

It Was Indeed a Rude Awakening

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By Robbie Friedmann

Since the 9-11 atrocity and the war in Iraq (including the tense period leading to it) the Bush administration was very careful to state that this is not a war against Islam. While there was no lack of voices suggesting it may not be a war against Islam it is certainly Islam's war against the West. It is interesting to note an opinion that does not look at "causation" but rather for an attribution of blame. A columnist from India suggests there is something inherently wrong with Islamic societies that results in externalizing and internationalizing their "grievances" instead of solving them internally ("[Fifth Column: Why It's Islam vs. Rest of the World](#)," Tavleen Singh, The (Indian)*Sunday Express*, 1 February 2004).

Singh criticizes the Islamic presence in the recent economic summit in Davos that only complained about the West but never looked at their problems internally: "It was the fault of the West that Islam was being labeled a terrorist religion, the fault of the West that most Muslim rulers were despots, the fault of the West that political issues had been allowed to fester, the fault of the West that Muslim countries had not progressed economically and the fault of the West that Osama bin Laden had got created."

Indeed, this propensity to blame everyone except themselves is evident in the vitriolic official writing by a princess - the daughter of the Saudi king - who specifically blames the West for "conspiring" against her country ("[Saudi Princess Fahda bint Saud ibn Abd Al-Aziz: Conspiracy Theories and Other Writings](#)," MEMRI, Special Dispatch - Saudi Arabia, 2 February 2004, No. 653). Using traditional antisemitic motifs she attacks the U.S. and Jews for "the Neo-Conservative conspiracy to control the world;" who built "a new American-Jewish \$95 million research center established to attack Saudi Arabia." She claims that "outside forces are trying to control Saudi Arabia." She quotes her father as saying "The Zionist threat is like cancer: Arabs will not accept an Israeli state amidst them 'the Saudi Army was trained to repulse Israel,' and 'Saudis support the PLO Charter to liberate Palestine.'"

It is precisely against this backdrop that the rantings of Tom Friedman are no longer "opinions" fit to be printed in a respectable newspaper. His recent article ("[A Rude Awakening](#)," Thomas L. Friedman, *The New York Times*, 5 February 2004) reads like one written for *Der Sturmer* or for/by representatives of current Arab propaganda like the Saudi princess as they repeat the exact same theme of "Jewish control." For anyone who has unfavorable views toward Israel to suggest that George Bush and Yasser Arafat are (Israeli) "house prisoners" (or even compare the two) is ludicrous but to say the White House and the VP are controlled by the Jews is purely an antisemitic canard. If anything, it is Sharon who is influenced by the White House as otherwise the measures he would and should have taken against terrorism would have been far more aggressive and timely.

Not only is Friedman offensive to Jews he insults the intelligence of Americans. Surely the White House is a bit more independent than his portrayal allows. [HonestReporting](#) pointed out

factual errors in Friedman's writing but perhaps he is preparing his retirement with a major Egyptian, Syrian or Saudi newspaper or alternatively is being paid by them already. Trouble is he is writing for the *New York Times* and too many people still take him seriously. Either way, clearly, it is Friedman who needs a "rude awakening." He can start by comparing his article to what the Saudi princess wrote and ask himself how is it they are identical. Perhaps he ought to even read/heed his own very words: "Criticizing Israel is not antisemitic, and saying so is vile. But singling out Israel for opprobrium and international sanction out of proportion to any other party in the Middle East is antisemitic, and not saying so is dishonest."

Some Arab writers have better vision than Friedman and are able to see the flaws of their own societies and even bravely write about them ("Martyrs and Individuals," Ahmed H. al-Rahim, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 February 2003): "The thread that connects the recurring stampedes in Mecca, the suicide bombings in Iraq, and the lopsided [prisoner] exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah is the deficit of respect for the individual in the Arab world. This erosion has occurred in a political context, where too many governments in the region deny their citizens basic individual rights in order to maintain a tight grip on society. When societies trample over the individual, human life is debased."

But even if some Arabs offer an accurate insight, the changes are not likely to come from within Arab and Islamic societies. Indeed, as the noted historian Bernard Lewis suggests, most Islamic countries have failed miserably at modernizing their societies, and it requires others to intervene ("A Historian's Take on Islam: Steers U.S. in Terrorism Fight," Peter Waldman, *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 February 2004). Previous world powers were not interested in changing Arab and Muslim societies; they were interested in controlling them either for direct subjugation (Turks - who were/are Muslim) or for economic, strategic, and military purposes (Great Britain, France). Lewis, however, suggests that the hope for internal change lies with American intervention which is far more benevolent. Whether a realistic vision, the "Lewis Doctrine" offers a fresh look at possible developments in the Middle East that are worthy of examination.

A Harvard scholar asks why do "religious" terrorists kill ("Explaining the Addiction to Jihad," Jessica Stern, *The Daily Star* - Beirut, 5 February 2004). She assumes it is only "religious" terrorists who kill as if "secular" terrorists have not resorted to it, or as if criminal gangs have not utilized terrorism to further their objectives. On one hand she offers a realistic assessment that like criminal gangs, they become addicted to their behavior because it succeeds and it becomes a way of life (inverse pun not intended): "...over time, terrorism can become a career as much as a passion. Leaders harness grievances, humiliation and anomie, turning them into weapons. Jihad becomes addictive. Violence turns activists and mystics into evil men. Grievances end up as greed - for money, political power, status or attention. For the leaders, perpetuating the movement becomes a central goal. What starts as moral fervor becomes a sophisticated organization."

However, Stern attributes too much blame and reason for terrorism on the washed-up mantras such as *envy*, *U.S. policy*, *humiliation*, *globalization* and (the threats of) *modernization*. Hence, instead of looking internally and place the blame directly on the terrorists she indirectly justifies their actions by accepting their *grievances* at face value. She starts well by describing the organizational realities of terrorist groups, misses the point on the reasoning for their action, but

then offers a good yet partial solution: "...the adversaries of terrorist groups need to respond not just with guns, but also by sowing confusion, conflict and competition among terrorists and between terrorists and their sponsors and sympathizers. They should encourage condemnation of extremist interpretations of religion by peace-loving practitioners." Had she stopped here her argument would have had some merit. But she then erroneously adds: "They should change policies that no longer serve their interests or are inconsistent with their values, even if these are policies the terrorists demand. In the end, what counts is what we fight for, not what we oppose. We need to avoid giving into spiritual dread, and hold fast to the best of our principles and values by emphasizing tolerance, empathy and courage." Too politically correct an ending to what was supposed to have been a scholarly article, and rather off the mark at that.

The acceptance of such theories only exacerbates the situation even further. There is little doubt Israel is being demonized and not only by the likes of the too-powerful Tom Friedman. Nations demonize Israel, and groups, organizations, media outlets, and regrettably self-hating Jews do that too often - not understanding (or not wanting to see) the fine line between valid criticism and antisemitism ("The Demonization of Israel and Antisemitism," Isi Leibler, *israelinsider*, 30 January 2004).

An illustration of the growing anti-Israel movement is evident in the workings of the recently established "World Social Forum" (WSF) which has adopted the cause of "Palestine" to the extent that in its view Israel is illegitimate and has no right to exist. In its recent convention in India its approach became crystal clear ("Networking to Destroy Israel," Shimon Samuels, *The Jerusalem Post*, 2 February 2004): "Regardless of what brought participants to Mumbai, an anti-Israel angle was promoted: Environmentalists were told, 'Israel is guilty of toxic apartheid.' Health workers were told by the Palestine Medical Relief Association that they could connect with a new branch of Physicians and Nurses in Solidarity with Palestine. Teachers, with the backing of Quebec and Vancouver unionists, could connect with international teachers conferences planned for Bethlehem and Ramallah. And Indian and Canadian Committees to Support Education in Palestine were officially launched." And "as a sidebar to the WSF, the Association of Muslim Hotels of Bombay declared a ban on American guests. U.S. and Israeli flags were burned. Stalls distributed anti-Israel posters and 'Free Palestine' scarves to hundreds of WSF participants."

Of course, the current Iranian regime's very existence seems to depend on not only demonizing Israel but actively trying to destroy it. Its leader must have been delighted to read Tom Friedman when he spouted in an interview last week ["Khatami Terms Tel Aviv as U.S. Capital," IRIB News (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting), 1 February 2004] that "Israel is not the friend of the U.S. because Israel's Zionist lobby decides a major part of American policy. I have once said in a speech that I do feel sorry for the American nation because although its capital is Washington, its real capital is Tel Aviv."

And it is not only the self-styled WSF which is anti-Israel. The official world body, the United Nations is truly united on one subject only: how to do more damage to Israel and how to use her as its punching bag ("The U.N. and The Jews," Anne Bayefsky, *Commentary*, February 2004): "In every U.N. body, Arab and Muslim states have opposed any effort to give meaningful definition to the notion of terrorism, largely because of its obvious implications for the

Palestinian 'uprising'. The U.N. Counter Terrorism Committee, set up by the Security Council in the wake of 9/11, has yet to identify publicly a single terrorist organization or state sponsor of terrorism. At the U.N., Israelis and Jews are, by definition, oppressors, as are the nations and organizations that rally to their cause, and there is no reason to think that this underlying reality will change anytime soon. Perhaps it is time to stop holding seminars and conferences on whether the U.N. glass is half-full or half-empty. The contents of the glass have been poisoned."

If there is any doubts left about how conducive are incitement, preaching and propaganda to inspire terrorism, just observe the official Arab press. An Egyptian paper endorses, encourages and legitimizes murder, even if children are killed in the process ("[Egyptian Government Daily: Suicide Bombings are Legitimate Even if Children Are Killed](#)," MEMRI, Special Dispatch - Egypt/Jihad & Terrorism Studies, 6 February 2004, No. 658) and it does so by blaming someone else (the victim) for the action: "Even if during [a martyrdom operation] civilians or children are killed - the blame does not fall upon the Palestinians, but on those who forced them to turn to this modus operandi."

Of course, terrorist organizations wholeheartedly pride themselves in carrying out such actions and the new Muslim Brotherhood leader argues that "martyrdom operations are a religious obligation" in Palestine and Iraq ("[New Muslim Brotherhood Leader: Resistance in Iraq and Palestine is Legitimate; America is Satan; Islam Will Invade America and Europe](#)," MEMRI, Special Dispatch - Jihad & Terrorism Studies Project, 4 February 2004, No. 655). Yet once these religious fanatics carry out their criminal acts they deny responsibility and state there is "no proof that al-Qaeda carried out the 9/11 attacks." Then the leader goes on to threaten the U.S. by describing it as a "Satan" who will "soon collapse" and that "Islam Will Invade Europe and the U.S." The Muslim Brotherhood leader also welcomes an "understanding with Egypt's government," provided it is made on his terms.

Not many notice but terrorism is not directed at Israeli, Americans and others (see the [bombing in the Moscow Subway](#)) only. The Palestinians seem to terrorize their own people as well and turn out to be far greater oppressors than they claim their enemies are ("When Palestinians become oppressors," Robert Fulford, *National Post*, 2 February 2004): "The mistreatment of Palestinians by Palestinians has seldom been given more than cursory examination by journalists outside the Middle East, and for obvious reasons. Israel's supporters are more inclined to worry about the random murdering and maiming of Jews, an attempt to shatter the nerves of Israelis and destroy their state. Those who sympathize with Palestinians don't want to remind anyone of how badly they treat each other. Palestinians have somehow become the favorite oppressed people of intellectuals and journalists in Europe and elsewhere. It's unfashionable to say a word against them...Palestinians murder other Palestinians in cold blood and no one gets charged. Gunmen, some political and some apparently not, spread fear among the population."

And the Palestinian governing organs (if that is not an oxymoron) is not anything that those who hope for law and order can bank on ("[Saving the Palestinian Authority](#)," Danny Rubinstein, *Ha'aretz*, 2 February 2004). Indeed, observers expect it to collapse in the very near future: "The PA might not collapse in one fell swoop, but under existing political circumstances, its future looks ominous." Given its terror-supporting track record it may not be such a big loss.

Even the Americans are starting to recognize the sad realities of Palestinian terrorism. In a lengthy account that was mostly aimed at dispelling the clouds of possible intelligence failure regarding Iraq's WMD, the CIA Director said earlier in the week ("Transcript of Tenet address on WMD intelligence," CNN, 5 February 2004) that the "burden here on Mr. Arafat and the Palestinians is considerable: They must prove that they're willing to sit side-by-side with the Israelis and engage in the constructive security arrangements that we fostered between 1998 and 2001. Unless we get a commitment to stop terrorism and to seriously talk about not just the aspiration of the Palestinian people but the security of the Israeli people in a way where we have two parties firmly committed to a common objective, we're not going to get anywhere."

The Palestinians may not notice it but Israel's strength lies in its conduct and reaction to terrorism. Indeed, some observers suggest ("Israel's Gift to a Terrorized World," Yossi Klein Halevi, *The Jerusalem Post*, 1 February 2004) that "...it is our struggle for balance between security and morality that is a sign of the vitality of the Israeli soul. In the global war against terror, Israel is humanity's laboratory for testing the limits of a democracy under permanent siege... The value of that experiment is ignored by Israel's foreign critics." "not only a tactical but a moral necessity. If Israel surrenders - for example, if we negotiate substantive political issues under terrorist fire - then terrorists everywhere will be encouraged to persist. If Israeli society can be broken, terrorists will realize, any society can be broken... But decisively resolving the unbearable tension inherent in our war against terror, in favor of either an absolutist human rights agenda or an absolutist security agenda, would destroy the essence of Israel's soul, which is the ability to sustain paradox." Perhaps a balance needs to be maintained but it also needs to tilt more towards security as after all we owe that much to all living souls.

Yet the war against the terrorists and their supporters permeates not only the streets and TV screens but language itself. As a linguistics scholar points out ("The Language War," Lewis Glinert, *The Jerusalem Post*, 29 January 2004): "Words are a cognitive mystery. We use them confidently and quite smoothly to exchange thoughts, yet we are often quite unaware of why we've used one word and not another. And when challenged to define a word we're using, we generally have no option but to reach for a dictionary - but only to find that dictionary definitions rarely capture the nuances of words, their connotations and associations, the very things that lead us to choose one word over another...One stealth technique is collocation - i.e., the use of two words in the same breath so as to effect a semantic contamination. Examples are 'the plight of the Palestinians' and 'illegal settlements.' Another is the use of ...'devil terms' and 'God terms' - words that act like automatic moral triggers, such as 'oppression,' 'occupation,' and 'uprising.' The Western media have duly done their best to keep the devil term 'terrorist' out of their reporting."

Therefore, mental warning labels should be assigned to writings such as Tom Friedman's so as to be able to de-construct the flimsy house of cards he builds and wants us to think he resides in Fort Knox. To a large extent, most of us cannot actively fight terrorism in the battlefield of bullets and bombs and hopefully most will not have to. But all of us can become active in the front of language and thought. Take the terrorist threats seriously, take their ideologies at face value but do not accept their rationalization and justifications; do not allow them to control the linguistic agenda. In this battlefield we can concentrate all of our energies and mental capabilities and actually win if we only pay enough attention and learn not to dance to the terrorists' or columnists' tunes.