

# Shukran, Israel

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**I**F ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS come to power all over the region, they should express their debt of gratitude to their *bête noire*, Israel.

Without the active or passive help of successive Israeli governments, they may not have been able to realize their dreams.

That is true in Gaza, in Beirut, in Cairo and even in Tehran. LET'S TAKE the example of Hamas.

All over the Arab lands, dictators have been faced with a dilemma. They could easily close down all political and civic activities, but they could not close the mosques. In the mosques people could congregate in order to pray, organize charities and, secretly, set up political organizations. Before the days of Twitter and Facebook, that was the only way to reach masses of people.

One of the dictators faced with this dilemma was the Israel military governor in the occupied Palestinian territories. Right from the beginning, he forbade any political activity. Even peace activists went to prison. Advocates of non-violence were deported. Civic centers were closed down. Only the mosques remained open. There people could meet.

But this went beyond tolerance. The General Security Service (known as Shin Bet or Shabak) had an active interest in the flourishing of the mosques. People who pray five times a day, they thought, have no time to build bombs.

The main enemy, as laid down by Shabak, was the dreadful PLO, led by that monster, Yasser Arafat. The PLO was a secular organization, with many prominent Christian members, aiming at a "nonsectarian" Palestinian state. They were the enemies of the Islamists, who were talking about a pan-Islamic Caliphate.

Turning the Palestinians towards Islam, it was thought, would weaken the PLO and its main faction, Fatah. So everything was done to help the Islamic movement discreetly.

It was a very successful policy, and the Security people congratulated themselves on their cleverness, when something untoward happened. In December 1987, the first intifada broke out. The mainstream Islamists had to compete with more radical groupings. Within days, they transformed themselves into the Islamic Resistance Movement (acronym Hamas) and became the most dangerous foes of Israel. Yet it took Shabak more than a year before they arrested Sheik Ahmad Yassin, the Hamas leader. In order to fight this new menace, Israel came to an agreement with the PLO in Oslo.

And now, irony of ironies, Hamas is about to join the PLO and take part in a Palestinian National Unity government. They really should send us a message of Shukran ("thanks").

OUR PART in the rise of Hizbollah is less direct, but no less effective.

When Ariel Sharon rolled into Lebanon in 1982, his troops had to cross the mainly Shiite South. The Israeli soldiers were

received as liberators. Liberators from the PLO, which had turned this area into a state within a state.

Following the troops in my private car, trying to reach the front, I had to traverse about a dozen Shiite villages. In each one I was detained by the villagers, who insisted that I have coffee in their homes.

Neither Sharon nor anyone else paid much attention to the Shiites. In the federation of autonomous ethnic-religious communities that is called Lebanon, the Shiites were the most downtrodden and powerless.

However, the Israelis overstayed their welcome. It took the Shiites just a few weeks to realize that they had no intention of leaving. So, for the first time in their history, they rebelled. The main political group, Amal ("hope"), started small armed actions. When the Israelis did not take the hint, operations multiplied and turned into a full-fledged guerrilla war.

To outflank Amal, Israel encouraged a small, more radical, rival: God's Party, Hizbollah.

If Israel had got out then (as Haolam Hazeh demanded), not much harm would have been done. But they remained for a full 18 years, ample time for Hizbollah to turn into an efficient fighting machine, earn the admiration of the Arab masses everywhere, take over the leadership of the Shiite community and become the most powerful force in Lebanese politics.

They, too, owe us a big Shukran.

THE CASE of the Muslim Brotherhood is even more complex.

The organization was founded in 1928, twenty years before the State of Israel. Its members volunteered to fight us in 1948. They are passionately pan-Islamic, and the Palestinian plight is close to their hearts.

As the Israeli-Palestinian conflict worsened, the popularity of the Brothers grew. Since the 1967 war, in which Egypt lost Sinai, and even more after the separate peace agreement with Israel, they stoked the deep-seated resentment of the masses in Egypt and all over the Arab world. The assassination of Anwar al-Sadat was not of their doing, but they rejoiced.

Their opposition to the peace agreement with Israel was not only an Islamist, but also an authentic Egyptian reaction. Most Egyptians felt cheated and betrayed by Israel. The Camp David agreement had an important Palestinian component, without which the agreement would have been impossible for Egypt. Sadat, a visionary, looked at the big picture and believed that the agreement would quickly lead to a Palestinian state. Menachem Begin, a lawyer, saw to the fine print. Generations of Jews have been brought up on the Talmud, which is mainly a compilation of legal precedents, and their mind has been honed by legalistic arguments. Not for nothing are Jewish lawyers in demand the world over.

Actually, the agreement made no mention of a Palestinian

state, only of autonomy, phrased in a way that allowed Israel to continue the occupation. That was not what the Egyptians had been led to believe, and their resentment was palpable. Egyptians are convinced that their country is the leader of the Arab world, and bears a special responsibility for every part of it. They cannot bear to be seen as the betrayers of their poor, helpless Palestinian cousins.

Long before he was overthrown, Hosni Mubarak was despised as an Israeli lackey, paid by the US. For Egyptians, his despicable role in the Israeli blockade of a million and a half Palestinians in the Gaza Strip was particularly shameful.

Since their beginnings in the 1920s, Brotherhood leaders and activists have been hanged, imprisoned, tortured and otherwise persecuted. Their anti-regime credentials are impeccable. Their stand for the Palestinians contributed a lot to this image.

Had Israel made peace with the Palestinian people somewhere along the line, the Brotherhood would have lost much of its luster. As it is, they are emerging from the present democratic elections as the central force in Egyptian politics. Shukran, Israel.

LET'S NOT forget the Islamic Republic of Iran.

They owe us something, too. Quite a lot, actually.

In 1951, in the first democratic elections in an Islamic country in the region, Muhammad Mossadeq was elected Prime Minister. The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who had been installed by the British during World War II, was thrown out, and Mossadeq nationalized the country's vital oil industry. Until then, the British had robbed the Iranian people, paying a pittance for the Black Gold.

Two years later, in a coup organized by the British MI6 and the American CIA, the Shah was brought back and returned the oil to the hated British and their partners. Israel had probably no part in the coup, but under the restored regime of the Shah, Israel prospered. Israelis made fortunes selling weapons to the Iranian army. Israeli Shabak agents trained the Shah's dreaded secret police, Savak. It was widely believed that they also taught them torture techniques. The Shah helped to build and pay for a pipeline for Iranian oil from Eilat to Ashkelon. Israeli generals traveled through Iran to Iraqi Kurdistan, where they helped the rebellion against Baghdad.

At the time, the Israeli leadership was cooperating with the

South African apartheid regime in developing nuclear arms. The two offered the Shah partnership in the effort, so that Iran, too, would become a nuclear power.

Before that partnership became effective, the detested ruler was overthrown by the Islamic revolution of February 1979. Since then, the hatred of the Great Satan (the US) and the Little Satan (us) has played a major role in the propaganda of the Islamic regime. It has helped to keep the loyalty of the masses, and now Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is using it to bolster his rule.

It seems that all Iranian factions – including the opposition – now support the Iranian effort to obtain a nuclear bomb of their own, ostensibly to deter an Israeli nuclear attack.<sup>1</sup>

Where would the Islamic Republic be without Israel? So they owe us a big “thank you”, too.

HOWEVER, LET us not be too megalomaniac. Israel has contributed a lot to the Islamist awakening. But it is not the only – or even the main – contributor.

Strange as it may appear, obscurantist religious fundamentalism seems to express the Zeitgeist. An American nun-turned-historian, Karen Armstrong, has written an interesting book following the three fundamentalist movements in the Muslim world, in the US and in Israel. It shows a clear pattern: all these divergent movements – Muslim, Christian and Jewish - have passed through almost identical and simultaneous stages.

At present, all Israel is in turmoil because the powerful Orthodox community is compelling women in many parts of the country to sit separately in the back of buses, like blacks in the good old days in Alabama, and use separate sidewalks on one side of the streets. Male religious soldiers are forbidden by their rabbis to listen to women soldiers singing. In orthodox neighborhoods, women are compelled to swathe their bodies in garments that reveal nothing but their faces and hands, even in temperatures of 30 degrees Celsius and above. An 8-year old girl from a religious family was spat upon in the street because her clothes were not “modest” enough. In counter-demonstrations, secular women waved posters saying “Tehran is Here!”

Perhaps some day a fundamentalist Israel will make peace with a fundamentalist Muslim world, under the auspices of a fundamentalist American president.

Unless we do something to stop the process before it is too late.

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<sup>1</sup>This week, the chief of the Mossad pronounced that an Iranian nuclear bomb would not constitute an “existential danger” to Israel.