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Strong democracies don't brag

Israel's right-wing government has found a new point of reference – Syria, a country groaning under a bloody civil war. Every time an Arab Knesset member tries to criticize something in Israel, the ministers immediately suggest that he “go to Syria.” Every time a right-wing minister or MK wants to boast about Israeli democracy, he compares it to what's happening under Bashar Assad's regime.

The latest example took place this week. After Deputy Knesset Speaker Ahmed Tibi and colleagues protested against the speech by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took the podium and bragged to the visitor about Israeli democracy.

“In our parliament,” Netanyahu said, “anyone can say anything they want. This is not possible in Damascus.” In another Knesset debate about a month ago, Culture Minister Limor Livnat taunted MK Mohammed Barakeh. “I'll send you to Assad's regime,” she said. “There you can talk about enlightenment and culture.” Tibi responded: “It's won't do that every time an Arab MK comments on something you've said, you bring up Syria.” Pandemonium erupted.

The comparisons to Syria and the statements about sending Arab MKs there are shameful and intolerable. More than once, Arab MKs have spoken out against the dictatorships in the Arab world, including Syria's. They're members of the Knesset, not any other parliament. This is their place – by right, not by any favor or benevolence on the part of the right wing.

The need to make comparisons at the expense of the bloody Syrian regime reflects Israeli democracy's weakness, certainly not its strength. Strong, stable democracies, like those in properly run countries, don't need to compare themselves to the worst regimes in order to be extolled.

Does Israel really want to be compared favorably to murderous Syria? Does it really want to be mentioned in the same breath as the Arab tyrannies? Israel's system of government is immeasurably better than the regime in the Arab states. But is this fact enough to guarantee its strength and quality?

Instead of brandishing the racist suggestion that we send Israel's Arabs to Syria, the government and right-wing politicians should occupy themselves with Israeli democracy, which is crying out to be strengthened.



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Ari Shavit

The city in white

WASHINGTON, DC – A heavy snow fell this week on Washington. The White House was even whiter, as were Capitol Hill and the glorious Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial and Lincoln Memorial. Traffic was nearly silenced, and the snow-covered streets on the banks of the chilly Potomac accentuated the restrained beauty and power of the capital of the Western world.

Where is America headed? To a great degree, America is going nowhere. It is wrapped within itself and licking its wounds without making any firm decisions about its future.

No one is precisely sure about the economic situation – whether it is gradually recovering or if there is an illusory recovery. No one is precisely clear about the strategic situation – Iran, Syria, Russia and China all look gloomy for the moment. No one has a clear hold on what the political future brings – will the bridge disaster strike down New Jersey governor Chris Christie, and is Hillary Clinton on the verge of returning to the White House?

Washington's beautiful winter befits its current

mood. Everything here is reserved and restrained – without clarity, without visibility, without passion.

During the first spring of the Iraq War, I conducted a comprehensive and intensive tour of a much different city: a Washington rejoicing in battle. Cherry trees blossomed in pink, and on every street corner red white and blue tom-tom drums rang out. The little Churchills believing in the big war strode

The neocon looked at me as if he were looking at a country bumpkin who didn't understand how things work in the big city. America is not Israel, and America is not the America of Vietnam, he answered. It has enough power to replace the regime in Iraq and to carry on with Iran, too, and change the face of the Middle East. President George W. Bush is a man of principles and character who will instigate

America shies away from anything that reeks of machismo. The worst nightmare of all is the nightmare of boots on the ground.

in the halls of power. Even the liberal media and the Democratic Party sounded like they never had since the bright days of JFK and LBJ.

I will never forget a profound conversation I had with a brilliant, senior neoconservative then among the city's rulers. I asked him if he didn't fear that this just started war would become a second Vietnam. I told him that what happened to Israel in Beirut and Gaza could happen to the United States in Baghdad.

a democratic revolution in the Arab world and establish a new world order that the United States will lead.

The cherry trees have blossomed 10 times since then, and have withered 10 times, and the city is covered in white. The superpower invested all its spiritual resources – and much of its economic resources – in the mud of Iraq and Afghanistan. It lost its famous self-confidence in two undying wars and an extended economic crisis. That is how

Washington is now a post-traumatic capital. It does not believe in big ideas and does not believe in big struggles and does not believe in itself.

America shies away from anything that reeks of machismo and anything that is reminiscent of Rambo. The worst nightmare of all is the nightmare of boots on the ground.

The American capital is on guard not to repeat that scenario. Thus, its current behavior in the world is the way one who leads in snow behaves: slowly, carefully, without making any sharp turns and without galloping uninhibited toward any desired goal.

Israel loves America, and Israel is dependent upon America, but Israel doesn't always understand America. For too long, Jerusalem deluded itself that Washington is a Republican Washington. It is not.

For too long, Jerusalem assumed that Washington lay in its pocket. It does not. The new situation of American conscientiousness, carefully leading through the snow, obliges Israel to prepare for crisis-ridden situations in which the deep conscientiousness gap between it and its ally will become dangerous.

Gideon Levy

Let's save the Palestinians in Yarmouk

This article will surely fall on deaf ears, even more than others of mine. Still, it must be written. I can't forget the images from the Yarmouk camp for Palestinian refugees. Among all the victims of Syria's horrors, these people should touch Israelis' hearts.

Israel is morally responsible for what happens in this camp, albeit indirectly. First, it bears historical responsibility for the fate of the camp's residents – Palestinian natives of Israel who were forced to flee and their descendants.

Second, many Israeli Arabs and Palestinians in the territory of the Palestinian Authority have relatives in Yarmouk, sometimes even of the first degree. Siblings, grandparents and cousins are starving to death, and dozens have already died.

We could draw a parallel. An atrocity takes place dozens of kilometers from the country's borders, and relatives of Jewish Israelis are starving to death and dying for lack of medicine and supplies, wandering around emaciated and being shot like stray animals. Would Israel remain complacent? Wouldn't it take action to save them?

It's easy to dump responsibility for Yarmouk on the Arabs: the Assad regime, which cruelly prevents supplies from reaching the besieged residents for many weeks; the armed Palestinians, who intervened in the civil war and sounded the camp's death knell; radical Islamist organizations, whose cruelty tops that of the regime; and the Arab states that didn't do enough to solve the refugee problem (even if relatively speaking they improved the refugees' lot in Syria).

And yet the moral responsibility still lies with Israel, whose establishment led to the existence of these refugees and exiles. As best it could, this country should try to save the families of its citizens, even if they're Arabs. An example is the elderly Lutafia, a camp resident whose brother Abed Abadi is a prize-winning artist in Haifa who has tried to save her for years.

Pictures of Yarmouk won't fade away: the Palestinian boy chewing on paper for lack of food; the boy crying to the cameras for help from the world now that his father has been killed; emaciated people just

half alive; lines of women and old people crowded for hours in hopes of obtaining a serving of food or dose of medicine; and the terrible hopelessness of thousands of people under siege whose homes have been demolished and worlds destroyed.

A few days ago my colleague Zvi Bar'el described the situation in the camp. The camp's coordinating committee called on residents to drink a liter of water with a teaspoon of salt, and after that a liter of water with a teaspoon of sugar, if available.

Bar'el was restrained as he referred to Yarmouk as resembling a World War II ghetto, and even this description fell on deaf ears. Only 20,000 people remain in the camp, where 150,000 lived before the civil war. Only the weak and helpless remain – to live in destruction under siege. The rest have suffered their second expulsion.

Israel should declare that its gates are open for the 20,000 besieged residents to reunite with their families.

Israel doesn't lift a finger. Israel even cynically sends back into the inferno the few wounded Syrians it does treat, amid its nauseating self-congratulations. While Syria's other neighbors, Jordan and Turkey, are bursting with millions of refugees, Israel doesn't even consider absorbing the few wounded Syrians who manage to reach it.

After the terror of Yarmouk, Israel should show a measure of humanity. It should try to save the 20,000 besieged residents – natives of this land, remember – and declare that its gates are open to them to reunite with their families.

Such a step would probably be rejected by the Syrians, but maybe not. Sadly, Israel could have organized a humanitarian operation or a donation campaign, just as it does for natural disasters far away for which it bears no responsibility. But in Yarmouk the dying are Palestinian refugees. What do they have to do with us?

Israel Harel

The boycott's boogymen exploit the Netanyahu government's weakness

Few Israelis know that John Kerry's staff includes a task force which, under the guise of public relations, engages in psychological warfare. Its purpose is to weaken Israel's will – that of its people, and that of its government – to stand firm on critical issues about which it disagrees with the U.S. secretary of state.

In addition, of course, there is the large staff of the embassy in Tel Aviv. It has many ways of working, including courting journalists and developing ties with public figures, academics, rabbis and businessmen. A particularly important target is former army officers and defense officials (as well as those still in uniform). And indeed, some, including former major generals and security service chiefs, have suddenly altered their conduct and now prophesy the diametric opposite of what they prophesied – and above all, what they acted on – in the past.

This week, a press release issued by 100 businessmen was published on the front page of the daily Yedioth Ahronoth. “The world is losing patience, and the threat of sanctions grows from day to day,” it warned. “We have a window of opportunity thanks to John Kerry's arrival, and we must take advantage of it.” Aside from

supermarket mogul Rami Levy, the list of signatories contained no surprises. Most are well-known activists in left-wing organizations.

So why, if not because they have joined the anti-Israel campaign of intimidation, did this routine expression of opinion suddenly merit such exposure? After all, it's well known that news editors don't like press releases.

The Netanyahu government, which is listless in almost every field, tamely accepts the boycott propaganda and leaves the battle for public opinion, both Israeli and international, to those who seek to lead the country astray.

That's why other newspapers, even those that are normally happy to publish material such as “the threat of sanctions grows from day to day,” didn't even mention this release.

Interested parties are disseminating predictions of boycotts and ostracism, and even working to make them more threatening. The ordinary citizen, who draws his information from a slanted or submissive media becomes worried. Jews are afraid of boycotts and ostracism. And thus, the psychological warfare achieves its goal: If we don't go along with the Kerry

plan, our economy will collapse.

Nobody recalls that the worst economic crisis of recent decades stemmed from the signing of the Oslo 2 agreement in 1995: It occurred after all the bells of peace had rung out and the self-deceiving photos and headlines from the White House about “peace in our times” had been published.

plan, our economy will collapse.

After a few years of economic growth, the terrorism that the Palestinians embarked on, which ultimately killed more than 1,000 people, paralyzed the economy and sent it into a prolonged crisis.

In such a situation, the logical move for a government that hadn't given in to the propaganda, which is meant to mislead both the government and the faint-hearted public, would be to simply tell the truth. But Benjamin Netanyahu's government, which is listless in almost every field, tamely accepts the boycott propaganda and leaves the battle for public

opinion, both Israeli and international, to those who seek to lead the country astray.

Occasional boycotts do occur, as in Holland recently. But most boycott initiatives fail miserably. Even Norway, which supports the Palestinians, is sobering up with regard to its attitude toward Israel. In other Scandinavian countries, important voices are also urging a rethink of attitudes toward Israel, against the background of violence by Muslim immigrants, the Arab Spring and the slaughter in Syria.

Only on the margins of British academia, and recently American academia as well, are calls for boycotts proliferating, and these have no impact. The biggest and most respected British universities, and even more so the American ones, have published unreserved statements in support of Israeli academia.

The principle boycott danger lies in its trendiness, and especially in our own fear of “what will the goyim say.” Many of those who try (but fail) to organize boycotts rely on home-grown Israeli initiatives. As far back as 1991, veteran journalist Amnon Abramovich advised the Americans, “Forget this government. ... Speak to it via its pocketbook. ... You have to go all the way.”

Robby Berman

End Israeli organ donation taboo

Israel has the lowest organ donor registration rate in the Western world. Only 14 percent of Israelis carry a donor card, as opposed to 45 percent of Americans. This week, the Israel Transplant Center announced a record number of new registrants for organ donor cards in 2013. This statistic implies that more organs in Israel will be donated in the future. But to me, this looks like a red herring.

The phenomenal growth in registration for ADI organ cards (managed by Israel's National Transplant Center) over the past few years is the result of a new law that enables any Israeli signed up for an organ donor card to get priority treatment on the organ waiting list if they ever require a transplant. This run on cards is, in fact, one of the consequences that motivated legislators to create the new law in the first place: Not only to ensure a just, symmetrical system of commitment and compensation, but also to increase the overall number of card holders.

But I believe that Israelis, somewhat cynically, are signing up en-masse for organ donor cards just for the benefits. It is their insurance policy. If they ever need an organ they will get one, but they are also hedging their bets: If and when it comes time for them to donate, I believe their families will refuse. And families in Israel have the right to say no

even if their loved one has an organ donor card, as we saw last year in the infamous case involving Avi Cohen, a soccer star who died in a motorcycle accident; it was widely reported that rabbi visiting the family in the hospital after his death persuaded them not to follow through with his expressed wishes to be a donor.

Consequently and understandably, well-intentioned people have been asking for a new law that enables the

Forcing families by law to donate the organs of their donor-card-carrying relatives won't defuse the suspicions and superstitions that even secular Israelis have about organ donations.

transplant community to forcibly remove organs from an organ donor card-holder in spite of the family's objections.

This is simply bad policy. I'm all for personal autonomy. I'm all for justice. But imagine the scenario: Your brother has an organ donor card and now he is brain-stem dead. You don't really understand the finality of brain-stem death. You see your brother's beating heart and you are wondering how he can possibly be dead. Hopeful spiritual healers are telling you he is going to wake up and religious

family members are saying psalms, pulling at God's prayer shawl, petitioning for an extra-terrestrial intervention. And all the while, deep down, you suspect that your brother never really wanted to be an organ donor in the first place. You suspect he only signed the ADI card to get the benefits. Now the transplant surgeons are coming down the hall with their unsheathed scalpels to remove your brother's organs. What are you going to do?

What are you going to do?

If Israeli doctors went on strike this week because of the constant physical abuse they are subjected to by unsatisfied patients and their families, often complaining about the long waiting times to see a doctor, it doesn't take much imagination to visualize the level of violence that will happen in a scenario where organ donation will take place by force. Appeals for this new “by force” legislation are justified in terms of fairness and personal autonomy – but as a public policy, it doesn't survive further reflection. And if implemented, I don't think the medical

transplant staff would survive, either.

If we want to increase organ donation in Israel we need to listen to the people who are refusing organ donation and ask them why. The majority of Israelis are secular Israelis – but this is not secularism as understood in other Western countries. Secular Israelis may not follow halakha (Jewish religious law) during their lifetime, yet often when death intrudes, there is an instinctive “return” to caring about halakha; many believe Judaism forbids organ donation.

We need to let them know that over 200 Orthodox rabbis in Israel carry organ donor cards and support organ donation. We need to let them know that years ago the Ashkenazi and Sephardi chief rabbis of Israel reviewed the medical and halakha aspects of brain-stem death and concluded that it constitutes the death of the human organism, even while the human organs remain alive. That they ruled organs should be donated. We need to publicize the fact that more than a dozen chief rabbis around the world support organ donation. Passing laws will not sway the critical mass of Israelis. The answer to this problem is education, not legislation.

Robby Berman is founder and director of the Halachic Organ Donor Society (www.hods.org), which works to increase Jewish participation in organ donation programs.