
EDITOR'S NOTE

A significant milestone was passed this month: the sixtieth anniversary of the Jewish triumph and the Palestinian catastrophe. In most years, only the birth of Israel is noted in the American media, except by fringe periodicals like this one. This year, however, the *nakba* was marked as well, even by such establishment publications as *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker*. Who had so much as seen the word in print until recently, or heard “ethnic cleansing” or “apartheid” applied to Israeli policies? Then, on May 15, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni instructed the United Nations and the Palestinian Authority that the word *nakba* was verboten. Apparently, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon had used it in expressing anniversary condolences to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The use of such a word implies that there might have been an injustice for which Jews are responsible. Israel refuses to accept this, as it would imply a moral requirement to deal with Palestinian suffering. In the official Israeli view, Jews are victims by definition and never perpetrators.

Jews all over the world have been moving beyond this position, however, as can be seen in an act by the student government of Brandeis University, whose student body is 50 percent Jewish. The group voted against celebrating Israel's birthday (see www.philipweiss.org), partly because it would be an affront to the many Palestinian and Muslim students on campus. A generational shift among Americans of all heritages is occurring, observable in the Democratic presidential race, as well. The young are waking up politically, and this time they are not taking to the streets. They have the Net; they inhabit a multicultural world; their sports and entertainment stars are black, white and subtler hues; their workplaces and schools have always been integrated; they have virtual friends in other countries. It is becoming more difficult here to argue for a racial or ethnic hammerlock on rights and privileges. Israel's activists and political agitators are also working courageously, against great odds, to change the status quo, whether that means two states or one. Here in America, doubts are even being expressed by mainstream commentators about the future of Israel as a Jewish state, given all the non-Jews it now rules and the durability of the settlements and supporting infrastructure it has built in the lands from which it has displaced them.

The generational shift will eventually result in changes in U.S. foreign policy, but change never occurs without a struggle. The policies that have generated the “war on terror,” the botched military campaigns in Afghanistan (see Aras article, p. 39) and Iraq, and the incubating wars against Iran and its allies (particularly Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas — see our symposium, p. 1) cannot be fixed without a great deal of talent and toughness in Washington. For one thing, doing so would require the president to make decisions based on judgments of U.S. interests rather than those attributed to Israel, as the Lobby insists (see the attempt by Jeffrey Goldberg to manipulate Barack Obama into declaring his love for Israel, www.jeffreygoldberg.theatlantic.com). Things are changing, but topics that are increasingly aired in public in Israel and Europe and in private in the United States remain taboo for open discussion here, particularly during an election year.

The silence is aided by the fear-mongering and constitutional corner-cutting that have accompanied the “Global War on Terrorism.” The American adoption of Israeli-inspired strategies and tactics to deal with enemies branded as “terrorists” has produced an occupation regime in Iraq that resembles the one in the Palestinian territories, complete with closures, checkpoints and even walls. Meanwhile, the Israeli counterinsurgency technique of “targeted killing” creates more terrorism, perpetuating the cycle, justifying the never-ending fight against Muslim fanatics while creating ever more of them, bent on revenge. The abject misery of Gaza should deeply distress every American, yet the atrocities in Darfur and Tibet, which Americans have neither funded nor played a role in causing or shielding from international condemnation, arouse far more public outrage and guilt.

U.S. officials now reflexively emulate Israel's example of branding opponents as immoral, refusing to deal with them, and attempting to ostracize them internationally. In the 1970s, Israel did

not want the United States to even talk to the Palestine Liberation Organization. We went along, offering the rationale that the PLO was a terrorist organization and “we do not negotiate with terrorists.” (That was never quite the case, as Ronald Reagan’s negotiations with Lebanese hostage-takers demonstrated.) To add irony to such posturing, we now insist on talking only to Palestinians associated with the PLO and refuse any dialog with Hamas, the political movement that defeated them in a free and fair election. The Israelis insist on this U.S. stand but are today themselves involved in not-so-secret negotiations with the officially “terrorist” Hamas, albeit through proxies. These talks are not part of the formal, officially touted (but transparently disingenuous) “peace process,” so they evidently don’t count. The bankruptcy of policies of strict non-intercourse with adversaries could be seen last week, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice begged Arab states to ask the Iranians and Syrians (with whom we avoid dialog) not to interfere in Lebanon, where France, Israel and the United States interfere regularly.

The Islamic Republic is now the official culprit for a wide range of American and Israeli troubles from Iraq, to Syria, to Lebanon, to Palestine. It is said that Iran has imported Hezbollah guerrillas to train Iraqi insurgents to kill American troops. Hezbollah has enjoyed great political and military prestige since it withstood the Israeli attack of August 2006. Last week, provoked by an ill-considered government challenge to its cell-phone network and role in security at the Beirut airport, Hezbollah showed that it could, if it wished, overthrow the U.S.- and Saudi-backed Lebanese government at will (see Tony Sullivan’s prediction of these events in our last issue). Thus, in rather short order, Tehran and its allies have seemed to show that they can spoil the U.S. surge in Iraq, the status quo in Lebanon and the Annapolis plan for Palestine. Few believe that they have abandoned their aspirations for nuclear weapons, though they may have postponed efforts at bomb-building. The Bush administration’s legacy in the Middle East is a region-wide strategic collapse in the American ability to influence events and outcomes. Could the results of the diplomacy and engagement the administration rejected as a craven alternative have been worse?

Some analysts continue to warn that at least part of the administration is intent on a military strike against Iran, but the Pentagon has apparently nixed this. That’s the good news. Ominous signs are everywhere, however, of plans for a long, hard slog ahead. On May 14, Establishment spokesman Thomas R. Friedman of *The New York Times* declared in his column that a new cold war had begun. The role of the USSR would now be played by the Islamic Republic of Iran, a weak, developing country that can by no means pass as a peer competitor of the United States, even if the allies that recent American policies have helped it gain are counted in. What is going on here? Friedman is considered wise about the Middle East, despite his devotion to shock and awe for handling obstreperous countries in the region like Iraq. Iran is now depicted as so threatening that Israel might have to give up the gains of 1967 in order to keep those of 1948. Or, even more frightening to Zionists, Israel might have to become a state of all its citizens and the many others whom it governs without their consent.

Anne Joyce
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