

COMMENT & FEATURES

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Witnessing genocide

The Trump administration this week accused the government of Bashar Assad of carrying out the mass killings of thousands of prisoners and burning their bodies in a large crematorium in order to conceal its ongoing atrocities.

The State Department estimated that some 50 prisoners are being hanged daily at Saydnaya Military Prison, north of Damascus, and are then burned in the crematorium to conceal these crimes against humanity.

While Israel should not act unilaterally, we should be leading the world's efforts to halt these atrocities – even to the extent of offering to join a coalition aimed at ending Assad's campaign of genocide. The self-destruction of Syria under Assad's dictatorship has so far destroyed some 500,000 lives since 2011 and has brought about Europe's worst refugee crisis since World War II, while enabling Islamic State jihadists to emerge as a global terrorism threat.

Israeli lawmakers from across the political spectrum are urging the IDF to bomb Syria's crematorium, evoking inaction during the Holocaust in demanding military action to stop Assad's atrocities. One minister has openly called for Assad's assassination as the only way to halt the execution and cremation of thousands of political prisoners.

Some cabinet members who urge action say this is the responsibility of the United States, which revealed the crematorium's existence. Rejecting this, Yesh Atid Party leader Yair Lapid posted on Facebook that Israel has a "moral responsibility to act, when within striking distance of the IDF people are being burned. We have to wipe that crematorium off the face of the Earth."

Lapid drew a direct parallel between the Allies' failure to bomb the railway lines to Auschwitz during the Holocaust and the international community's failure to stop the bloodshed in Syria. "Why did the world know [what was happening], but not do anything? Well now we know, and we're not doing anything," he declared. "Chemical weapons and incinerators – both the crematorium and Assad must go."

Zionist Union MK Tzipi Livni tweeted on Monday that "Assad cannot be a part of the region's future," while Interior Minister and Shas Party chairman Arye Deri also called for Assad's crematorium to be bombed, but urged the US to carry out the strike.

On Tuesday, Construction Minister Yoav Gallant (Kulanu) accused Assad of genocide and called for the dictator's assassination. "The reality of the situation in Syria is that they are executing people, using directed chemical attacks against them, and the latest extreme – burning their corpses, something we haven't seen in 70 years," Gallant said. "In my view, we are crossing a redline. And in my view, the time has come to eliminate Assad. It's as simple as that."

While nothing in the Middle East is nearly that simple, US Jews also drew parallels with the Holocaust. The head of the Anti-Defamation League, Jonathan Greenblatt, spoke for all Jews in a statement on Tuesday:

"As Jews, we are particularly shocked by the extreme brutality of the Syrian regime, which evokes the worst nightmares of Nazi atrocities against the Jewish people. The world learned from the 20th century that it did not do enough to stop the crimes of the Nazis, which led to the genocide of six million Jews." He challenged the international community "to put an end to the inhumane actions of the Syrian government."

The Assad regime's use of the outlawed sarin gas to asphyxiate civilian opponents is well documented and should have already been brought before the International Court of Justice for it to issue a warrant for his prosecution.

The reason it has not yet done so – according to Jonathan Spyer, director of the Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya – is realpolitik. He warns that Russia's ever increasing intervention in support of the Assad regime could result in a possibly violent showdown with the US.

It is time to realize that concerted action, not fruitless diplomacy, is the Syrian people's lifeline. "It's an insane regime and good that the administration is telling people about it," Spyer concluded. But as a largely silent world contemplates the grim, black-and-white US satellite photos of the Syrian crematorium, Israelis cannot help but be reminded of how a similar silence condemned millions of Jews to death just a lifetime ago. It is time to do something.

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PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP speaks at an event in Washington earlier this month. (Reuters)

Trump in Israel – what's the plan?

• By IDO AHARONI

US President Donald Trump's upcoming visit to Israel will be the eleventh US presidential visit in Israel's 69 years. This is hardly a spectacular record considering the intimacy between the two nations and the fact that Israel is the most reliable, like-minded and ancillary ally of the United States in a region widely viewed as hostile to American values.

The first president to make an official state visit to Israel was Richard Nixon in 1974. President Trump will become the sixth president to pay an official visit to Israel.

Usually, leaders build their brand while in office. Most American presidents were not well known internationally prior to being elected. President Trump represents a unique phenomenon: a well-established brand that has transitioned successfully into political life. Thus, we know a lot more about "Brand Trump" than President Trump, simply because we have been exposed to the brand for over four decades. Brand Trump is known for its expressive, straightforward and reflexive manner. We also know a lot about President Trump's own self-perception: big thinker, winner, problem solver, deal-maker, successful.

So, what can we learn about the president's plans from all of this self-provided insight? What will President Trump say or do about the conflict? Based on what we know about the way he thinks it would not be unsafe to assume that the president will aspire to present an internationally-backed grand design for a solution.

As the president departs on this important tour, I'd urge him and his team to bear these critical points in mind:

Israel is a constituent democracy and Israeli public opinion matters. Here's an interesting political fact: while most Israelis believe that the two-state solution is the only solution, they do not believe it's feasible. The solution to this seemingly fantastic political enigma is quite simple. Since the summer of 2000, most Israelis changed their views as to the root cause of the conflict. The conversation gradually shifted from "territorial" to "existential."

For years, Israelis believed that the conflict was essentially territorial. There was a simple bargain: land to the Palestinians in return for safety and security to the Israelis. An entire political camp was based on the notion of "territorial compromise."

This concept, once a formidable and leading political platform that brought Rabin to power in 1992, was badly wounded by three dramatic events. The first was the rejection of the Clinton Plan by Yasser Arafat at Camp David in 2000 and the ensuing intifada, the second was the bellicose Palestinian reaction to Israel's unilateral pullout from the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2005 (and the election of Hamas in its aftermath) and the third was the Palestinian rejection of prime minister Ehud Olmert's far-reaching territorial deal in 2008.

These, combined with the continued firing of rockets at Israel's southern region for the past decade, led many Israelis to question the validity of the territorial argument and gave rise to the notion that the "unfinished business" was not the 1967 Six Day War, as previously suggested, but rather the 1948 War of Independence, which was over Israel's right to exist.

Public addresses play an important role in establishing relationships between leaders and audiences. An effective public address can even serve as a psychological breakthrough and ignite profound changes. It would be safe to assume that if not for president Anwar Sadat's speech in Jerusalem in

November of 1977, it would have been practically impossible for prime minister Menachem Begin to sell the Camp David Accords (peace agreement with Egypt) to the Israeli public. Sadat provided the breakthrough, catharsis and inspiration that fueled the process for years to come.

This far, only two American presidents chose to rally in Israel and address Israel's younger generation in open events: Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. President Clinton, who holds the record with four visits out of 10, generally considered Israel as part of his constituency. It reflected his assessment that in terms of US domestic politics Israel is punching way above its weight. He was rewarded for doing so by boundless love from the Israeli public. President Obama's public address was greeted, too, with great deal of enthusiasm.

If, indeed, we have moved to an existentialism orientation, rather than territorialism, what can President Trump do to move a solution forward? The answer is in his own words from his 1987 book: "I like thinking big. I always have. To me it's very simple: if you're going to be thinking anyway, you might as well think big." Should he choose to share his vision for a "grand solution" with the Israeli public and hold a similar rally, President Trump, who has been a well-established brand name in Israel decades before he entered politics, can expect to be greeted similarly; with warmth, admiration and enthusiasm.

In Israel, the role of commander-in-chief, rather than being the responsibility of a single individual as in the US, is performed by cabinet. The prime minister heads the cabinet and exerts a great deal of influence but, ultimately, decisions are made by this top governing body. The cabinet is comprised of several political parties; each has its own agenda, constituency and platform. Israel's legislative body, the Knesset, with its 120 elected members, has displayed acute weakness and has suffered from a bad public image. Populism, reckless legislation and fragmentation all contributed to this erosion. Surely the Knesset's weakness is unhealthy for Israel. But it is also an American interest to empower Israel's constituent assembly.

ONLY THREE presidents addressed the Knesset: Nixon, Clinton and George W. Bush. President Trump could become the fourth president to do so, thus recognizing the importance of Israel's legislative body. Trump's addressing the Knesset might not only enhance the Knesset's image but also prove useful and even instrumental for the advancement for Trump's own plans for the Middle East.

Israel is not a byproduct of the Holocaust. Of course, the Holocaust played an important role in the founding of the state. It was a dramatic catalyst. Yet it is an indisputable fact: Israel was in the making decades prior to the Holocaust. The modern State of Israel is a creation of the Zionist movement. David Ben-Gurion, the founder of the State of Israel, along with his peers, designed a meticulous nation-building process that turned the question of Jewish independence almost into an inevitability.

The narrative according to which Israel's establishment was a form of post-Holocaust compensation is usually advanced by Israel's detractors. To them, Zionism is a product of 19th-century European colonialism. Post-Holocaust European guilt consented to the Zionists' robbing land from Israel's indigenous inhabitants. While the uninformed may find this narrative instinctively correct and even compelling, it is deeply offensive to Israelis.

President Obama's decision to avoid Israel in 2009,

after visiting Egypt, was received by many Israelis with disappointment. Instead, Obama chose to visit Buchenwald, not Israel, right after delivering a programmatic and forthcoming speech in Cairo that was meant to address the concerns of the Arab and Muslim world. Obama said then: "Threatening Israel with destruction or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews is deeply wrong and only serves to evoke in the minds of the Israelis this most painful of memories while preventing the peace that the people of this region deserve." Powerful words. They should have been spoken in Israel. Many perceived his decision to balance his Cairo speech by visiting a concentration camp as an indirect validation of the narrative that correlates Israel's creation with the Holocaust.

The only boycott is the Arab Boycott. The past two US administrations addressed directly and in a very straightforward manner the efforts to isolate Israel through divestiture, sanctions and boycotts. Top American decision-makers used it as an implied threat. If no progress is achieved with the Palestinians, was the message, then the boycott will intensify. The only problem is that the only boycott is the Arab boycott. Israel is not being boycotted in the West. Not by governments, corporations or banks. On the contrary, Israel has never been better off in this regard. Israel's economy is thriving. It is a major hub of creativity in all walks of life, not just in hi-tech, and a world leader in the creation of conceptual products. Israelis are welcomed to do business or study in most countries.

THE ONLY boycott Israel has ever endured was the Arab economic boycott of 1945. For many years, fueled by the American-Soviet rivalry, it was implemented directly and indirectly. Israel of the '60s and the '70s was deprived of access to major goods and services originating from countries such as Japan, France and, yes, even the United States. A twist in the plot turned the Arab boycott into a blessing. The twist was Israel's reaction: relying on its human capital. The result is today's advanced knowledge-based economy of problem-solvers, the "Can-Do Nation" if you will. Today, the European Union is Israel's largest trade partner and GDP per capita is fast approaching the European standard. None of these things can be said about the boycotters themselves.

So, why was the "boycott conversation" adopted so readily by leading American decision-makers? Simply because they took their cue from their Israeli counterparts. The boycott conversation is alive and kicking mostly in Israel, and it serves a domestic political need. It was eagerly embraced by almost all political parties. Israelis live in constant fear of isolation and so everybody in Israel is fighting the boycott – alas, the wrong one. Instead of dealing with the real problem, namely the unfair treatment by intellectuals and academics, they fight powerless fringe elements thus helping them to amplify their messages. The real effort should take place in the realm of ideas, academic research and the intellectual sphere.

Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger is credited for the famous quote "Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic policy." For any American leader to take their cue from the cacophony of Israel's intense internal political debate is highly inadvisable.

The author is a Global Distinguished Professor for International Relations at New York University. He served as Israel's counsel general to New York, as a policy adviser to Israel's chief negotiator with the Palestinians and was a member of Israel's official delegation to the White House for the signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993.