

Russia, Iran, Turkey in Syria:

*A Middle East Round Table Discussion
with Daniel Diker of JCPA*

by Jerry Gordon and Mike Bates (April 2018)



Victim of Palestinian terror: Taylor Force

Nowruz, meaning “new day,” the 2018 celebration of the ancient Persian Spring, brought no further resolution to the seven years of chaos in Syria. For US Allies, Israel, and the Syrian Kurds, it meant tests of their resolve in the face of new threats from Russia, Iran and Turkey.

On January 20th, Turkey and 25,000 Jihadists refitted as a Free Syrian Army launched an assault on the largely Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northwest Syria. They sought to eject or destroy YPG/YPJ forces that it accused of being ‘terrorists’ aligned with the Turkish Workers Party, the PKK. After two

months of daily air attacks and artillery bombardments, the euphemistically misnamed Operation Olive Branch of Islamist Turkish President Erdogan seized Afrin. That forced the withdrawal of Kurdish, Yazidi and Christian civilians and the YPG/YPJ forces from their ancient Kurdish homeland. Erdogan then turned his sights on a possible confrontation with US special force and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. The flashpoint was the bastion of Manbij, 60 miles to the east on the West bank of the Euphrates River. That set up an unprecedented conflict between two NATO member allies, Turkey and the US.

On February 7th, a reinforced battalion of Russian "mercenaries", Assad regime tanks, Iranian proxies Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia Popular Mobilization units crossed the Euphrates River into Deir Ez Zor in eastern Syria. Their objective was to seize the important oil and gas fields overrun by Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces backed by US special forces and Marine artillery units. The attacking Russian and Iranian-backed Assad force was destroyed by vastly more powerful US air and ground bombardment. Leaders of the Russian mercenary force in Moscow threatened further attacks to dislodge the US backed Kurdish Syrian Democrat Forces. Thus, depriving the Kurds of a major geo-resource chip in a possible bid for regional autonomy.

On February 10th, an Iranian launched drone, based on a US intelligence version forced down seven years earlier, intruded Israeli airspace and was shot down. That triggered a massive IAF assault that took down nearly 60 percent of the Assad regime's air defense system with the loss of an Israeli F-16 allegedly due to collateral shrapnel damage. That exchange was followed by a pin point mission against an Iranian precision missile base controlled by Iran's Qod's Force. Israeli PM

Netanyahu had flown to Moscow on January 29th to express his concerns to Russian President Putin over Iran's deepening occupation in Syria and threat on Israel's northern frontier.

Speaking at the AIPAC plenary session March 6th, Netanyahu would stress to a crowd of 18,000 in Washington DC that, with Iran, "darkness is descending on our region."

Tensions with the Palestinians were heightened with the announcement on February 23rd by the Trump White House of the opening of the US Embassy based at the existing East Jerusalem consulate in May. This will coincide with the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Jewish nation of Israel. Compounding that was the reshuffling of the Trump cabinet with the termination of Secretary of State Tillerson and his replacement with CIA director Mike Pompeo.

Against this background, we convened another in the periodic 1330am WEBY Middle East Round Table discussions with Daniel Diker Director of the Program to Counter Political Warfare at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA) during his recent visit to the U.S.

Mike Bates: Good Afternoon and welcome to Your Turn. This is Mike Bates. It's a special edition hour of Your Turn. This is one of our periodic Middle East round table discussions. I have with me in the studio, Jerry Gordon, Senior Editor of the New English Review and its blog, "the Iconoclast". He is also a contributor to Israel News Talk Radio out of Jerusalem. Jerry Gordon welcome.

And joining us by telephone Dan Diker, Director of the Program to Counter Political Warfare and BDS at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. He is also former Secretary General of the World Jewish Congress and that's Dan Diker. Dan welcome to Your Turn.

Perhaps biggest breaking news of the day and this happened this morning, a tweet was sent out at 8:44 a.m. Eastern Time from President Donald Trump and that tweet read as follows, "Mike Pompeo, Director of the CIA will become our new Secretary of State. He will do a fantastic job. Thank you to Rex Tillerson for his service. Gina Haspel will become the new Director of the CIA and the first woman so chosen. Congratulations to all". Now, that tweet in and of itself might just be an announcement that Tillerson is being replaced. What makes it so unique is that Tillerson learned of his termination via that tweet. Now, Dan, I know you would prefer not to comment on American politics, and I respect that, but give me your initial take anyway.



Diker: This seems in line with the way the President does things. He uses social media, which may be surprising from an executive management standpoint, to notify the second most senior official in the administration that his services are no longer needed. However what is interesting from the point of view in the Middle East is that the replacement for Mr. Tillerson, CIA Director Pompeo, has been very much on the same page in terms of the Iranian regime threat with the President as well as with Prime Minister Netanyahu. That is a meeting of the minds when it comes to confronting that greatest state sponsor

of terrorism in the world. I think that is positive takeaway in the appointment of CIA Director Pompeo as Secretary of State.

Bates: Dan, I'm not saying that there is a connection. I'm just curious was the Israeli government dissatisfied with Secretary Tillerson's performance?

Diker: I don't think so because the way Secretary Tillerson's job ended up unfolding did not squarely have Israel in the middle of Secretary Tillerson's file. I think the concern when the Secretary was confirmed was his traditional big oil relationships with Arab oil-producing countries. It had been a somewhat contentious position or profile as far as the American Jewish community was concerned. Thus, initially Tillerson's views had the potential of putting undue pressure on Israel in its very problematic relationship with the Palestinian Authority and some of the twenty-two Arab states in the region. However, what happened in the first year of the President's Administration was that the President himself handled what has become known as the Middle East Peace Process between Israel and the Palestinians. He appointed three very able interlocutors: his son-in-law Jared Kushner, the Ambassador to Israel from the United States Ambassador David Friedman and Jason Greenblatt as a Special Representative of the Trump administration. With that in place, Secretary Tillerson had focused on matters that were secondary to Israel. It is known in Israel that the President has taken a direct interest in what he called the disastrous JCPOA deal, known colloquially as the Iran deal. The president was managing the major security issues that involved Israel. That is why I think that the disagreement between the President and Secretary Tillerson on Iran was something that the president was very much on top of from the very beginning and didn't end

up bringing Israel into that conversation.

Gordon: Dan, let's segue to some other news of the week. It appears that there is a dispute in the Knesset over conscription of Haredi Extreme Orthodox Jews that might result in a call for an early election in Israel. What is the nature of that dispute and why could it possibly bring down the Netanyahu coalition government?

Diker: That is a very important question for domestic Israeli politics. Especially now when there is so much potential danger lurking over Israel's northern border. There you have the Iranian regime, the Syrian Army and proxies Hezbollah and other Islamic groups, literally peering across the border with Israel equipped with thousands of rockets, drones and chemical weapons. All while Israel is in the midst of a domestic political crisis. The ultra Orthodox parties have long demanded to continue what had been a seven decade old exception for the ultra Orthodox young men not to be drafted but instead to learn Torah and religious studies in Yeshivas. That had been a decision taken after the holocaust when Israel was re-established in 1948 by Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. In recent years this so-called draft law has come up several times which would require the enlistment or drafting of all young Jews. It is voluntary and not required for Arab Muslim citizens of Israel. The ultra Orthodox didn't want the draft for all kinds of cultural and other religious reasons. So their objection to a draft of yeshiva students created a coalition crisis as there are two ultra Orthodox political factions in Netanyahu's coalition. The Shas faction as well as the United Torah Judaism Ashkenazi faction. They constituted a coalition of several ultra Orthodox parties. The threat here is if they can't come to an understanding with the Netanyahu government over the draft law then there would be a

possibility of breaking up the government and calling for new elections. However, in the last twenty-four hours, my understanding is that there is less of a threat today than it was forty-eight hours ago. It seems that it is in no one's interest, except potentially the Prime Minister, to call for June 2018 elections. It seems there was a successful negotiation and a compromise was reached to keep the Netanyahu coalition government intact.

Bates: Dan, if I understood what you said correctly . . . it is in the interest of the Prime Minister to have early elections. Why would that be and what is the standing of Netanyahu and the Likud party should there be early elections for the Knesset?

Diker: There has been an a dramatic series of developments over the past year or so, investigations of gift receiving and, even worse, bribery against the Prime Minister. Of course nothing has been proven. There have been all sorts of police investigations. Ironically, at the same time, the Prime Minister's popularity and the electoral popularity of his Likud party has maintained its thirty seats which are twenty-five percent of the total number of mandates in the Knesset. His popularity has actually been maintained. If you were the Prime Minister and saw that your numbers were strong and numbers of potential competitors for Prime Minister in your current coalition and those in the opposition parties weaker than his, you could make the argument that it would make sense to go to early election in order to receive a new mandates from your constituency. What we are seeing in Israel today is that the other parties' poll numbers are not looking particularly strong. The Shas party, which is a coalition partner, their numbers are barely at the minimum threshold for re-election. Some of the other center right parties like the

Kulanueaning together in Hebrew—formed by a former Likud senior official, is down from nine to six. According to one poll, Defense Minister Lieberman and his party Yisrael Beiteinu, Israel My Home, another coalition partner, would not make the minimum threshold. It is in the interest of the leaders of other factions in the current Israeli government not to go to early elections, Mr. Netanyahu is the only leader whose numbers are very favorable to potentially go to new elections. However, it looks like a compromise has been worked out with the six leaders that formed this coalition of sixty-six seats out of a hundred and twenty in the Knesset.

Gordon: Dan, as you said earlier, Iran and its proxies virtually surround Israel's frontiers in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Sinai threatening the Jewish nation's annihilation. What message is Netanyahu sending to Iran and the West and how realistic are Israel's options for contending with these Iranian threats, both near and far, especially its nuclear and ballistic missiles?

Diker: As you pointed out, there is a major threat on the ground. I think it's important to point out the disconnect in the national security messaging regarding Iran's strategic threat to Israel. Far more dangerous is what Iran is doing on the ground via it's proxies in Iraq which it largely controls—certainly Southern and Central Syria. The Kurds in the North are the only western-friendly force keeping Iran at bay there. As you said, Syria and Iran's proxy Hezbollah are on Israel's Northern frontier. Even in Gaza, the Iranian regime has reinserted itself in terms of financing and weapons. Iran brings Hamas from Gaza to Lebanon and even to Iran for training. Israel is literally surrounded by proxies of radical Islamic groups of the Iranian regime. This strategic danger to Israel has not been well publicized in the

West. It is an existential danger as Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon has tens of thousands of rockets and access to chemical weapons supplied by the Syrian regime. Bashir al-Assad did not send all of his chemical weapons to the Russians as President Obama had agreed to. Therefore it is a very dangerous volatile situation for Israel. If you followed the Prime Minister's various public statements over the last ten days during his visit to the United States – his talk on *FoxNews* to Mark Levin, his public address at AIPAC in Washington, he kept focusing on what he calls "Iran, Iran, Iran." The Prime Minister has repeated this message for some time—that Israel will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear or develop nuclear weapons. That is the major concern of the Prime Minister. What is happening now across the Northern border Iran is moving naval as well as air force assets into Syria. It is building weapon factories in Syria and Lebanon across from Israel's Northern border. This is clearly an unacceptable security challenge to Israel. Bear in mind that Israel has probably the best cyber capabilities in the world. I think the Prime Minister has messaged that to the Iranians in no uncertain terms. Former CIA Director Pompeo, now Secretary of State designee, has been an important messenger—as has President Trump—who believes that Iran should not have a nuclear weapon—that Iran must change its behavior, aggressive capabilities and objectives to conquer the Middle East and ultimately the world. Israel has many different ways of defending itself and it is using those different forms of defense not only to defend the Jewish state but defend the West together with the United States.

Gordon: Related to that the situation in Syria is chaos with the Turkish invasion to annihilate the Kurds in the enclave of Afrin and threats to the U.S. Forces at the strong point of Manbij on the Euphrates. Then there was the Russian mercenary and Assad attack on the U.S. and Kurdish Syrian Democratic

Forces at Deir Ez Zor in Eastern Syria. What are Israeli views on these complex and troubling developments?

Diker: It seems that today, Syria is in a very complex geopolitical or geostrategic situation. There are so many apparent contradictions. You have the Russian presence in Tartus with its air force and support for the Syrian regime, bombing radical Salafist operatives throughout Syria. There are potential complications of Russian activity especially when it comes to Israel's reported aerial bombing attacks destroying weapons that are being deployed by Iran to proxy Hezbollah. As a result, Syria has become extremely dangerous because of unintended consequences that arise from mistakes. That is what concerns the Israeli political and security echelons regarding Syria. There are many moving parts and dynamic shifts from moment to moment. Even when there is no intention of starting a conflict or (being) provoked by a terrorist or counter-terrorist action, with all of these players Syria, Turkey, Iran, Russia, Israel and the United States, anything can happen. This is exactly what the Iranian regime likes. This type of total chaos diverts international attention away from Iranian ballistic developments inside Iran as well as R&D on uranium and plutonium.

Bates: Dan, the downing of the Israeli F-16 jet a few weeks ago notwithstanding, the IDF has been able to fly over Syria pretty much at will. Does that mean that the Russian supplied air defenses are not as good as we believe them to be or that the Russians are tolerating it?

Diker: Clearly, Israel and Russia are cooperating and have a good relationship. It is not the lack of capability and cooperation. Israel needs to defend itself. As you know Prime

Minister Netanyahu has taken a number of trips to Moscow and has met with Russian President Putin about very close cooperation and understanding on actions against radical Islamic groups in Syria. There are no confusing signals and mistakes that can lead to serious consequences between Russia and Israel when there really is a strong working relationship between the two countries.

Gordon: Dan, what was behind the Trump Administration's decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and will it be opened in time for the seventieth anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel in May of this year?

Diker: This is one of the most substantial and even dramatic diplomatic developments in decades. President Trump made a campaign promise to the American people that he would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. That is basically the fulfillment of a Congressional declaration in the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act that the United States would support the move of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. However, succeeding Presidents over the last twenty years have tabled that decision for what they call national security reasons which was the Presidential prerogative. They were responding to a "dire warning" by the Arab world that this would cause unprecedented bloodshed, violence and chaos throughout the Middle East. What ended up happening when President Trump made both announcements, one recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the second announcing an imminent move of America's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, nothing happened. You saw the muted reaction by the Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia which was telling. I think that the United States has done an excellent job strategically in reading the Middle East map and making a principled decision to move the American Embassy to Jerusalem which has been

Israel's capital since 1948. An injustice has been corrected and I think that President Trump personally deserves a tremendous amount of credit for having the courage to do what past Presidents perhaps declared, but were not able or willing to carry out the pledge.

Bates: Yes, I too am surprised that there was not a violent reaction. The fact that there was fear of one in years past in my view didn't justify delaying it. So I'm very pleased with the President's decision. Do you expect President Trump to attend that embassy opening?

Diker: One never knows what the President of the world's greatest power will do from moment to moment with all of the moving parts in the international scene especially with developments taking place with North Korea and with Iran. However, I think that the President wants to do that because by going to Jerusalem would be a major legacy builder for him. I think that he would come to the Middle East, especially at the behest of his vice president, Vice President Pence, who has been a major shaper of this policy as well as his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and his good friend, the Ambassador to Israel from the United States, David Friedman. I believe, barring any unexpected development, this might happen. The important point is the world has been mislead and deceived into thinking that the Israeli Palestinian conflict led by Israel's so-called occupation of Palestinian land and Israel's conquering of Jerusalem is the reason that the entire Middle East is violent and full of radicalism. This is a complete deception. That Islamic radicalism and Arab refusal in the past to accept Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people was the reason for violence in the Middle East. The reality is that Islamic radicalism is behind violence in the Middle East. There is far more violence between Arabs and Muslims in the

Middle East than there is between anyone and Israel.

Bates: Is the Trump Administration considering new ideas to further the peace process that haven't been tried before?

Diker: I think the Trump administration is one of the first US Administrations to understand this type of non-military political warfare the Palestinians have engaged in. One of the things Palestinians have been doing is paying the terrorists. Palestinian Authority law mandates thousands of dollars a month for Palestinian terrorists convicted with blood on their hands in Israeli prisons or those US and Israeli victims that were killed. The money goes to their families. The Trump Administration has said this is a non-starter. The Congress has also said that and is about to pass the Taylor Force Act against this type of behavior that would cut American funding to the Palestinian Authority if they continue to fund terrorism. Now regarding diplomacy, it helps to reset the table towards a more balanced diplomacy and one that could possibly end up in a long term arrangement. The U.S. administration has been crafting an actual peace plan that is mindful of the constant failures of past peace plans. Those past peace plans have been unrealistic. They have assumed that the Palestinians would make compromises with Israeli governments though they will never have. I'm talking about past attempts at peace processes brokered by the United States, the European Union, as well as the diplomatic Quartet. Those attempts assumed that Israel would be able to make far reaching territorial compromises pushing Israel back to the indefensible pre-1967 June War. That would leave Israel with no strategic depth and its narrowest of about nine miles. That is something that neither the Israeli government nor the Israeli people would accept. The Trump Administration has said let's see what we can accomplish on both sides. Let's try to

create a socio-political and economic environment of greater normalization, of greater integration between the two people. Let's talk about a bottom up approach as much as a top down approach. I think that approach will mark the Trump Administration's diplomatic effort. There is another concept, secure and defensible borders for Israel. The Trump administration understands that nine miles at Israel's narrowest point, based on the pre- 1967 line, the 1949 Armistice Line, is indefensible. I think we will see the Trump administration support the traditional defensible borders and security requirements that have been a requirement for decades by both Labor and Likud Israeli governments.

Bates: Former President Jimmy Carter is constantly accusing Israel of being an apartheid state despite the facts simply don't support that at all. Muslims not only can be full citizens of Israel, they vote, they serve in the military although service is not mandatory, they serve in the Knesset, they serve on the Supreme Court. What is apartheid about that? It is perhaps the biggest lie presently told about the State of Israel.

Diker: Yes, you are absolutely right. It is probably the greatest political deception of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that Israel is an apartheid state.

Gordon: Prime Minister Netanyahu has masterfully conducted diplomatic outreaches to China, India and Africa. How has that benefitted Israel?

Diker: Israel has a sort of a triangular foreign policy. There

is a very strong integrated economic, diplomatic, and security policy. The Prime Minister ties that in you his remarks to a strong economy based on significant technological innovation that the world is using. Not only Europe, but China, India and Africa are all using Israeli innovations in agriculture, water desalinization and health care. That creates underlying conditions for improved diplomatic relations. China, for example, currently invests more than six billion dollars a year in Israeli technology. It is Israel's second largest trading partner besides the United States. African countries are also using Israeli technologies as never before. In Israel there is a great sense of optimism at the highly skilled diplomacy the Prime Minister Netanyahu has forged using Israeli technology that has become of great interest to much of the developed as well as the less developed world. That has created much better conditions for relations with India, China and African countries. What we in Israel are hoping to see is leveraging economic trade and technological sharing, security and defense commerce to obtain international political support from these heretofore unfriendly countries towards Israel. Politically they have tended to vote with the Palestinians. What I think can be expected is a possible shift in the diplomatic positions of these countries to possibly become aligned with Israel economically via use of its technology. That is capped by the sharing of defense and security technology used to combat radical Islamic threats affecting the entire African continent, as well as, China, India and Latin America.

Bates: We have had a very good conversation today. Jerry Gordon is Senior Editor of the New English Review and its blog, "the Iconoclast". He is online at www.newenglishreview.org and Dan Diker is Director of the Program to Counter Political Warfare and BDS at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and you can find Dan Diker online at

www.jcpa.org and at @DanDiker84. And I look forward to another Middle East round table discussion on another edition of Your Turn here on 1330 WEBY.

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