Israel’s New Wretched Republic

BY GIDEON LEVY

On Tuesday, the Second Republic of Israel was born. It will be different from its predecessor. The First Republic chalked up impressive achievements, accompanied by lies and deceptions. The Second Republic will dispense with any pretense. The new Israel will no longer use disguises. When the ninth Israeli prime minister puts together his fifth government, Israel will look different. With victory at hand and growing confidence, Binyamin Netanyahu will be able to declare the advent of the Second Republic, formed in his image. Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s. No one will be able to claim again that this man hasn’t left his mark on the country and region.

The Second Republic will no longer hide anything taking place in its backyard or try to pretty itself up. It will look exactly like it is. The First Republic was characterized by a mixture of reality and deception: the only democracy in the Middle East, but, at first, one with a military government in Arab areas, then one with a military dictatorship in the occupied territories.

It says it’s the darling of the free world, but it’s also the last colonial regime in the world. It says it’s an esteemed member of the family of nations, but it breaks almost every international law, and it doesn’t annex occupied land so that it can create a false sense of impermanence. It takes pride in this country’s rule of law and Supreme Court, but it has two separate sets of laws based on nationality: it’s Jewish and democratic, but with a built-in contradiction, an unbridgeable one. All that is over. The next government will be a continuation of the previous one, but stronger, more ultra-nationalist and racist, less legitimate and demo-

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Israel’s New Wretched Republic, Gideon Levy, Haaretz  
Binyamin Netanyahu’s Re-Election Underlines Israel’s Apartheid Reality, Saree Makdisi, Los Angeles Times  
With Netanyahu Victory, It’s Time We Admit: Israel Has Become a Dictatorship, Bradley Burston, Haaretz  
Why I’m Glad Netanyahu Won, Dr. James J. Zogby, www.aaiusa.org  
Great March of Return Is Palestinians’ Cry for Justice, Ramzy Baroud, www.alezeera.com  
How the Left Also Dehumanizes Palestinians in Gaza, Susan Abulhawa, www.alezeera.com  
It’s Time to Hold the Israeli Football Association to Account, Mahmoud Sarsak, www.alezeera.com  
Airbnb Officially Reverses Decision to Pull out of Israeli Settlements, Jonathan Ofir, http://mondoweiss.net  
Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib Show Muslim Women Don’t Need Saving, Sahar Aziz, www.alezeera.com  
Do Members of Congress Take Too Many Private Trips to Israel With AIPAC?, Grant F. Smith, www.antiwar.com  
Republicans, Democrats Snipe Over “Anti-Semitism” at AIPAC Conference, Kelly Kennedy, The Arab Weekly  
The Path to War With Iran Is Paved With Sanctions, Joseph Cirincione and Mary Kaszynski, http://lobelog.com  
Algeria, Sudan on the Road to Arab Statehood, Sovereignty And Citizenship, Rami G. Khouri, Agence Global  
Two Rays of Hope in Post-Election Turkey, Yavuz Baydar, The Arab Weekly
Binyamin Netanyahu’s Re-Election
Underlines Israel’s Apartheid Reality

BY SAREE MAKDISHI

The results of Israel’s elections reveal a stark reality: Not only will Binyamin Netanyahu almost inevitably form a coalition government even further to the right than the one he already heads, but the country’s Jewish electorate has given its resounding endorsement to the policies for which he stands.

Netanyahu ran a manifestly racist electoral campaign, reaching out to embrace politicians who openly espouse the desire to expel Palestinians from the state and promising to annex parts of the West Bank, dealing probably a final blow to the moribund two-state solution. What Israeli voters want, clearly, is precisely what is on offer: more dispossession of Palestinians, more home demolitions, more indiscriminate bombing campaigns, more shooting of protesters, more settlements, more restrictions on Gaza and on Palestinian life in general, and deeper and deeper inequality between Jews and non-Jews in Israel and in the territories over which it rules.

The bloc led by Benny Gantz hardly offered much of a difference. Gantz’s own electoral campaign prominently featured a series of videos called “Only the Strong Survive,” which gloated over how many Palestinians the former army chief of staff had killed and how proud he was to have bombed parts of Gaza “back to the Stone Age.” One video lightheartedly offered, “It’s not shameful to be striving for peace.” In the end, Gantz’s tough-guy claims were clearly not enough to convince Israeli voters to depart from a wily politician they knew for a fact—because he’s been doing it for so long—would continue to subjugate the Palestinians.

The takeaway from Israel’s election is simple: The two-state solution is dead.

The voters reaffirmed the de facto or de jure realities. Palestinians have long faced. Last year, Israel legally enshrined a Jewish nation-state law that formalized the superior status of Jews over non-Jews, officially relegating Arabic—the language spoken by the 20 percent of the state’s citizens who are Palestinian—to a secondary status, elided Palestinians’ ongoing presence in and claim to their ancestral land, directed the government to “encourage and promote” Jewish settlement and thereby further segregation, and declared that the right to self-determination in the state is reserved for Jews alone. Netanyahu himself announced on Instagram in March that Israel is “the nation state not of all its citizens but only of the Jewish people.”

International law has a word to describe a state that discriminates along racial lines like this: apartheid.

Two sets of numbers indicate how institutionalized this apartheid is. First,
although Israel exerts control over territory (including the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza) inhabited by around 13 million people, only 5.8 million—80 percent of them Jews, according to Israel’s Central Election Committee—are eligible voters.

When you add to these shameful figures the millions of registered Palestinian refugees living outside Israel and the occupied territories, in enforced exile solely because Israel refuses to allow them to return home, the reality becomes even more stark: Israel’s elections, far from being legitimately democratic, are in fact a manifestation of minority rule. Millions of disenfranchised Palestinians have no say over the structures and patterns of their everyday lives. They are subject to whatever Jewish Israeli voters think they deserve, which is essentially further dehumanization.

But if the Palestinians had the right to vote, what would they vote for? They may not have elections, but opinion polls consistently show that when asked which Palestinian leader they trust the most, the overwhelming winner (48 percent in the most recent poll conducted by the reputable Jerusalem Media and Communications Centre) is “none of the above.” And when asked which party they support, the answer is consistently neither Fatah, which controls the Palestinian Authority (28 percent), nor Hamas (10 percent), but “don’t trust anyone” (41 percent). A solid majority prefer negotiations to armed struggle and an increasing number want a single state, shared with Jews. (Only 0.4 percent want an Islamic state to replace Jewish state of Israel.)

The takeaway from Israel’s election is simple: The two-state solution is dead. What remains is a single racist state whose beneficiaries are satisfied with their government and whose victims are deeply unhappy and desperate for something new: a transition from an apartheid state to a genuinely democratic one in which Palestinians are treated as equal citizens with Israeli Jews, not disenfranchised brutes.

Saree Makdisi is a professor of English at UCLA. This op-ed was first published in the Los Angeles Times, April 10, 2019. Copyright © 2019. Reprinted with permission.

With Netanyahu Victory, It’s Time We Admit: Israel Has Become a Dictatorship

BY BRADLEY BURSTON

If Binyamin Netanyahu manages to bribe his way to a ramshackle, immunity-from-prosecution coalition after his borderline showing in Tuesday’s election, we will all know one thing for sure: Israel has become a dictatorship.

You need look no further than his Election Day obscenities of voter fraud and voter suppression.

First to come to light was the operation in which Netanyahu’s Likud planted 1,200 hidden cameras in polling stations in Arab areas of Israel. Only in Arab areas.

A Netanyahu classic. A totalitarian stroke of genius:

Win Number 1: Soon after the polls open, the cameras are easily discovered, leading to national news bulletins, and focusing attention on the Likud’s role, thus burnishing Netanyahu’s standing among Arab-hating extreme right voters.

Win Number 2: The revelations of the hidden cameras deter Israeli Arabs from coming to the polling stations, further depressing an already low voter turnout and placing Arab parties in danger of elimination from the Knesset.

Win Number 3: Analysts note that a low Arab turnout could mathematically help far-right parties clear the vote minimum, entering the Knesset and thus helping form a new Netanyahu government.

Win Number 4: Netanyahu publicly—and with a straight face—defends the use of the hidden cameras as a means of ensuring a “kosher” election process. This breathes new life into news reports, further deterring Arab voters.

But why stop there? In polling stations in Rishon Letzion, widely seen as a stronghold for Benny Gantz’s Kahol Lavan party, far and away Netanyahu’s chief rival, voters planning on voting for Gantz were shocked to find that all of the ballot slips bearing the Kahol Lavan symbol were missing from the polling booths and unavailable to voters.

In other areas, Kahol Lavan ballot slips in the polling booths had been written on in writing small enough to be undetected by unsuspecting voters, but clear enough to be grounds for disqualifying the slips.

But it was the election itself that provided the surest proof that Israel under his leadership has transitioned to dictatorship—the emergence of the equation under which Netanyahu hopes to trade annexation of West Bank settlements in exchange for immunity from prosecution.

The list is endless, from exploiting the return of a fallen soldier’s remains for political advantage to hosting the Brazilian president—who stated, after a visit to Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, that Nazism was a leftist movement.

In the main, the campaign was marked by a monopolization and manipulation of media. Under the pressure of Netanyahu’s charges of bias and with the past knowledge that the prime minister could bring further harm to careers and media outlets, the media pushed back only meekly against a cascade of lies directed at Gantz.

Not only were the full resources of Sheldon Adelson pressed to the max—the pre-election Friday edition of the billionaire’s Israel Hayom newspaper featured no fewer than 25 adoring photographs of the prime minister—but Netanyahu was everywhere, all the time, radio and television, wall to wall.

At every turn, Netanyahu transgressed the rulings and regulations of the government elections oversight board and received not so much as a single slap on the wrist.
As the campaign regressed into the realm of the scarcely believable, Netanyahu defended unilateral decisions regarding what is arguably Israel’s most important single strategic weapon, its submarine fleet—decisions which circumvented and often contradicted his most senior defense officials.

It became clearer and clearer as the campaign ground on that anyone who opposed him and his Likud, anyone who questioned his policies, had earned the worst four-letter expletive in the Hebrew language: “Smol,” Left, and thus sub-Israeli, enemies of the people and of the state.

The subtext was clear: Netanyahu himself had become the state.

On and on, the tools of the dictator became Netanyahu’s weapons of choice: In particular the diametric lie, that is, accusing the opposition of what the Likud did as a matter of course—for example, falsely accusing his opponents of branding him a traitor.

Polls showed that large numbers of Israelis believed the Likud campaign’s lies and bogus accusations, among them the charge that Gantz’s wife was a radical leftist, that Gantz—who had served as Netanyahu’s army chief of staff—had attended a memorial ceremony for a Hamas terrorist, that Gantz was a sex offender, deviant, a mental patient and a traitor, ready and willing to help Israeli Arab politicians extermiate Israel.

Perhaps most telling, though, was the prime minister’s performance on his most congenial of home turfs: The prime minister’s performance on his most congenial of home turfs: The slavishly pro-Netanyahu television talk show anchored by Sharon Gal and Ran Rahav.

Question: How many terms would you like?

“As many as I want, and as many as I can serve,” Netanyahu replied, adding, half in jest, half not: “If I can, another 20 times. Twenty-five times.”

Only once did Netanyahu seem stumped. It was when Rahav asked him what he replied to critics who said that Israel’s democracy was in danger, first and foremost because of attacks by Netanyahu and his allies on the Supreme Court and other basic institutions of governance.

After a pause, Netanyahu’s answer was this:

“I—uh—think that the danger is far greater danger if Gantz and Lapid will be in charge—and it’s Gantz and Lapid. Lapid is supposed to be prime minister. Maybe they’ll drop him at the last minute, as a trick. But Lapid is the one running things. Lapid will be prime minister here. Will Lapid stand up to Iran? Will Lapid sit beside Putin? Or opposite Trump? It’s a joke,” Netanyahu said, seeming, for a moment, to channel his friend Donald Trump.

“But democracy?” he said at last. “It’s safe.”

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Netanyahu Courts Trouble to Retain Political Power

BY PAUL R. PILLAR

The direct, and still extreme, descendant of a U.S.-listed foreign terrorist organization is in position to become part of the next ruling coalition of Israel, and it has been put in that position at the urging of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. The organization is Otzma Yehudit, which translates as Jewish Power or Jewish Strength. It is the current political vehicle for unreconstructed followers of the late Meir Kahane, the radical Brooklyn-born rabbi and ultra-nationalist.

Netanyahu, facing a challenge for the prime minister’s job in coming elections from former army chief Benny Gantz, has urged two other far-right parties to form a joint list with Otzma Yehudit for elections in April, lest none of the three parties reaches the 3.25 percent of the vote required to win seats in the Knesset. In his appeal this week to the party leaders, Netanyahu said, “If you don’t unite, you won’t pass the electoral threshold, the right-wing bloc will lose and Gantz will form a left-wing government with the support of the Arab parties.” The following day, Otzma Yehudit reached agreement with one of the other two parties, Jewish Home, on a joint list of candidates.

Meir Kahane repeatedly demonstrated his penchant for violent extremism when he still resided in the United States. In 1971, he received a five-year suspended sentence for a bomb-making plot. He later was sentenced to a year in prison for violating the terms of his probation by smuggling arms from Israel and trying to instigate a bombing of the Iraqi Embassy.

After relocating to Israel, Kahane founded Kach, a party that competed unsuccessfully in several elections before finally winning a single Knesset seat in 1984. Kahane and his followers meanwhile continued their violent activities, and Kahane was arrested multiple times. After an Egyptian-born gunman assassinated Kahane in New York in 1990, Kach split, with the offshoot group calling itself Kahane Chai (Kahane Lives). Both parties have been outlawed in Israel since the mid-1990s on the grounds that they are racist, and Kahane Chai is the group that still can be found on the State Department’s list of foreign terrorist organizations.

The Kahane-associated parties were extreme even for Israeli politics 25 years ago, but the continued rightward drift of those politics has permitted a rebirth of the Kahaneists. Otzma Yehudit exemplifies the sort of reincarnation of outlawed parties under a different name that has occurred elsewhere, such as with Islamist parties in Turkey.

Otzma Yehudit embodies Kahane’s ideas and professes a fondness for his methods. The party calls for the annexation of the West Bank, undiluted Israeli rule over all the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, and the expulsion of “enemies of Israel” to Arab countries. When the party’s current leader, Michael Ben-Ari, was invited to disavow Kahane’s racist ideol-
ogy, he scoffed at the idea of doing so and said that Kahane was his rabbi and his teacher. Ben-Ari has argued for the removal of most Arabs from Israel. During the Israeli military attacks on the Gaza Strip in 2012, he said, “There are no innocent in Gaza, don’t let any diplomats who want to look good in the world endanger your lives—mow them down!” Another party leader and former aide to Kahane, Baruch Marzel, has organized parties to celebrate Baruch Goldstein, who in 1994 killed 29 Palestinians praying at Hebron’s Tomb of the Patriarchs.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro has warned that any Kahaneists who get elected to the Knesset might not be able to visit the United States because their precursor organization is on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. Anyone who boosts the political fortunes of the Kahaneists might also violate the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act by providing material support to a terrorist organization.

Netanyahu’s effort to boost right-wing parties over the electoral threshold and thereby help form a majority in the Knesset is, of course, all about the prime minister trying to hang on to power. But the effort also says something about the current political spectrum in Israel. What might have been isolated and dismissed as a fringe 25 years ago no longer is. There certainly are critical voices in Israel disparaging the idea of Netanyahu getting into bed with Otzma Yehudit, but the prime minister is a smart politician. He evidently has calculated that whatever he loses from such criticism is more than offset by the prospect of a few extra Knesset seats that could become part of a governing coalition that will be at least as far to the extreme right as his current coalition is.

Paul R. Pillar, non-resident senior fellow at the Center for Security Studies of Georgetown University and an associate fellow of the Geneva Center for Security Policy, retired in 2005 from a 28-year career in the U.S. intelligence community. This blog was first posted on <http://nationalinterest.org>, Feb. 26, 2019. Copyright © 2019 Center for the National Interest. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

Why I’m Glad Netanyahu Won

BY DR. JAMES J. ZOGBY

I’m glad Binyamin Netanyahu won re-election. Since I realize that saying this won’t sit well with many folks, let me explain:

As the election developed, it became clear that Benny Gantz, the leader of the opposition “Blue and White” coalition, for a number of reasons, had come to be seen as the darling of the liberal set—especially here in the U.S.

Some, for example, were justifiably upset by Netanyahu’s gross corruption or unnerved by his authoritarian actions designed to intimidate the press, silence non-governmental organizations, and strip the courts of their power. Others were optimistic that should Gantz win, Israel’s image would improve in the U.S. and there would be the possibility of a “reset” in the U.S.-Israel relationship. One publication described a Gantz victory as creating “a fresh slate and an opportunity to re-energize support for Israel.”

Driving this support for Gantz was the concern of liberal Democrats who have been troubled by recent polls showing a significant erosion of support for Israel among core Democratic constituents—especially millennial and minority voters—including American Jewish millennials. This growing alienation from Israel has in part been due to both Netanyahu’s repressive policies and his close relationship with Donald Trump. There could be no doubt that Trump had been excessive in his support for his Israeli partner: canceling the Iran Deal; moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem; the “gift” of the Golan Heights; cutting all U.S. aid to the Palestinians; and remaining silent in the face of settlement expansion and Netanyahu’s declared intent to apply Israeli sovereignty to West Bank settlements. This virtual Trump/Netanyahu marriage most certainly had a role to play in the embrace of Gantz by many liberals.

Because American liberals have embraced the mantra of a “two-state solution” and see Netanyahu’s aggressive settlement construction and his pledge to “annex” the settlements as obstacles to that goal, they also fretted that a Netanyahu victory might spell the end of their idea of two states—one “Jewish and democratic” and one for the Palestinians. At the same time, American Jews had an additional frustration with Netanyahu as a result of his accommodation of the illiberal policies of Israel’s ultra-Orthodox religious community on issues of marriage, conversion and women’s rights.

It was in this context that Gantz became the “great hope.” I, however, never believed that he was.

In the first place, on the issue that mattered most to the future of peace—the treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories—there was little that separated Netanyahu from Gantz. In fact, Gantz’ opening campaign advertisement featured Gaza in rubble (Gantz had been in charge of the most brutal and devastating of the Gaza wars), boasting that he had reduced parts of Gaza “back to the Stone Age.” And right before the election, an American Jewish publication reported on a Gantz speech laying out his “seven pillars” for peace with the Palestinians: “he said his priority was to ensure a Zionist ‘end state’—Jewish and Democratic—and not a binational state, while keeping the Jordan Valley, a united Jerusalem, and modifying the 1967 lines...I don’t want to rule the Palestinians.” In addition to these goals, he added keeping the settlements and maintaining security control west of the Jordan River.

In other words, Gantz might have been a “fresh face,” but, on the central issue of dealing with Palestinians and the occupied territories, he was no different than the prime minister he was seeking to replace.

In addition to the positions he espoused, I felt that it was important to
It was interesting to watch how a few leading liberal pundits and Democratic elected officials reacted during and after this election. When it appeared that Gantz might win, they felt that it was safe to denounce Netanyahu and even call him a racist; now with Netanyahu emerging as the victor, they have flipped on a dime, congratulating him on his victory and pledging to work with him to implement the two-state solution—some illusions do die hard.

But with Netanyahu expected to continue his extremist anti-Palestinian, anti-peace, anti-rule of law and pro-Trump agendas, the debate about Israel here in the U.S. will intensify. Because the base of the Democratic Party has awakened to the realities of the occupation and is deeply offended by everything both Netanyahu and Trump stand for, several developments can be expected.

The rift between the base of the Democratic Party and its elected officials will continue to grow. This will take the form of candidates for higher office increasingly being called to account for their failure to challenge Israeli behaviors. The debate within the American Jewish community will also intensify, with liberal Jews forced to re-examine their views of Israel and their support for the policies of that state. As a result of these developments, the Democratic Party is moving toward becoming the anti-Netanyahu, anti-settlements, anti-annexation party—with an increasing number of Democrats even voicing support for cutting aid to Israel and advocating for the rights of citizens to support the BDS movement.

We are on the threshold of a major change in how Israel will play out in American politics. I’m afraid that it has come too late to save the two states that were envisioned by the long dead Oslo accords. But it is a good thing that we will now finally be able to have an honest debate about the dreadful situation created by American complicity in enabling Israel’s continued oppression of Palestinians. This debate might have been aborted for a time had Gantz won. The occupation and settlements would have continued—but liberals would have been less inclined to challenge him. With Netanyahu back, the debate will be energized. It might be late in the game, but better late than never.

BY RAMZY BAROUD

The aims of the Great March of Return protests, which began in Gaza on March 30 last year, are to put an end to the suffocating Israeli siege and implement the right of return for Palestinian refugees who were expelled from their homes and towns in historic Palestine 70 years ago.

But there is much more to the protests than a few demands, especially bearing in mind the high human cost associated with them. According to Gaza’s Ministry of Health, more than 250 people have been killed and 6,500 wounded, including children, medics and journalists.

Aside from the disproportionately covered “flaming kites” and youths symbolically cutting through the metal fences that have caged them for many years, the marches have been largely nonviolent. Despite this, Israel has killed and maimed protesters with impunity.

A U.N. human rights commission of inquiry found last month that Israel may have committed war crimes, resulting in the deaths of 189 Palestinians, within the period March 30 to Dec. 31. The inquiry found “reasonable grounds to believe that Israeli snipers shot at children, medics and journalists, even though they were clearly recognizable as such,” the investigators concluded.
Many in the media, however, still do not understand what the Great March of Return really means for Palestinians. A cynically titled report in The Washington Post attempted to offer an answer. The article, “Gazans have paid in blood for a year of protests. Now many wonder what it was for,” selectively quoted wounded Palestinians who, supposedly, feel that their sacrifices were in vain. Aside from providing the Israeli military with a platform to blame Hamas for the year-long march, the long report ended with these two quotes: The March of Return “achieved nothing,” according to one injured Palestinian. And “the only thing I can find is that it made people pay attention,” said another.

If The Washington Post paid attention, it would have realized that the mood among Palestinians is neither cynical nor despairing. The Post should have wondered: If the march had “achieved nothing,” then why are Gazans still protesting, and why has the popular and inclusive nature of the march not been compromised?

Sabreen Al-Najjar, the mother of young Palestinian medic Razan, who was fatally shot by the Israeli army while trying to help wounded protesters, wrote in the Independent last week: “The right of return is more than a political position, more than a principle: Wrapped up in it, and reflected in literature and art and music, is the essence of what it means to be Palestinian. It is in our blood.”

Indeed, what is the Great March of Return but a people attempting to reclaim their role, and be recognized and heard in the struggle for the liberation of Palestine?

What is largely missing from the discussion on Gaza is the collective psychology behind this kind of mobilization, and why it is essential for hundreds of thousands of besieged people to rediscover their power and understand their true position, not as hapless victims, but as agents of change in their society.

The narrow reading, or the misrepresentation, of the Great March of Return speaks volumes about the overall underestimation of the role of the Palestinian people in their struggle for freedom, justice and national liberation.

The story of Palestine is the story of the Palestinian people, for they are the victims of oppression and the main channel of resistance, starting with the Nakba—the creation of Israel on the ruins of Palestinian towns and villages in 1948. Had Palestinians not resisted, their story would have concluded then, and they would have disappeared.

Those who admonish Palestinian resistance or, like the Post, fail to understand the underlying value of popular movement and sacrifices, have little understanding of the psychological ramifications of resistance—the sense of collective empowerment and hope that spreads among the people. In his introduction to Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, Jean-Paul Sartre describes resistance, as was passionately vindicated by Fanon, as a process through which “a man is recreating himself.”

For 70 years, Palestinians have embarked on that journey of recreation of the self. They have resisted, and their resistance in all of its forms has molded a sense of collective unity, despite the numerous divisions that were erected among the people. The Great March of Return is the latest manifestation of the ongoing Palestinian resistance.

It is obvious that elitist interpretations of Palestine have failed—Oslo proved a worthless exercise in empty clichés, aimed at sustaining American political dominance in Palestine as well as in the rest of the Middle East. The signing of the Oslo I Accord in 1993 shattered the relative cohesiveness of the Palestinian discourse, thus weakening and dividing the Palestinian people.

In the Israeli Zionist narrative, Palestinians are depicted as drifting lunatics, an inconvenience that hinders the path of progress: A description that regularly defined the relationship between every Western colonial power and the colonized, resisting natives.

Within some Israeli political and academic circles, Palestinians merely “existed” to be “cleansed,” to make room for a different, more deserving people. From the Zionist perspective, the “existence” of the natives is meant to be temporary. “We must expel Arabs and take their place,” wrote Israel’s founding father, David Ben-Gurion.

Assigning the roles of being displaced, dispossessed and nomadic to the Palestinian people, without consideration for the ethical and political implications of such a perception, has erroneously presented Palestinians as a docile and submissive collective.

Hence, it is imperative that we develop a clearer understanding of the layered meanings behind the Great March of Return. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza did not risk life and limb over the last year simply because they required urgent medicine and food supplies. They did so because they understand their centrality in their struggle. Their protests are a collective statement, a cry for justice, an ultimate reclamation of their narrative as a people—still standing, still powerful and still hopeful after 70 years of Nakba, 50 years of military occupation and 12 years of unrelenting siege.

Ramzy Baroud is a journalist, author and editor of Palestine Chronicle. His latest book is The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story (available from Middle East Books and More). This article was first posted on <www.ramzybaroud.net>, April 3, 2019. © Copyright 2010-2019 Ramzy Baroud.net. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.

How the Left Also Dehumanizes Palestinians in Gaza

BY SUSAN ABULHAWA

Along the political spectrum, from the far left to extreme right, and spanning racial and ethnic lines, nearly everyone who has something to say about protesters in Gaza seems to fail the task of recogni-
ing Palestinian humanity. If it’s coming from the right, the narrative is of terrorists, rockets and Hamas, a legitimate Palestinian resistance fully cemented as the Boogieman in the Western imagination.

From the left, the stories are the stuff of legends, portraying unfathomable Palestinian heroism, courage and “sumud,” an Arabic word romanticized in English to convey epic Palestinian steadfastness.

At both ends of the spectrum, defenseless Palestinians are larger than life, unlike other humans, either superhumanly posing a threat to highly armed soldiers several football fields away, or displaying supernatural courage and fearlessness before near-certain death. The latter narrative, which manages to sentimentalize unspeakable misery, is so enticing that even Palestinians have taken up this framing.

NOTHING TO LOSE

Just days ago, I watched a video of a young man who was shot in the legs. He limps along, falls and gets up, only to be shot again. The scene repeats over five or six bullets before the man cannot get up again and others come to evacuate him. The headline and comments exalted the “brave young man” who continued to stand up to his oppressor despite being hit multiple times in his legs.

As a Palestinian mother, I saw something else in that man, young enough to be my son. Maybe he was utterly disheartened with hope and robbed of the will to live a life encased in the barbaric, malicious, and creative savagery of Israel’s siege on Gaza. A young man who has probably known little more than fear, despair, want, and impotence to do anything. Maybe a young man with nothing to lose, someone already bled of his rightful life, attempting a single moment of dignity in defiance, knowing, and maybe hoping, it would be his last. And maybe this is what the soldier saw, and chose instead to add the trauma of amputated limbs to a tortured man feebly raising a small rock with no will or energy to even throw it. Maybe his motivation was national-ism. Maybe it was the hope of securing money for his family following his martyrdom or injury. Maybe he thought his death would give his people an inch toward liberty. Maybe it was the only thing left for him to do. We cannot know what is in the hearts of those who put their bodies between bullets and despair. But we can be sure that their motivations are painfully human. There is nothing godlike to see or fetishize.

REDUCTIVE ANALYSES

There is no doubting the courage required to stand up to hateful, murderous Israelis, but narratives that imbue Palestinians with mythical bravery are harmful. They propose an otherworldly ability to withstand what no human should be forced to withstand, and they obscure the very human and very dark reality of life in Gaza, which has led to rates of suicide never before seen in Palestinian society.

Individuals in Gaza have different reasons for joining the Great March of Return, but the prevailing analyses are reductive, often coupling epic Palestinian bravery with nonviolent resistance, because Western imaginary cannot abide armed resistance, no matter how enduring or merciless the violence inflicted on them. The kind of heroism that is connected with guns is the exclusive purview of Western soldiers. The only moral resistance available for the oppressed in the Western psyche is exclusively nonviolent. This means that the case for Palestinian liberty and dignity collapses the minute we fly an incendiary kite or fire a rocket toward a state that has been eviscerating Palestinian society and Palestinian bodies for decades. We see the same phenomenon around reactions in the United States when Black Americans rise up and do not perfectly conform to “peaceful” and “nonviolent” protest, despite the centuries of denigration and marginalization they have endured.

It does not help that even some Palestinians reinforce this notion by dismissing Hamas or downplaying any form of armed resistance as outliers in an otherwise ideal and tidy protest of a preternaturally strong and valiant oppressed people.

GAZA IS A DEATH CAMP

But the truth must be said, and the truth is abysmally ugly and bleak. There is nothing for the world to romanticize in Gaza. Nothing to idealize. Gaza is a death camp. Death and suppression technology is “the Jewish Nation’s” single greatest export and Gaza is the human laboratory where Israeli arms manufacturers fine-tune their wares on the bodies, psyches and spirits of Palestinians. It is a wretched existence that spares none of the two million prisoners in that concentration camp.

Israel has turned Gaza, once a great city at the intersection of trade across three continents, into a black hole of dreams. Gaza is hope’s coffin, an extinguisher of human potential and extinguisher of promise. People can barely breathe in Gaza. They cannot work, cannot leave, cannot study, cannot build, cannot heal. By all accounts, the tiny Strip is unlivable, literally unfit to sustain life. Nearly 100 percent of the water is undrinkable. Youth unemployment is so high that it makes more sense to measure employment, which stands at a pathetic 30 percent. Approximately 80 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Most residents get just a few hours of electricity every day. The sewage system has collapsed. The healthcare system has been stretched to its breaking point and hospitals are closing for lack of vital supplies and fuel, which Israel often prevents Palestinians from buying or even receiving from donors. This ineffable misery is intentional. Israel designed and made it. And the world allows it to persist.

DISCOURSE OF “SUMUD”

When our lives, resistance and struggle are framed in mythical terms, not only does it obscure our humanity, but it diminishes the depravity of Israel’s control over millions of Palestinian lives. The discourse of sumud set us up for failure at every turn. On one hand, it supposes that Palestinians can endure anything. On the other hand, it suffuses the unut-
The Israeli authorities accused me of being a “terrorist”—a claim which remained completely unsubstantiated and unproven right up to the day I was released—three years later. During the final stages of my wrongful imprisonment, I spent three months on hunger strike.

Throughout my ordeal, I received many messages of support from athletes across the world who called for my immediate release. When you are stripped of your rights, unlawfully imprisoned and banned from seeing your family and friends, global solidarity like the kind that I received during those dark days is incredibly important. But the need for solidarity with Palestinian football players, and the Palestinian people as a whole, did not end when I walked out of Israeli prison. In fact, that solidarity is needed now more than ever.

I was not the first and will not be the last Palestinian football player who has been the subject of Israeli repression. Just over a year ago on March 30, 2018, the career of promising young Palestinian football player Muhammad Khalil Obeid was destroyed in a flash when he was shot in both knees by Israeli snipers while he was peacefully protesting as part of the Great March of Return. And in January this year, a number of Palestinian football players were injured when Israeli forces fired tear gas into the stadium they were playing in—for absolutely no reason.

When you live under military occupation, the oppressive regime infects every aspect of your life—from sport to education, from your culture to your home. Endless restrictions on freedom of movement, access to resources and fundamental civil liberties make engaging in sport a constant struggle for Palestinians—these violations of rights are totally incompatible with the principle of sport being accessible to all.

Today marks the U.N. International Day of Sport for Development and Peace. It is a great opportunity to reflect on how sport can be used as a vehicle for positive change in the world around us and how Israel, instead of doing so, is using sport to perpetuate its crimes against the Palestinian people.

The Israeli Football Association (IFA) includes football clubs based in illegal Israeli settlements, training and playing matches on stolen Palestinian land. Israeli settlements are illegal land grabs that form an integral part of Israel’s occupation infrastructure pushing indigenous Palestinian families off of their land, robbing Palestinians of natural resources and denying them their right of movement. Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are considered war crimes under international law.

In this sense, the IFA is clearly in breach of FIFA rules, which prohibit a member association holding competitions on the territory of another without permission. A comprehensive report by Human Rights Watch said that allowing the IFA to hold matches on stolen Palestinian land, FIFA is enabling business activity that supports the illegal settlements more broadly and, in doing so, is in violation of its own human rights commitments.

Over the past few years there have been growing calls for FIFA to take action and suspend IFA’s membership until Israel complies with international law, but this demand has consistently been ignored.

Meanwhile, IFA has refused to take measures to end its complicity in war crimes, despite being repeatedly condemned by U.N. advisers, dozens of elected officials, public figures and civil society and human rights groups. It is, therefore, imperative that all individuals and organizations who believe in freedom, justice and equality hold the IFA to account for its actions, and refuse to work with its representatives until it ends its complicity in crimes against the Palestinian people.

In particular, IFAs main sponsor, German sportswear manufacturer Puma, needs to take action. Just last summer, Adidas announced it was ending its sponsorship of IFA following a sustained campaign by activists and athletes across the world. Over 200 Palestinian sports clubs have already called on Puma to end its support for Israel’s military occupation by terminating its sponsorship.

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian writer and the author of the international bestselling novel Mornings in Jenin (available from Middle East Books and More). She is also the founder of Playgrounds for Palestine, an NGO for children. This article was first posted on <www.aljazeera.com>, April 12, 2019. The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial stance. Copyright © 2019 Al Jazeera Media Network. Reprinted with permission.
deal with the IFA, and we must continue to lobby the German company until it decides to fully abide by its stated commitment to human rights.

As someone who has experienced first-hand the devastating impact Israel’s regime has on access to sport, I urge all organizations who work with Puma to call for an end to its sponsorship of the IFA and, if it does not answer these calls, to cease all partnerships with Puma until it does. I also urge all those who believe in freedom, justice and equality for all to join the growing global campaign to get Puma to stand on the right side of the history by ending its complicity in human rights violations against the Palestinians.

Though Israel robbed me of my career and my freedom, they will not rob me, or any other Palestinian, of our determination to attain the rights and freedoms that we are owed.

Mahmoud Sarsak is a Palestinian soccer player who has played for the Palestinian national team. This article was first posted on <http://www.aljazeera.com>, April 6, 2019. The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial stance. Copyright © 2019 Al Jazeera Media Network. Reprinted with permission.

Airbnb Officially Reverses Decision To Pull out of Israeli Settlements

BY JONATHAN OFIR

If you wanted a statement on a controversial issue regarding Israel obscured by events, the date you would choose for it is the day of Israeli elections. Everyone is now gazing at the apparent results, which indicate a major win for Netanyahu’s Likud. Who will notice the fact that Airbnb just officially declared that it will continue doing business in illegal Israeli settlements, in reversal of its announced decision from November to pull out of these settlements in the occupied West Bank?

Airbnb has made maddening rhetorical somersaults in order to both have its settlement cake and eat it too. First it announced its decision to pull out, pre-empting a Human Rights Watch report on this dirty business (the report also cited Booking.com, which pleaded the 5th). Then Airbnb seemed to reverse its decision following meetings with Israeli government officials, calling the issue “complex and emotional,” offering contradictory statements that were neither here nor there.

Meanwhile, in January, an Amnesty International report about this business pattern came out, emphasizing the brokers’ complicity in war crimes, also bringing into focus other companies such as TripAdvisor and Expedia.

After the announced decision to pull out in November, Israeli lawyers filed a class action suit against Airbnb. And yesterday [April 9], Airbnb caved in to these pressures: “Airbnb will not move forward with implementing the removal of listings in the West Bank from the platform,” the company said in a news release, as reported by Al Jazeera.

The company said the agreement settled all legal actions brought by hosts and potential hosts who went to court. Airbnb is now trying to whitewash its crime by charity. Stating that it “will take no profits from this activity in the region,” the company claims that profit generated from its listings in the West Bank will be donated to non-profit groups dedicated to humanitarian aid in various parts of the world.

But this is really like Pilate ritually washing his hands. Arvind Ganesan of Human Rights Watch:

Donating profits from unlawful settlement listings, as they’ve promised to do, does nothing to remedy the “human suffering” they have acknowledged that their activities cause. By continuing to do business in settlements, they remain complicit in the abuses settlements trigger.

Airbnb has had its chance. It initially attempted to avert bad PR by declaring its “good intention” to pull out of (some) settlements, but then didn’t follow through. It caved into political and, let us not forget, economic pressure, and decided that it was not worth the trouble. Throughout the process since the initial declaration, it has been demonstrating weakness and cowardice, manifested in weak and contradictory statements, until it now officially declared that it will not realize its intention.

And it did this on the day where it would be least noticed, as everyone is looking at the Israeli elections. Airbnb, with all its earlier declared good intentions, will remain knowingly complicit in war crimes, and this process leaves it as a symbol of surrender to Israeli criminality.

If Airbnb was not a major target for popular boycott, this chain of events now places it front and center as such. No charity actions will whitewash this crime.

(Hat/tip to Nasser Butt)

Jonathan Ofir is an Israeli musician, conductor and blogger/writer based in Denmark. This article was first posted on <http://mondoweiss.net>, April 10, 2019. Copyright © 2019 Mondoweiss. Reprinted with permission.

Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib Show Muslim Women Don’t Need Saving

BY SAHAR AZIZ

The image of a Muslim woman conjures up stereotypes of meek, subjugated women in need of saving. The arrival of Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib to the American political scene, however, has exposed the fallacy of these gender stereotypes.

Their brash, fearless and irreverent responses to the heightened scrutiny of their every word show how these two Muslim women are poking American patriarchy in the eye.
Not only are Omar and Tlaib shattering the image of the powerless Muslim woman in distress, but they are breaking taboos that have long suppressed all women in the United States.

Tlaib curses like a sailor while in the same breath declaring her intent to impeach a notoriously misogynistic U.S. president. Omar unabashedly questions powerful white male elites like Elliott Abrams at Foreign Relations Committee hearings. And both women are unafraid to defend the human rights of Palestinians, the most vilified people in U.S. media, contrary to the advice of their senior colleagues.

As a result, our predominantly white patriarchal political elite are having a meltdown.

Refusing to be instrumentalized by superficial notions of diversity that exotize and infantilize minority women, Tlaib and Omar vocally challenge the power structure.

A case in point is Tlaib’s reference to President Donald Trump as a m******** at a bar after her confirmation. Her words triggered tens of media stories despite more pressing issues like a government shutdown. The disproportionate attention evinced the depth of our society’s infantilization of Muslim women. Male politicians curse and they are just engaging in “locker room talk.” But when women curse, they are dishonorable—a trope framing used to silence women around the world.

Indeed, President Trump reprimanded Tlaib by calling her comments disgraceful and lamenting, “she dishonored herself, and I think she dishonored her family using language like that…I thought it was highly disrespectful to the United States of America.”

These patronizing words came from the same man who was caught on tape stating he grabbed women by their genitals and forcibly kissed them and who has called women fat, bimbos, and rated them on the size of their breasts.

That Trump was still elected president notwithstanding such lewd behavior, not to mention his use of profanity on a regular basis, is further proof of misogynistic double standards infecting our political system.

Another case in point is Ilhan Omar’s reference to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in a tweet. Along with Tlaib, Omar is a supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, which emulates the South African anti-apartheid movement in the use of nonviolent divestment as a political tactic to oppose the Israeli government’s violation of Palestinian civil and human rights.

When Omar responded “AIPAC” to a question on Twitter about whom she “thinks is paying American politicians to be pro-Israel,” her tweet triggered a common anti-Muslim trope—the anti-Semite. Alongside the oppressed Muslim woman, Islamophobia perpetuates a stereotype that Muslims are inherently violent and anti-Semitic.

These Islamophobic stereotypes contribute to the erasure and delegitimization of Palestinian experiences from mainstream discussions in the U.S. about the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. They lead to the vilification of Arab and Muslim American academics on blacklists reminiscent of the McCarthyist era. Islamophobia also fed the attacks on both Omar and Tlaib during their campaigns and after the elections. At a campaign event in August 2018, for example, the two Muslim women were subjected to a diatribe by a conservative activist, calling the activists “jihadi” and accusing them of supporting “terrorists.”

And when, after her election, Omar sought to remove the prohibition on headwear on the House floor, conservative pastor E.W. Jackson said: “The floor of Congress is now going to look like an Islamic republic. We are a Judeo-Christian country. We are a nation rooted and grounded in Christianity and that’s that…Don’t try to change our country into some sort of Islamic republic or try to base our country on Sharia law.”

While the anti-Semitic trope of a Jewish conspiracy to take over the world is real, both past and present, to analogize it to criticism of AIPAC is a red herring.

Like any other lobbying firm in Washington, AIPAC seeks to influence politicians on the Hill and in the White House pursuant to its motto “America’s Pro-Israel Lobby.” To its credit, AIPAC is one of the most successful lobbying groups alongside the National Rifle Association, Koch Industries, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

AIPAC boasts significant political influence arising from its over $3.5 million annual investment in lobbying. Indeed, AIPAC astutely leveraged the controversy over Omar’s tweet to ask its supporters to donate, declaring: “We are determined to continue our bipartisan efforts in support of the shared values that unite America and Israel.”

The aspersions cast on Ilhan Omar’s character bring into sharp relief the ways in which allegations of anti-Semitism are frequently used to silence Muslims with dissident views, and when these are coupled with misogyny, Muslim women become easy targets.

Tropes of the “bad girl” are weaponized to police women’s speech and behavior. Men exploit arbitrary civility codes to chastise women and minorities who do not accommodate existing power structures. Any expression of anger, indignation or rebuke of the status quo is quickly reprimanded—hence the calls on Omar to resign, while dozens of white male Republican politicians peddle Islamophobia on a regular basis.

To be sure, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib will continue to be caught in the crosshairs of Islamophobia and American misogyny. But like the millions of other confident, ambitious, smart Muslim women in the U.S., they are up to the task.

And for those who cannot accept Omar and Tlaib’s presence on Capitol Hill, Omar has some advice: “You’re gonna have to just deal.”

Sahar Aziz is professor of law and Chancelor’s Social Justice Scholar at Rutgers Law School. This article was first posted on <www.aljazeera.com>, Feb. 26, 2019.
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Do Members of Congress Take Too Many Private Trips to Israel With AIPAC?

BY GRANT F. SMITH

One of every three members of Congress boarding a jetliner on a privately funded all-expense-paid trip overseas has Israel as their final destination. Only one out of a hundred ever visits Palestinian territories as a final destination.

Analysis of Gift Travel Filings made to the U.S. House of Representatives Office of the Clerk over the past half-decade reveals Israel is far and away their top foreign destination. House of Representatives members made nearly 1,400 trips to Israel, while total subsidized visits to foreign countries other than Israel were 2,500.

The vast majority of Israel trips are funded by the American Israel Education Foundation, which raises tax-exempt contributions from pro-Israel donors and Jewish federations. They typically last eight days and cost $10,000. AIEF is a corporation created in 1988 by the domestically registered lobbying group AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. In 2009 66 percent of AIEF’s board was comprised of AIPAC directors. Since AIEF is merely a lobbying funding conduit with no employees, whenever members of Congress travel to Israel they are accompanied instead by staffers from AIPAC. In 2017 AIEF reported raising $60 million in revenue and expending $57 million. Another sole-purpose entity set up by AIPAC in 1984 is the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, which works to portray policies favored by the Israeli government as being in the American interest.

AIPAC differs from many other groups funding private trips because of its foundational foreign ties. AIPAC lobbying began in earnest in the 1950s by a former employee of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs—Isaiah Kenen—who received ongoing payments from Israel to set up public relations and lobbying in the U.S. Kenen was paid by the Israeli government to receive congressional delegations in Israel after major aid packages were passed into law. Late in 1962, the umbrella organization in which AIPAC served as the lobby division was ordered by the Justice Department to register as an Israeli foreign agent. Six weeks later AIPAC incorporated and filed for tax-exempt status as a religious charity. These historic facts never appear in mainstream reports about AIPAC.

A typical AIEF itinerary consists of numerous briefings by Israeli government officials, trips to historical sites, and lavish restaurant visits and hotel stays. Absent from the itineraries are any briefings on Israel’s nuclear weapons triad or meaningful visits to Palestinian refugees. This leaves members of Congress with a highly distorted view of one of the world’s longest-running and most contentious issues, and inflated views of Israel’s military vulnerability. Disproportionate numbers of trips to Israel are one major reason Congress has given the country over $250 billion since 1948, more than was given Europe to rebuild under the Marshall Plan.

Members reported privately sponsored visits to the Palestinian territories in only two of the past five years. In 2015, 30 members of Congress traveled under sponsorship of the American Global Institute; Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy. In 2016 10 members traveled under the same sponsor.

Members of the House of Representatives also visit foreign countries on official, taxpayer-funded trips. Congressional records of official trips reveal that in 2018 members made approximately 250 trips, most lasting only a few days, with two countries visited per trip. Committee on Agriculture member trips focused on important buyer countries such as Canada and South Korea. House Armed Services Committee travel centered on Japan, South Korea and the Middle East. Members of the House Financial Services Committee visited mostly European nations.

Members reported only 13 official trips to Israel and none to Palestinian territories in 2018. This should concern Americans. It means their representatives in Congress almost never have an opportunity to make unguided, adversarial, official assessments in Israel, much less Palestinian territories. However, members can no longer justify the minuscule number of trips to Palestinian territory as a constituent mandate. When asked, 41.2 percent of American adults recently polled said members making visits to Israel should also visit “territories where Palestinians expelled during Israel’s creation live.”

Though not as statistically relevant as the overall poll results, demographic filtering reveals younger and older adults are generally more supportive of Palestinian territory visits. In the 18-24 category, 45.7 percent favored such visits, while in the 25-34 age group 46 percent were supportive of Congress members visiting Palestine. 55-64 year-olds and the 65+ category also had higher favorability to the idea.

If private groups provided fact-finding trips to Palestinian territories at a rate commensurate with quantifiable public interest, members would have taken 567 such visits between 2014-2018. Whether meaningful numbers would be courageous enough to go on such trips—officially or privately funded—is an open question.

Freshman Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib floated the idea of an official delegation visit to the West Bank, telling the Intercept, “They don’t show the side that I know is real, which is what’s hap-
penned to my grandmother and what’s happening to my family there.”

But such trips would likely shatter decades of Israel lobby myth-making and assiduous opinion molding among U.S. elected officials. This was the fear of Texas Republican Rep. Brian Babin, who argued such an official visit to the West Bank could “undo years of goodwill built by the foreign policy and Israeli-American communities.”

Grant F. Smith is executive director of the Institute for Research: Middle Eastern Policy (IRmep). This article was first posted on <www.antiwar.com>, March 1, 2019. Copyright 2019 Antiwar.com. Reprinted with permission.

Republican, Democrats Snipe Over “Anti-Semitism” at AIPAC Conference

BY KELLY KENNEDY

WASHINGTON—Both Democrats and Republicans, speaking at a gathering of a major pro-Israel group, made clear that the United States would continue to stand behind Israel and push back against Iran, but also introduced new talking points for the 2020 presidential elections.

Republican politicians, many of them evangelical Christians, aimed at Democrats, calling them anti-Semites for refusing to attend the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference in Washington.

“Let me go on the record,” U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said March 25: “Anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism.”

Pompeo blamed journalists, college professors and politicians for the “rise in anti-Semitism,” which he equated to support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which demands Israel meet its “obligations under international law.”

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence earlier claimed that Democrats had been “co-opted by people who promote anti-Semitic rhetoric but U.S. Senator Charles Schumer, a Democrat from New York and the longest-serving Jewish member of Congress, hit back as the AIPAC session ended.

“Let me tell you, if you only care about anti-Semitism coming from your political opponents, you are not fully committed to fighting anti-Semitism,” he said.

He lashed out against Muslim Rep. Ilhan Omar, a Democrat from Minnesota, who has made comments considered anti-Semitic, as well as U.S. President Donald Trump.

“When someone names only prominent Jews as trying to buy or steal our elections, we must call it out,” Schumer said. “When someone says that being Jewish and supporting Israel means you are not loyal to America, we must call it out. When someone looks at a neo-Nazi rally and sees some ‘very fine people’ among its company, we must call it out.”

The conference provided a platform for politicians to try to outdo each other in their support for Israel while insisting that the issue remain non-partisan.

An expected address to the group by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu was cancelled when Hamas fired a missile into Tel Aviv that hit the home of a family of seven. Netanyahu immediately returned to Israel and several speakers used the attack to call for unity behind Israel.

Trump, with Netanyahu at his side March 25, signed an executive order recognizing Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

“Allow me to bring greetings from a friend of mine,” Pence said to the thousands-strong AIPAC audience, adding that Trump is the greatest friend of Israel and that he would continue to support Israel in every way.

Pence’s words ended speculation that Trump’s feelings might have changed after reports that a lengthy special counsel investigation said it found no evidence of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign during the 2016 election.

Investigators said there was “insufficient evidence” to conclude there was collusion. U.S. Attorney General William Barr wrote in a summary of the investigation that “while this report does not conclude that the president committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him” on accusations of obstruction of justice.

Pence turned to the 2020 election, laying ground to continue accusing Democrats, including Jewish Americans, of anti-Semitism based on support of BDS or for promoting a two-state solution. Pence is an evangelical Christian.

The Jewish Democratic Council of America denounced his comments, posting on social media: “As VP Pence falsely claims that Dem candidates are boycotting AIPAC, we want to remind him and [Trump] to stop politicizing Israel and treating Jews as political pawns.”

Several Democrats running for president, including Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Sen. Kamala Harris of California, Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, former Congressman Beto O’Rourke of Texas, Obama cabinet member Julian Castro, Washington state Gov. Jay Inslee and Mayor Pete Buttigieg of South Bend, Indiana, said they would skip AIPAC because of the push against a two-party solution for Israel and Palestine.

“Anyone who aspires to the highest office in the land should not be afraid to stand with the strongest supporters of Israel in America,” Pence said. “It is wrong to boycott Israel and it is wrong to boycott AIPAC.”

Trump, speaking March 22, said: “I don’t know what’s happened to them but they are totally anti-Israel. Frankly, I think they’re anti-Jewish.”

The liberal U.S. policy group MoveOn.org advised presidential candidates to boycott the event.
“AIPAC is clearly a partisan lobbying group that has undermined diplomatic efforts,” said Iram Ali, campaign director for MoveOn’s political action committee, in a post on the group’s website. “It’s no secret that AIPAC has worked to hinder diplomatic efforts like the Iran deal, is undermining Palestinian self-determination and inviting figures actively involved in human rights violations to its stage.”

Israel Blue and White alliance candidate Gen. Benjamin Gantz also spoke of party differences at AIPAC.

“Let me tell you, my friends, the divisive dialogue is tearing us and tearing our nation apart,” he said. “It may serve, I doubt it, but it may serve political purposes. But it is shredding the fabric that holds us together.”

He called for unity within the country as it heads into elections April 9.

“Bergen-Belsen, no one asked who is Reform, who is Conservative, who is Orthodox or who is secular,” he said, referring to a Nazi concentration camp in Germany. “Before going into battle, I never checked to see who had kippah under their helmets. As a proud owner of the red beret worn by the liberator of the Kotel, I can tell you with confidence that the Western Wall is long enough to accommodate everyone, everyone.”

Gantz attacked Netanyahu for allowing an anti-Arab extremist into the right-wing alliance: “There will be no radicals, from either side of the political map,” he said. “There will be no Kahanists running our country.”

He praised the 1978 Middle East peace talks and said he hoped for peace.

“I truly know that the children of Tehran and the children of Jerusalem are born free of hate,” he said. “I know the Iranian people are waiting for a new dawn, one I hope we all see in our lifetime.”

He said his government would “extend our hand in peace and we will strive for peace with any honest and willing Arab leader.”

Gantz praised Trump for recognizing Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights and for recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and said the Jordan Valley would always remain Israel’s “eastern security border.”

“Let Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda and [the Islamic State] ISIS know: We’ve met before on the battlefield,” he said. “You know the result.”

He praised Netanyahu for returning to Israel to tend the country after the rocket attack and said he would also return to Israel.

Kelly Kennedy is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Washington. This article was first published by The Arab Weekly, March 26, 2019. Copyright ©2019 The Arab Weekly. Distributed by Agence Global.

Why Designating The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Terrorists Would Paint a Big Red Target on U.S. Troops in Iraq

BY JUAN COLE

The Trump administration is considering designating the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps as a terrorist organization. This is an old Joe Lieberman idea from 2007, and it is a very bad idea. It keeps being done rhetorically (2007, 2017), and then announced again out of amnesia. It is illogical, but it is also practically speaking a potential disaster if it were actually thoroughly implemented.

The notion is illogical because the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) is a state actor, not a non-state actor. Terrorists are civilians who commit violence against other civilians to achieve some political goal.

The IRGC is sort of like the U.S. National Guard. It isn’t the formal army, but it is an adjunct to it.

If the U.S. has a problem with IRGC actions, it should accuse the Iranian government of war crimes. States commit war crimes. There are international laws and institutions for dealing with war crimes.

But the practical side of the issue is that Iraqi Shi’i militias close to the IRGC are essentially the hosts and protectors of the some 5,000 U.S. troops in Iraq.

Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called Saturday for the Iraqi government to expel U.S. troops from Iraq as soon as possible, lest they become entrenched. Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi is on a state visit to Iran. Iran is proposing dozens of joint projects, despite the U.S. increasingly severe sanctions on Iran.

When ISIS took over 60 percent of Iraqi territory in 2014, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani called for Iraqis to mobilize against the terrorist organization. Many Shi’i took this call to mean they should form militias, since the formal Iraqi army had collapsed.

The Shi’i-led Iraqi government reached out to the IRGC for help with training and logistics, and the IRGC appears to have sent a small number of troops into Iraq.

The IRGC planned out and helped execute the first major campaign against ISIL, at Tikrit. The U.S. initially declined to join in because it was an Iranian-led campaign, but in the end when the Iraqi forces got bogged down, the U.S. offered air support. IRGC offered strategic advice, but a lot of the heavy lifting was done by Shi’i militiamen who formed a strong bond to the IRGC.

The formal Iraqi military is still small and weak, and the Shi’i militias are increasingly powerful, having formed civilian political parties, and having done well in elections.

So security is provided to U.S. troops, essentially by the friends of the IRGC.

The Trump administration is painting a big red X on the backs of those troops.

Juan Cole is the founder and chief editor of Informed Comment and the Richard P. Mitchell Professor of History at the University of Michigan. He is author of, among many other books, Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the
The Path to War With Iran Is Paved With Sanctions

BY JOSEPH CIRINCIONE AND MARY KASZYNSKI

The Trump administration is laying siege to Iran. Taking pages from the Iraq War playbook, senior officials paint a picture of a rogue, outlaw, terrorist regime bent on acquiring nuclear weapons and whose “malign activities” are the cause of all the chaos in the Middle East. They know what they are doing. They have done it before. They are building a case for war.

The “maximum pressure” campaign by the White House, Treasury Department and State Department accelerated this week with the announcement that the United States would force China, India, Japan, South Korea and Turkey to cease all imports of Iranian oil or face severe U.S. sanctions. The goal is to cut to zero all of Iran’s oil exports, which account for some 40 percent of its national income. This strategy is unlikely to force the capitulation or collapse of the regime, but it very likely could lead to war.

The United States has already reimposed all the nuclear-related sanctions lifted by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that successfully rolled back and effectively froze Iran’s nuclear program and put it under the most stringent inspections ever negotiated. The goals of the sanctions announced April 22, however, go way beyond nuclear issues.

“We have made our demands very clear to the ayatollah and his cronies,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in remarks to the press Monday evening. “End your pursuit of nuclear weapons. Stop testing and proliferating ballistic missiles. Stop sponsoring and committing terrorism. Halt the arbitrary detention of U.S. citizens.”

All are worthy policy goals. The first, of course, has been met. The National Intelligence Estimate on Iran concluded that Iran ended its nuclear weapons program in 2003. There is no evidence that the program has restarted. Instead, in true Trumpian fashion, the administration simply asserts the counterfactual. It claims that the program has restarted, with slippery phrases about seeking weapons or references to long-ended activities. The media, overloaded with the Mueller report and a daily cascade of lies, does not challenge these claims.

THE ROLE OF BOLTON

It is no accident that National Security Adviser John Bolton, the man who declared unequivocally in November 2002, “We are confident that Saddam Hussein has hidden weapons of mass destruction and production facilities in Iraq,” is now the chief strategist behind the drive toward war—with Mike Pompeo happily riding shotgun.

Both are manipulating a distracted and largely uninformed president into a confrontation he may not actually want. Although Trump came into office promising to cancel the JCPOA painstakingly negotiated by the Obama administration and our allies, he was initially held in check by the united front of his military, intelligence and diplomatic advisers.

Then, Trump ousted Rex Tillerson and replaced him with Mike Pompeo. He fired H.R. McMaster and appointed John Bolton. He accepted the resignation of Jim Mattis as secretary of defense and replaced him with a former Boeing executive more interested in contracts than policy. Bolton has had a clear field ever since. With minimal or no inter-agency discussion, Bolton quickly dispensed with the Iran accord, but he did not stop there.

By Christmas 2018, Bolton had dismantled what remained of U.S.-Iran relations. The United States reinstated all sanctions on Iran that were previously lifted by the Iran accord, and the State Department pulled out of the 1955 Treaty of Amity between the United States and Iran, which provided a “legal framework for bilateral relations.” As a result, Iran’s currency hit a historic low and the country witnessed waves of economic protests. Bolton used his national platform to publicly send bellicose warnings to the regime with statements like, “If you cross us, our allies, or our partners…there will indeed be hell to pay.”

THE TERRORISM “CONNECTION”

The “maximum pressure” campaign escalated in 2019. When terrorists attacked the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—an official branch of Iran’s military—killing 27 and wounding 13, the State Department offered no condolences. When widespread flooding devastated Iranian cities and infrastructure, claiming 60 lives in one week, the United States faulted the regime for the “mishandling that has led to this disaster.”

The campaign hit a crescendo on April 8, 2019—exactly one year to the day after Bolton’s appointment—with the unprecedented move of designating the IRGC a “Foreign Terrorist Organization.” It now appears alongside the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram on this list. That day Pompeo delivered a statement to the press and public in which the words “terror,” “terrorism” and “terrorist” appeared 21 times.

This designation brings at least the IRGC and perhaps the entire nation within arm’s reach of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, legislation originally written to provide a legal basis for the invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11. The 2001 AUMF gives the president wide scope for the unilateral use of force against any parties or individuals associated with the 9/11 attacks, a point not lost on Pompeo.

For over a year, the Trump administration, and Pompeo in particular, has...
been exaggerating the connection between Iran and al-Qaeda to claim legal justification for military action against Iran under the 2001 AUMF. In 2017, the CIA released additional records from the bin Laden files, ostensibly “to enhance public understanding of al-Qaeda.” Wrote former CIA analyst Ned Price:

But this release by Pompeo wasn’t about transparency. Pompeo is playing politics with intelligence, using these files in a ploy to bolster the case against Iran by reinvigorating the debate on its terrorist ties. While the politicization of intelligence is more than sufficient cause for concern, the fact that he appears to be returning to the Bush administration’s pre-Iraq war playbook underscores the danger. This effort reeks of former vice president Dick Cheney’s consistent false allegations of links between Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the 9/11 attacks, a nexus the Bush administration debunked only after we had lost too much in blood and treasure.

Bolton, Pompeo and their allies in and out of government continued to hype the Iran-al-Qaeda link. In May 2018, announcing the U.S. abrogation of the nuclear agreement, Trump made a point of saying that “Iran supports terrorist proxies and militias such as…al-Qaeda.” In a speech at the Heritage Foundation later that month, Pompeo said: “Today we ask the Iranian people: Is this what you want your country to be known for, for being a co-conspirator with Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda?”

Experts have disparaged the administration’s claims, noting the longstanding hostility between Iran, a Shi’i-majority nation, and the radical Sunni group. A definitive New America study published in late 2018 found no evidence that Iran and al-Qaeda collaborated in carrying out terrorist attacks. That hasn’t stopped the administration from continuing the insinuations.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Pompeo went out of his way to construct explicit connections between al-Qaeda and the IRGC with multiple statements like: “there is no doubt there is a connection between the Islamic Republic of Iran and al-Qaeda. Period, full stop.”

**INVOKING THE AUMF**

Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) zeroed in to the subtext of Pompeo’s repetitive al-Qaeda-Iran connections. If the administration determines a valid link between al-Qaeda and the Iranian government, it may be able to declare war on Iran by using the 2001 AUMF, bypassing Congress entirely. So, Senator Paul pressed Pompeo on that point, asking him if he believes that the 2001 AUMF applies to Iran or Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. Pompeo dodged the question: “I would prefer to leave that to the lawyers, Senator.” Neither Bolton nor Pompeo has yet provided a clear answer.

The administration’s plan is clear: keep beating the twin drums of terrorism and nuclear threat. Bolton and Pompeo will use both to justify more sanctions and more provocations. They have a highly disciplined, coordinated messaging strategy. They establish the following false claim, as Bolton did this January in a conversation with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel: “Despite getting out of the Iran nuclear deal, despite the sanctions, we have little doubt that Iran’s leadership is still strategically committed to achieving deliverable nuclear weapons.” The claims are then echoed, as this one was in a Twitter video a few weeks later. And again by U.S. Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook, in a *New York Times* op-ed, demanding that Iran “behave like a normal, peaceful nation: end the pursuit of nuclear weapons, stop testing ballistic missiles, stop sponsoring terrorist proxies.” And again this week by Pompeo, in announcing the oil sanctions, when he demanded that Iran “end [its] pursuit of nuclear weapons.”

It does not matter that U.S. intelligence assessments—as well as Israeli intelligence and the International Atomic Energy Agency—confirm that Iran is not complying with the JCPOA. Or that Saudi Arabia has likely funded al-Qaeda and other Sunni terrorist groups. Or that the U.S. invasion of Iraq is the principle cause of Middle East chaos today. Trump officials will cherry-pick information, package it, and amplify it across a willing echo chamber—exactly as the Bush administration did in the lead up to the Iraq war.

The real question is whether America will fall for it again.

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**Waiting for the Second Algerian Revolution**

**BY ERIC S. MARGOLIS**

Algérie has long been the forgotten nation of North Africa. But now, it is bursting into the news as the latest example of popular revolution in the woefully misgoverned Arab world.

After seven weeks of mass street protests, Algeria’s ruler for the past two decades, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, finally faced the inevitable and resigned after a big shove from the army and the governing elite, known as “le pouvoir” (the power).

Algeria is an important nation in spite of its recent semi-obsccurity. At the center of North Africa, bordered by the Mediterranean and great Sahara Desert, Algeria has over 42 million people, with an important ethnic Berber minority in the mountains and uplands of the interior. Algeria is a major, world class producer of oil and gas, most of which is exported to Europe. In fact, 90 percent of government revenue comes from energy exports.

I have a particular interest in Algeria because I nearly went there as a guerrilla fighter during its long, bloody war for independence from France (1954-1962). Algerian independence from brutal, exploitive French rule was then a noble cause that inspired many young men and women. Over one million people, mostly Algerians, died in the struggle.
Torture and murder were rampant. I led student demonstrations in Europe calling for free Algeria. As a result, I received my first death threats from La Main Rouge, a supposedly independent organization that murdered supporters of Algerian independence. Later, it was revealed to be a false flag branch of French foreign intelligence.

After independence, the victorious FLN (National Liberation Front) leadership set about killing one another. The revolution devoured its own. So much for youthful idealism and hope.

Post-war Algeria was run by the FLN hierarchy and military until gas and oil prices dropped in 1991 and the regime did not know what to do. It was decided to actually allow a free vote in local elections, one of the first in the Arab world. The moderate Islamic Salvation Front (FIS in French) won a landslide. The dictators, king and soldiers who ran the Arab world under U.S., British and French tutelage were horrified. The FIS was banned, its leaders jailed, and martial law imposed over Algeria.

A national uprising erupted against military rule. The army fought back with extreme cruelty, using torture, beatings and executions that far exceeded the cruelties inflicted by former colonial ruler France.

Over 200,000 Algerians died in this butchery.

Most FIS leaders were killed or murdered. But some escaped to Morocco, Libya and the Sahara to create a new militant fighting group, GIA, which still operates today in the Sahara, notably Mali, Cameroon, Chad and Togo. Leaders of the Islamic State took their cues from FIS/GIA.

A young, bright, personable former army officer, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, was named foreign minister. He eventually became president because the regime’s bigwigs (le pouvoir) could not agree on who was to become leader. Bouteflika became the compromise candidate and occupied this role for 20 years—at least until he suffered a severe stroke that left him crippled and mute. He kept ruling from a wheelchair.

Algerians, half of whom are under 30 years old, poured into the streets to demand democracy and free votes. Even army chief Ahmed Salah could not withstand these demands for a new Arab spring. The last one in 1991 turned into a disaster as reactionary forces in the Arab world and their U.S., French and British backers reimposed autocratic rule on the long-suffering Arab world.

But Algeria might spark a new wave of revolution, notably in war-torn Libya, Tunisia and medieval Morocco. Egypt, a virtual U.S.-Saudi colonial dictatorship, would be threatened by a democratic Algeria. The Saharan region would seek real independence from foreign rule.

As of now, we wait to see what will happen in Algiers. It would be good to see Algeria’s military step back and give up its unproductive role in politics. Algeria urgently needs to develop its civilian economy away from oil and gas. When they run out, Algeria will be forced to rely on agriculture and fishing.

Most important, Algeria’s army must ensure a peaceful transition to civilian government and fair elections. This would be the real second Algerian revolution for which so many have died. As we used to chant long ago, “long live free Algeria.”

Eric S. Margolis is an award-winning, internationally syndicated columnist and the author of American Raj: Liberation or Domination? Resolving the Conflict Between the West and the Muslim World (available from AET’s Middle East Books and More). This article was first posted on <http://ericmargolis.com>, April 6, 2019. Copyright © Eric S. Margolis 2019. Reprinted with permission.

Algeria, Sudan on The Road to Arab Statehood, Sovereignty and Citizenship

BY RAMI G. KHOURI

BEIRUT—The nationwide street demonstrations that have now toppled two long-serving and aging dictators in Algeria and Sudan are particularly poignant, because they occur in two pedigree countries in the modern Arab struggles for freedom and dignity.

Much instant commentary around the world will speak of the arrival of Arab Spring 2.0, following the 2010-11 popular rebellions that achieved mixed results in half a dozen Arab countries; it will also note the armed forces’ continued hold on power, or at least on transitional political mechanisms, hinting that Arab societies are doomed to be ruled by military officers.

Such short-sighted and incomplete views of what is actually going on across most of the Arab region should be juxtaposed against the Algerian and Sudanese people’s reaffirmation of Arab citizens’ longstanding desire for a life of political dignity and socio-economic equity—and their willingness to risk their lives to achieve those rights.

Algeria has long been appreciated across the Arab region for its epic struggle for independence from French colonialism over nearly two centuries, and its support for Arab nationalist and progressive movements since the 1960s. Its decades of military rule reflected similar trends in most Arab lands, while the brief democratic breakthrough of the 1992 elections that were won by local Islamists was quickly and viciously quashed by the armed forces who were supported by Western governments.

Sudan is especially noteworthy because this will be the fourth time since its independence in 1955 that its citizens install a democratic system of government—the first three having been overthrown by military coups. Two other popular uprisings overturned military rulers and briefly restored democratic rule in 1964 and 1985.

So far from being sudden, isolated, and delayed revivals of the 2010-11 Arab Uprisings (or “Arab Spring”), Algeria and Sudan’s populist ejections of military rulers more accurately affirm a century-long quest for democracy and
human dignity that has defined Arab societies since their late 19th century stirrings for freedom from European or Ottoman rule.

Algeria and Sudan today should remind us of how deep, wide and continuous has been the struggle for human rights and political decency across the Arab world, not how erratic or episodic it is. The historical reality is that every conceivable configuration of Arab citizens has struggled day and night, week after week, year after year, from century to century, to achieve the rights they expect as human beings, first, and as citizens of their states, second. They face prison, torture and death. They are ridiculed and humiliated, marginalized and exiled, beaten, bought and disappeared—but they persist because they know their own humanity is both invincible and universal.

So they march, write, speak out, challenge, organize, mobilize, vote, go to court, and try every available means to break through the authoritarian chains that bind them to empty political systems, drowning in gutted economies, on the surface of ravaged natural environments, supported by cruel and uncaring Arab and foreign governments.

Everybody beyond a handful of wealthy families and their guards in the power elites struggles in one way or another—sometimes silently, only in their hearts—in this legacy of Arab demands to achieve one’s humanity and rights: individuals, political and professional groups, women’s and student groups, lawyers, street artists, media figures, singers and dancers, local religious and cultural leaders, businessmen and women, high school and university students, local fruit and vegetable sellers, global high-tech magnates, mass movements anchored in religion, ethnicity or ideology, garbage collectors and school teachers. These and hundreds of other categories of citizens have always challenged their own disdainful authorities, foreign occupiers and invaders, and a global capitalist elite that works closely with ruling governments.

These activist Arab men and women never stopped, even when the foreign television crews went home. They only occasionally laid low when death and imprisonment were no longer useful options to achieve their goals. But they always revived after brief interludes of rest, planning, re-grouping and re-strategizing, when they sought the most effective and non-destructive way to remove their hollow regimes of old men with guns who routinely go to London, Paris, Washington, Moscow and other faraway capitals to secure praise and more guns.

I feel this viscerally because for the past 50 years, I have personally experienced, reported on, analyzed and marveled at this legacy of modern Arab struggle for decency, democracy and dignity, and not just once every seven years when it rears its head and waves to the television crews who drop in from New York, London and Paris for a few days to marvel at the suddenly restive natives dressed in flowing robes who peacefully but relentlessly demand to live free, or not at all.

The meaning of Algeria and Sudan in this long, uninterrupted legacy of human struggle that has toppled dictatorial rulers recently is in three main causes: citizens who no longer fear their military regimes but challenge them peacefully in the streets; economies that have been turned into wastelands by the regimes can no longer feed, employ or house the population, two-thirds of whom have become poor, vulnerable and desperate; and, the massive security systems the regimes created to protect themselves in the end refused to shoot and kill their own brothers and sisters.

Most honest people in the Arab region understood in their bones that the 2010-11 uprisings were a milestone on a very long and hard road to the three goals that teased—but ultimately eluded—Arab people a century ago, when the modern Arab state system was formed: statehood, sovereignty and citizenship. Those three prizes, we learned finally, would not come from the generosity of colonial rulers or brutal indigenous autocrats, no matter how many troops they have or how much money they spend.

Statehood, sovereignty and citizenship emerge only from the persistent toil of honest citizens who respect each other, love their country, and dare to battle homegrown or foreign tyrants to live in freedom and dignity. Arabs have done this for many, many decades, and Algeria and Sudan are the latest examples of this ongoing legacy.

Ramzi G. Khouri is senior public policy fellow and professor of journalism at the American University of Beirut, and a non-resident senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School Middle East Initiative. He can be followed on Twitter @ramikhouri. This article was first distributed April 11, 2019. Copyright © 2019 Ramzi G. Khouri. Distributed by Agence Global. Reprinted with permission.
tion stems from the terminology. There was not much Turkish “democracy” to speak of before the elections, and the uncertainty, which hints at a “hijack” of the Greater Istanbul Municipality by the alliance under the leadership of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, casts dark shadows over the term.

If anything, one could speak of “continued resistance of the opposition voter bases” to a system in which fairness and transparency of the ballot-box process are non-existent. One can certainly not speak of “democracy” in an environment where the third largest party, the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party, is severely bruised by arrests, threats and harassment and with its leaders kept in prison.

Neither can one have trust in accountability of a voting process in which the rule of law has collapsed: There is no credible autonomy of state institutions, including the Supreme Electoral Council, which manifests convulsions under extreme political pressure by the executive.

It is, therefore, important to curb the enthusiasm and not mislead world opinion. It is true that opposition voters in Turkey showed that the elections on March 31 were a crucial threshold before Turkey fell prey to consolidated authoritarian rule.

The 84 percent turnout was a healthy sign of a collective insight that the ballot box was the only leverage to pull the brakes for Erdogan and his like-minded supporters, nested in state apparatus and business.

It is also true that the mainstream opposition bloc, consisting of secularist Republican People’s Party (CHP) and nationalist Iyi Party, gained control of municipalities that signify embrace of the two-thirds of the GDP.

However, it is also true that Erdogan and his nationalist ally, Devlet Bahceli, won nearly 52 percent of the nationwide vote on mayoral races and in city councils.

The ground on which Erdogan stands is not shattered but slightly shaken. Having displayed time and again a remarkable skill for survival, Erdogan may throw enthusiastic analysts another curveball. How? The answer is simple: The Turkish president has the “system,” which has nothing to do with “Turkish democracy” as suggested. On the contrary, it was designed and implemented to serve his ambition for absolute power by the referendum on April 16, 2017.

Erdogan won it with 51 percent of the vote then and, despite much deeper challenges on economy and foreign policy, he may claim that the pro-Erdogan bloc is shaken but still solid. Since there are no elections scheduled until 2023, he will not be in a hurry to exercise powers over the local administrations given to him. His real challenge will be within his party: He may choose to go with full force to reassert his authority. At the moment, we may sweep aside undue exuberance and suffice with saying that the mainstream opposition bloc has helped to slightly open the gate to “democracy.” There is a little more light coming into the darkness caused by cruelty in the country.

Let me finish by underlining two key factors, which offer strong opportunities for any future challenge to Erdogan’s power.

One is the Kurdish vote. Without the tactical Kurdish voting, we would not see any loss at all for Erdogan’s alliance in Istanbul, Ankara, Adana, Mersin and the tourism hub of Antalya. Kurds have become the game-setters for the outcome of the elections, which means a change in the asymmetry of power balances on the local level.

The second has to do with a rising star: Ekrem Imamoglu. Having emerged from “bottom up,” which is unusual in the vertically run Turkish politics, Imamoglu proves to be a tough nut to crack under the disguise of a soft-mannered man.

His performance as a contestant for Istanbul as the candidate of the opposition bloc reminds us strongly of the late Turkish President Turgut Ozal, who in the mid-1980s took Turkey out of military rule by embracing a large spectrum of political ideologies.

If he remains persistent and resilient to the political intrigues his party—the CHP [Republican People’s Party]—is known for, Imamoglu is possibly the best outcome of Turkey’s local elections, symbolizing a chance for change in Turkey, albeit in slow motion.

Imamoglu may save the country, which for years posed as the outcast from the ship of democracy.