**The ‘Israel Loved Dictators’ Canard**

*This faulty narrative is used as an excuse for the Israel hate-fest on the Egyptian street.*

By Seth J. Frantzman/JointMedia News Service

“Whoever thought that there had been no point in supporting [Israeli] agreements with tyrants now argues that the Arab Spring let loose the hatred which the Arabs feel toward Israel. But Israel is not able to stop history. In the dilemma between the support for stable tyrannies and supporting the revolutionaries and their uncertain future, the choice is clear. Israel must do everything possible to prove to the Arab peoples that are being freed that democracies are meant for each other; and that Israel is part of the family of freedom, democracy and peace, that same family that is seeking to adopt them.”

That was the claim of *Haaretz* in a recent editorial whose title in English was “Israel must find its place in an ever changing Middle East.” The implication is that Israel has not found its place because Israeli policy favored the “stable tyranny” over the will of the democratic Arab street.

This canard that Israel has always preferred dictatorships (which are supposedly easier to deal with) to democracies is especially common in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In fact, this allegation is now being used as an excuse to explain the “real reason” that the Egyptian street hates Israel. The argument goes that the Egyptians were enraged by years in which Israel supported the Mubarak dictatorship, and therefore manifestations of anti-Israel behavior such as the attack on Israel’s embassy in September are simply reactions to Israel’s support for dictatorship and repression.

This logic was at work when Daniel Byman, a counterterrorism analyst, wrote at the Brookings Institute in August that “such a shift is hard for Israel, which worked with the region's dictators for many years.” Israeli columnist Carlo Strenger agrees, writing, “The Arab Spring certainly creates a problem for Israel’s traditional policy of relying on dictatorial regimes to keep down Islamic terrorism.”

It seems this theory also had widespread acceptance in the Arab world. In an unsigned post on the site Palestine Remembered from 2001, the author writes: “There is no denying of the fact that the Middle East is mostly ruled by autocratic, oppressive, and undemocratic regimes. On the other hand, the majority of these repressive regimes were mostly founded and funded based on Israeli and American wishes.” This argument was also presented in Rashid Khalidi’s 2009 book *Sowing Crises*.

However, the historical reality diverges greatly from these claims. In his excellent 2002 book, *David Ben-Gurion, the State of Israel and the Arab World,* Zakai Shalom shows that Israeli leadership in the early days of the state hoped that the Arab world would democratize. Ben-Gurion wrote in 1956 that “democratic government is not only government elections but government whose main concern is to provide for the people’s basic needs. In nearly every one of the neighboring states a military dictatorship or juntas or federal government exists…The Egyptian people are in need of development, health and education. But a dictatorship that rules by military force, lacking the support and consent of the nation, cannot deal with these matters.”

Ben-Gurion understood that Israel’s most intractable enemies were the dictators, writing, “The King of Saudi Arabia declared his willingness to sacrifice ten million soldiers in the destruction of Israel. The Egyptian tyrant was somewhat more modest, he spoke of enlisting four million for this goal; for what are four million Egyptians in the eyes of this tyrant?”

Shalom writes that Ben-Gurion “rejected the claim that the absence of democracy in Arab countries should be considered as merely an ‘internal problem’ of no import for Israel, for he believed that it held long-range implications for Arab foreign policy.”

History further supports Shalom’s depiction of Ben-Gurion’s position on Arab dictatorships. When Israel was born, it fought a war against its five neighbors. Most of those countries subsequently underwent political upheavals. The most significant of these brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in Egypt.

Nasser vowed to eradicate Israel, making hate a centerpiece of his policy and a frequent topic on his radio broadcasts to the Arab world. Nasser exported his Arab nationalism and socialist program—sometimes unsuccessfully—to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Jordan, where “free-officers” movements modeled on the Egyptian mold were formed. Nasser even convinced Syria to unite with Egypt briefly under the unwieldy United Arab Republic. Only the demise of Nasser and his rhetoric led directly to the Israeli-Egyptian peace accords. With Nasser gone, Anwar Sadat, with support from Israel leader Menachem Begin, was able to change the radical policy in favor of a more pragmatic one.

That Israel preferred dictators in order to make peace over the wishes of the local people is the one argument that has some plausibility. Had the Egyptians been asked in the 1980s if they wanted peace with Israel, they would certainly have said no. This is why Anwar Sadat spoke to the Israeli Knesset, but Menachem Begin did not go to speak in the Egyptian parliament. When Jordan made peace with Israel in the 1990s, it is likely that the majority in Jordan, many of whom descend from Palestinian “refugees,” would have disagreed.

This is an unfortunate and tragic fact. However, in other cases it is not clear if the people prefer a state of ongoing conflict. The Maronites in Lebanon have never been enamored of the official militant policy of the government.

In the end it is important for commentators to challenge the theory that Israel supported Arab regimes against the wishes of the people, and that any rage against Israel on the streets of the Arab capitals is because of Israeli support for tyranny. Witness the civil strife in Syria—it certainly cannot be said that Bashar al Assad is a friend of Israel. What will be the excuse, if he is overthrown, for why the “street” in Syria still hates Israel?

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