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Article 1.

NYT

Are Iran and Israel Trading Places?

Abbas Milani and Israel Waismel-Manor

April 11, 2014 -- Although the Israeli and Iranian governments have been virtually at war with each other for decades, the two countries have much in common.

Both are home to some of the oldest civilizations on earth, and both are primarily non-Arab states in a mostly Arab region. In the 1950s, David Ben-Gurion's Israel and Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's Iran were bastions of secular nationalism; the shah pushed authoritarian modernization, while Ben-Gurion advanced a form of nonreligious Zionism. Only after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran did radical Islam all but eclipse this secular brand of politics. It held on for much longer in Israel but is now under threat.

Both Iran and Israel are now entering potentially challenging new stages in their relations with the outside world, and particularly with the United States. Over the last seven years, United Nations Security Council resolutions have imposed sanctions on Iran with the aim of halting its nuclear program. For years, Iran's former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad railed against the "Great Satan." But even if Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is still opposed to reforms, it appears that some officials inside Iran have finally realized that continued intransigence and bellicosity will beget only more sanctions and catastrophic economic consequences.

As the winds of change blow across Iran, secular democrats in Israel have been losing ground to religious and right-wing extremists who feel comfortable openly attacking the United States, Israel's strongest ally. In recent months, Israel's defense minister, Moshe Yaalon, called Secretary of State John Kerry "obsessive and messianic," while Naftali Bennett, Israel's economy minister, labeled Mr. Kerry a "mouthpiece" for anti-Semitic elements attempting to boycott Israel.

Israel's secular democrats are growing increasingly worried that Israel's future may bear an uncomfortable resemblance to Iran's recent past.

For more than three decades, Iran's oil wealth has allowed its religious leaders to stay in power. But sanctions have taken a serious economic toll, with devastating effects on the Iranian people. The public, tired of Mr. Ahmadinejad's bombastic and costly rhetoric, has replaced him with Hassan Rouhani, a pragmatist who has promised to fix the economy and restore relations with the West.

But Mr. Rouhani's rise is in reality the consequence of a critical cultural and demographic shift in Iran — away from theocracy and confrontation, and toward moderation and pragmatism. Recent tensions between America and Russia have emboldened some of Iran's radicals, but the government on the whole seems still intent on continuing the nuclear negotiations with the West.

Iran is a land of many paradoxes. The ruling elite is disproportionately made up of aged clerics — all men — while 64 percent of the country's science and engineering degrees are held by women. In spite of the government's concentrated efforts to create what some have called gender apartheid in Iran, more and more women are asserting themselves in fields from cinema to publishing to entrepreneurship.

Many prominent intellectuals and artists who three decades ago advocated some form of religious government in Iran are today arguing for popular sovereignty and openly challenging the antiquated arguments of regime stalwarts who claim that concepts of human rights and religious tolerance are Western concoctions and inimical to Islam. More than 60 percent of Iranians are under age 30, and they overwhelmingly believe in individual liberty. It's no wonder that last month Ayatollah Khamenei told the clerical leadership that what worried him most was a non-Islamic "cultural invasion" of the country.

As moderate Iranians and some of the country's leaders cautiously shift toward pragmatism and the West, it seems that many Israelis are moving away from these attitudes. In its 66 years, Israel has seen its share of ideological shifts from dovish to hawkish. These were natural fluctuations driven mainly by the country's security situation and prospects for peace.

But the current shift is being accelerated by religion and demography, and is therefore qualitatively different. While the Orthodox Jewish parties are currently not part of the government, together with Mr. Bennett's Jewish Home, a right-wing religious party, they hold about 25 percent of seats in the Knesset. The Orthodox parties aspire to transform Israel into a theocracy. And with an average birthrate of 6.5 children per family among Orthodox Jews (compared with 2.6 for the rest of the Jewish population), their dream might not be too far away.

By contrast, Iran has a falling birthrate — a clear indication of growing secularism, and the sort of thing that keeps Ayatollah Khamenei awake at night.

The long-term power of these demographic trends will, in our view, override Iran's current theocratic intransigence and might eclipse any fleeting victories for liberalism in Israel.

Israel's shift toward orthodoxy is not merely a religious one. Since the vast majority of Orthodox Jews are also against any agreement with the Palestinians, with each passing day, the chances of reaching a peace deal diminish. Nor is time on the side of those who want to keep seeing a democratic Israel.

If Israel continues the expansion of settlements, and peace talks serve no purpose but the extension of the status quo, the real existential threat to Israel will not be Iran's nuclear program but rather a surging tide of economic sanctions.

What began a few years ago with individual efforts to get supermarket shoppers in Western countries to boycott Israeli oranges and hummus has turned into an orchestrated international campaign, calling for boycotts, divestment and

sanctions against Israeli companies and institutions.

From academic boycotts to calls for divestment on American university campuses to the unwillingness of more and more European financial institutions to invest in or partner with Israeli companies and banks that operate in the West Bank, the “B.D.S.” movement is gaining momentum. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has recently called B.D.S. advocates “classical anti-Semites in modern garb.”

In the past, Israel could rely on Western nations and especially the United States to halt such initiatives, but as the fabric of Israel’s population changes, and Jewish populations in the West become less religious and less uncritically pro-Israel, the reflex to stand by the Jewish state, regardless of its policies, is weakening.

Moreover, as Western countries shift toward greater respect for human rights, the occupation is perceived as a violation of Western liberal norms. A new generation of American Jews sees a fundamental tension between their own liberal values and many Israeli policies.

This, coupled with the passing of the older generation and a high rate of interfaith marriage among American Jews, means the pro-Israel lobby will no longer be as large or as united as it used to be. While American presidents from Lyndon B. Johnson to Barack Obama have declared that the United States’ commitment to Israel flows from strategic interests and shared values, in a generation or two, interests may be all that’s left.

An opposite shift is occurring in Iran’s diaspora. An estimated five to seven million Iranians live in exile. Their economic,

scientific, scholarly and cultural achievements are now well known in the United States thanks to people like the eBay founder Pierre Omidyar. They are increasingly establishing themselves as a powerful force advocating a more democratic Iran and better relations with the United States. Just as a united Jewish diaspora once helped the new state of Israel join the ranks of prosperous, industrialized states, Iran's diaspora could one day play a similar role for a post-theocratic Iran.

One of Israel's most popular singers, the Iranian-born Rita Jahanforuz, laments on her recent album, "In this world, I am alone and abandoned, like wild grass in the middle of the desert."

If Iran's moderates fail to push the country toward reform, and if secular Israelis can't halt the country's drift from democracy to theocracy, both Iranians and Israelis will increasingly find themselves fulfilling her sad prophecy.

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Article 2.

Agence Global

Lebanon Rejoins the Arab World

Rami G. Khouri

12 Apr 2014 -- One of the gradual developments that has taken place over the past few years has been the almost total reversal of Lebanon's place in geopolitics of the Middle East, which likely portends more years of stress and violence ahead. For most of the recent era of independent Arab states, Lebanon has always been the exception to the rule. From the 1950s it was always the lively, open, liberal and freewheeling place where other Arabs came for exile and safety, or where Arab regimes fought their ideological battles through the Lebanese press or militias that they backed or funded to a large extent.

While most Arab countries were ruled by top-heavy autocracies dominated by individuals or families, often representing some minority sect or ethnic group, Lebanon was different: It was governed by a consociational system of government that sought consensus among 18 different confessional groups represented in the parliament and society. Lebanon's central government was usually weak, because power was decentralized in the hands of the leaders of the sectarian groups. Arab and foreign governments supported various Lebanese groups, and often used them to fight proxy wars in Lebanon, instead of fighting directly throughout the region.

When the Lebanese engaged in debilitating war or political stalemate because they could not agree on major issues on their own, they usually had to turn to a foreign country or two to

mediate and help straighten them out. Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, the United States, France and even Qatar have played this role in the past. That was all in the past, though, as Lebanon today finds itself in a very different situation.

It is no longer the exception to the region, but rather now finds itself as something of a mirror of the Middle East. It is deeply entrenched at the heart of the biggest proxy conflict in the Middle East—the war in Syria—and its internal dynamics accurately capture all the major tensions and active conflicts in the Middle East. Across the region and within Lebanon we see Shiite self-assertion, Sunni militancy and dynamism, Shia-Sunni tensions, Iranian-Arab tensions, anti-authoritarian rebellion (mostly against the Syrian government), sectarian tensions and violence, fragmentation and polarization of society and state, large-scale and sustained external interventions, the rapid growth of Salafist-takfiri movements and their violence, and the slow fraying of the state's borders in some places.

Especially through Hizbullah's and Lebanese Sunni militants' military roles inside Syria, Lebanon now finds its condition and fate closely tied to the big conflicts that define the entire region—particularly the outcome in Syria and the widespread Saudi-Iranian proxy confrontations in several countries. The linkages between these two main issues mean that the recent increase in fighting and bombings in Lebanon is likely to persist for some time, because political violence and warfare inside Lebanon and throughout the region have meshed into a single dynamic. The most vicious aspect of this phenomenon is the fighting across the region that comprises Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran—which have effectively become a single operational theater in which guns, money, people and ideas flow across

borders with virtual impunity.

The heart of this battleground is the fighting between different forces that seek to topple or protect the government of President Bashar Assad in Syria. This has significantly increased the level of violence inside Lebanon—in Beirut, Tripoli and the northeast Beqaa Valley along the Syrian border—and also has placed tough new pressures on Lebanon through the flow of a million Syrian refugees into the small country. Yet it also seems that the Lebanese political leaders who are the ones who control the country's policies are firmly committed to preventing a plunge back into the terrible civil war the country experienced in 1975-90.

The Lebanese people for decades have had a hard time sustaining any kind of coherent, diligent governance system, due to the constant political wrangling among the many confessional groups in the country. Now that Lebanon also emphatically mirrors the ideological tensions and more directly takes part in the political violence that defines most of the region, it loses its former status as an exceptional Arab land.

All the ills of Arab countries are now visible in Lebanon, which suggests that the situation in the country is likely to remain volatile, as it has for some years now. A resolution of the Syrian war and an agreement between Iran and Western states on nuclear and other issues would go a long way to allowing Lebanon to resume its life as a different kind of pluralistic Arab society when compared to the other Arab countries. That was in the past, and is no more.

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[Article 3.](#)

The Daily Star

The paradox of Egyptian-Israeli ties

Aaron Magid

A regional governor in Egypt recently blamed Israel for being behind shark attacks against tourists. Despite an environment that makes such absurd comments possible, Israel continues to describe its relationship with Egypt as a strategic partnership.

This conundrum exemplifies Egypt's current relationship with Israel. Although security ties have been tightened over mutual interests in Sinai and the Gaza Strip, Egyptian popular attitudes toward Israel remain as hostile as ever and the two nation's overt diplomatic ties have deteriorated. This has demonstrated Egypt's increasingly antithetical relationship with Israel.

Following the military coup against President Mohammad Morsi in July 2013, Egypt's security ties with Israel were upgraded. A military strongman, Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, was back in power in Cairo. A sign of the times, Israel carried out a rare drone strike in the Sinai Peninsula killing five Islamic

militants in August 2013. Eric Trager, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, described Israeli-Egyptian security coordination as “better than it’s ever been,” explaining that their shared threat in the Sinai from jihadists had been a principle cause of this.

Egypt and Israel also have shared interests in Gaza. The smuggling of weapons and goods into Gaza thrived during previous regimes. Prior to Morsi’s downfall, taxes from the tunnel trade accounted for nearly one-third of Hamas’ budget, but this number dropped considerably in the Sisi period, with Hamas seen as being affiliated ideologically and politically with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian military has tried to prevent instability in Gaza since advanced weaponry transferred in and out of Gaza can quickly turn into a national security threat.

From an Israeli perspective, Hamas has been a long-time nemesis and the recent unearthing of a tunnel crossing into Israel, designed to abduct Israeli soldiers, highlighted the growing concern of violence emanating from Gaza. Because of the importance that Israel ascribes to its security ties with Egypt, Israel’s ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer, is lobbying Congress to maintain American military aid to Egypt.

Despite the robust military coordination, Egyptian popular attitudes toward Israel have remained hostile. In a television interview in January, former Egyptian Minister Hasaballah al-Kafrawy claimed, after reading “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” that the Jews ruled the world and were aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. A popular television show, “Khaybar,” depicts the Prophet Muhammad’s conquest of the Jews in 629.

Ahmed Maher, a famous actor, has said that “Khaybar” aims to show Jews “as the ugliest slice of humans.” When asked to speak about the atmosphere toward Israel in Egypt, several Egyptian journalists declined interviews because of the tense climate.

Egypt is hardly the only Middle Eastern country whose media are harshly critical of Israel. In 2010, Israel’s Foreign Ministry provoked a diplomatic crisis with Turkey after a Turkish television series showed Israeli officials snatching babies.

Such attitudes contrast with Israel’s reaction toward Egyptian press attacks. Israel has remained eerily silent in the face of the Egyptian media onslaught, as the Israelis desperately try to preserve their close security coordination with Cairo. Avi Issacharoff, an Arab affairs analyst for the Times of Israel, has said: “With Egypt, they [the Israelis] are treading very carefully. They understand that the ship is still rocking and the situation is not very stable.” Israel’s silence is designed to prevent any Egyptian public backlash, which could inhibit security ties.

The hostile attitude reflected in Egyptian media, which often have close ties to the ruling regime, can be dangerous for the country’s government. “This exacerbates the traditional gap between regimes and public sentiments,” explained Robert Danin of the Council on Foreign Relations. When there is a crisis between Israelis and Arabs, the combative press tends to only heighten public anger, limiting the government’s margin of maneuver.

Egypt’s public diplomatic ties with Israel have nearly ceased. While many described relations with Israel during the Mubarak

era as a “cold peace,” Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, frequently visited Egypt. Even more dramatically, in 1996, after a spike of suicide bombings in Israel, Mubarak hosted 29 world leaders in the Sinai to boost the peace process and condemn terrorism against Israel.

After the fall of Mubarak in 2011, even in the period of military rule since last July, no Israeli minister has been formally invited to Cairo. Nor has Egypt’s Foreign Minister met publicly with his Israeli counterpart in Israel.

Furthermore, Egypt is no longer playing a prominent role in the peace process, seeking to bridge gaps between the Palestinian Authority and Israel.

Egypt’s relationship with Israel has long been complex. Its paradoxical nature has been illustrated since last July by unprecedented security cooperation, even as diplomatic and popular ties have deteriorated to a new low.

Mass demonstrations during the 2011 Egyptian revolution captured the attention of Egypt’s leaders regarding the importance of responding to citizens. The rulers learned the importance of popular support to maintain their rule. Pursuing Egypt’s close security cooperation with Israel, despite the fact that Israel is reviled among many Egyptians, is risky for Sisi, even as it is quietly comfortable for both countries.

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The Washington Institute

Israeli Financial Measures Against The Palestinian Authority

Neri Zilber

April 11, 2014 -- On April 1, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas signed accession papers to fifteen international conventions, endangering the current round of peace talks and spurring the Israeli government to state that unilateral Palestinian steps would be met by unilateral steps of its own. Over the past several days, Israel has made good on this promise, instituting various economic and financial sanctions against the PA. Yet recent historical experience indicates that Israel's willingness to maintain punitive financial sanctions on the PA is limited.

BACKGROUND

As part of the negotiated bilateral political structure created by the 1993 Oslo Accords, the PA was tasked with self-governing Palestinian political, social, and economic affairs. Yet it remains greatly dependent on its financial and economic ties with Israel, codified in the Paris Protocol on Economic Relations (1994). A major component of the Paris Protocol is a joint customs union whereby Israel collects duties on goods destined for the Palestinian territories, value-added taxes on major Palestinian purchases from Israel, and excise taxes on gasoline, then disburses this revenue on a monthly basis to the PA government. As of earlier this year, these customs transfers amounted to

nearly \$115 million per month, making up an estimated 36 to 44 percent of the PA's yearly budget of \$3.88 billion (adjusting for currency fluctuations between the Israeli shekel and the U.S. dollar). In other words, they constitute the PA treasury's largest single revenue source, surpassing even direct budgetary assistance from foreign donors.

Last week's diplomatic crisis brought with it reported threats of "sanctions" from Israeli negotiator and justice minister Tzipi Livni, followed by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's April 6 pledge that "unilateral actions from the Palestinians will be answered with unilateral actions from our side." Indeed, immediately after the PA decided to sign accession papers, the Israeli government reportedly took a variety of economic measures, such as freezing permits issued to Palestinian cellular provider Wataniya for infrastructure development in the Gaza Strip and delaying Palestinian planning work in Area C of the West Bank (a zone that is under Israeli security and civil control but also contains small Palestinian population centers, necessitating coordination between the PA and the Israel Defense Forces). Other unilateral economic measures were also being considered, such as suspending agricultural permits for Palestinian farmers in West Bank "seam zones." Israel is said to be implementing some noneconomic measures as well; for instance, top ministry officials were instructed to stop meeting with their Palestinian counterparts.

HISTORY OF FINANCIAL MEASURES

Israel's most significant measure came on April 10, with the announcement that customs transfers would be withheld. In fact, this has long been Israel's most common countermeasure to unilateral Palestinian diplomatic moves outside the Oslo framework. The second intifada period (2000-2004) saw

wholesale Israeli closures of PA-controlled areas and the withholding of customs transfers -- sometimes for as long as two years -- in response to waves of Palestinian terrorist attacks. Since then, however, Israeli financial sanctions have been shorter-lived, issued in response to diplomatic and/or political developments seen as inimical to the Oslo framework and a negotiated two-state solution.

* 2006-2007: In the wake of Hamas's 2006 victory in Palestinian legislative elections, Israel -- along with the United States and European donors -- stopped most direct budgetary assistance to the PA. The move was taken as a result of Hamas's designation as a terrorist organization and its refusal to abide by three international conditions for legitimate rule: namely, ending its armed struggle, recognizing Israel, and accepting past Israeli-Palestinian agreements (including the Oslo Accords). Only after Hamas's coup in Gaza a year later and the creation of an emergency West Bank government headed by Salam Fayyad did Israeli customs transfers and donor funds resume. Despite Hamas rule and the Israeli closure policy, however, financial support to Gaza has continued in the intervening years, primarily via international organizations such as the UN Relief and Works Agency as well as an estimated \$1.5 billion per year from the PA.

* 2008: In mid-2008, Israel delayed transferring customs revenues in protest of Palestinian diplomatic efforts to turn European governments against Israel. At the time, Israel was seeking closer technical and political ties with the European Union, as well as accession to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In delaying the transfers, Israeli

officials expressed "regret and disappointment that our Palestinian interlocutors with whom we are working for a common goal...are spending time and energy to undermine Israel's bilateral relations with the EU." After a few weeks, the Israeli Finance Ministry, under international pressure, released most of the customs transfers to the PA, though it initially subtracted a significant amount to cover PA debts owed to the Israel Electric Corporation (IEC). This threat of subtracting PA debts owed for services such as electricity and water would be repeated in future years -- indeed, it was the rationale given for this week's customs delay. As of early 2014, PA debt to Israel stood at \$573 million, 60 percent of which is due to the IEC.

* November 2011: Israel withheld customs transfers for four weeks in protest of Palestinian efforts to seek diplomatic recognition at the UN. A secondary issue was the PA's expression of interest in reconciliation talks with Hamas. The transfers were eventually resumed due to international pressure and concerns from within the Israeli security establishment about economic and political stability in the West Bank. At the time, Prime Minister Netanyahu's office issued a statement indicating that the money was released only "after the Palestinian Authority stopped taking unilateral moves."

* December 2012-January 2013: Israel announced another halt to customs transfers after the PA's successful November bid to secure nonmember observer status at the UN. The following January, it made a single transfer -- which Israeli officials termed "a one-time event" -- after a personal appeal by Middle East Quartet envoy Tony Blair. Regular transfers resumed two months later, after President Obama visited the region.

IMPLICATIONS

The 2012-2013 episode highlighted the tensions involved in Israel's policy of using financial sanctions against the PA, as well as the reason for their usually limited duration. In September 2012, prior to the Palestinian statehood bid at the UN, Israel actually transferred customs revenues in advance so the PA could better deal with a wave of popular protests against its economic policies. That cash infusion, along with other Israeli economic assistance, allowed the PA to placate its public and avert a more serious political challenge. The subsequent withholding of transfers two months later was therefore met with alarm by Israeli security officials, who privately counseled the government to reverse the decision.

Similar fears are in evidence today, as Israel's threat to match unilateral PA diplomatic moves with unilateral economic measures could lead to volatility in the Palestinian territories. The Palestinians' dependence on financial and economic links with Israel is overwhelming, as is Israel's interest in maintaining the PA's viability. In recent days, some wealthy Arab states pledged additional assistance to fill the Palestinian funding gap, but numerous past pledges of this sort have rarely materialized at the scale and pace promised.

In the end, neither Israeli nor Palestinian leaders want the current diplomatic crisis in the peace process to undermine their overall security and economic coordination. While diplomatic or financial unilateralism might seem like an effective tool to pressure each other, such tactics carry a real risk of miscalculation amid escalating tit-for-tat moves.

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Al Ahram

The Arabs smitten by the Israeli lobby

Mohamed Elmenshawy

10 Apr 2014 -- The most pessimistic Arab could never imagine the day would come when a US official would say, if “he covered the faces of top officials he met during the recent trip to Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv, and listened to their perceptions on the issues and future of the Middle East, he would not be able to differentiate between the Saudi, Emirati and Israeli. Their views are the same on these issues.”

This picture is not only bleak because Israeli and Gulf interests are the same, but because separate efforts to pressure the US administration into adopting positions that support this united regional vision are being expressed by Arabs in Washington. This is done through repeated praise (so far privately) and heavy reliance on activism by the Israeli lobby. A US expert justifies this situation by saying, “Israel, along with Arab Gulf states, has been the oasis of stability in the Middle East since the start of the Arab Spring three years ago. Naturally, they share the same concerns and fears about the elements of instability surrounding them.”

These adversaries come together on very general goals, such as not wanting Bashar Al-Assad’s regime to make any gains in the

civil war in Syria, and that the west does not reach a deal on Iran's nuclear capabilities. Also, that Egypt does not become a failed state and no democratic regime succeeds in the Arab region.

Last month, the annual meeting of AIPAC – the most powerful Jewish lobby in the US – was attended by nearly 14,000 people, making it the largest conference in the US capital. The conference focused on several issues, most notably how to handle Iran as 5+1 negotiations continue to resolve its nuclear issue. Discussions noted grave concern over the possibility of reaching an interim agreement that would end the sanctions regime, and lead to normalising relations between the west, US and Iran. AIPAC believes if this happened, Tehran will automatically win. Saudi Arabia agrees with AIPAC.

For many other reasons, both camps want to block this scenario by putting pressure through sanctions by Congress, despite White House objections. More importantly, there are repeated rumours about Iran's influence in the Arab Mashreq (east) as Tehran plays a greater role in the Syrian conflict. There are also repeated statements that Iran's Islamic regime has expanded to reach the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and Israel's borders. The Gulf and Israeli adversaries are not allowing the US administration to come up for breath on Iran by highlighting the wide gap between the White House and Congress on the issue. They are also convincing Congress members to continue pressuring US President Barack Obama until it becomes impossible to reach any agreement with Iran.

The Israeli lobby believes that Hamas's weaknesses – because of losing its Syrian ally and Gulf funds as well as the rising hostility in Egypt – is a key development that must be exploited because it makes for an opportune moment to reach peace

between the Palestinians and Israelis. There are many calling for Gulf states and Egypt to pressure Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to accept US Secretary of State John Kerry's proposal for a US framework agreement for peace between the two sides.

The ambitions of the Israeli lobby go even further. Many are calling to amend the Arab peace initiative proposed in 2002 by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz, which suggested creating a globally recognised Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, the return of refugees and complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights. In return, there would be Arab recognition and normalisation with Israel. Today's calls assert that any talk of withdrawing from the Golan Heights is a waste of time, and that the Palestinian leadership itself is open to ideas about the problem of the "right of return" for Palestinian refugees.

Accordingly, the initiative should be revised and, naturally, Arabs – including Egyptians – should stop mentioning anything about halting settlement building in the West Bank, "right of return" or even the future of Jerusalem.

Glover Park Group (the lobby firm with which Egypt's interim government signed a contract six months ago) is competing with stronger, wealthier and more versatile lobby groups to influence Congress members, their aides, key officials in the US administration and media.

AIPAC has not missed a chance to press on Congress the need to support the Egyptian army through continuing military aid. After hundreds of Egyptians died during the dispersal of the sit-ins at Rabaa and Nahda, the US administration was forced to suspend some military assistance. AIPAC, however, sent a letter to all members of Congress protesting the measure, claiming the step would increase instability in Egypt, threaten vital US

interests and negatively impact its key ally in the region, Israel. Meanwhile, Israel asked Washington not to reduce assistance to the Egyptian army in anticipation of its impact on Israel's security, or deterioration of security conditions in Sinai. After the suspension of aid, several Israeli officials visited Washington to highlight the risks of such a step on Israel's security and its negative impact on regional security issues in the Middle East.

Gulf countries adopt the same position – rejecting any pressure on the Egyptian government and demanding the return of the entire military package to Egypt. It is noteworthy that the managing director of the lobby group hired by the Egyptian government is Arik Ben-Zvi, a former officer in the Israeli army, an Israeli citizen who served in the Israeli army and a campaign adviser in several elections in Israel. The firm also works with Apple and Coca Cola, and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority is its top foreign client.

Thus, Arabs in Washington are immersed in playing a role that does not in any way confront Israel or its lobby group. Arabs decided to exchange what needs to be done in the world's most important capital with an easy agenda, namely confronting their domestic political opponents and historic neighbours.

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Article 6.

Al Jazeera

Bringing Muslims back to science

Mohamed Ghilan

11 Apr 2014 -- Turkey is the only Muslim country in the top 20 ranking on science output [AP]

The most important rule in Islam is "judgment on anything is a branch of conceptualising it". To determine whether a belief can be accepted by a Muslim or not, this is the first and most often repeated principle. However, when it comes to matters scientific, this indispensable rule for correct judgment is paradoxically the most disregarded one.

Ever since the decline of the Islamic civilisation and the end of its Golden Age, Muslims have ironically taken up superstitious and irrational thinking habits they had previously dropped when they originally accepted the Message of Prophet Muhammad. The ideas that the sun could eclipse for the death of someone, that certain numbers have magical powers, or that birds flying in a certain direction indicates an omen of some kind were among superstitious beliefs explicitly pointed out by Prophet Muhammad and in verses in the Quran for their irrationality. Unfortunately, it seems that Muslims have gone full circle. Out of the top 20 countries in overall science output, Turkey is the sole Muslim representative, barely sneaking in at number 19.

Overly simplistic explanations of this phenomenon have pointed to Al-Ghazali (c 1058-1111), one of the most influential Muslim theologians. His work, *The Incoherence of Philosophers*, is cited for its negative impact on Muslim thinking. This, however, is a

grave misrepresentation of Al-Ghazali, his attack on contemporary philosophers, and the Islamic civilisation as a whole.

Contrary to how it is popularly misconstrued, Al-Ghazali's attack against the philosophers was not an attack against science. The Incoherence is viewed as one that defended Islamic theology from what was considered an unjustified encroachment of science onto it. It is worthy to note here that although Al-Ghazali aimed to refute the turning of science into theology, he acknowledged empirically valid claims as such and did not prescribe for Muslims to ignore them.

Head to Head - Has political Islam failed?

As for the Muslim scientific and intellectual decline being attributed to Al-Ghazali, this claim is overly speculative and one-dimensional. No civilisation deserves to be called a civilisation, if the works of a single individual, regardless of who it is, can bring it crashing down. The decline of a civilisation is a complex process that is influenced by numerous factors.

Oversimplification in this regard is disingenuous and can further a people's stagnation because it prevents proper assessment of where the problems lie.

The problem Muslims have with regard to the relationship between science and religion today is in their reliance on people who are not professional scientists or theologians. It is not uncommon to see Muslims rely on professional debaters to learn about science and the "Islamic" position on matters such as the theory of evolution. Furthermore, when they do direct their questions at scientists or theologians, most Muslim scientists

and theologians do not respect the limits of their expertise and regularly speak of matters they know little about.

When Prophet Muhammad migrated to Medina, he moved from a business hub in Arabia to an agriculture-based society. He was not familiar with farming practices and upon observing how cross-pollination took place he voiced his wonder. Human intervention to manipulate outcomes in nature was counter-intuitive to him.

The companions misunderstood the Prophet's wonder to be a religious decree not to cross-pollinate their palm trees. Upon realising a very poor crop yield, they approached him to ask for a metaphysical reason. Prophet Muhammad's response was, "You know the affairs of your worldly matters better". In other words, the reasons for the poor crop yield are to be sought in physical practices.

It is a relatively modern phenomenon to see Muslims in mass turn Scriptural sources into scientific textbooks. In fact, a careful reading of traditional texts of Islamic theology would reveal to the reader that imposing a scientific interpretation on Scripture is a form of heresy. The consequences of such a practice will always be negative for Scripture not due to an inherent problem within it, but a problem with the reader.

What is desperately needed for modern Muslims is to come to terms with the fact that progress is not going to come from theological debates. Many spend their time in reproducing Christian apologetics as Muslim arguments, or attempting to "refute" that we evolved. What are currently perceived as conflicts between science and Islam are misguided constructs

imposed by people who should not be engaged in these discussions in the first place.

It is ironic that Al-Ghazali, falsely accused for the decline of Islamic civilisation by superseding religion over science, warned against bringing religious discourse where it does not belong. He compared religious discourse to medicine, only needed in certain contexts, and scientific discourse to food, always needed for sustenance. If Al-Ghazali were around today, he would assert that Muslim religious discourse on matters scientific is poisonous, killing the scientific aspirations of the religious, and the religious aspirations of the scientists.

There is no such thing as an "Islamic" position on the validity of a scientific theory. In fact, scientific theories have no concern with any religious or non-religious positions on them.

Empirically unsubstantiated claims, even if they sound perfectly logical, are not fully accepted until they survive the rigor of experimentation. No amount of philosophical refutations or Scriptural references will change facts. Scientific progress is not based on its congruency with Scripture, or whether the scientist believes or disbelieves in God. It is based on resolving conflicts between hypotheses and experimental data.

It may be difficult to accept for many Muslims that questions in science are areas of inquiry where one is not allowed to appeal to God. But this is a product of how they have been cognitively conditioned with regards to this issue. Ironically, some of the most spiritually elated people are scientists who identify themselves as atheists. This is because they do not approach science assuming they have all the answers.

The universe is truly magnificent, and for a religious person to appreciate it as a Creation in the broad sense of the word, they have to negate their presumptions. If there is an Islamic position on science, it is that when you do not invoke God as an explanation that His magnificence unfolds in your quest to understanding His Creation.

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[Article 7.](#)

Guardian

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process is dead, but there is a solution

[Yoaz Hendel](#)

10 April 2014 -- I'll start with the bottom line: despite the goodwill and idealism, a final status agreement to put an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be signed in the current context.

The peace process as we know it is dead, and the international community is divided between those who are in denial and those

who are torturing the corpse. It is time to stop grieving and find an alternative.

I speak not as an enemy of peace, but as a pragmatic Israeli. In January 2012 I was sent by prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to take part in peace talks in Amman, Jordan. Most of the participants knew each other from previous peace talks, the food was good, the coffee was strong but the process was weak.

The Palestinians spoke of history, what was the case in 1948 and what could have been. They could not bring themselves to talk about the present. As soon as talks started, each side began its own blame game. The gaps were huge, not just because of demography but because of democracy. The Israeli interest is to preserve its status as a Jewish democratic state. By contrast, the Palestinian interest is, undeniably, to preserve honour. This is how millions of Palestinians in exile live 66 years on from the establishment of Israel, with the belief that one day all the territory (of both Israel and Palestine) will be theirs.

The most significant problem since the signing of the Oslo Accords is the search for an end to the conflict. Anyone serious about a peaceful resolution has to acknowledge that doing so means both sides recognise each other as equals. If Israel recognises an Arab Palestinian state, the Palestinians have to recognise a Jewish state. Similarly, anyone interested in long-term coexistence should not accept that a Jewish minority would be barred from living and enjoying equal rights in a Palestinian state, like Arab citizens do in Israel. Neither should they accept a reality where the Palestinians are not able or willing to maintain a peaceful and secure border, which they are certainly not doing in Gaza. As long as the Palestinians are not ready to

acknowledge the reality, a conflict-ending agreement will remain beyond reach.

The world is a stage, but regarding the peace process it is the same show every time: discussions, talks collapsing and the blame game. The international community has a crucial role in this. Dogmatically sticking to an outdated peace plan without allowing changes to reflect the reality on the ground halts progress at any given opportunity.

Since 2005 there have been two potential Palestinian states. One, in the Gaza Strip, is under the control of the radical Islamist Hamas, and the other in the West Bank is under the control of the Palestinian Authority. These separate entities have yet to make peace with each other, let alone with Israel. So in reality any Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement would require a "three states for two people" solution. An additional obstacle is the international community's attitude to territories Israel holds beyond the 1967 borders, treating them as a single entity. Products and services from the Golan Heights, captured from Syria, are subject to calls for boycott and sanctions, even though the Golan Heights have no connection whatsoever to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Does anyone in Europe think the residents of the Golan Heights are in a hurry to be returned to Syrian sovereignty and become part of the slaughter and civil war, or that there is a realistic partner for a peace agreement in Syria?

Over the past two years I have met many diplomats and representatives who come to Israel. They all want to hear differing opinions about the conflict. Most understand that the conflict is at a dead end, but politely explain that they cannot publicly change their official policy. Their stubbornness is our

restriction.

For the international community to remain relevant it must understand the restrictions and the available options. The most realistic practical option in the current circumstances is the drawing of borders along demographic lines. Most Palestinians (98%) in the West Bank live in Areas A and B, under the control of the Palestinian Authority. These areas are spread over 40% of Judea and Samaria. Most Israelis live in 12% of the West Bank in large settlement blocks.

The remaining 48% of the territory has 100,000 Israelis and an equal number of Palestinians. The Palestinians' territories should be upgraded to the status of demilitarised state with interim borders and continuity based on A and B. The large settlement blocks can be annexed to Israel, and as result of that the disputed territory would be immediately halved.

It is not a permanent solution, but it would be progress. If the money from the various pro-peace organisations were to be invested in the Palestinian education system, encouraging support for democracy, it would be possible to restart negotiations in a generation. If the international community can let go of its attachment to the phrase "an end to the conflict" who knows – maybe we will have a glimmer of a practical peace on the ground, which would improve the chances for a comprehensive peace in the future.

Yoaz Hendel is chairman of the Institute for Zionist Strategies and a former director of communications for prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.