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March 15, 2014

<a href="#">Article 1.</a>	NYT <b><u>Obama Has Made America Look Weak</u></b> John McCain
<a href="#">Article 2.</a>	The Guardian <b><u>Let Georgia be a lesson for what will happen to Ukraine</u></b> <a href="#">Mikheil Saakashvili</a>
<a href="#">Article 3.</a>	CNN <b><u>Israel, Abbas face 5 realities on peace</u></b> Aaron David Miller
<a href="#">Article 4.</a>	Al-Ahram Weekly <b><u>AIPAC and CPAC in town</u></b> James Zogby
<a href="#">Article 5.</a>	The Washington Institute <b><u>Mahmoud Abbas and the 'Jewish State'</u></b> <a href="#">Robert Satloff</a>
<a href="#">Article 6.</a>	The Financial Times <b><u>Lunch with Prince Turki al-Faisal</u></b> Edward Luce
Article 7.	Asharq Al Awsat <b><u>Obama, the Bomb and the Fatwa</u></b> <a href="#">Amir Taheri</a>

[Article 1.](#)

NYT

## **Obama Has Made America Look Weak**

John McCain

March 14, 2014 -- Should Russia's invasion and looming annexation of Crimea be blamed on President Barack Obama? Of course not, just as it should not be blamed on NATO expansion, the Iraq war or Western interventions to stop mass atrocities in the Balkans and Libya. The blame

lies squarely with Vladimir V. Putin, an unreconstructed Russian imperialist and K.G.B. apparatchik.

But in a broader sense, Crimea has exposed the disturbing lack of realism that has characterized our foreign policy under President Obama. It is this worldview, or lack of one, that must change.

For five years, Americans have been told that “the tide of war is receding,” that we can pull back from the world at little cost to our interests and values. This has fed a perception that the United States is weak, and to people like Mr. Putin, weakness is provocative.

That is how Mr. Putin viewed the “reset” policy. United States missile defense plans were scaled back. Allies in Eastern Europe and Georgia were undercut. NATO enlargement was tabled. A new strategic arms reduction treaty required significant cuts by America, but not Russia. Mr. Putin gave little. Mr. Obama promised “more flexibility.”

Mr. Putin also saw a lack of resolve in President Obama’s actions beyond Europe. In Afghanistan and Iraq, military decisions have appeared driven more by a desire to withdraw than to succeed. Defense budgets have been slashed based on hope, not strategy. Iran and China have bullied America’s allies at no discernible cost. Perhaps worst of all, Bashar al-Assad crossed President Obama’s “red line” by using chemical weapons in Syria, and nothing happened to him.

For Mr. Putin, vacillation invites aggression. His world is a brutish, cynical place, where power is worshiped, weakness is despised, and all rivalries are zero-sum. He sees the fall of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” He does not accept that Russia’s neighbors, least of all Ukraine, are independent countries. To him, they are Russia’s “near abroad” and must be brought back under Moscow’s dominion by any means necessary.

What is most troubling about Mr. Putin’s aggression in Crimea is that it reflects a growing disregard for America’s credibility in the world. That has emboldened other aggressive actors — from Chinese nationalists to Al Qaeda terrorists and Iranian theocrats.

Crimea must be the place where President Obama recognizes this reality and begins to restore the credibility of the United States as a world leader. This will require two different kinds of responses.

The first, and most urgent, is crisis management. We need to work with our allies to shore up Ukraine, reassure shaken friends in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States, show Mr. Putin a strong, united front, and prevent the crisis from getting worse.

This does not mean military action against Russia. But it should mean sanctioning Russian officials, isolating Russia internationally, and increasing NATO's military presence and exercises on its eastern frontier. It should mean boycotting the Group of 8 summit meeting in Sochi and convening the Group of 7 elsewhere. It should also mean making every effort to support and resupply Ukrainian patriots, both soldiers and civilians, who are standing their ground in government facilities across Crimea. They refuse to accept the dismemberment of their country. So should we.

Crimea may be falling under Russian control, but Ukraine has another chance for freedom, rule of law and a European future. To seize that opportunity, Ukrainian leaders must unify the nation and commit to reform, and the West must provide significant financial and other assistance. Bipartisan legislation now before Congress would contribute to this effort. More broadly, we must rearm ourselves morally and intellectually to prevent the darkness of Mr. Putin's world from befalling more of humanity. We may wish to believe, as President Obama has said, that we are not "in competition with Russia." But Mr. Putin believes Russia is in competition with us, and pretending otherwise is an unrealistic basis for a great nation's foreign policy.

Three American presidents have sought to cooperate with Mr. Putin where our interests converge. What should be clear now, and should have been clear the last time he tore apart a country, is that our interests do not converge much. He will always insist on being our rival.

The United States must look beyond Mr. Putin. His regime may appear imposing, but it is rotting inside. His Russia is not a great power on par with America. It is a gas station run by a corrupt, autocratic regime. And eventually, Russians will come for Mr. Putin in the same way and for the same reasons that Ukrainians came for Viktor F. Yanukovich.

We must prepare for that day now. We should show the Russian people that we support their human rights by expanding the Magnitsky Act to impose more sanctions on those who abuse them. We should stop allowing their

country's most corrupt officials to park ill-gotten proceeds in Western economies. We should prove that countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova have a future in the Euro-Atlantic community, and Russia can, too.

We must do all we can to demonstrate that the tide of history is with Ukraine — that the political values of the West, and not those of an imperial kleptocracy, are the hope of all nations. If Ukraine can emerge from this crisis independent, prosperous and anchored firmly in Europe, how long before Russians begin to ask, “Why not us?” That would not just spell the end of Mr. Putin’s imperial dreams; it would strip away the lies that sustain his rule over Russia itself.

America’s greatest strength has always been its hopeful vision of human progress. But hopes do not advance themselves, and the darkness that threatens them will not be checked by an America in denial about the world as it is. It requires realism, strength and leadership. If Crimea does not awaken us to this fact, I am afraid to think what will.

*John McCain is a Republican senator from Arizona.*

[Article 2.](#)

The Guardian

## **Let Georgia be a lesson for what will happen to Ukraine**

[Mikheil Saakashvili](#)

14 March 2014 -- Crimeans [vote tomorrow](#) in an illegal "referendum" which will lock them into Russia's embrace. After this vote, and the takeover by Russian troops of the southern Ukraine peninsula, Vladimir Putin will claim he has legal justification for further military build-up and direct armed attack. How do I know? Because of the many painful parallels and lessons from [Georgia in 2008](#).

The invasions of Ukraine and [Georgia](#) bear striking similarities, not only because the pattern of the invader stays the same, but also because the two countries share deep historic parallels. Today, when Putin and his cheerleaders in the west claim Russia has legitimate interests in Ukraine —

as they justified Russia's aggression in Georgia on the pretext of protecting Russian citizens – they seem to ignore the facts. In eastern Ukraine, [Stalin's regime killed 7 million people](#) in an artificially created famine called Golodomor in the 1930s, to replace a restive population with a more loyal one. In Crimea, they deported the indigenous Tatars, increasing the number of Russians instead, and even though some have made it back to their ancestral lands, they haven't regained the majority they enjoyed historically.

By the same token, those who justify Russia's occupation of the Georgian regions of [Abkhazia](#) and [South Ossetia](#) stubbornly ignore the fact that largely due to direct Russian intervention, the ethnic Georgian majorities were cleansed from their homelands.

Both Ukraine and Georgia aspired to join Nato, but the door was closed at the Bucharest summit of 2008. From Putin's point of view, this untied his hands to deal with two neighbours that had tried to free themselves from Russia's grip. Both countries have had democratic revolutions, which clearly created ideological problems for Putin, as he regards successful reforms in Georgia, and Ukraine's aspirations to achieve the same, as a direct threat to his own iron grip in Russia.

There are many parallels, too, with how the conflicts started. For months prior to August 2008, "unidentified troops" masquerading as local insurgents grabbed more and more control over Georgia's separatist regions, and were getting into a growing number of shooting matches with local law enforcement. Russian tank columns started to move into Georgia to the point when, on 7 August 2008, the armed forces were compelled to respond. It was easier to start a hot war in Georgia as there was already a history of violent Russian-supported separatism, unlike Ukraine.

Thankfully, we have not yet reached that point in Crimea.

The difference between Ukraine and Georgia is the sheer size of the territory. In Georgia's case, if we had not responded then troops, which every impartial expert clearly identified as Russian special forces, could have easily reached our capital, Tbilisi, within 24 hours. We couldn't afford to wait. By our military response we managed to gain time, raise the stakes, and ultimately save our statehood and democracy. Having said that, I have no doubt that in Ukraine Russia's goal is the same as in Georgia. It is not limited to the restive regions, and I am fully convinced that Putin is as

eager to take over Kiev in 2014 as he was to take Tbilisi in 2008. The Crimea referendum is just an intermediary instrument to achieve this goal. In Georgia's case they called it a "new legal reality", Putin's version of gross violation of existing international law.

If the west had reacted properly to Georgia, Ukraine would never have happened. The invasion of Georgia was the first time since the cold war that Russia had tried to revise existing internationally recognised borders. So the west's reaction was of disbelief, and then it sought to pin the blame on both sides.

Soon after the Russo-Georgian war, on Germany's initiative, the EU created the Tagliavini Commission to study the origin of the conflict, which while not able to ignore the basic facts of Russia's actions enabled the EU to get back to business as usual with Russia.

Looking back, this gave Putin the sense he could get away with a similar adventure closer to Europe's heartland, in a country whose population is 10 times greater than Georgia's. Many in the west hope the Ukraine crisis will fade away to business as usual. But the cycles of appeasement usually get shorter with geometric progression. It took Putin only five years after Georgia to strike again. The longer he stays in power, the more his insecurity increases. He sees territorial conquest as a means of achieving political rejuvenation and longevity. With the Crimea "referendum" a new clock has started to tick. The longer the west's wishful thinking lasts, the bigger this problem will become.

*Mikheil Saakashvili is a Georgian politician and was the third President of Georgia for two consecutive terms from 25 January 2004 to 17 November 2013. He is the founder and leader of the United National Movement Party.*

[Article 3.](#)

CNN

## **Israel, Abbas face 5 realities on peace**

Aaron David Miller

March 14, 2014 -- Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian President who will sit with U.S. President Barack Obama on Monday to discuss the state—and the fate--of Secretary of State John Kerry's peace process is a good man and most likely the best partner for peace negotiations that Washington, this Israeli government or any other is likely to have. He's rational, enlightened and a leader who eschews both violence and the dream that somehow, sometime, the armed struggle, or demography will deliver Palestinians their state.

But there's only one pesky problem: Under current circumstances, he cannot deliver his side of a comprehensive peace agreement with Israel. Here's why.

### **The Palestinian consensus**

Abbas is in a bind. He's trapped by traditional Palestinian negotiating positions and a narrative that is almost impossible to alter. These positions include: June 1967 borders with minor territorial adjustments, a capital in East Jerusalem, security arrangements that don't suck every bit of sovereignty out of Palestinian statehood, and an acceptable answer to the question of what to do about the volatile issue of "right of return."

To diverge significantly from them would end his political viability and perhaps his life. Even the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat—whose power, authority and legitimacy conferred some discretion and flexibility--wouldn't agree to anything short of this consensus. I once heard Arafat remark, at the Camp David Summit: You won't walk behind my coffin. And Abbas has little of Arafat's street cred. He is head of the Palestinian Authority, and the Palestinian Liberation Organization's executive committee, but is master of none.

### **Not enough urgency**

The idea that you could reconcile this Palestinian consensus with Benjamin Netanyahu's bottom lines—assuming you could identify them-- is fantastical. And his self-image is not to become the midwife or father of a Palestinian state based on Abbas' requirements or needs; it is to water them down with U.S. help. Even then the idea that he's prepared to yield to Abbas on borders or Jerusalem is highly improbable.

The history of peacemaking on the Israeli side is, to be sure, a history of transformed hawks (see Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert). But Netanyahu is different, and circumstances have

changed. The region is in turmoil, and Iran is his real priority. There is neither enough pain nor prospect of gain for him to urgently make this deal.

### **Divided Palestinians**

Hamas has been greatly weakened. The ouster of Egypt's Mohammed Morsy, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's troubles and Hamas' need to distance itself from Syria have blocked its options. But, between Fatah and Hamas, the Palestinian national movement is still badly divided and resembles a kind of Palestinian Noah's Ark: There are two of everything: statelets, security services, patrons, constitutions and visions of what Palestine is and even where it is.

The real problem is that any reconciliation of the two factions will likely further harden Palestinian positions, creating a "tradeoff": internal peace in the Palestinian ranks but more tension with Israel, and probably the United States, too. And yet, unless the Palestinians find a way to assume control over the forces of violence in Palestine -- in short, one authority and one gun -- it's hard to see how Israel, even if it could be persuaded to withdraw from the West Bank on paper, would ever do so in practice.

The Obama administration understandably cannot deal with the Hamas issue now. Instead, it seems to subscribe to the "Field of Dreams" school of diplomacy: If you build it, they will come. According to this logic, an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would leave an already weakened Hamas no choice but to put up or shut up. The only problem is that for that to work, the "it" that they build would have to be an agreement so compelling that the vast majority of Palestinians would rally around it. That's very hard to see now.

### **No help from Obama**

The President would like to be a historic peacemaker. And he made clear in his 2012 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg that he is very frustrated with Prime Minister Netanyahu. But to have a fight with this Israeli Prime Minister over the possibility of a long-shot Israeli-Palestinian deal doesn't add up. A productive fight with Israel that ends up producing a historic peace deal where everyone wins is one thing. But right now that deal is nowhere in sight.

Indeed, right now Obama's priorities are Ukraine, Iran, preserving a domestic legacy and maintaining Democratic control of the Senate in the

upcoming midterm elections. He has little incentive or capacity to forcefully press Netanyahu for a deal.

People may think that a second-term president freed from the need for re-election is free to take a big gamble. But it has really never been the absence of political constraints as much as it is the presence of real opportunity that drives presidents. Obama doesn't want to fail.

### **No cause for alarm?**

The odds of a conflict-ending agreement between Netanyahu and Abbas in which the core issues that drive the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are resolved are slim to none. Think outcomes, not solutions.

But this isn't a cause for despair. Kerry's relentlessness and skill in engaging the parties have created a process that will at least survive the U.S.-imposed April deadline for a peace deal and live at least until year's end. Nobody wants to be blamed for the demise of the Kerry process, and both Netanyahu and Abbas likely wonder--and worry about--what will happen if there is no process.

Israel probably doesn't have a Plan B. And Abbas' fallback -- to go to the United Nations and rely on the international community and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement -- doesn't offer much promise without Washington pressuring Israel.

And so Abbas' meeting at the White House will go well enough. The President deeply cares about the Palestinians and their cause. And while Abbas won't betray Palestinian positions for Obama's legacy, neither will he humiliate the President. Kerry may yet squeeze out enough from the two sides to produce a piece of paper.

In any event, it won't be the Palestinians who spoil the party. President Abbas will almost certainly tell the President, paper or not, deadline be damned, let us continue the important work of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. Peace may not be around the corner, but more negotiations almost certainly are.

*Aaron David Miller is vice president for new initiatives and a distinguished scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.*

## **AIPAC and CPAC in town**

James Zogby

13 March, 2014 -- This past week, Washington hosted two of my least favourite annual events.

It began with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) bringing their faithful to town to lobby for whatever the government of Israel might want at this particular moment. At week's end, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) was in Washington rallying their crowd to bash the president and defend their "true conservative" principles.

During the past year, several commentators have, on occasion, pronounced both groups weakened and wounded, possibly fatally so. Conservatives were seen to be cannibalising themselves, while AIPAC was reeling from having picked and lost two separate fights with President Barack Obama: Syria and Iran sanctions. Based on the size and enthusiasm of their respective crowds and from the "red meat" thrown out by major speakers, neither group appeared to be in their death throes, but looks can be deceiving.

AIPAC is far from defeated. They still define the playing field and roles of engagement for most Middle East issues. Their operatives are well placed in Washington and their influence is real. Three years ago, they and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu took on the US administration over whether or not the 1967 borders should be the basis for a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and they won. AIPAC's allies in Congress turned out en masse to give the Israeli prime minister multiple standing ovations as he scolded the president and rejected his terms for peace.

This year was different. AIPAC hoped its lobbying might work to push the White House to attack Syria. They lost. Then, after President Obama launched negotiations with Iran in an effort to limit their nuclear programme, AIPAC again challenged the White House, calling for new sanctions against Iran. The president fought back indicating that because such new legislation would have the effect of sabotaging the negotiations, he would veto any such effort. Once again, AIPAC lost.

As a fall back, AIPAC put everything it could think of into what it called the US-Israel Strategic Partnership Act — a bill that would deepen the already too deep US ties with Israel in trade, technology, defence and intelligence sharing. When they threw in adding Israel to the “visa waiver” programme, it was a step too far. Arab Americans lobbied hard that it would be fundamentally wrong for the US to grant Israel this benefit when Israel regularly discriminates against Arab American who attempt to enter Israel or the occupied territories. In the end, AIPAC lost. The bill passed, but without the automatic “visa waiver” provision.

If all that weren't enough, the “coup de grace” came the day before Netanyahu was to arrive at the White House to meet with the president. The Atlantic Magazine published a long interview with President Obama in which he alternately challenges, cautions, scolds, and warns Netanyahu about the need for Israel to make the right decisions to advance peace. There was no mention of all these setbacks at the AIPAC meeting. Administration officials came pledging their “unshakable” devotion to Israel. Senators, Democrats and Republicans alike, took aim at the administration for not loving Israel enough. Netanyahu, as always, was passionately spinning his webs of deceit.

While listening to the speeches at the AIPAC meeting it might appear that nothing had changed, but it has. The group has suffered a few blows, and the most they have had to endure in a short period. They may not show it, but they feel it.

As the week closed out, CPAC gathered to lay out their agenda and hear from conservative leaders — and those Republicans who may have strayed from the “true faith” and now need to burnish their conservative credentials.

As in past years, the speeches at CPAC were focused on rage over all things Obama. There were funny lines, to be sure, but a lot of angry and mean-spirited attacks as well. Freshmen Senators Rand Paul and Ted Cruz were the crowd-pleasing “flavours of the year”. Others like New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and Senator Marco Rubio were there. They were once held in high esteem but, after displaying some moderate tendencies, have fallen out of favour. Their appearances were designed to atone and receive the movement's blessing.

A highlight of the event is the CPAC's "straw poll", as delegates vote for the person they most want to be the party's standard-bearer. It has become a major media event. This year, Rand Paul won the straw poll by a significant margin. In second place was Ted Cruz. Between them, Paul and Cruz garnered almost one-half the votes. Christie and Rubio finished way back in fourth and fifth place.

Aside from the energy and enthusiasm of the weekend, conservatives have a real problem. Here's what they agree on: they don't like Obama and they don't like government. They control Congress and can block most anything the president puts forward, but their movement is divided and their leaders don't much like each other. In primary after primary, ultra-conservatives are challenging more mainstream GOP'ers, sometimes defeating them, sometimes weakening them, and other times forcing them to adopt policies that make them less electable.

Conservatives also have come to realise that they have a demographic problem. The US electorate is dramatically changing. Black, Latino, and Asian voters are increasing with each election cycle. These groups vote for Democrats, as do significant majorities of young voters and educated women. Because conservative policies are so out of touch with the needs of these groups, the base of the conservative movement continues to shrink, further reducing the GOP's chances in national contests. Conservatives know they have these problems, but continue to blissfully ignore them. When listening to the fiery rhetoric and watching the enthusiasm at both AIPAC and CPAC, it becomes apparent that both groups retain the capacity to create problems for opponents. They may be down, but they are not out.

*The writer is president of the Arab American Institute.*

[Article 5.](#)

The Washington Institute

## **Mahmoud Abbas and the 'Jewish State'**

[Robert Satloff](#)

March 14, 2014 -- In refusing to recognize Israel as the "Jewish state," the Palestinian leader is denying a fact that even Arafat was willing to admit.

On my desk sits a replica of a tourist guide printed in 1924 by the Supreme Muslim Council of Jerusalem, the highest Muslim communal body in Palestine. Thousands of travelers to the Holy Land in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s learned from this guide that Solomon's Temple, the holiest site in Judaism, was located on the site now occupied by the Haram al-Sharif, or "Noble Enclosure," which includes the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque.

The fact that the head of the Supreme Muslim Council was Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the Britain-appointed mufti of Jerusalem and father of Palestinian nationalism who later infamously collaborated with the Nazis, lent special credence to this statement of Muslim recognition of historic Jewish connection to Jerusalem.

Flash forward to July 2000, when President Bill Clinton hosted a fateful peace summit at Camp David. In one critical encounter, Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat -- who effectively inherited the mantle of leadership from him -- rejected what his mentor had affirmed decades earlier. As Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross later recalled, Arafat told Clinton that Solomon's Temple was never in Jerusalem. If any Jewish temple existed, Arafat suggested, it was in the West Bank town of Nablus. The summit collapsed in acrimony. Within weeks, Palestinians launched the Second Intifada, which cost thousands of lives and dealt prospects for peace a terrible blow. As President Barack Obama prepares to host Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House on Monday, amid a violent flare-up of tensions between Israel and Islamic extremists in Gaza, history may be poised to repeat itself. Once again, a Palestinian leader is taking an even more rejectionist position than his predecessor. Today's issue is the question of the "Jewish state." This is shorthand for Israel's demand that Palestinians specifically accept that the goal of current diplomacy is the mutual recognition of two independent, sovereign states -- Palestine, the nation-state of the Palestinian people, and Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people. Abbas affirmed last week that he would flatly refuse such a formula: "No way," he said. The fact that he is, as Obama has said, the most moderate Palestinian leader Israel has ever dealt with only lends gravity to the fact that he has adopted such a hardline view.

On the surface, it is difficult to understand what all the ruckus is about. Israel, of course, was built by Jews as a haven for Jews. The 1947 ██████████.

resolution that gave international imprimatur to the partition of British-mandated Palestine mentioned the phrase "Jewish state" dozens of times. Surveys over the last decade by respected Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki show that 40 to 52 percent of Palestinians would accept recognition of Israel as the "Jewish state" -- levels of support, it is important to note, achieved without Abbas's public endorsement. Even Arafat, the uber-nationalist, understood this. The same Arafat who rejected the idea of a historic Jewish connection to Jerusalem and orchestrated numerous terrorist attacks in his bitter fight against Israel accepted the contemporary reality that Israel -- whether he liked it or not -- was the "Jewish state." And he said so publicly, on at least three occasions. On Nov. 18, 1988, in the early days of the first Palestinian uprising, Arafat convened the Palestine National Council, the proto-parliament of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), to issue a declaration of independence. That document, a Palestinian hybrid of the American and Israeli declarations of independence, proclaimed the establishment of a Palestinian state based on the United Nations resolution "which partitioned Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state." This description was not simply a throwaway line, but rather the considered position of the Palestinian leadership at the time. On Dec. 8, 1988, the New York Times reported on a press conference Arafat held with several American peace activists. At the event, Arafat said: "We accept two states, the Palestine state and the Jewish state of Israel." Sixteen years later, in an interview published on June 17, 2004, Arafat reaffirmed his position. Asked by Israel's liberal daily newspaper Haaretz if he understood that "Israel has to keep being a Jewish state," the PLO leader replied, "Definitely." He later said to the interviewer that it was "clear and obvious" that the Palestine refugee problem needs to be resolved in a way that does not change the Jewish character of Israel through an influx of millions of returning Palestinians.

Reasonably enough, Palestinians are asking today why Israel insists on them recognizing its status as the "Jewish state," when past Israeli leaders did not make this demand in peace talks with Egypt or Jordan. The reason is because conflicts with those countries were, by the time of peace talks, essentially territorial disputes, resolved through the equitable drawing of boundaries and the creation of mutually satisfactory security arrangements.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is deeper -- it is existential. While many Palestinians suspect that Israel will forever deny them independence, deep in the minds of many Israelis is the idea that Palestinians have a long-term plan to destroy Israel. Formal recognition of Israel as the rightful national home of the Jewish people, which would exist side by side with the rightful national home of the Palestinian people, would go far toward calming such fears. The fact that Abbas still refuses to offer this recognition only deepens those fears.

Perhaps Abbas's refusal is tactical -- an attempt to extract concessions from Israel in exchange for saying the same words Arafat uttered years ago. Or perhaps his refusal is as real and portentous as Arafat's refusal to accept a Jewish connection to Jerusalem.

To his credit, Obama has understood the centrality of the "Jewish state" issue. Despite the pressure he has exerted on Israel to stop building in Jerusalem, release jailed terrorists, or make painful concessions in peace talks, the president has never wavered from his characterization of "the Jewish state of Israel."

That position will be put to the test in Obama's meeting with Abbas on Monday. The president will face a choice: He can recite how even the iconic Arafat recognized Israel as the Jewish state, remind Abbas of the years lost and lives wasted since the last time a Palestinian leader took a harder line than his predecessor, and -- taking a page from his recent public warnings to Israel -- threaten Abbas with a dire future of isolation and irrelevance if he doesn't grab this opportunity for peace. Or alternatively, he could punt -- letting Abbas keep both the accolades of a moderate and the positions of a rejectionist.

For a president confronted elsewhere by metaphors of the past -- Vladimir Putin as Adolf Hitler, the return of the Cold War -- how Obama deals with the "Jewish state" issue in his meeting with Abbas will determine whether, in the Israeli-Palestinian context, history is moving forward or once again moving backward.

*Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute.*

[Article 6.](#)

The Financial Times

# **Lunch with Prince Turki al-Faisal**

Edward Luce

March 14, 2014 – The man who headed Saudi Arabia’s intelligence service for 24 years talks to Edward Luce about equal rights for Saudi women, and which country has the best spies

I have been waiting 20 minutes before Prince Turki al-Faisal arrives, looking flustered. “My driver had to drop me off five blocks away,” he says apologetically. “All the streets are cordoned off.” I tell him the brouhaha is for Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, who is in Washington, DC, for the week. The former head of Saudi intelligence laughs and says: “That’s just another inconvenience that Netanyahu is causing.”

We have arranged to have lunch at the Occidental Grill & Seafood, a smart restaurant very near the White House. In addition to the roadblocks, there is a lot of snow outside. Turki, 69, is dressed in several layers and is wearing a dark trilby hat, which he entrusts to the coat check staff.

I have requested a booth to minimise the noise. It helps but unfortunately not so much as to block out the restaurant’s soundtrack of cheesy 1950s hits.

Having been head of [Saudi Arabia](#)’s General Intelligence Directorate (GID) for 24 years – stepping down in 2001 just 10 days before the 9/11 attacks – Turki is probably the most experienced spy on the planet. Since then he has been Saudi Arabia’s ambassador to the UK and Ireland and then to the United States. Now he runs a think-tank in Riyadh, the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, and travels the world giving lectures and meeting friends. It sounds like a nice life, I say. “For me it’s heaven on earth,” he replies.

A scion of Saudi Arabia’s royal family, the House of Saud, Turki is the youngest son of King Faisal, who was assassinated in 1975. Turki’s brother, Saud al-Faisal, is foreign minister, and cousins and brothers dominate the upper echelons of the government.

Turki is in town for several weeks to lecture at Georgetown University, which he attended as an undergraduate (leaving in 1968). Before that he was at Lawrenceville, a boarding school near Princeton. Washington must

feel like a second home to him, I observe. “Yes but I have plenty of second homes,” he says. “There is London, Paris. I travel a lot. I meet people. I say what I want to say. I am having the time of my life – Alhamdulillah [praise be to Allah].”

Since he first set foot here as a teenager almost 60 years ago, surely America must be first among equals of Turki’s second homes, I suggest. He nods. We are interrupted by the waitress coming to take our order. Turki orders a house steak, medium cooked, and an endive salad. He is drinking iced tea. I choose the Maine lobster roll and a side salad. ■ drinking Diet Coke. Turki is keen to get back to his thoughts on America.

“There are certain characteristics about Americans that I find constant,” he says. “One of them is a tremendous curiosity about you. They want to know more about you – they ask about your family. It is a quality that brings you closer to them. They read up about you before. Nowadays it is on Google. That I found throughout my engagement with America, as a teenager, as a man of responsibility and now as a senior citizen. Americans are also very hospitable – they are always ready to host you in some form or another. These are constant qualities that I find very endearing.” I wonder whether being a Saudi prince helps in this regard but say nothing. As our dishes arrive – both courses are put on the table at once – I ask what he thinks has changed in the US over the years. In between enthusiastic jabs at his steak, Turki speaks almost continuously. His demeanour is warm but I am struck by his piercing eyes. He clearly loves talking about America. “When I was here in the 1960s, LBJ was still president – he had it all. He did the Great Society, internal social reform, expansion of the welfare state, he also conducted a massive external war in Vietnam – 500,000 Americans were there,” he says. But things have changed. America is now in an era of choices, yet it seems incapable of making them. “In Johnson’s days when I was in college, he was very good at bringing in the Republicans to support him,” says Turki.

“Now there is polarisation – that sense of waywardness and distraction. Two extremes pulling American society and we don’t have the centre pulling them back. The middle used to absorb – there were shock absorbers. It doesn’t do that any more.”

How, I ask, do America’s internal problems affect the Middle East? At the mention of his own corner of the world, Turki’s pace slows measurably. He

reminds me that Barack Obama is about to make his first trip to Saudi Arabia since 2009. Back then the president was accused by US conservatives of “kowtowing” to the Saudi king after making a long bow. The atmosphere has since changed. Relations between Washington and Riyadh have rarely been worse. The al-Sauds got along famously with both Bushes but there is great mistrust of the Obama administration, particularly over its pursuit of nuclear talks with Iran, which Saudi Arabia sees as its arch-enemy. “Let’s say that people are talking about the American retreat, particularly in the Middle East,” Turki says.

“For the Kingdom, it is a matter of putting our foot down, where in the past we did not. It is a matter of accepting reality. You have to acknowledge the world has changed. Obama’s speech to the UN last September made it clear that America will be concentrating exclusively on [Palestine](#) and Iran, and for everywhere else – Syria, Libya, Sudan, Yemen, Mali, Iraq, Egypt, and so on – you will have to fend for yourself. So whether it is collecting your [Saudi Arabia’s] own resources to do that, or reaching out to others in the area to help you overcome these challenges, we are adjusting to the reality of a retreating America.”

I am mindful that Turki remains a controversial figure in the west. In 2004, Paris Match was ordered to pay Prince Turki damages after the French magazine had accused him of foreknowledge of the 9/11 attacks. The next year a US court ruled that he and other Saudis were immune from prosecution over 9/11 (although that is now under appeal). Turki has called al-Qaeda an “evil cult”. But the fact that he stepped down just 10 days before the attacks was poor optics. Was 9/11 an intelligence failure, I ask? “Yes, across the board,” he replies. “Now when you look back on it, signals should have been picked up that weren’t, information that should have been shared wasn’t – across the whole intelligence community. I know there is a lot of work being done to get away from those failures, not reading signs correctly, etc. That’s the main reason there hasn’t been the same spectacular events as happened in 2001. Not just in America but also in Saudi Arabia.”

Turki has by now polished off his steak. The greens to its side are left untouched. The waitress asks if he wants to see a dessert menu. After some debate he goes for the cheesecake with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Buoyed by his example, I opt for the crème brûlée. I get a double espresso

to go with it and Turki orders a regular coffee. I am curious to hear his assessment of America's intelligence capabilities today. I ask him to rank the best in the world in terms of data gathering, interpretation of data, and operations. Turki relishes the question.

"In terms of raw data, definitely the Americans have it over everybody because of their technical and financial means," he says. "In terms of human resources, I would rate the British as having the most expert human capabilities on specific subjects – at that time [when he was head of Saudi intelligence], of course, it was the Soviet Union – the bane of everybody. To get a first-hand report from a British analyst always had that extra edge and knowledge that you felt comfortable in accepting as being authoritative. Probably in terms of operational capability and in terms of unleashing your capabilities, I would say the Israelis are the most professional, although they've committed lots of mistakes. But they do accomplish their missions."

No mention of the Chinese? "That's what has changed the most since 2001," he says. "I can only tell you that Chinese intelligence didn't loom large in those days."

The cheesecake seems to have accelerated Turki's rate of words per minute. He is positively buzzing. You obviously love sweets, I blurt out suddenly – you're a typical Bedouin [the original desert nomads of the Arabian peninsula]. Turki looks puzzled at my observation and ignores it. I feel slightly embarrassed at having indulged a stereotype and then risk more by asking him whether he likes dates. Luckily this gets him back on track. "I love dates," he says. He mentions that his name, Turki, was given because he was the youngest of eight sons. It means the "unripened date that is left on the branch", which will be picked later in the season. "Yes, I love dates passionately. I eat them every day." Are you proud of having been born in [the holy city of ] Mecca, I ask, now in full conversational risk mode. "Well, it's a privilege, but not especially," he says. "It's fun to tell people that ■■■ a Meccawi."

Having drunk my coffee, I move back on to international affairs, asking what he thinks of Vladimir Putin's incursion into Crimea? "■■■ reminded of children's stories," Turki says. "The wolf is attacking a pack [sic] of sheep. It is gobbling up one of them and going about its business eating and the rest of the sheep are bleating." At this point he mimics a sheep:

“Baaaaaa baaaaaaa.” There is a twinkle in his eye. “This is what is happening today. While the wolf is eating the sheep, there is no shepherd to come to the rescue of the pack. This is where we find ourselves today.” But how should the west respond? I remind him that a few months ago he had criticised Obama for having set a red line on Syria’s use of chemical weapons and then failed to act on it. The line then turns pink and eventually white, Turki had added. The Obama administration had reacted testily to his words. “If you are going to set a red line, you must act on the red line,” Turki says now. “This is what Putin is very much a master of. He has kept quiet. You didn’t hear him roaring, or boasting, or anything like that. He is quiet. The rest of the world is going baaaaaaa. It’s a terrible situation.” But what can the world reasonably do? Turki smiles. “You’re British, he says, “so you would remember the charge of the light brigade [the disastrous British cavalry charge against well-defended Russian forces during the Crimean war].”

That having been settled, I turn the conversation to Saudi Arabia. Is Turki concerned that his country has such a poor reputation in the west, and particularly here in the US? I mention the ban on women drivers, among other things. “When I was ambassador talking to British, Irish and American audiences, I used to ask the question, ‘Who is the most prized woman in Saudi Arabia today?’ And the answer is, ‘A woman with a job.’ When I was growing up, the head of a family considered it shameful to ask his wife or daughter to get a job. He thought he should take care of his womenfolk. Because of education, the woman with a job became something of a prize and she brings in more income to her parents, she’s looked up to by her siblings, and she’s sought after by suitors.”

But she still isn’t allowed to drive, I point out. He nods. “But what I hear from people in my entourage, the women in my family, is that driving is not that important. What is important to them is equal legal rights, whether it is inheritance, divorce, childcare, things that affect women’s livelihood. They say let us concentrate on improving these things first and not expend our energy on driving, because that will come by itself.”

As the bill arrives, I tell him I have to head to a briefing on the latest Obama budget proposal. Turki laughs. “Is there any chance of that being passed?” he asks. No, I reply. “America is acting like a third world country,” he replies. Then after a pause, he adds: “I watched the Oscars the

other night. And I turned to the person next to me and said, ‘You know, this is what America is best at – putting on a parade, crowds of people coming in and cheering and eating popcorn and living a wonderful life. In everyone’s minds, this is what America is about. They live the good life.’” I say that I agree with him in the main, except that life is getting tougher for the middle class. He interrupts: “But it’s true, most Americans have the good life. They have those unique qualities of inquisitiveness and hospitality and they think of their country as nirvana. Every once in a while they get woken up by someone like Mr Putin – they get a reality check.” He laughs. I half-expect him to mimic a wolf. He puts on his hat and we walk together into the snow outside.

*[Edward Luce](#) is the FT’s chief US commentator*

[Article 7](#)

Asharq Al Awsat

## **Obama, the Bomb and the Fatwa**

[Amir Taheri](#)

14 Mar, 2014 -- When lobbying to prevent further sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program, US President Barack Obama often refers to a fatwa, an Islamic religious opinion. According to Obama, the fatwa supposedly issued by “Supreme Guide” Ali Khamenei, confirms Tehran’s claims that its nuclear program is entirely peaceful. Obama does not quote the text of the mysterious fatwa, nor does he tell us where and when he saw it.

The trouble is that no one has actually seen the fatwa, although many people comment on it. In a bizarre twist, some mullahs even quote Obama as the source that confirms the existence of the fatwa. “Our Supreme Guide has issued a fatwa against the use of nuclear weapons, as confirmed by the President of the United States,” Ayatollah Mahmoud Yusefwand told the official Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) last week.

Presented as a “Theological Expert of the Scientific Center,” the ayatollah was one of more than 100 mullahs and government officials who attended a two-day conference in Tehran on “A Theological View of Nuclear

Weapons.” None of the speakers claimed that he had seen the text of the fatwa. Nor did anyone suggest that the fatwa—if there were such a thing—was meant to stop the Islamic Republic from securing the means of making a bomb.

A few speakers, including Yusefwand, suggested that the use, though not the building and/or stockpiling of such weapons, might be haram, or forbidden. “Islam uses the term ifsad [corruption] to ban a number of weapons of mass destruction,” Yusefwand said. “The term specifically designates poisoning water resources, the cutting down of forests and the use of arson as a weapon of war.”

The ayatollah then wondered whether the principle could also apply to nuclear weapons. He did not offer a definite opinion. In other words, no such ban exists at the moment.

Another theologian, Ali-Reza Qorban-Nia, explained that adopting an “Islamic position” on nuclear weapons would not be easy. On the one hand, he argued, such weapons could be banned because they “are blind in targeting,” in the sense that they could “wipe out believers and kuffar [infidels] alike.” On the other hand, “Shi’ite Islamic rules of war” strongly recommend the use of any weapon that could accelerate the destruction of the enemies of the Umma. According to Qorban-Nia, this is indicated in the principle of ma-yarji bel-fatah, or “that which creates hopes of victory.” Thus, if a nuclear bomb could ensure ultimate victory for the believers, it should not be shunned.

To confuse matters further, Ayatollah Bahman Akbari claimed that Khamenei’s statements, though not the fatwa, which may not even exist, show that the Islamic Republic sees nuclear weapons as “a deterrent that assures the reciprocal destruction of the adversary.” In other words, developing a nuclear arsenal for deterrent purposes could be licit. Akbari also suggested that the issue of a nuclear arsenal be examined “in the context of other weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological.” This means that nuclear weapons should not be discussed as a special category, presumably the ultimate evil.

During the seminar, two theologians, Mahmoud Hekmati-Nia and Hashem Zaafarani, criticized Akbari for not actually referring to Khamenei’s fatwa. The reason, of course, was that neither Akbari nor anyone else had seen the non-existent document.

The closest reference to Khamenei's fatwa came in a speech by the spokesman for the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency, Behruz Kamalvand, when he said: "Our Supreme Leader has fixed our slogan: 'Nuclear weapons for no nation, nuclear energy for all nations!'" In other words, the Islamic Republic would be prepared to abandon the military aspects of its nuclear program only in the context of global nuclear disarmament. And, if others had nuclear weapons, why should Iran deny itself such an instrument?

While the conference was under way, Ayatollah Hassan Mamduhi, a member of the Assembly of (Clerical) Experts, offered an enigmatic quotation from the late Ayatollah Aziz-Allah Khoshwaqt to the effect that the Hidden Imam would conclude his Grand Occultation only when his "sword" was ready. "The Return of the Mahdi is conditional on what our nuclear scientists are doing," Mamduhi said, without elaborating. The Tehran media, however, claimed that "The Sword of the Imam" in the modern world could only mean a nuclear arsenal.

A week later, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Council of the Guardians of the Constitution, claimed in a Friday sermon that the return of the Hidden Imam was "imminent" thanks to "fantastic progress" achieved by the Islamic Republic in Iran. Ayatollah Khoshwaqt, who died last year, was regarded as Khamenei's teacher and "guru" and a strong opponent of negotiations to limit any aspect of the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. His views have found echoes among a number of Khomeinist clerics who argue that, with the US in retreat under Obama, there is no reason to make concessions to the P5+1 group.

One prominent cleric, Ayatollah Mahmoud Nabawian, has published a 40-page essay arguing that Tehran is now in a position to tell the rest of the world to "get lost." Another critic is Muhammad-Javad Larijani, son of an ayatollah and brother of Chief Justice Sadeq Larijani. He argues that Islamic powers should only ask non-Islamic nations to "submit" to God's "Final Word." In 1988, he carried a letter from Ayatollah Khomeini to Mikhail Gorbachev, inviting him to convert to Shi'ism.

Obama would do well to consider three points before beating the drums for the mullahs. The first is that the famous fatwa either does not exist or is couched in the style of obfuscation that would open it to countless interpretations. The least that Obama should do is demand to see the fatwa

that he is defending as a text that trumps even international law. The second point is that Khamenei, though a major political figure in Tehran, is not generally regarded as a theological heavyweight. In religious terms, any of the 10 or 12 grand ayatollahs and hundreds of lower-ranked clerics could overrule Khamenei's fatwas.

Finally, Obama should know that the Iran nuclear project is a political issue and not a religious issue to be settled with a fatwa, which is, in any case, just an opinion and in no way legally binding on any individual, let alone the Islamic Republic as a nation-state.

*Amir Taheri was the executive editor-in-chief of the daily Kayhan in Iran from 1972 to 1979. He has worked at or written for innumerable publications, published eleven books, and has been a columnist for Asharq Al-Awsat since 1987.*