Insider and Outsider: Israel's Demons in the New Millennium

https://www.e-ir.info/2017/11/19/insider-and-outsider-israels-demons-in-the-new-millennium/

STEPHEN CHAN, NOV 19 2017

As Israel consolidated its place in the Middle East, few anymore questioned its right to exist – but many questioned its right to exist within its expansionist borders; questioned also its treatment of those within its borders who were destined for all foreseeable future to be denied citizenship rights, that is the Palestinians living within Israel; and of course questioned the colonisation by settlers, patch by patch, of Palestinian land. But, insofar as those borders enclosed Palestinian populations – populations that expanded both by natural birth rate and by expulsion from Palestinian territory – the Israelis began to feel an internal dilemma that mirrored the dilemmas and threats they perceived externally. It led to a discourse of insecurity, the need for securitisation, and the sense of an existential threat to the nature of the Jewish person with a Jewish identity within the Jewish homeland that was the essence of the Jewish state. What if Palestinians came to outnumber, within the borders of Israel, the Jews? And what if, by sheer weight of numbers and cultural practice, including religious practice, the Jewish identity based on a Jewish culture began to change?

The analysis of the Jewish scholar, Uriel Abulof, superbly rendered, of the discourse of 'deep securitisation' over in particular Israel's 'demographic demon', i.e. the size of the Palestinian population within Israel overtaking the size of the Jewish population, and how this is a genuine 'existential threat', is an example of excellent scholarship that blends theory with analysis. The theory of which he speaks essentially derives from the Copenhagen School of International Relations – which added to the English School's concern for historical context an emphasis on discursive formations. There is a complication of course in the neatness of the theory's approach: if the state may be discursively 'constructed' in Foucauldian terms, how does the state in turn play any determining role in constructing its citizens? What is the nature of the feedback loop? What are the characteristics of a virtuous circle when all manner of disruptions and jagged edges in fact interrupt this circle? In one article, these questions are not Abulof's concern. What is his concern is a step-by-step analysis of Israeli discourse to do with the threat of Palestinian demographics. He is able to depict this as a very real threat, and one serious enough to be regarded as an existential threat: identity, the practice of identity, the security and assuredness of identity are imperilled. The importance of this was within living memory, in a land which declared its purpose was to retrieve Jewish identity from the butchery of the Holocaust and preceding centuries of European marginalisation – and this declaration, the formation of this state which was to do this, to do this within a homeland for the Jews where Jews and their identity would be secure at last, even if they had to fight for it. Within one lifetime, it had been threatened from without, and now it was threatened from within.

Hostility towards the Palestinian population and the idea of a Palestinian state perhaps derives from, among other things, a distaste of doing something to accommodate a threat. But, while it has led to all manner of confusion and belligerence in domestic policy and policy towards Palestine both as a concept and as an Administrative Authority, it adds to a sense that everything is a threat – and, if the 'traditional' enemies of Egypt and Jordan are now placated, and Syria has other concerns on its mind, and the Arab League in general, despite rhetoric, is hardly pushing the Palestinian issue or indeed any issue that might threaten Israel, the need for an enemy nearby, even if not immediately neighbouring, is fulfilled by Iran.

The Persia that birthed Israel and Christianity

The ironies that emerge from the region's history are immense. We have noted King Hiram's provision of the Cedars of Lebanon for King Solomon's temple. This is from the Biblical account and we have no other evidence either existed. We do have evidence for the Persian political ethics that allowed the Jews, held in Babylonian captivity, to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple – which was completed about 516 BC. This evidence is in the form of the Cyrus Cylinder (held in the British Museum) from 539-8 BC, which has been described as the world's first charter of human rights – but which is King Cyrus's promulgation of religious freedom; and it was probably under its rubric that the Jews were able to rebuild the temple and worship freely. Certainly, the Biblical book of Esther tells of how the Persian King Ahasuerus (probably Xerxes I, 518-465 BC, who waged war on Greece) protected the Jews who had stayed behind in Persia, rather than returning to Jerusalem with the first wave. It was the religious establishment of that first wave, led by Biblical figures such as Ezra, who anthologised and consolidated the foundations of what we now take as traditional Jewish belief and Biblical scripture dealing with the foundations of the world, the nation of Israel and its rituals and early history.

The ironies of Persia's impact on early Christianity are in some ways even greater. They depend on the shadowy figure of Zoroaster (Zarathustra in the times of Nietzsche), who died about 551 BC. Like Buddha, no scripture was written down until hundreds of years after his death. Even so, the main body of his teachings predated Christianity, and they included: a universe of dualisms that contained good and evil, heaven and hell, light and darkness, and the personification of these dualisms in powerful spiritual beings (i.e. what we would know as a God and a Devil); a messiah, a saviour, born of a virgin; a final judgement and a resurrection.

The struggles of the early Christian church, with its rivalries and divergent bodies of teaching, included early strands of Gnosticism and, later, Manicheanism – derived at least in part from Zoroastrian thought; and the popularity of the Zoroastrian sect of Mithras, among Roman soldiers who had served on the front with Persia, included (although the historical record is disputed) the virgin birth on 25 December, and the sign of the cross in a circle. The debate is the extent to which all these elements impacted upon the final composite that Emperor Constantine in 325 CE officialised as the Christian faith in the key outlines we accept today.

The Persians, and Zoroastrianism, were extremely multicultural. Alexander the Great is said not to have died but to have seen the huge cultural and scientific merits of Persia and became a long-living king of Persia. The 'thought of Alexander' was in constant debate with the emergence of Islam, and this thought was regarded as important enough for the work of Aristotle and Plato to be curated and debated even while it was being lost in the European 'dark ages'. The 10th century Zoroastrian epic, the *Shahnameh*, the Book of the Kings, has one telling episode where the Roman Emperor (Vespasian) is brought before a Zoroastrian sage who lectures him on the teachings of each of the major world religions, including those from China and India, and concludes by chastising him in Christian terms, asking him what Jesus, the son of Mary, would think of Roman vanity and blood-lust. It is this kind of cosmopolitan cultural heritage, forced into a reductionist Shi'a fundamentalism by Western commentators on the 1979 Iranian Revolution, that confronted US and European negotiators over the issue of Iranian nuclear capacity. The Islamic conquest of Persia only achieved success towards the end of the 10th century and, until the 15th century, Persia was largely Sunni. One and a half millennia of deep culture preceded Islam, and impregnated Iranian selfhood as much as Islam. The work of great poets from the 13th and 14th centuries like Rumi and Hafez are cases in point. They praise God, but draw from mysticism and metaphysics.

But was even the Iran of the Ayatollahs dangerously fundamentalist?

The US antipathy towards latter-day Iran began with the supplanting of the US ally, the Shah Reza Pahlavi, in 1979. The US had invested much in his regime and, indeed, together with the British had engineered the demise of a government under him in what was recognised even at the time as a major petroleum scandal. But the revolution of 1979, together with its unpredictability, was characterised in US minds by the holding as hostage of US Embassy workers – followed by a failed US military rescue bid. The felt humiliation was immense. The US, funding the effort through the Saudis, greatly supported Saddam Hussein's effort to invade Iran in 1980.

For the Israelis, the concern about Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah, as noted in the last chapter, was a major reason for antipathy. The greatest element of fear directed towards Iran was, however, the deeply felt conviction that

the Iranians were developing sufficient capacity to acquire nuclear weapons. With a secret but widely estimated 80 to 100 nuclear warheads of its own, Israel did not want to conduct a genuine balance of power with a nuclear-armed Iran. The balance of power with Egypt was US-managed, and in any case did not involve nuclear weapons. Having to enter a balance of power arrangement with Iran, predicated on nuclear mutual deterrence, would have involved Iranian leverage over a range of Israeli 'good behaviour', including possibly within Palestine. It would have meant an end to Israeli licence. Both US and Israeli public relations, therefore, worked assiduously to paint the Iranian regime as dark and as sinister as possible. The Iranians, for their part, hardly did themselves any favours with a cascade, several years long, of invective and religiously-inflected condemnation of the West.

As former UN Under Secretary-General, Giandomenico Picco, said however – he being the man who negotiated the end of the Iran-Iraq war, and the release of several Western hostages in Lebanon up to 1992 – there has never been a Shi'a or Iranian-masterminded atrocity against a major Western target. Moreover, Iran's support for Bashar Assad as President of Syria is not because of his own Shi'a affiliation. Assad's branch of Shi'a is Alawite, which has significant syncretic beliefs – such as a Trinity, being descended from the fallen angels and subject to repeated reincarnation (including as Christians) as they make progress towards heavenly reinstatement, observing Christmas and the feast day of Mary Magdalene, and a form of mass which uses wine – and is not recognised as Islamic at all by many Sunni scholars. To secure a more favourable attitude from Sunnis, and the majority Sunni population, the first President Assad, Bashar's father Hafez, took a pragmatic line and made the faith in Syria appear as Sunni as possible. However, he was himself the leader of the Ba'ath party, and this was dedicated to secular modernisation.

Although Ayatollah Khomeini did recognise the Alawites as Islamic, the alliance with Syria probably owes much more to securing allies in the region, i.e. it is as much to do with power politics as religion, as much to do with the long-term stability of a neighbouring state and its government, as being revolutionary. Given Alawite beliefs, Iran's support is certainly not fundamentalist.

It should also be pointed out that, although Iran supports Hezbollah and Hamas, it has encouraged and funded neither to do outrageous things against Israel. There has been no mass attack, no rolling waves of suicide bombs. There have been homemade rockets from Hamas, and a defence of Lebanon from Hezbollah. In short, the policy seems to have been one of violent harassment and damage, not of destruction.

The deep reason for Israeli antipathy towards Iran is to do with a balance of power fuelled by nuclear weapons. And this is exactly the reason for Saudi Arabia's antipathy towards Iran. Quite apart from the vaunted Sunni-Shi'a division, there is a simple question of power politics and regional hegemony.

Antipathy between Saudi Arabia and Iran

That the two states are Sunni and Shi'a is true, and this has a bearing on their often volatile relationship, but is not a sole determinant. Certainly Iran was furious that Saudi Arabia supported and funded Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, using among other things chemical weapons. However, during the Presidency of Mohammad Khatami, Iran made huge efforts to establish a *rapprochement* with the Saudi state and the two signed a security pact in 2001.

However, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a huge turning point. Regime change led to the unintended, or under-estimated consequence of empowering the Shi'a majority in a country previously led by a Sunni despot. It meant an Iraqi tilt towards Iran and, instantly, the region's balance of power was destroyed. Thereafter, the Saudis saw Iranian plots everywhere – for instance, in the Arab Spring in Bahrain, where many protesters were Shi'a (in a Shi'a majority country), and which was suppressed with Saudi military help – but, before then, Saudi and US antipathy to the rhetoric of President Ahmedinejad saw the creation of a hostility which has lasted through the Arab Spring to this day.

The US-led 2013 agreement with Tehran to limit the Iranian nuclear programme, even under the moderate government of Hassan Rouhani, and even with moderates dominating the Iranian Parliament from early 2016, has not been enough to placate the Saudis. The two states back opposing sides in the Syrian war – and, in any case, Saudi Arabia never had its own nuclear weapons in the regional balance of power; it had a US nuclear umbrella

instead so, in that sense, could be said to be way ahead of the Iranians in final-status muscle. There is something to be said, which has been almost fully under-estimated by commentators, and that is Tehran's relative modernisation of its social freedoms – despite a religious policing of sometimes hugely rigorous dimensions – and overall modernisation of society, a society not dependent on imported labour as in Saudi Arabia, and thus without those kinds of internal pressures that come from alien populations within. And Iranian women can drive cars. Simply put, despite the seeming monolithic nature of the House of Saud, Iran may simply be the more stable and progressive society – and comes with a far greater cultural heritage and historical glitter than the descendants of desert tribesmen and cattle raiders. The balance of power may not fully hide a balance of perceptions and self-perceptions. For the Israelis, however, the balance of power is huge and is militarily demarcated and measured.

Israel and the planning of attacks on Iran

There has been no war at any time directly between Israel and Iran, but the attitude and approach towards Iran by Israel suggests an existential threat to replace that which once emanated from its immediate neighbours; so that, in addition to the internal threat articulated so well by Uriel Abulof, is an external one chiefly articulated by the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran. It is not an existential threat in the sense of the demise of a homeland for Jews. That is what a Palestinian majority within Israel would do. It is a threat to Israel's sense of hegemony in the region, and the freedom that comes from that to act as it sees fit and to project power unimpeded. Insofar as that has become part of an identity, not only the fighting Jew but the power-projecting Jewish state, what Israel does not want is a genuine balance of power with a nuclear Iran.

Iran's rhetoric in 2012 included statements about eradicating Israel, about an Iranian attack to 'wipe them off the world's geographic history'. But this was in response to a series of similar verbal volleys from Israel from May 2006, firstly to do with destroying Iran's nuclear facilities, but also, in the words of Vice Premier Shimon Peres, that 'the president of Iran should remember that Iran can also be wiped off the map'. It would seem that, from 2006 to 2012, Israel seriously contemplated, planned and at one stage was ready to launch a pre-emptive air strike against Iran's nuclear installations. It would seem that, at least in one such strike, the US air force would have been involved. In 2010, Israeli senior military personnel publicly questioned the wisdom of such strikes, but in November 2012 Prime Minister Netanyahu reiterated the possibility of such a strike, even without US support. As late as 2013, retiring defence minister Ehud Barak said that the Obama administration was preparing detailed plans for a strike.

The strikes never came but, in 2013, a series of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists took place. Moreover, as far as we know from rumours and leaks, it would seem that all of the plans were predicated on the facilities being able to be hit – but the Iranians had dispersed them within mountainous terrain – and that an attack would not encounter disabling resistance, Israeli warplanes being far superior to Iranian ones and probably able also to elude Soviet-supplied anti-aircraft missile defences. No one seemed to contemplate a different form of Iranian response – sending up its air-force not to engage the Israelis, but to bomb Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

A meditation

The diplomatic problems of the Middle East, especially those between Israel and its perceived enemies, are immense. The situation is made more complex in that Israel's external threats, requiring an appropriate 'securitisation move', are to an extent mirrored by internal threat, requiring a securitisation move that is not yet sensible. The need for an external threat is one that may have roots in a deep psychological need – always the readiness must be to react to a powerful force outside – derived from historical experience and reified discursively into an Iran of today with, simultaneously, all the attributes of modernity and a host of evil antiquities. Iran bears on its shoulders the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and not the cosmopolitan history and culture of incorporation, tolerance and multiculturalism.

The bomb becomes the clinching point. It was the Israeli point of decisiveness. No one else in the region had it. Therefore, an Israeli and Jewish hegemony could not be challenged. The prospect of challenge, but only insofar as there would be mutual deterrence and balance, was a request too far. Even though Henry Kissinger viewed his ideal world order as a concert, or regional concerts, that produced equilibrium, the Israelis could find no equilibrium from a

history where they suffered from radical disequilibrium. Iranian rhetoric certainly did not help, but nor did US perceptions of Iran which reinforced Israeli fears.

As a case example of use to the Copenhagen School, the situation may have no peers – but not only in Abulof's formulation. Here we have a parallel between the formulation of Abulof and the perceived threat of Iran. In the face of such perceptions of threat, in the face of securitisation moves, no amount of diplomacy or correct balances of foreign policy formulation – using any and all of Allison's models – may allow us, certainly for now, to find a way forward. And, as for the hapless Palestinians, with only the most rudimentary apparatus for diplomacy and foreign policy formulation – encamped upon and dependent on an enemy for fundamental basics like water – there is no discernible autonomous future.

About the author:

Stephen Chan OBE was Foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at SOAS University of London, where he remains as Professor of World Politics. He has occupied many named chairs around the world, most recently the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Chair of Academic Excellence at Bir Zeit University in 2015, and the George Soros Chair of Public Policy at the Central European University in 2016. He was the 2010 International Studies Association Eminent Scholar in Global Development. As an international civil servant he helped pioneer modern electoral observation in Zimbabwe in 1980, worked in many post-conflict zones – where 'post' was a largely fictional if politic appellation – and continues to be seconded to many diplomatic initiatives around the world today. He is the author of *Meditations on Diplomacy: Comparative Cases in Diplomatic Practice and Foreign Policy* (2017).