



Commentary...

The Threat Of A Jewish Army

Over the past two weeks, the Israeli media have renewed their witch hunt against religious Zionists in the IDF. These assaults have become seasonal affairs. Usually there is a proximate cause, such as anticipation of a deal with the Palestinians, to spur their attacks. But sometimes the assaults on religious soldiers come on more like a twitch, or a flexing of muscles.

With the Olmert-Livni-Barak government on its way out and no agreement with the Palestinians on the horizon, this latest assault is of the muscle-flexing variety. It began with a three-page spread in Yediot Aharonot's Simchat Torah supplement. Under the headline, "After Me, God Willing," the paper's military commentator, Alex Fishman, set out the ominous details of the narrative: Religious Zionists today make up about seven percent of the total population of the country. But their sons comprise twenty percent of IDF combat soldiers, nearly a quarter of the IDF's junior officer corps, and fifty percent of its company commanders.

The growing prominence of religious Zionists in all combat arms of the IDF is a consequence of a now two-decade trend among religious Zionists in Israel to serve in combat units - the more elite, the better. A contrary trend among upper middle class secular youth not to serve in the IDF at all renders the contribution of the religious youth all the more noticeable to the general public and all the more crucial for the IDF.

That latter trend has found a sympathetic audience in Yediot's pages. Just last month the paper ran a cover story in its weekend magazine showcasing the daughter of the deputy head of the Mossad. The young woman is now anticipating prison in the wake of her refusal to serve in the army due to her anti-Zionist ideological beliefs.

These countervailing social currents of increased religious participation and decreased secular participation in fighting units was brought to the public's attention in a graphic manner during the Second Lebanon War. In the course of the war, only one soldier from Tel Aviv was killed in battle while over a dozen soldiers from religious communities were killed in combat.

Fishman wrote darkly of the steps the IDF has taken to adapt to its growing religious population. It has built synagogues. It allows rabbis to visit troops. It has introduced lessons on Jewish values in command courses. Cadets in Officer Training School are now required to pass a test on Jewish values to receive their 2nd lieutenant bars.

In his penultimate paragraph, Fishman cut to the chase. With all these religious Jews in the army, how will the Left be able to inculcate soldiers with its post-Zionist values? Or, as he asked rhetorically, "Is the dominance of the religious Zionist sector in command positions - for now in the junior echelons, but in time, in more senior levels - a problem? Is there a danger that the IDF will be mobilized one day to serve a specific ideology? Is there liable to be a problem someday with giving the army certain duties, if they don't suit the religious Zionist ideology and the values of most of the chain of command?"

Fishman's article was not directed against anyone in particular. It served merely as a warning shot across the bow. The direct assault on a specific scapegoat came a week later in Haaretz. Based on allegations by one unnamed "senior officer," Haaretz's military commentator, Amos Harel, accused the IDF Rabbinate of "brainwashing soldiers" by "exposing troops to Jewish heritage and ties to the Land of Israel."

The main villain for Haaretz is IDF Chief Rabbi Brig. Gen. Avichai Ronski. Haaretz attacked Rabbi Ronski for the "crime" of bringing Jewish values and

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religion into fighting units through the IDF Rabbinate's Jewish Consciousness Department.

The department's motto is "Jewish consciousness for a victorious IDF." It offers programs about historical battles of the IDF and the biblical geography of the Land of Israel. It has published pamphlets for commanders and troops about combat from a Jewish viewpoint.

The pamphlets use "motivations and understandings gleaned from the Bible and the heritage of Israel to enhance the army's ability to achieve victory." It also offers units weekend trips to Jerusalem that include visits to the City of David.

Like Yediot, Haaretz considers the rabbinate's activities geared toward providing Jewish soldiers in the army of the Jewish state information about their heritage and their connection to the land they defend an assault on its atheist, post-Zionist value system. Last Friday, Haaretz published an editorial denouncing the IDF Rabbinate for all these activities.

Under the title "Without a Lord of (Military) Hosts," the paper demanded that IDF Chief of General Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi "put the military rabbinate in its place" and force it to limit its activities to ensuring that IDF grub is kosher and that religious soldiers have what they need to observe religious laws. Haaretz further insisted that the position of chief rabbi be cancelled and that the position of "chief religious services officer" be created in its place. As the editorial put it, "The injection of a religious dimension into the Israel Defense Forces' goals constitutes a serious internal threat."

The real question is, who feels threatened? The Haaretz editorial claimed that Israel "has a secular majority, which would be outraged if anyone tried to change its way of life through religious coercion." But this is untrue and Haaretz's editors know it.

They know it because last November Haaretz published the results of a survey conducted by the Israeli Democracy Institute regarding how Israeli Jews self-identify on the secular-religious spectrum. The results of that survey showed that only twenty percent of Israelis classify themselves as secular. Eighty percent of Israelis view themselves as either religious or traditional.

Rabbi Ronski himself is the most beloved and charismatic IDF chief rabbi since Rabbi Shmuel Goren, who served as chief rabbi during the Six-Day War. Rabbi Ronski, 56, regularly risks his life by accompanying combat units on missions. He doesn't simply show up. The soldiers ask him to join them.

The popularity of leaders like Rabbi Ronski is an unbearable affront to the Israeli Left. The enthusiasm with which young Israelis embrace their Jewish heritage is a direct assault on the Left's demand for cultural supremacy. But what the Left refuses to acknowledge is the simple fact that Israeli society has never accepted their views of what Israel is supposed to be.

Until the mid-1970s, most of today's leftists were Labor Zionists. They believed Israeli society followed them both for their Zionism and for their socialism. But Israeli society never bought into the Left's utopian social theories. Labor Zionists were the cultural avant-garde because they were Zionists.

When, in the late 1970s, the Labor Zionist movement began disavowing Zionism, it became increasingly estranged from the general public. Religious Zionists like Rabbi Ronski are followed while the leftist cultural elites are ignored because religious Zionists today are the most outspoken advocates of values shared by the vast majority of Israelis.

The Left's vision of Israel as an atheistic, multicultural, morally relativist society holds little attraction for most Israelis. So to reassert their cultural superiority, leftists have increasingly taken to bullying and intimidating the rest of the country to toe their line. The seasonal assaults on religious soldiers are simply one aspect of their larger culture war against Israeli society as a whole. (Jewish Press Oct 29)

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All Roads Lead to Jerusalem By Caroline Glick

Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's failure to form a government proved that all roads do in fact lead to Jerusalem. It was the issue of Jerusalem that deadlocked and ultimately scuttled Livni's coalition negotiations with Shas, which demanded that she pledge not to negotiate the partition of the city with the Palestinians. Livni refused to make such a pledge. And so the negotiations failed and new elections will soon be called.

In refusing to agree to Shas's demand, Livni made clear that partitioning the city - that is, giving the Palestinians sovereignty over the Temple Mount and the Arab neighborhoods - is so central to her preferred foreign policy that she could not budge on the issue despite her obvious desire to take up residence in the Prime Minister's Office. Moreover, it showed that she believes that the bulk of her potential voters hail from the post-Zionist Left. To win their support, she had to make clear that she is one of them.

In making Jerusalem, rather than welfare payments the wedge issue in their negotiations with Livni, Shas's leaders demonstrated their recognition of the fact that defending Israeli sovereignty over the capital city is more important to their voters than increasing welfare. Had they entered a Livni government without securing a pledge to defend Jerusalem, Shas would have been hard pressed to compete with the Likud in the coming elections.

Due to the centrality of Jerusalem in Livni's failed negotiations with Shas, it is apparent that maintaining or ending sovereignty over united Jerusalem will be the central issue of the coming elections. If the Left can convince a sufficient number of voters that a united Jerusalem is a drain on the country's resources or that it is impossible to enforce Israeli law among an increasingly lawless and irredentist Arab population, then it will have a fighting chance of winning the elections.

If the Right is able to demonstrate that the problems that afflict Jerusalem are little different from those suffered by mixed Jewish-Arab cities throughout the country and are a consequence of government and municipal mismanagement and are therefore manageable, then it will win the elections.

Today the problems that Jerusalem faces stem from its unique demographic character, municipal mismanagement and the clear if previously unstated intention of successive leftist governments to eventually withdraw from the Temple Mount and from the city's Arab neighborhoods.

Jerusalem's ranking today as the poorest city in the country redounds to the fact that the majority of its residents are Arab and haredi. These two sectors by and large do not work and do not pay municipal taxes. As a consequence, the municipal tax burden falls on the plurality of Jerusalemites who work and pay taxes - mainly religious Zionists and non-observant Jews. Due to the unfair tax burden, recent years have seen a steady stream of the city's productive residents migrating to surrounding communities where the tax burden is more evenly distributed and municipal services are consequently better.

Beyond the chronic problem of under-collection of taxes, Jerusalem suffers from problems of lawlessness among its Arab residents not unlike the problems that affect all cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations. This Arab lawlessness is facilitated on a national level by the government's refusal to order the police and the State Attorney's Office to enforce and apply the law equally to Arab citizens.

Jerusalem also suffers from unique problems with lawlessness and underdevelopment. These problems have been created by successive governments that have silently encouraged the partition of the city by both enabling the PA to field militiamen in the city's Arab neighborhoods and discouraging and indeed prohibiting Jewish building in areas the government foresees being transferred to Palestinian sovereignty. These manufactured problems have retarded development and expansion plans. They have also artificially raised housing prices for the city's Jewish residents.

One of the chief responsibilities of Palestinian militia that operate in the city has been to enforce the PA's anti-Semitic law which defines the sale of land to Jews as a capital offense. Since 1994, dozens of Arab Jerusalemites have been executed by these men and their Fatah masters in Ramallah and Jericho for the "crime" of selling land to Jews. The government has made little effort to prosecute the offenders. Since 2004, when prime minister Ariel Sharon forced internal security minister Uzi Landau to resign due to Landau's opposition to Sharon's sharp turn to the left, the police have not been ordered to rein in the activities of the militia.

Largely as a consequence of this state of affairs, Jews are prevented from living in half of the city. The scarcity of housing options for Jews is what has caused an artificial increase in housing prices that has compelled young families to migrate out of the city.

Another factor contributing to the scarcity of land for Jewish building is the government's refusal to permit the building of new neighborhoods in areas like E-1 near Mount Scopus. Commerce is stifled, among other reasons, because

the government has refrained from ordering the IDF to reassert control over Atarot municipal airport and industrial zone after the Palestinians began murdering businessmen, shooting passing motorists and threatening air traffic in 2000. In essence, as the building of the separation fence within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries shows clearly, the government has been effectively enacting the partition of the city for the past several years without ever acknowledging this fact.

The government's effective support for partition is perhaps nowhere more obvious than on the Temple Mount. There, the Islamic Wakf not only incites for jihad with impunity, it is also systematically destroying the remains of the Second Temple with impunity. The abject abandonment of Judaism's holiest site by successive governments has facilitated not only the radicalization of Jerusalem Arabs from surrounding neighborhoods, like Silwan, it has also emboldened global jihadists to believe that Jerusalem - and Israel with it - will soon fall into their hands.

IN LIGHT of these difficult realities, it is a relief that Jerusalemites are likely to elect Nir Barkat as their new mayor on November 11. While the mayor of Jerusalem has only a limited capacity to solve the unique, politically-driven maladies endangering the city, he does have considerable power to solve the problems that are similar to those impacting other cities nationwide. He can compel residents to pay their municipal taxes. He can enforce building codes. And he can use his power and influence to facilitate new building while improving municipal infrastructure to encourage economic growth and population expansion.

Barkat is a 48-year-old Jerusalemite. He served as a company commander in the paratroopers, and then went on to make a fortune in the hi-tech sector. In 1999, he and his wife became active philanthropists supporting various Zionist educational causes related to the city. In 2003 he retired from his business ventures to run for mayor. His party, Yerushalayim Tatzliah (Jerusalem will succeed), won 43 percent of the vote. Barkat has served for five years as the head of the opposition in the city council. In 2005, he joined Kadima.

Last year, he broke with Kadima when he discovered that the government was conducting negotiations on the partition of Jerusalem with Fatah leaders. Emerging as a staunch defender of the city's unity, he was one of the prominent leaders of the national opposition movement which arose to demand that the government end its negotiations on the issue.

As a mayoral candidate, Barkat has assembled a candidates list for his party comprised of members of the Likud, the Gil Pensioners Party, the Green Party and Labor. They have committed themselves to a common platform pledged to defend and facilitate continued Israeli sovereignty over the entire city.

In a recent conversation, Barkat explained to me that enforcing law and order in the Arab neighborhoods while encouraging local, non-jihadist neighborhood councils to take a leadership role in their communities is one of his primary goals.

"Today we have a crazy situation in which the number of municipal inspectors assigned to a neighborhood is inversely proportional to the degree of building code violations. We have four times more municipal inspectors assigned to Jewish neighborhoods than to Arab neighborhoods which have four times more building violations. I will reverse this situation as mayor."

Barkat also intends to push hard to build a new neighborhood for young people in E-1. To date, building in E-1 has been blocked by the government which as bowed to US pressure not to build in the strategically critical area that connects Jerusalem to Ma'aleh Adumim.

Barkat also intends to encourage economic growth in the city by developing its tourist sector. He correctly identifies projects like the City of David as sites with massive tourist potential. He believes that the proper way to achieve his goal of bringing 10 million tourists a year is to develop tourist attractions that link the Old City to surrounding areas like Gush Etzion.

Barkat has a vision of setting up a council of metropolitan Jerusalem that will involve the heads of the Jewish communities around the city in its overall development plans. This he believes will encourage business growth and lead to more rational long-term urban planning and infrastructure development.

Barkat's headquarters bustle with campaign workers. Most of them are in their early 20s. They hail from both non-observant and national religious backgrounds. Their enthusiasm for his candidacy is a product of his chairmanship of the non-profit Ruah Hadasha (new spirit) organization that helps students find post-university job opportunities in Jerusalem and encourages student involvement in the city. Yakir Segev, who founded and directs Ruah Hadasha, is one of the senior members of Barkat's party.

There is no guarantee, of course, that Barkat will be able to succeed in contending with the daunting challenges facing the city. But there is no doubt

that if elected, he will bring a new integrity and commitment to the office and a welcome vision for Jerusalem that is both attractive and eminently achievable. Indeed, it is the success of Barakat's vision that will put paid the notion that united Jerusalem is ungovernable.

If as the polls indicate, Barakat wins the mayoral race in two weeks, the overwhelming majority of Israelis who are committed to safeguarding Israeli sovereignty over the eternal capital of the Jewish people will find a formidable ally in city hall. (Jerusalem Post Oct 27)

Proud Jew, Proud Israeli By Yishai Fleisher

This article may seem at first to be dealing with nothing more than semantics. But in this case, we are dealing with words pertaining to our very identity. Our identity is the way we perceive ourselves and broadcast that perception to others. The name we are given and words we use to describe ourselves are fundamental to our identity.

In an interview with Haaretz journalist Daniel Ben Simon the day following Shimon Peres' defeat to Benjamin Netanyahu in the 1996 election, the following exchange took place:

Interviewer: "What happened in these elections?"

Peres: "We lost."

Interviewer: "Who is we?"

Peres: "We, that is, the Israelis."

Interviewer: "And who won?"

Peres: "All those who do not have an Israeli mentality."

Interviewer: "And who are they?"

Peres: "Call them the Jews."

According to the Peres model, there are two publics in Israel: the 'Israeli' and the 'Jew'. 'Israeli' represents the New Jew, free from the constraints of religion and free of the "Galut mentality." This individual has thrown off the baggage of two thousand years of exile and has now taken his rightful place amongst the nations as an equal. He has developed a new culture, a mix of East and West; and while he speaks Hebrew, he is a citizen of the world and feels that Israel's greatest mission is to achieve normalcy and equality amongst the nations.

Peres' 'Jew', on the other hand, stubbornly retains his religious observance. The 'Jew' tends toward political isolationism and in his ignorance he is willing to disregard world opinion. The troublesome 'Jew' supports the continued "occupation" or "settlement" of Judea and Samaria, thereby retarding all progress towards peace. The 'Jew' is some kind of relic that needs to be cleared away so that a "New Middle East" can be born. The 'Jew' even has the audacity to fight for his land, not to mention for his life.

Recently, Yair Lapid, the son and heir of the anti-religious Shinui party founder Tommy Lapid, with no trace of brotherly love, eulogized the "Jews" of Judea and Samaria by saying the following: "These people create a situation whereby, when the day comes, and the agreements are signed on the lawn in Washington, it will be easier to give up this land, which isn't really ours; this land where not only the laws and landscape are different, but also the people."

This is yet another example of the linguistic and anthropological paradigm which we have been taught: the progressive and the regressive are two very different people living in the same parcel of land. One is 'Israeli' while the other is an outsider; he is the 'Jew'.

The division between the Israeli and the Jew is artificial, counter-productive, and anti-Jewish. Our leaders should always be striving to strengthen the bonds that unite every Jew in the world - especially in this time of renewed anti-Semitism and the world jihad. So why do people like Peres and Lapid utilize the 'Jew' versus 'Israeli' paradigm? Because the distinction between 'Jew' and 'Israeli' was created by them and their post-Zionist cohorts. By blaming the 'Jew', they seek to create a scapegoat for their failed attempts to make peace by manipulating the public and giving away our country. By diverting the spotlight away from their own ineptitude and corruption, they stay in power.

Furthermore, cowardly people who are prepared to give away the heart of Israel to our sworn enemies feel threatened by fellow countrymen who represent bravery and a will to survive. For post-Zionists like Peres and Lapid, the woman who happily raises her kids in Judea and Samaria is a constant reminder of their own gutlessness, leading them to develop a burning hate for the pioneering and strong 'Jew'.

The irony of it all is that in today's Israel, the 'Jew' is the new 'Israeli'. Israel was supposed to be the breeding ground for a strong new Hebrew who does not cower. Yet in today's Israel, it is the secular-post-Zionist-left which is the cowering Jew being led to the slaughter. The religious settler is now the emancipated Israeli, bedecked with side locks and tzitzit, and armed with the classic fundamentals of Zionist ideology; that is, to ingather, to build, and to

settle the land of Israel.

In a cynical and cunning fashion, the post-Zionists are attempting to take away 'Israeli' identity from those parts of society which still retain the true 'Israeli' and Zionist spirit. By branding strong Israelis as 'the Jews', post-Zionists are trying to marginalize and denigrate that segment of society. The division between Jew and Israeli works to their advantage.

Sadly, after the Disengagement, many of the 'Jews' have also embraced the very same 'Jew' versus 'Israeli' lingo. While it is not commonplace, some religious Zionists proclaim: "I am not a Tzioni, leave that for the Israelis, those who kick Jews out of homes and bash our children's heads in Amona like Cossacks."

Without realizing it, the religious Zionist who embraces the 'Jew' vs. 'Israeli' lexicon is a victim of a propaganda aimed at destroying him by cutting him off from the state he helped build and defend. Instead of relinquishing his Israeli identity, he would be better off saying the truth: it is the post-Zionists who have lost their Israeli self. The strong Jews of Israel are the real Israelis.

The word 'Israel' has been hijacked and has been made merely to reflect an identity of citizenship. However, while Israel is indeed the name of our country, it is much more than that. It is the name of our people.

Our familial and tribal name is Israel. Our Book of Collective Memory tells us that we are all sons and daughters of one man named Jacob, who was renamed Israel: "Then G-d said to him, 'Your name is Jacob, your name shall not be called Jacob any longer, but Israel shall be your name.' Thus he called his name Israel." (Genesis 35:10)

(Israeli Arabs are not Israeli, and how could they be? Israel is a name set aside for the people of Israel. Arabs who live here can be called "Arabs with citizenship of the State of Israel", but they are certainly not 'Israelis'. Ask them and they will tell you the same thing.)

Israel is the country that we have built. We, the Children of Israel, have returned to our land and have built a prosperous and healthy country in which Torah flourishes alongside advanced farming, life-saving medicine and computers. Are these things in contradiction? Of course not. We are one nation, reuniting on one land, speaking one language. We are Israel.

I am Israeli, because for two-thousand years of exile I was the Jew, a lone speck traveling through time just to arrive at this point of redemption. I am no doubt Jewish, and I love Judaism. But I am even prouder that I have been given the great opportunity, the Jewish dream of two thousand years, to live in Israel and to help build it into the wonderful and holy country that it will one day be.

Nobody is going to take away my hard-earned right to be an equal member of Israeli society. Nobody is going to take from me my country and my identity. And certainly I am not going to relinquish my name Israel and give it to those who have forgotten what Israel is really all about.

The writer is the Director of Programming and show host at Israel National Radio. (IsraelNN.com Oct 24)

The Fence, Revisited By Moshe Arens

Is it out of habit or mental lassitude that we continue to build the fence, which was begun many years ago? It continues on its weary way, meter by meter, costing billions, causing anguish to many, damaging private property, keeping the High Court of Justice occupied with the complaints it arouses, stirring demonstrations against it, and keeping the Israel Defense Forces busy. Does anyone still remember what the original purpose was of this physical obstacle, hundreds of kilometers long, stringing across the country? Who is taking a second look to see whether it really serves its intended purpose?

Many of us prefer to forget those terrible days when Palestinian suicide bombers were roaming through our cities and murdering Israeli citizens daily. It was in those stressful days that the cry went out: "Keep them out! Build a fence, no matter what it costs! The fence around the Gaza Strip works, and we need a fence like it around Judea and Samaria!"

Then-Shin Bet head Avi Dichter said we needed such a fence, and Haim Ramon accused those who opposed it of being dinosaurs prepared to endanger human lives for the sake of their outworn ideologies. No politician could withstand this pressure. A human life is worth everything, and if it took hundreds of kilometers of fence to save one, so be it. Besides, this fence was supposed to separate Israelis from Palestinians once and for all. So this humongous, unprecedented project began, and it has continued on its not-so-merry way, winding over hill and dale, ever since. Palestinian terrorism from Judea and Samaria has in the meantime been defeated, our streets and buses have become safe again, but the fence project seems to have assumed a life of its own.

Billions are still being spent, our beautiful country is being defaced, great anguish is being caused to tens of thousands living in the vicinity of the fence, and it is high time that we ask ourselves whether this fence serves any useful purpose. Is it the fence, far from completed, that is keeping terrorism out of our cities, or is it the presence of the IDF in Judea and Samaria? There is good reason to believe that it was the IDF's entry into Judea and Samaria, after the Park Hotel massacre in Netanya on the night of the 2002 seder, that largely ended the terror, and that the IDF's continued presence in Judea and Samaria is still Israel's primary defense. Without that presence, terrorism would be striking cities in central Israel. If that is the case, the fence is worse than useless. It is no more than the product of momentary hysteria and a Maginot-line mentality that seized some of our politicians, who deluded themselves into thinking that terrorism could be "fenced out."

But what happens when the IDF's presence in Judea and Samaria is no longer necessary? Will we need the fence then, and should we therefore continue building it for that eventuality? That hardly seems a reasonable course of action. The IDF will not withdraw from the area until the danger of Palestinian terror has passed, and then no fence will be necessary. Continuing to build the fence is a waste of time and money, and only breeds anger and hostility. In this case, the fence does not make for good neighbors.

But some will argue that the fence around the Gaza Strip works. Well, hardly. The terrorists have found ways of outwitting our politicians. Terror is coming over and under the fence. That fence did not stop the Qassam and Katyusha rockets from raining on Israel's citizens in the south. The fence did not keep the Olmert government from finally surrendering to this terror and agreeing to a cease-fire with Hamas in Gaza. And the same thing will happen if the IDF withdraws from Judea and Samaria before the terrorists there finally have been uprooted. The fence will not keep terror away. If not controlled on the ground, it will return to Israel's cities - it will come over and under the fence.

Some of us want the fence not in order to keep terrorists out, but to keep Jews in. Or, in other words, in order to keep Jews out of Judea and Samaria ("the occupied territories"). But that will not work. The British tried to keep Jews out when they blockaded Mandate Palestine's shores and pursued the MacDonald White Paper policy to prevent Jews from purchasing land here. It didn't work. Nor will the fence.

The time has come to take a good look at this outlandish project. Does it make any sense to continue building it? And maybe we should begin considering dismantling what has already been built. Do our politicians have the courage to admit they made a mistake? (Haaretz Oct 28)

Was He Wrong about Everything? By Jonathan Tobin

Has there ever been a lamer duck than George W. Bush? How he went from winning a clear majority of the 2004 popular vote to his current dismal showing is a topic that will fascinate historians in the future.

The answers will assuredly revolve around Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, and the financial meltdown that has panicked Wall Street and made a Democratic victory this November all but certain. Yet, even as Bush gets swept into the proverbial dustbin of history, it would be a mistake to succumb to the temptation of viewing everything he did as wrong.

But this is exactly the angle that has been adopted by the Democrats as they appear to be coasting to victory.

In the partisan debate for the Jewish vote, the Democrats argue that the Bush administration has been harmful to the Jewish state. This is despite the fact that most Jewish voters understood the administration to be quite friendly to Israel.

Part of this has to do with the stale debate about the decision to go to war in Iraq. There's no question that the demise of Saddam Hussein and the weakening of Iraq helped Iran. Tehran's nuclear potential now poses the No. 1 threat to both Israel and the region in general.

That's a fair point, though it must be said almost no one in the pro-Israel community on either side of the aisle was unhappy about the fall of Saddam, given his history of attacks on Israel and support for terrorism. Iran's growing strength is frightening, and the decision to invade Iraq must be considered to have contributed to it.

Yet, this line of reasoning fails to take into account that if Saddam had been allowed to stay in power, his menacing of the region would have continued and Iran's nuclear program would still have grown to the existential threat that it is today.

EVEN MORE significant to the Democrats' strategy to woo Jewish voters is the charge put forth during the current campaign that Bush's decision to back away from Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy should also be considered a mistake. They argue that Bush's refusal to continue Bill Clinton's hands-on engagement

with the faltering peace talks led to years of violence and the current impasse. This point, heralded by no less a personage than Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden, is not only an indictment of Bush's place in history, but a chilling prescription for foreign policy in the next four years.

As such, it could not be more wrong.

Whatever else one may say about George W. Bush's time in the White House, his negative view of Bill Clinton's mad dash for a Nobel Peace Prize was spot-on. Clinton's feckless advocacy for the Oslo process, even after it was clear that this scheme would lead to disaster, is spoken of today as a noble failure by his admirers.

But the truth is, the Clinton administration was itself at fault for spending years coddling then-Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat. It was Clinton (who made Arafat his most-frequent foreign guest at the White House) and his foreign-policy team, including respected men like Dennis Ross (who is hoping to return to office next year), who indulged Arafat's demands, and lied to both the public and Congress about the Palestinian's ties to terror and unwillingness to abide by the peace accords that he, Arafat, had signed.

Clinton's sponsorship of the July 2000 Camp David conference resulted in a sweeping Israeli peace proposal from then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak. The answer from Arafat was a decisive "no." His dismissal of Israel's offer was topped a few months later by the launch of a Palestinian terror offensive that would take the lives of more than a thousand Israelis and far more Palestinians.

The idea that Bush could have prevented this war or lessened its impact is ridiculous, since it started on Clinton's watch, not his. More to the point, it was Bush, acting against the advice of Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose actions directly contributed to squelching the intifada.

In 2002, as the violence grew in intensity, Bush broke with precedent by refusing to stick to the Clintonesque policy of urging "restraint on both sides." Despite Powell's objections, Bush gave Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon a "green light" to send in the Israel Defense Force to clean out Arafat's terror bases in the West Bank. He also backed the building of the separation fence that effectively ended the suicide-bombing campaign.

Just as in 2006, when Bush supported the failed effort to fight back against the Hizbullah terrorists in Lebanon, the administration understood that being evenhanded about the response to terror was a diplomatic code phrase for stopping Israel from defending itself.

What's more, after Israel's capture of a ship filled with Iranian arms sent to assist the Palestinian attacks, Bush finally did what his predecessor would not. He rightly branded Arafat as an unrepentant terrorist, and cut off American aid and diplomatic contact with him. Bush then went on to state that peace could only come once the Palestinians rejected terror and the leadership of those who support terror.

Was that a mistake? Can anyone really believe that continuing Clinton's urging for more concessions to Arafat would have brought peace?

OF COURSE, Bush did make some serious mistakes after cutting off Arafat. Following the old terrorist's death, his wholehearted embrace of Mahmoud Abbas led him to repeat some of Clinton's errors.

Abbas, Arafat's longtime aide, looked more respectable, but was no better than his mentor and was powerless, to boot. Bush's decision to push Abbas to allow elections that were then won by Hamas was another blunder. And, in the last year of his presidency, Bush has abandoned Middle East policy to Powell's successor Condoleezza Rice, who seems determined to re-enact the follies of Clinton's final year in office.

Though Democrats now claim the 2007 Annapolis conference, which Rice and Bush hosted, was too little, too late, it was just as foolish as Clinton's Camp David debacle. All it accomplished was to ratchet up the pressure on Israel again, while doing nothing to force the Palestinians to face reality and make peace.

As Israel prepares to elect new leadership and faces apocalyptic threats from Iran, with no assurance that the international community will act responsibly, the next president must avoid falling into the trap of believing that every Bush precedent is to be overturned.

It isn't really important whether Bush gets credit for doing the right thing about Arafat and backing Sharon's tough policies, which defeated Palestinian terror. What is important is to learn the lessons not only from Bush's mistakes, but also from those of his predecessor.

If the next administration is staffed by people who embrace the Clinton Administration's delusions about Palestinian intentions, then we can expect the same results that we got the last time: more bloodshed. (Jerusalem Post Oct 29)

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