

# Under the Lime Trees

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ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS lines in German poetry is “Don't greet me under the lime trees.” The Jewish-German poet Heinrich Heine asks his sweetheart not to embarrass him in public by greeting him in the main street of Berlin, which is called “Unter den Linden” (“Under the Lime Trees”).

Israel is in the position of this illicit sweetheart. Arab countries are having an affair with her, but don't want to be seen with her in public.

Too embarrassing.

THE MAIN Arab country in question is Saudi Arabia. For some time now, the oil kingdom has been a secret ally of Israel, and vice versa.

In politics, national interests often trump ideological differences. This is so in this case.

The area referred to by Westerners as the “Middle East” is now polarized into two camps, led respectively by Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The northern arc consists of Shiite Iran, present-day Iraq with its Shiite majority, the main Syrian territory controlled by the Alawite (close to Shiite) community and Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The Southern bloc, led by Sunni Saudi Arabia, consists of the Sunni states of Egypt and the Gulf principalities. In a shadowy way, they are connected with the Sunni Islamic Caliphate, a.k.a. Daesh or Isis, which has lodged itself between Syria and Iraq. Except for Egypt, which is as poor as a *mosque mouse*, they are all stinking rich with oil.

The northern arc is supported by Russia, which just now has given the Assad family in Syria a massive military boost. The southern bloc has been supported until recently by the US and its allies.

THIS IS an orderly picture, as it should be. People around the world don't like complicated situations, especially if they make it difficult to distinguish between friends and enemies.

Take Turkey. Turkey is a Sunnite country, formerly secular but now ruled by a religious party. So it is logical that it quietly supports Daesh.

Turkey also fights against the Syrian Kurds, which fight against Daesh, and who are allied with the Kurdish

minority in Turkey, which is considered by the Turkish government as a deadly menace.<sup>1</sup>

The US is fighting against Assad's Syria, which is supported by Russia. But the US is also fighting against Daesh, which is fighting against Assad's Syria. The Syrian Kurds are fighting against Daesh, but also against Assad's forces. The Lebanese Hezbollah strongly supports Syria, a traditional enemy of Lebanon, and keeps the Assad regime alive, while fighting against Daesh, side by side with the US, a deadly enemy of Hezbollah. Iran supports Assad and fights against Daesh, side by side with the US, Hezbollah and the Syrian Kurds.

Can't make sense of this? You are not alone.

Recently the US has changed its orientation. Until then, the picture was clear. The US needed the Saudi oil, as cheaply as the King could supply it. It also hated Iran, since the Shiite Islamists threw out the Iranian Shah of Shahs, an American stooge. The Islamists captured the American diplomats in Tehran and held them as hostages. To get them out, the US provided the Iranian army with weapons, via Israel (this was called Irangate). Iran was at war with Iraq, which was under the Sunni dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. The Americans supported Saddam against Iran, but later invaded Iraq, hanged him and effectively turned Iraq over to Iran, their deadly enemy.

Now the US is having second thoughts (if all this mess has much to do with “thoughts”). Its traditional alliance with Saudi Arabia against Iran does not look so attractive anymore. The US dependence on Arabian oil is not so strong as it was. Suddenly the Saudi religious tyranny does not look so much more attractive than the Iranian religious democracy and its beckoning market. After all, against the 20 million native Saudis there are 80 million Iranians.

So now we have a US-Iranian agreement. Western sanctions on Iran are being lifted. It looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship, threatening to leave the multitudes of Saudi princes seething with anger and shaking with fear.

WHERE is Israel in this mess? Well, it's a part of the mess.

<sup>1</sup>The Kurds are a separate people, neither Arab nor Turkish, who are divided between Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, and generally unable to unite. They are mostly Sunnis.

When Israel was established in the middle of a war with the Arabs, the government favored something called “the alliance of minorities”. This meant cooperation with all the peripheral factors in the region: the Maronites in Lebanon (the Shiites were disdained and ignored), the Alawites in Syria, the Kurds in Iraq, the Copts in Egypt, the rulers of Iran, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Chad, and so on.

There were indeed some loose connections with the Maronites. The Shah's Iran became a close if half-secret ally. Israel helped the Shah to build his secret police, and the Shah allowed Israeli officers to pass through his territory in order to join and instruct the Kurdish rebels in North Iraq—until, alas, the Shah made a deal with Saddam Hussein. The Shah also became a partner in the oil pipeline that brought Persian oil from Eilat to Ashkelon, instead of going through the Suez Canal.<sup>2</sup>

Now the situation is quite different. The Shiite-Sunni divide (about the succession of the prophet Muhammad), which has been slumbering for many generations, has come to the fore again, serving, of course, very mundane worldly interests.

For Saudis, their competition with Iran for hegemony in the Muslim world is vastly more important than the old fight with Israel. Indeed, years ago the Saudis published a peace plan that resembles the plans put forward by Israeli peace forces (including my own). It was accepted by the Arab league but rejected by Sharon's government and then totally ignored by successive Israeli governments.

Binyamin Netanyahu's advisers boast that never has the geopolitical situation of Israel been better than it is now. The Arabs are busy with their quarrels. Many Arab countries want to strengthen their secret ties with Israel.

The ties with Egypt are not even secret. The Egyptian military dictator openly cooperates with Israel in strangling the Gaza Strip with its close to two million Palestinian inhabitants. The Strip is ruled by Hamas, a movement that the Egyptian government claims is connected with its enemy, Daesh.

Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, is close to having open relations with us. Israel's political or economic ties with India, China and Russia are good and growing.

Tiny Israel is considered a military giant, a technological power, a stable democracy (at least for its Jewish citizens). Enemies like the BDS movement are mere irrita-

tions. So what's bad?

THIS IS where we return to the lime trees. None of our secret Arab friends want us greet them openly. Egypt, with which we have an official peace treaty, does not welcome Israeli tourists anymore. They are advised not to go there.

Saudi Arabia and its allies do not want any open and formal relations with Israel. On the contrary, they continue to speak about Israel as during the worst stages of Arab rejectionism.

They all quote the same reason: the oppression of the Palestinian people. They all say the same: official relations with Israel will come only after the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The masses of the Arab peoples everywhere are far too emotionally involved with the plight of the Palestinians to tolerate official connections between their rulers and Israel.

These rulers all embrace the same conditions, which were put forward by Yasser Arafat and included in the Saudi peace plan: a free Palestinian state side by side with Israel, mutually agreed borders based on the June 1967 lines with minor exchanges of territory, an “agreed” return of the refugees (“agreed” with Israel, meaning at most a symbolic return of a very limited number).

Israeli governments have never responded to this plan. Today, under Binyamin Netanyahu, they are further from these peace conditions than ever. Almost every day our government enacts laws, enlarges settlements, takes measures and makes declarations that push Israel further away from any peace that Arab countries could accept.

FUTURE GENERATIONS will look at this situation with wonderment.

Since the foundation of the Zionist movement, and most certainly since the creation of the State of Israel, Israelis have dreamt of overcoming Arab resistance and inducing the Arab world to accept the “Jewish and democratic” State of Israel as a legitimate member of the region.

Now this opportunity is presenting itself. It can be done. Israel is invited to the Arab table. And Israel ignores the opportunity.

Not because Israel is blind, but because the occupied Palestinian territories and more settlements are more important to them than the historic act of making peace.

That is why no one wants us to greet them under the lime trees.

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<sup>2</sup>I once spent a day building that line, which is still a joint Israel-Iranian venture, subject to arbitration.