



Commentary...

America's Coalition Confusion By Caroline Glick

A core question arises from last weekend's Arab League summit in Damascus. Boycotted by half the league's members, the conference demonstrated the depth of Egyptian and Saudi opposition to Iran's rise to prominence in the Arab world. So too, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki's ostentatious participation at the summit showed the strength of Iran's strategic ties with Syria.

The question that arises from the summit is if Egypt and Saudi Arabia are willing to discard even the semblance of Arab unity in order to make clear their opposition to Iran, why do they support Hamas?

Hamas is an Iranian proxy. It receives its arms, training and orders from Teheran. Its leaders reside in Syria. Given their open opposition to Iran, and their increasingly open opposition to Syria as Iran's client, wouldn't it make more sense - from their perspective - to boycott Hamas?

The reason that Egypt and Saudi Arabia support Hamas in spite of its client relationship with Teheran is that for Egypt and Saudi Arabia, support for Palestinian terrorists trumps opposition to Iran. If they are forced to choose between fighting Iran and collaborating with Iran in support of Palestinian terrorists, they will always choose the latter. This is why they are spearheading negotiations between Fatah and Hamas towards the reestablishment of a Fatah-Hamas unity government. This is why Egypt enables Hamas and Iran to use its territory as their weapons supply route.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia think supporting the Palestinians is more important than fighting Iran because the Palestinians fight Israel. As the heads of the so-called "moderate Arab" camp, Egypt and Saudi Arabia hate the Jews more than they fear the Iranians.

The central question then for policymakers in Washington who are trying to deploy a successful strategy for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and asserting regional predominance is how can the Palestinian war with Israel be defused so that the 'moderate' Arab states will be forced to join them in confronting Iran?

THE CONSENSUS answer that the US has come up with is to pressure Israel to make massive concessions to the Palestinians. It is argued that such concessions will appease not just the Palestinians, but more importantly, they will appease the US's "moderate" Arab supporters in Egypt and Saudi Arabia. As this thinking goes, if Israel can be forced to cough up big enough concessions quickly enough, then the Palestinians will quiet down and the Egyptians and Saudis will be sufficiently satisfied with the "progress" being made to direct their attentions to confronting Iran.

This argument was elucidated this week by Democratic Senator and presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton in an interview with the Jewish Exponent. Clinton claimed that the Oslo negotiating process between the PLO and Israel which her husband embraced as his central Middle East policy from 1993 through 2000 brought levels of violence down between Israel and the Palestinians and so engendered regional stability.

In her words, "I think what we did in the '90s was beneficial in a strategic way and led to a period where, at times, there were no attacks being made, no suicide bombings and no deaths." She then went on to criticize the Bush administration which during its first term in office did not pressure Israel to restart negotiations towards Palestinian statehood with the PLO. Clinton added that she would consider opening negotiations with Hamas if she is elected president.

Clinton's argument is notable for two reasons. First, it accurately reflects not only her view, but the view now being pushed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her bimonthly visits to Israel. As she made apparent in

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her visit to Israel this week, Rice believes that the only way to reach an agreement is for Israel to empower Fatah and give Hamas a pass. So too, in her clear support for Egypt's negotiations with Hamas, Rice shows that the Bush administration is already holding indirect negotiations with Hamas.

The second reason that Clinton's argument is notable is because it has been so obviously disproven by reality.

During the years that her husband was applying massive pressure on Israel to appease the Palestinians, terror levels against Israel eclipsed anything Israel had seen since the 1950s. In the 15 years which preceded the 1993 Oslo accord, 216 Israelis were murdered in terrorist attacks. In the seven years of the Oslo peace process, 286 Israelis were killed. Indeed, it was only in 1994, when Israel was first transferring territory to PLO control and the Palestinian Authority was building its armies that Israel suffered its first suicide bombing.

During the six years of the Palestinian uprising from 1987-1993, 172 Israelis were killed. During the first six years of the Palestinian terror war against Israel which Oslo produced, more than 1,100 Israelis were killed. Violence levels dropped not because of peace talks, but because of Israeli offensive operations against the Palestinians.

As Yasser Arafat told Palestinian audiences throughout the 1990s, his goal in the Oslo process was to gain the military and political means to continue his war against Israel. Arafat's confidante Faisal Husseini made this Palestinian perspective explicit with the outbreak of the Palestinian terror war in September 2000. Speaking to the Arab media, Husseini said that for the Palestinians, the Oslo process was a "Trojan horse" against Israel. They came to Israel bearing the promise of peace with the premeditated aim of using Israel's willingness to make peace as a means of launching a new round of war whose aim was the political and military destruction of the Jewish state.

THE OSLO process which Clinton praises and Rice apes with her Annapolis process brought the Palestinian issue, which had been buried throughout much of the 1980s to the forefront of the pan-Arab social consciousness and political agenda. This it did to the detriment of other salient issues like Iran's steps towards regional hegemony, Egyptian and Saudi repression of liberal forces in their countries, and, during the 1990s, Saddam Hussein's systematic breach of UN Security Council sanctions.

Here it is worth noting that the pinnacle of US success in building an Arab coalition against a rogue state came in 1990. The Gulf War against Saddam Hussein, which saw the entire Arab world united with the US against a fellow-Arab regime, came not in the midst of a Palestinian-Israeli peace process. It came when there were no diplomatic negotiations whatsoever between Israel and the Palestinians or between Israel and any state.

THERE ARE two principal reasons that the advent of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations weakened pan-Arab interest in working with the US against common threats. First, because the Oslo process empowered terrorists, terror attacks increased. Each terror attack received massive, supportive coverage in the Arab media.

Second, since the Oslo process placed terrorists in charge of Gaza, Judea and Samaria, the Palestinians found themselves ruled by murderers who had no interest in economic development and opposed liberalization and democracy. As a consequence, the Palestinian economic situation went from one of sustained growth to one of massive depredation. The footage of Palestinian terror attacks and Palestinian economic privation shown daily in the pan-Arab media eclipsed coverage of every other issue. And since the US is viewed as Israel's ally, it engendered unprecedented levels of anti-Americanism in the Arab world.

So if the Palestinian-centric model embraced by the US to build an Arab coalition against Iran works precisely to undermine such a coalition by bringing to the forefront the one issue that the Arabs and the Iranians agree on, what would an alternative model of policymaking look like?

The Achilles heel of the US's current strategy is its reliance on Egyptian

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and Saudi support. Since Egypt and Saudi Arabia prefer fighting Israel to confronting Iran, a better policy for confronting Iran would be to base a US coalition on states that prefer fighting Iran to fighting Israel. Regionally, Israel, Lebanon and Iraq fit this model.

IF THE US were to shore up these allies and stiffen their resolve to confront Iran rather than divert its attention to a policy which simply serves to galvanize Arab attention and energies against Israel and away from Iran, the US would pose a more imposing threat to Iran. It would also push the Iranian threat to the forefront of political discourse in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Such a revised policy would involve not only shoring up Israeli, Iraqi and Lebanese willingness to confront Iran and Syria. It would also involve scaling back US involvement in the Palestinian conflict with Israel. Such a scaling back could only be successful if at the same time as it disengaged from the negotiations process between Israel and Fatah, Washington also gave Israel a green light to defeat Hamas in Gaza. Such an Israeli operation would both end the specter of an Iranian takeover of Judea and Samaria and remove Iran's ability to reignite the Palestinian conflict at will.

Obviously, to advance such a policy option, the US would have to confront an Israeli government that has embraced the incorrect logic of the current failed strategy of winning Arab support for confronting Iran by forcing Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians. So too, it would have to confront an Iraqi government that is afraid to confront Iran, and a UN that seems to have abandoned its previous willingness to acknowledge Syria's culpability for the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri.

It would also have to ensure that Israel's military defeat at the hands of Iran and Hizbullah in 2006 will not repeat itself. That defeat enabled Hizbullah to reassert its control over south Lebanon and acquire an even more sophisticated arsenal than it had two years ago.

Replacing the current failed strategy of squeezing Israel in the hopes of winning the support of unreliable Arab allies for confronting Iran will no doubt be a controversial move. It will win the Bush administration no fast friends in Europe or on American university campuses. It will even anger the Israeli Left which now sues for peace with Syria.

The only advantage to be had from basing America's strategy towards Iran on building a US-led anti-Iranian coalition comprised of states that prefer to fight Iran than to fight Israel is that such a policy has the potential of actually ending Iran's increased domination of the Middle East and of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. (Jerusalem Post Mar 31)

Hillel Goes Post-Modern By Isi Leibler

Post-modernist thinking has made massive inroads at all levels, not excluding the Jewish political world, where references to right and wrong or good and evil have become rare, replaced by a politically correct lexicon. Recent controversies involving the Jewish campus organization Hillel highlight the trend.

Supported by the Jewish community to further its stated objectives of strengthening Jewish identity and assisting Jewish students to confront anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic agitation on campus, Hillel extended an invitation to Michael Drake, chancellor of the University of California Irvine (UCI), to address its recent summit of Jewish leaders in Washington. The UCI campus is notorious for widespread allegations of anti-Semitic harassment that often escalates into actual violence. That harassment reached a level which compelled the Hillel director himself to complain that "Jewish students are legitimately fearful for their safety."

The local Hillel board created a task force to review the situation, but for reasons yet to be disclosed, the Hillel board of directors refused to release the findings of their own divisional enquiry and withdrew the report.

The task force decided to carry on as an independent body and, a year later, in February 2008, released a scathing report condemning the university authorities. The report singled out Chancellor Drake for having repeatedly declined to condemn the demonization and delegitimization of Israel and the physical harassment of pro-Israeli speakers. The report went so far as to advise Jews to cease enrolling at UCI until the authorities institute tangible changes.

STUDENT activists bitterly protested the Drake invitation. A delegation met with the national president of Hillel, Wayne Firestone, arguing that honoring Drake at a Hillel event made a mockery of their failed efforts to persuade him to condemn the extremists. Firestone rebuffed them, insisting he was "proud" that Hillel had provided the chancellor with a platform, and that he considered it "more constructive" to "engage" people like Drake rather than confront them, so as to "build sensitivity" to issues of Jewish concern.

Drake did "reject" anti-Semitism at the Hillel summit. But he remained adamant that the university must retain "content neutrality" in relation to anti-Israeli agitation. Subsequently, as though on cue, a number of Jewish students,

Hillel leaders and local Jewish groups - while conceding that "verbal anti-Semitism" remained a problem - praised Drake for condemning hate speech and endorsed the Hillel approach of "promoting civil discourse."

Subsequent angry exchanges exposed major divisions among Jewish leaders.

Hillel president Firestone is no stranger to Israeli affairs. He spent seven years in Israel, two as head of the Jerusalem ADL office. Prior to becoming Hillel president he was engaged in coordinating pro-Israel activities on campus. Yet he made the astonishing observation that there was "less hostility to Jews on campus than anywhere else in American society."

In another statement, which will undoubtedly return to haunt him in the future, Firestone told the JTA that he denied any relationship between anti-Israeli activity and anti-Semitism and said that bracketing the two together was like "mixing apples and oranges."

It is surely disconcerting for a Hillel president to express views by now repudiated even by such bodies as the European Union and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, not to mention the US government.

WHATEVER THE rights or wrongs of the UCI fracas, there was no ambiguity about the Harvard Hillel one. There, Hillel displayed its adherence to "pluralism and freedom of expression" by enabling a handful of disgruntled former IDF soldiers to launch a ferociously anti-Israeli exhibition on Hillel premises, including the room utilized as a synagogue.

Titled Breaking the Silence, the exhibit comprised 100 photographic blow-ups portraying excesses purportedly committed by the IDF on Palestinians suffering under Israeli occupation.

The exhibition made no reference to the deaths of so many young Israelis as a result of the IDF's reluctance to maximize its firepower in an effort to minimize civilian casualties. No mention was made of the major wars Israel has fought for survival against more numerous foes seeking its destruction. The ongoing terrorism and missiles directed against Israeli civilians weren't noted, nor was there even a suggestion of the poisonous incitement against Jews which saturates all levels of Palestinian society from kindergarten on.

In an open letter published on the Web, Harvard Hillel Director Bernie Steinberg justified this obscene anti-Israeli exhibition on the bizarre grounds that some students "feel it humanizes the soldiers, and people come away with a more positive feeling about Israel."

Perhaps sensitive to the gobbledygook he was expressing, he added "I myself did not anticipate this response, but it is much more widespread than I would have thought."

STEINBERG also defended the exhibition on the nonsensical grounds that Hillel was not sponsoring the event, merely providing a venue. Moreover, he claimed that had it not been located on Hillel premises, it would have been displayed in a more public area, and more students would have seen it. He added that an Israeli soldier had been present to provide a more balanced picture.

What made this surrealistic scenario even more disturbing was the silence of the Jewish establishment, perhaps because Hillel is deemed a sacred cow. The only public protest came from Mort Klein, head of the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA), which most of the Jewish establishment regards as extremist. The ZOA had previously protested the Drake invitation as well.

Steinberg responded to Klein by blaming him for unleashing a stream of "hate mail" against students - which turned out to have been angry letters by Jews demanding that Hillel cancel the exhibition.

Topping off this inanity, Steinberg claimed that an Israeli diplomat, whom he did not name, praised Hillel's approach to the exhibition, telling Steinberg that "public bickering between Jews in America, especially when it involves Israeli combat soldiers, does nothing to help Israel. We like the way you guys (Harvard Hillel) work."

If Steinberg's Israeli "diplomat" genuinely exists, he should be identified and speedily recalled.

These mind-boggling Hillel imbroglions reflect the extent to which post-modernism has penetrated the Jewish agenda and blurred distinctions between good and bad. How else can one explain an organization like Hillel effectively giving an imprimatur to an exhibition that dehumanizes the IDF? Or a national Hillel president insisting that anti-Israel activity and anti-Semitism are unrelated?

These are not isolated cases. Unless vigorously confronted, the toxic combination of post-modernism and simplistic liberalism will inflict further shameful scandals on us. (Jerusalem Post Mar 31)

Lies Begging to Be Exposed By Evelyn Gordon

Many factors contribute to Israel's perennially poor public relations, most of them stemming from its own incompetence. They range from spokesmen who are not fluent in the relevant foreign language to the failure to formulate a clear, simple and consistent message for these spokesmen to convey. One aspect of the problem, however, is Israel's persistent failure to refute Palestinian lies.

Two weeks ago, for instance, the New York Times/International Herald Tribune ran a report on the latest poll by Khalil Shikaki's Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR). It stated that Shikaki "was shocked" because the poll "showed greater support for violence than any other he had conducted over the past 15 years... Never before, he said, had a majority favored an end to negotiations or the shooting of rockets at Israel."

Shikaki's "explanation for the shift," it continued, "is that recent actions by Israel, especially attacks on Gaza that killed nearly 130 people, an undercover operation in Bethlehem that killed four militants and the announced expansion of several West Bank settlements, have led to despair and rage among average Palestinians."

The message could not be clearer: The normally peace-loving Palestinians, who previously opposed rocket attacks on Israeli civilians, have been driven to violence by Israel's brutality. There is only one problem: Shikaki's claim is utterly false.

HIS LATEST poll found that 64 percent of Palestinians favored rocket attacks on Israeli civilians. Far from being unprecedented, however, that figure is almost identical to what it was 18 months ago, according to Shikaki's own data: A PSR poll conducted in late August, 2006 found that 63 percent of Palestinians favored such attacks. And it is lower than the figure in some earlier Shikaki polls: In September 2004, for instance, PSR found that 75 percent of Palestinians supported rocket attacks on Israel.

The other leading Palestinian pollster, the Jerusalem Media and Communications Center, has consistently produced similar results: A JMCC poll from July 2006, for instance, found that 60 percent of Palestinians supported rocket attacks on Israel.

In other words, peace-loving Palestinians have not been suddenly radicalized by Israeli brutality; they have supported rocket attacks on Israeli civilians from the moment they acquired this capability.

This is not a trivial issue. First, the main international criticism of Israel's counterterrorism operations in Gaza is that they hurt "innocent civilians." Yet that argument loses much of its force if those "innocent civilians" actually support the rocket attacks, because repeated studies have shown that whether terrorist organizations wither or thrive depends substantially on the support they receive from the local population. Thus a populace that backs terrorist activities is not "innocent," it is an active and essential contributor to the terrorists' success.

This is even truer for the Palestinians, because Hamas is not only a terrorist organization; it is also an elected ruling party. Public opinion is thus an especially crucial component of its power, one it cannot afford to totally disregard. Hence were ordinary Palestinians largely opposed to rather than supportive of rocket attacks, Hamas would be much more likely to restrain both its own military wing and smaller groups like Islamic Jihad.

Israeli operations in Gaza are also routinely slammed as counterproductive - which might be valid if these operations indeed increased support for anti-Israel attacks. But if support for rocket attacks against Israel has remained steadily high for years, regardless of the ups and downs of the fighting, that claim, too, loses much of its force.

THE SHIKAKI poll, of course, is merely one of many Palestinian lies that have gone unrefuted by Israel. Another excellent example is the partial fuel embargo on Gaza.

Palestinians have had great success in charging that this embargo deprives them of fuel for such humanitarian essentials as pumping water and running hospital generators. Israel routinely counters that it does provide enough fuel for humanitarian needs, but since it never provides evidence to back this assertion, the world has largely dismissed it.

Yet such evidence is readily available: One need look no farther than the New York Times.

On February 26, for instance, the International Herald Tribune ran a Times report on a protest against the Israeli embargo that Hamas organized in northern Gaza. Of the approximately 4,000 demonstrators, it said, "many were schoolchildren who arrived directly from their classrooms ... They had been bused in to join the protest, despite complaints from Gaza about a dire shortage of gasoline because of the Israeli sanctions."

On March 11, the Times reported on another Hamas-organized protest, in Gaza City. Palestinian livestock owners "were paid 100 shekels each (about \$28) to attend the protest, as well as transportation costs. Hundreds of animals

- sheep, camels and donkeys - came from all over Gaza."

Busing in schoolchildren from all over Gaza guzzles fuel; so does trucking in livestock from all over Gaza. Thus clearly, Hamas has fuel for things it deems important. If it considers anti-Israel demonstrations more important than supplying hospitals and pumping stations, that is hardly Israel's fault; it is Hamas that has chosen to deprive its own people in order to score propaganda points.

Again, this is a nontrivial issue. Virtually nothing could damage Israel's image more than people worldwide imagining Palestinian children with no water to drink, or hospitals unable to perform lifesaving operations, due to an Israeli embargo. And virtually nothing could damage Hamas's image more than having people worldwide realize that it is cynically withholding vital fuel from its own people in order to make Israel look bad.

It would be nice if journalists, world leaders and international human rights organizations consistently noticed such lies on their own, but the reality is that they rarely have the time, energy or interest to do the necessary research. For Israel, however, exposing Palestinian lies is a vital interest. Hence it is Israel's responsibility to invest the resources necessary to document these lies and expose them to international opinion leaders.

That would still be only one small element of the comprehensive public relations strategy that Israel needs. But it would be far better than the current policy of letting such damaging lies go unchallenged. (Jerusalem Post Apr 2)

When Terrorism Makes Sense By Barry Rubin

Years after September 11, despite more than 10,000 terrorist attacks by radical Islamist groups alone, there is still an amazing amount of confusion and falsehood over what should be a very simple point: What is terrorism all about?

The answer is politics and, to be specific, revolutionary politics. Most obviously, terrorism is a tactic used by political groups but, most importantly, it is a strategy. Defining who and what is "terrorist" should be neither a moral judgment nor a propaganda exercise. It should be a simple use of political analysis.

There are many incomplete or misleading concepts of terrorism. Often, terrorism is conceived as evil and its perpetrators as irrational criminals. While terrorism is evil in moral terms, the problem with this approach is that it goes further in understanding the phenomenon.

Partly in reaction to that concept, terrorism is presented as a matter of opinion.

Once terrorism is defined in moral terms, it is depoliticized. The media thinks of itself as neutral. Consequently, the English-language Western media often calls people who commit terrorist actions "militants" or "extremists." That may be a good thing since it indicates a radical and implies a violent orientation. But it only educates up to a point.

There are arguably good reasons for employing a terrorist strategy to seize state power and transform societies. When does an ideology or movement decide that its best course is deliberately murdering the maximum number of civilians? Choosing a terrorist strategy is a judgment about one's goals, enemy, and constituency:

- Only a despotic goal pursued by a totalitarian movement can sustain a terrorist strategy which, in turn, further reinforces an anti-democratic, intolerant orientation. A radical Islamist dictatorship in which the ruling elite's whims are rationalized as divine will is the shining hell that is the movement's ultimate goal. This replaces the Marxist dictatorship of those claiming to embody the proletariat's needs with that of those pretending to interpret divine desires.

- To be deserving of mass murder or even genocide, the enemy must be defined as simultaneously demonic and weak. The enemy must be seen as pure evil to justify its being massacred - but also cowardly, so as to explain why the revolutionaries will triumph. Yet the terrorist strategist may make a tactical adjustment in the face of a tough opponent. The reason that Muslim Brotherhoods in Egypt and Jordan do not presently engage in terrorism has nothing to do with their worldview and everything to do with fear of repression. In contrast, Hamas and Hizbullah - parallel movements in every way - can go all-out because there is no government of their peers that is going to flatten them for doing so.

- Especially important is the terrorist strategist's assessment of his constituents. He must believe that terrorism will be relatively popular among those he wants to win over. Terrorism appeals as a revolutionary strategy mainly because the violence used against Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, and Western targets is largely cheered among Arabs. Only a minority are radical Islamists but a majority is pleased, at least at their work in nearby places. The fault lies with the fans in the stands rather than the victims in the arena.

THIS IS the problem presented by terrorism and radical Islamism. Crazy people can be given therapy; misunderstandings can be cleared up with dialogue; honest grievances can be resolved by mutual concessions. With determined, ideologically clear, mass-based revolutionary movements you can either defeat them or surrender. A third option is holding them off - that is, preventing them from winning for a very long time until they are truly worn down. Refer here to the history of Communism.

Finally, a new twist is added, not for the folks at home but for all the suckers abroad. "The communists disdain to conceal their aims," wrote Karl Marx in 1848. Since then, the public relations industry has flourished. Terrorist movements and supporters learned to feign innocence (and moderation), accusing their victims of being terrorists. With a lot of help from prestigious Western news organs, they have turned the tables.

Arab leaders spoke in 1948 and 1967 of repeating the Mongol massacres and driving the Jews into the sea. This has not completely changed. Hizbullah chief Hassan Nasrallah said recently, "The Zionist entity can be wiped out of existence." But there is no end of commentators around to explain that he doesn't really mean it. Even a young gentleman of the old school like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has many saying he was misquoted about seeking to wipe Israel off the map

Instead, the sophisticated talk is of "collective punishment" and "excessive force."

Consider this 1993 exchange between two founders of the US-based, Hizbullah-supporting Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR):

Omar Ahmad: "There is a difference between you saying, 'I want to restore the '48 land, and when you say 'I want to destroy Israel.....' Nihad Awad: "Yes, there are different but parallel types of address. There shouldn't be [a] contradiction. Address people according to their minds. When I speak with the American, I speak with someone who doesn't know anything. As for the Palestinian who has a martyr brother or something, I know how to address him, you see?"

Yes, I see. But I wish everyone else did, too. (Jerusalem Post Mar 31)
The writer is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center at IDC Herzliya and editor of the Middle East Review of International Affairs Journal. His latest book is The Truth About Syria.

Forgetting Our Faith By Daniel Gordis

There were days, and they were not that long ago, when Zionism was about something different. Days when Zionists could articulate what the purpose of Jewish statehood was, days when Israelis understood that having a state was about changing the existential condition of the Jew. No longer.

Hayyim Nachman Bialik, writing in 1903 shortly after the massive pogrom in Kishinev, understood that the very essence of Jewish existence had to change. What else could he possibly have been saying in his epic poem, *The City of Slaughter*, when he describes the mass rape scene in which Jewish women are helpless victims and Jewish men are powerless to intervene? In fact, for Bialik, the villains of the scene are not the Cossacks; rape and murder are simply what Cossacks do. The fault in what happened in Kishinev, Bialik intimates with his bitter irony, rests with the Jewish men.

It's bad enough that they were too weak to defend their wives, their sisters, their mothers and their daughters. But worse than that, they were too frightened even to try. And even worse than that, says Bialik, when the slaughter and the butchery were over, these men looked down at the broken bodies of the women that they had supposedly once loved and instead of assuring them that they would take care of them, they gazed at these violated, half-dead women and saw a halachic question: "Is my wife," the kohanim in Bialik's poem want to know, "still permitted to me?"

It makes no difference whether or not anyone in Kishinev really asked that question. Bialik is describing the human (or no longer human) condition of the Jew. And what he wants us to know is that the Jews have come to accept their victimization as part of their nature.

Real people, Bialik suggests, simply don't stand by and watch their family members get raped and slaughtered and do nothing about it. Even if you'll get killed in the process, you try to defend the people you love. When you no longer defend your family, he intimates, you're not human; you're sick.

The Jews are sick, he says, their souls eroded by passivity, by weakness, by fear. And the cure, we know not from this poem but from much of what he writes, is a Jewish homeland.

Just over 40 years later, with 6 million Jews ushered heavenward, the State of Israel was about to be born. And Natan Alterman, who in some ways had replaced Bialik as the poet laureate of the Zionist movement, wanted Jews to understand what was unfolding. It wasn't just a country that they were getting;

it was a purpose, salvation. The Jews would not simply have a state; the Jews would be transformed.

And thus, in his poem *The Silver Platter*, when the whole nation assembles to receive the "unique miracle," they are assembled not at Sinai but in their homeland. And they are awaiting not Torah but statehood. Independence, not religion, is what will save the Jews, Alterman is effectively saying.

Bialik and Alterman were, of course, quite right. And dead wrong. Bialik was right that the condition of the Jew in Europe was intolerable, and Alterman was right that immigrant boys and girls would help redeem what was left of the Jewish people. But they were sadly wrong about the advisability of leaving Jewish religious discourse in the dust, for they failed to predict how quickly Israelis would find themselves unable to say or remember why they needed a state.

To go to war to defend your citizens, you'd have to be able to articulate why Israel still makes a difference. You'd have to be able to see yourself as part of a several-thousand-year-old conversation. When you've lost the sense that Jewish statehood is about changing the condition of the Jew, and when you can no longer recall that independence was designed, among other things, to end the era of hunting seasons in which the Jews are the ducks, when any semblance of a Jewish conversation is thoroughly absent from your worldview, it's hard to say much about why the Jews need a state.

When you can't articulate why you need this state, you fret. You worry mostly about what the world thinks of you because, more than anything else, you simply want to be "normal," indistinguishable, just like everyone else. So, just like the "men" in Bialik's poem, you don't allow yourself to be horrified by the fact that in the last seven years, almost 8,000 rockets have been fired at Sderot.

You don't allow yourself to focus on the fact that this is exactly what Zionism was supposed to prevent. You get so used to it that you don't see that the region's most powerful army, sitting on the sidelines and polishing its boots, is a bastardization of what Zionism was supposed to be.

When you can't say anything about why the Jews need a state, you don't allow yourself to stare reality in the face and wonder what will happen when they get Grads and then Katyushas, and hit Ashkelon and then Ashdod - until they start. And then, when they do, you tell yourself that it's "not so bad." When a country's prime minister can articulate no agenda for the Jewish state beyond the hope that it will be "a fun place to live," you know we're bankrupt.

We're bankrupt because Bialik and Alterman were too successful. They were part of a movement that so utterly disconnected the Jews from the discourse that had nurtured them for centuries that now, we can't remember why we wanted this state to begin with. So we don't defend it because we don't want to hurt Palestinian civilians (even though they openly target ours). We don't want to earn the world's opprobrium because our prime minister loves being welcomed in foreign capitals. We don't defend ourselves because we're no longer sure that it's really worth the casualties on our side.

So we allow ourselves, once again, to become hunted ducks. Kishinev morphs into Sderot, and very few people see the irony, or the utter shame and shamefulness, of what's transpiring here.

Bialik would recognize us. And he would weep.

And then, at the end of the day, you're sitting in a friend's living room when someone's phone rings and then someone else's. And before you know it, all of the Blackberrys are out and all the cell phones are being used because the news has reached us - it's starting again. There's been an attack at a yeshiva in Jerusalem.

In the morning, the papers report the attack, but there's not a single mention of a response or even a contemplated response. Of course one will come, but not yet. It will have to get worse first because a few people killed in Sderot and a couple of soldiers and even eight kids from a yeshiva - well, it's sad, but just for that we're actually going to start a war?

No, probably not. Because to go to war to defend your citizens, you'd have to be able to articulate why Israel still makes a difference. You'd have to be able to see yourself as part of a several-thousand-year-old conversation. There were days when this land was filled with that.

There were days when we remembered and we knew and we fought. And even if we died in the process, we figured it was worth it because life here was about something, for something. And so was dying here.

But those days are gone. (World Jewish Digest April 2008)

The writer is senior vice president of the Shalem Center in Jerusalem. His next book, a defense of Zionism in a hostile world, will be published by Wiley later this year.
