

The Geo-Politics of the Temple Mount Crisis: an interview with Seth Frantzman

By Mike Bates and Jerry Gordon (September 2017)



Muslims worshipping before metal detectors at Temple Mount July 16, 2017, Source: *Ha'aretz*

On Friday morning July 14, 2017, three Israeli Arabs from the town of Umm al-Fahm in the Haifa district entered the Temple Mount and secured homemade *Carlos* submachine guns and knives brought by a fourth accomplice to the Al Aqsa Mosque. They were identified as 29-year-old Muhammad Ahmad Mahmoud Jabarin, 19-year-old Muhammad Ahmed Fadel Jabarin, and Muhammad Hamed 'Abd al-Latif Jabarin. Near the Lions' gate, they [shot and killed](#) two Israeli police officers from the loyal Druze sect, 30-year-old Hail Stawi, from Maghar, and 22-year-old Kamil Shanan, from Hurfeish, both in northern Israel. Officer Shanan was the son of former Israeli Druze Knesset member Shakib Shanan. The perpetrators, who injured two other Israeli police officers, were promptly killed by return fire from other Israeli border police.

[Watch](#) the video of the Temple Mount attack on July 14th.

Israeli police did the only rational thing. They closed the Temple Mount and [placed](#) metal detectors and surveillance cameras at each gate entrance to the Noble Shrine of the two Mosques atop the platform of what is the revered Jewish holy site of the Second Temple. Then they reopened it. That security measure triggered protests from Muslim worshippers, who refused to pass through. It triggered protests from across the Ummah-the global community of Muslim believers. The administrators and Imams of the Waqf, or trust, [appointed](#) by the King of Jordan, Abdullah II, and the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem appointed by the Palestinian Authority falsely claimed that "al Aqsa is in danger," that is, from Israel.

That was the incitement that came from [Salafist Sheikh Ra'ed Salah](#) of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement based in Umm al-Fahm, who has been perennially arrested and jailed by Israeli authorities. As further evidence of the extremism of this Israeli Arab community, two brothers, Naim and Mahmoud Abdel Karim Qassem Jabarin were [arrested](#) in July, 2017, and later indicted in mid-August in the Haifa District Court. They were accused of making those Carlos submachine guns, copied from the Swedish Carl Gustave weapon. They planned to cross into Syria to join the Islamic State. Sheik Salah was once again arrested for incitement and is awaiting a trial and sentencing.

Palestinian terrorism provoked by the Temple Mount Crisis [took](#) the lives of [three members](#) of the Israeli Jewish Salomon family, Yosef Salomon, 70, his daughter Chaya Salomon, 46, and son Elad Salomon, 36 in the community of Halamish on July 21, 2017. 19-year-old Hamas supporter Omar al-Abed from a village near Ramallah burst into a Shabbat dinner celebrating the birthday of a grandson stabbing the grandfather, son and daughter. Al-Abed was promptly shot and wounded by an IDF soldier on leave. When the IDF searched the Abed residence,

his mother said that she was “proud” of him. She was subsequently arrested for incitement.

The Halamish episode resonated in Washington. Just before Congress recessed on August 4, 2017, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee [passed](#) a version of the eponymous [Taylor Force Act](#) named for a West Point Graduate and US Army officer who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The US full Senate is likely to pass it upon return in September. The PLO denounced it as an “[unacceptable act](#).” Force was stabbed and killed by a Palestinian terrorist at a restaurant in Tel Aviv in March 2016. The Act is directed at impounding US funds supporting various projects of the Palestinian Authority given the PLO/Fatah funding of a so-called “pay for slay” program. This program pays stipends to jailed terrorists such as al-Abed and their families. He would receive the equivalent of \$3,100.00 a month for his murderous act. Estimates suggest that more than half of the foreign aid funds in the PA budget for 2018 of \$693 million are allotted for these payments.

The hypocrisy of Muslim objections to Israeli Police taking security precautions is [reflected](#) in the significant bio-metric and electronic measures used by Saudi Authorities for the annual Haj of the faithful at the Grand Mosques in Mecca and in Medina to deal with possible terrorist threats. The terrorist takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 prompted those security measures. Because of global terrorist threats the Vatican and India have taken security measures to protect religious shrines as has the Muslim Ismaili sect in Pakistan.

The persistent calls for removal of the offending Israeli security measures persisted, even being characterized by autocrat Turkish President Erdogan as an offensive “challenge to the Islamic character” of the Noble Shrine. The government of Iran promptly paid for thousands of packaged meals provided to Muslim protesters at the Temple Mount. They came with a flyer [quoting](#) Ayatollah Khamenei: “With the help of God, Palestine will be freed. Jerusalem is ours.”

King Abdullah II of Jordan was immediately incensed and [arranged](#) for a rare meeting with PA President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah. Jordan relinquished claims to the West Bank in 1988. The motivation for Abdullah is to forestall more restiveness in Jordan amid increasing opposition to his alliances with Israel and even the US.

Following the uproar, perhaps prompted by calls for restraint from the Trump Administration in Washington, the Netanyahu government relented and [removed](#) both the metal detectors and surveillance cameras. It has been suggested that Israeli security feared another Intifada. During a *Channel 2* interview in late July, [suggestions](#) were made by Likud MK Avi Dichter, former Shin Bet director and head of the *Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee*, to make the Muslim Noble Sanctuary atop the Temple Mount into a “sterile area” through technical means to prevent the two mosques of the so called Noble Sanctuary from ever again being turned into a weapons storage area.

Seth Frantzman, in a *Jerusalem Post* op-ed on the Temple Mount Crisis, [cited](#) the astute comments of Palestinian expert, Jonathan Schanzer of the Washington, DC-based *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*. Schanzer noted the Netanyahu stance towards the Palestinian Authority amidst the developing tacit relationship with Arab monarchies and emirates over the common threat of hegemonic Iran. Schanzer said:

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’ decision to cut off ties with Israel “gives him leverage with regard to the so-called regional architecture, where he was being left out.”

This would give him an opportunity to weigh in with the Arab states.

Netanyahu is not willing to cede that leverage and this might explain his unwillingness to bend to the demands of the Palestinians right now.

The UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are still focused on pressuring Qatar to end what many commentators in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi say is an Iran-Qatar axis of extremism spreading instability throughout the Middle East.

Frantzman Responded:

In short, what is happening so far in Jerusalem is not an existential crisis for those countries with which Israel shares a worldview in the Middle East.

But Netanyahu should know that the main concern of these countries is instability.

The instability to which Frantzman referred was the outcry from King Abdullah of Jordan over the shooting deaths of two Jordanian teenagers who had attacked an Israeli security guard, Ziva Moyal, at the legation in Amman on July 23, 2017. That prompted Netanyahu to invoke the Treaty of Vienna and an evacuation of the entire legation staff headed by Ambassador Einat Schlein and the security officer back to Israel. King Abdullah called out Israeli PM Netanyahu for hugging Moyal, [calling](#) it “unacceptable and provocative behavior.” Enmity among Jordanians toward Israel had antedated this episode. In any event, the Israeli security guard was interviewed by Israeli police to determine the facts in the attack.

In the midst of the Temple Crisis, the Trump White House announced it was dispatching the President’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, Special Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt, and National Security Council official Dina Habib Powell to Jerusalem and Ramallah for consultations. PA President Mahmoud Abbas described these dispatches of officials a “pointless” exercise. Moreover, Kushner’s remarks caught on audio and published in *WIRED* magazine at a meeting with Congressional interns discussing his role in calming the Temple Mount

crisis [suggested](#) that “there may be no solution” to the Palestinian Israeli impasse on the moribund peace process.

In August, another contretemps arose over allegations that Gen H.R. McMaster, National Security Adviser, had fired staffers who were pro-Israel or were so-called “hawks” on overturning the Obama administration’s Iran nuclear deal. A dossier on McMaster’s views on the Israel and Iran contretemps was prepared and promoted by the Zionist Organization of America [seeking](#) the firing of the National Security Adviser by President Trump. There is still a dispute as to whether major Trump-backer and friend of Israeli PM Netanyahu, gambling mogul Sheldon Adelson, had backtracked from his initial condemnation of McMaster.

PM Netanyahu was at the center of a number of [police investigations](#) questioning alleged corruption that have yet to surface in possible charges. The major turn in those on-going investigations came when a Likud ally American born Ari Harrow apparently became a cooperative witness in the on-going investigations.

Against this background, we reached out to interview Seth Frantzman, opinion editor of *The Jerusalem Post* and writer of the weekly Terra Cognita column.



Mike Bates, Seth Frantzman and Jerry Gordon

Mike Bates: Good afternoon and welcome to Your Turn. This is Mike Bates. This hour we are doing one of our periodic Middle East round table discussions and I have with me in the studio Jerry Gordon, Senior Editor of the *New English Review* and its blog, *The Iconoclast*.

Welcome Jerry.

Jerry Gordon: Glad to be back Mike.

Bates: And joining us by telephone for the first time Seth Frantzman, Opinion Editor for the *Jerusalem Post* and writer of the weekly column, *Terra Incognita*. Seth Frantzman, welcome to Your Turn.

Seth Frantzman: Great, thanks a lot for having me.

Bates: Seth because this is your first visit with us I was reading your bio so my opening question is somewhat of a personal one, not a political one. How did you go from being an infant in the State of Maine to being the Opinion Editor at the *Jerusalem Post* in Israel?

Frantzman: That is a long, complicated story. Basically, I grew up in a sporting lodge in Maine. We didn't even have electricity when I was a kid because my parents were into getting back to nature and all that. They wanted to provide people with a really rustic feel and so I was home-schooled through the age of seven. At some point, I ended up going to regular public school in Maine and went away to boarding school in Arizona. After completing University in Arizona I was working in the mortgage business. If people remember back then, 2001 to 2003, that was before the big crash with the entire sub-prime mortgage business at the time. I felt that was kind of a soulless business and I always wanted to go back to school and get an MA or a PhD in History. I had an interest in the Middle East and I had been reading a lot about Israel and the region. I thought here was an opportunity to go to the Middle East; but one of the problems back then was, of course, that there was the Second Intifada.

Very few people were interested in coming here at the time which is probably a kind of good thing for me, so I happened to come to Jerusalem to study for a master's degree at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. They still have an English language program there at the

Rothberg International School. So, I came to Israel, and I basically have stayed ever since in Jerusalem and Israel and I spent a lot of time reporting from the region. I have done a lot of reporting from Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. In many ways, Jerusalem and this conflict are sort of a center, I think, of so much that goes on in the world. I mean, it may not want to be a center, but it happens to be because of the nature of where it is and the world's religions.

Bates: I do consider Israel, and specifically Jerusalem, to be the center of the universe for many reasons, so let's talk about what is happening in Jerusalem. I would like to begin with the Temple Mount crisis of July 14, 2017 that ultimately resulted in the metal detectors being installed and then later removed. Let's talk first about what instigated that. Tell me about the policemen who were shot.

Frantzman: What happened that day which was if you remember back on July 14th which was a Friday, there were three young men who came to Jerusalem. They came from an Arab town, almost a city, inside Israel's Green Line called Um al Fahm. They came to Jerusalem and with a fourth man whose identity has not been revealed but has been detained. The fourth man brought weapons onto the Temple Mount which is of course the holy site where you have the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque. Obviously, it is the place where the second Jewish Temple existed.

These three Israeli-Arab perpetrators obtained their homemade weapons there and then they shot and killed two policemen. There are nine gates that lead to the Temple Mount. The Temple Mount is really big. It's like the size of a few football fields. Each gate has several border policemen there whose job it is to stand there and watch people going in and out. The perpetrators then killed two of these policemen, then the three terrorists fled back onto the Temple Mount and they were shot and killed. The two policemen happened to be from the Druze minority in Israel which is a small sect unique to Israel and the other states surrounding it like Syria and Lebanon.

Bates: I want to put the whole thing in context in terms of the metal detectors as a result of those attacks. Previously, Muslim worshippers could ascend the Temple Mount without any encumbrance of magnetometers or any kind of check like that. Israel then imposed, in my view, very reasonable requirements that they go through a security screening. People need to understand that there are eleven gates to access the Temple Mount. Muslims may use eleven of them at any time of the day or night minus certain times when security reasons might temporarily shut down the gates. Non-Muslims may only use one gate and that is the Mughrabi Gate near the Western Wall. The Mughrabi Gate has metal detectors and it has airport style security screening to x-ray any backpacks or purses or whatever may be brought in. So, security to access the Temple Mount isn't new, it's just new for Muslims so what's the problem?

Frantzman: As you pointed out not just the Temple Mount but most holy sites in the world these days have security of some sort, often involving nowadays metal detectors and plain clothes police. For instance, if you go on Hajj or wherever to Saudi Arabia you will go through a security regime when you get to the two shrines in Mecca and Medina. This is usually directed against Islamic extremists or also their fear of Iranian agents. If you go to the Vatican you will find much higher levels of security than ten years ago because of Islamic extremists. If you go to holy sites in India you will find more security than in the past. So, the fact that there is security is nothing new. I think with the Temple Mount you have a very sensitive area and it's not like there wasn't security there before because the very fact that there were two policemen there who were killed is evidence of that fact. There is a higher level of security for non-Muslims who are allowed to enter the Temple Mount basically only once or twice a day and not on Fridays.

Bates: Right.

Frantzman: The main difference here, from the prospective of the Waqf for the Islamic authorities that run the Temple Mount area, is they are not the ones that wanted the security. They feel it is an encumbrance or a change in the status quo. I think we have to understand that it's not about the metal detectors; it's about this much larger issue of who owns the Temple Mount, who runs it. This feeling is expressed in many mosques, not only here but even in the U.S., that somehow the "Jews" are defiling the Temple Mount. That is something that you can actually hear in sermons in Mosques in Montreal, in California, and many other places. The issue is much more pervasive than just the idea of one metal detector.

Bates: Now, I have an opinion/question—but you are, after all, the Opinion Editor of *The Jerusalem Post*, so I trust you have no problem giving your opinions. In your opinion, did the Netanyahu government cave when they removed the metal detectors or are the security cameras truly going to be adequate protection?

Frantzman: In a sense they did cave, in the sense that they wanted to put them there and then decided to take them away. I'm not even sure if even the cameras were then removed. It was a very rational response from the police's point of view. Two policemen get killed, what do you do the next day? You put up a new type of metal detector. That's the way the way U.S. Airports respond, right? When they hear about a threat involving a shoe bomber the next day everyone has to remove their shoes even though actually there is no more threat from shoe bombers. When we heard about the liquid explosive threat then all of the sudden we had to dispose of liquids like bottled water. From a law enforcement perspective, it makes sense. The Israeli law enforcement authorities said okay, our policemen were killed; we should have metal detectors now. Because of the political/religious aspect, I think it was a bad decision-making process to put these things there and then take them away. As you said it makes it look like he caved and it made Israel appear it had backtracked.

Gordon: Seth, what was the Israeli response and those from the U.S., particularly the Muslim reactions? What we saw looked very peculiar. We saw the King of Jordan coming to Ramallah to make common cause, which he hasn't done in years, with Mahmoud Abbas over this incident. What role did the Waqf play in this episode and what is the Palestinian Authority's role in terms of management of the Temple Mount?

Frantzman: The King of Jordan's involvement is interesting because the Kingdom of Jordan had relinquished its claims to the West Bank but it has never relinquished its role as a protector of the holy place. It views itself as closely connected to the Waqf and closely connected to protecting or defending the Temple Mount. The Jordanian relationship with the Temple Mount is both very special and very unique. The Jordanians as you said have another relationship with what goes on in Ramallah and Mahmoud Abbas. If we look back to the beginning of the Trump administration, Trump originally wanted to move the Embassy. One of the first that Trump met with after he was inaugurated was the King of Jordan. I think the King of Jordan has conducted more business to Washington than any other foreign leader in the last six months. The King of Jordan thinks that if there is a change in the status quo in Jerusalem, it could turn into an Intifada. That could also lead to some form of repercussions inside the Kingdom. Which could lead to his possible removal. His trip to the West Bank of course was to pay lip service to showing that he is standing by the Palestinians and, of course, the faithful.

Gordon: Seth, there appears to be a power struggle going on between PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas in Gaza. There also is a figure who was thrown out of Gaza in 2006, who has suddenly reappeared on the scene as a power broker. He has been living in exile in the UAE. What is, in fact, going on in those political dynamics and what can we expect?

Frantzman: Obviously, the power broker you referred to is Mahmoud

Dahlan, right?

Gordon: Yes, that is correct.

Frantzman: Dahlan was supposed to be the strong man who had an iron grip on Gaza and he was also a friend of the West. He was a young up-and-comer in Fatah. Mahmoud Abbas and other Fatah/PLO leaders were born in the 1930s or 1940s. Dahlan is obviously much younger. However, in 2006 his forces basically disappeared from Gaza when Hamas started killing them. They didn't put up much of a fight and he just happened to be away from Gaza at the time. The reality is that there is a stagnating decay in the Palestinian Authority. Because Fatah/PLO terrorist leader Marwan Barghouti is in prison, it is really hard to judge how much legitimacy Dahlan really has among the Palestinian people. Is there any way that he could actually find his way back to power? I kind of suspect that is not going to happen. It is just media hype.

Bates: I have a question, Seth, about a different power grab regarding electricity to Gaza. What limited reporting has been done on that in the United States portrays Israel as the big, bad oppressor who doesn't want the residents of Gaza to be able to turn on their lights or have any electricity. The reality is that the Palestinian Authority isn't paying the full electric bill on behalf of Gaza. What is the full story?

Frantzman: First of all, you have an electric plant in Gaza. It is part of Gaza's overall dependence on Israel, the Palestinian Authority and also Egypt. Because it is such a small territory and it has limited financial resources, the Palestinian Authority can cut off money for this power plant and it doesn't get transferred through Israel. At the end of the day, the blowback is always on Israel. Because if something happens in Gaza and people are starving, who has to transport the food into Gaza? Israel—not the Palestinian Authority.

It is a double game where the Palestinian Authority wants to punish Hamas but of course Israel also looks like the bad guy. That is just a strange fact of life that Gaza is very much dependent on Israel for virtually everything.

Bates: That is why I wanted to ask the question, Seth, because Israel is portrayed as the bad guy but the facts don't support that portrayal.

Frantzman: Don't let facts get in the way! This is the nature of the media narratives because the Palestinians and everyone else would like to put the blame on Israel. They themselves don't want to take the blame for anything so Israel is the scapegoat, because Israel is the more powerful player. It controls the ports which makes it easy for opponents to make their case despite the fact.

Bates: So, do you see Hamas weakening over this or not?

Frantzman: Weakening is an interesting concept. Hamas is like the North Korean regime, right? It's an isolated regime and an isolated place with large numbers of poor people who are kept in a cage mostly by Hamas. However, it's always a Catch-22. If you fight Hamas then they get stronger. If you don't fight them then they will just kind of stay there. It is never clear how to tackle a regime like Hamas or North Korea or even regimes like Iran. Because no matter what you do empowers the regime. If you open the borders, the regime gets rich. If you close the borders and lay them under siege then they all cry and play the victim. It is a very strange vicious circle. I don't think anyone has figured out how to solve this conundrum.

Gordon: Seth, just before Congress recessed, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed the Taylor Force Act. It was named in memory of an American graduate of West Point who served as an officer

in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He was killed in a Tel Aviv restaurant, March 8, 2016. The Act may sequester upwards of four hundred million in U.S. aid to the PA because of its so-called "pay for slay" policies in which they were making payments to jailed Palestinian terrorists and their surviving families. That is going to significantly impact on foreign aid for PA. It was roundly objected to by the PA. What is going on there?

Frantzman: For the Palestinians, it makes sense to have a regime that pays, as you said, if someone is a terrorist or pays his family. It is an incentive to kill people. The US is "why don't we try to take away some of the money that's going to the terrorist or the terrorist families?" From other perspectives, if you take away these funds, these people become poorer and may decide to become terrorists anyway. If the US denies funds, perhaps they make up for the money by going to the Iranians or they go to some other bad actor. This could destabilize the Palestinian Authority because, at the end of the day, the Authority has obligations to pay those families. I assume that they would find that money from some other part of the budget so the idea that you could get the Palestinian Authority to stop paying for these prisoners and terrorists I think is just something that is not in their playbook. They are going to keep doing this somehow.

Bates: Seth, when you say they have an obligation to pay those families, what do you mean? Is this a legal contractual obligation to pay the families of these so-called martyrs?

Frantzman: I think that from their context it is. It is not one I agree with. That is how the Palestinian Authority has set things up. If you are a convicted terrorist or a martyr from their point of view you have done something wonderful for the Palestinian cause. Therefore, the Authority will pay his family or pay him. To try and wean them from that would be great but it's like a lot of things in the region. If you asked the Palestinians, they would agree that the guy that blows up a bus or someone who hacks kids is not only a martyr

but is some sort of hero. You can see that in the way in which public squares, parks or streets are named in the Palestinian Authority. It is very overt.

Bates: They certainly have made that promise. Whether it's a legally enforceable promise or not remains to be seen. One of the objections that people who oppose that Act are saying is that the U.S. doesn't fund those payments; the U.S. funds infrastructure. We are building parks and hospitals and day care centers. That is where American money goes. The reality is money is fungible and so if we weren't funding that then they would have to use other money to fund it. That is definitely a vantage point and a perspective that needs to be considered by those who are looking into passing the Act.

Gordon: Seth, why have Iran and its proxy Hezbollah emerged as the principle threat to the region, especially on Israel's northern frontier? I reference a report that came out recently indicating that there are satellite photos of another underground missile factory being built in Syria by Iran. We have threats coming out of Iranian President Rouhani to end the nuclear deal because of new U.S. sanctions and accelerate development. They have also announced a large missile program in defiance of U.N. sanctions. They have announced sending a fleet to the Western Atlantic probably to visit Mr. President Maduro in war-torn Venezuela. So, what is going on?

Frantzman: I think Iran is making its play for regional hegemony. It feels—especially after the Iran deal—that there is basically nothing that's holding it back. From an Iranian point of view, they are doing pretty well. They have built up Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hezbollah basically runs the government of Lebanon. In Syria, they are winning the war. Their proxies and their friend Bashar al-Assad are obviously linked in alliance with the Russians. In Iraq, they control the interior ministry and a very powerful Al Hashd al Sha'bi Shia militia force of about one hundred thousand fighters that is basically part of the Iraqi government now. They control parts of Yemen. Iran basically

thinks that it is on the march so it can do whatever it wants and no one is ever really going to push back against it. Iran, for instance, is harassing shipping in the Persian Gulf. Every time you see a report you hear that the US Navy fired warning shots among them and then we ran away because no one really wants to basically confront them which is odd because Iran is not that powerful a regime. It could be confronted. It is just that most people don't want to.

Gordon: Seth, you have written a rather stunning series about what you have discovered on the ground both in the Golan and on the Lebanese border. What did you find there that seemed to be menacing towards Israel?

Frantzman: We saw the Hezbollah flags flying at the Lebanese border basically sitting there overlooking Israel. The fear in the Golan is the Iranian regime is slowly creeping closer to the border although it is sort of a static front line. At some point with this current deconfliction peace deal in Southern Syria involving Russia, the US and Jordan, I think the idea is that the Iranian supportive regime of Syria will reach the Israeli border. Until now, the Syrian regime and Israel, you know, had a kind of cold peace for many years. They didn't have to fight each other and Assad was not a good neighbor but he was a quiet neighbor. The problem is now Assad is very weak and the Iranians are very strong in Syria. So, what comes back to the border will be very different than what was there in 2010.

Bates: What is the situation with Iranian involvement and bases in Syria? What kind of threat does that pose to Israel? What is Israel going to do about it, if anything?

Frantzman: With the latest news, Iran is alleged to (be) building a missile factory in Northern Syria, very close to the coastline near Baniyas. It is not far from the Russian Naval Base at Tartus in

Latakia province. That is a base for production of missiles and long-range rockets. If you examine the satellite imagery, they reveal buildings there are very similar to buildings at facilities in Iran used for the same types of production. It is a large site, several kilometers long, located in a valley. You can see it on Google Earth. It is not that secretive. The Iranians don't even feel that they need to be secretive. As we know, Israel has always worked to interdict weapon flows to Hezbollah from Iran. That usually takes the form of alleged Israeli strikes on convoys of weapons near Damascus. What that means is weapons are flown from Teheran to Damascus and then they are trucked over the hills to Lebanon. Many of those convoys have met with an accident along the way. Most of those strikes are not admitted by Israel. I think the only one that was admitted was the one near Palmyra where the Israeli planes were then attacked by Syrian air defense systems on the way back to Israel. Iranian bases in Lebanon are probably a Red Line. The question is, "Okay, you have a very large Iranian base being constructed in Northern Syria. Is that a Red Line?" I think the answer to that question is yes. That base is only a few miles from a very large air base for Russian operations. Just as there are Russian vessels at the Tartus Naval Base. That means Israel would have to fly through Russian supplied Syrian air systems. I don't think Israel wants to do that at this point.

Gordon: Seth we had an interesting development in Jerusalem. We had Prime Minister Netanyahu stand up before a visiting Congressional delegation and say that "Israel supports an independent Kurdistan," which probably ruffled the feathers of the folks in Teheran. How complicated are the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish aspirations for autonomy given the rejection by the Assad regime, Baghdad and Iran, for openers, and where does the U.S. versus Israel stand on an independent Kurdistan?

Frantzman: The Israeli government basically supports an independent Kurdish region in Iraq, currently called the Kurdistan Regional government. It has announced a referendum on independence originally

scheduled for September 25th. The Kurdistan region in Iraq is a highly developed region. People will be surprised that it's in Iraq because if you fly into the airport at Erbil which is a Turkish built airport it's very modern. If you go into Erbil it appears not quite a western city but it a nice functioning city with highways and lots of new buildings and a lot of potential. So that is why Israel would be on board with backing Kurdish independence. Many Western countries have thrown cold water on that and said we don't support the Kurdish referendum, we don't support independence. This is hypocritical considering the fact that America and many other countries in the world declared independence. It is kind of strange the Americans would say, well, of course in 1776 we had a right to declare independence but, well, no, the Kurds have to be part of Iraq. The Iraqi regime committed genocide against Kurds and today is partly controlled by Iran. Why do we want the Kurds who are probably one of our closest friends in the region to be forced into that? The Syrian-Kurdish region is a whole different ball game. It is a region that is much less developed and it has only gained semi-autonomy in the last few years fighting against ISIS, and has a very close relationship with U.S. forces there.

Gordon: Seth, a bit of history on the Kurdish side. A lot of people don't remember what happened in March 1988, when the infamous Saddam Hussein unleashed a poison gas attack on hundreds of villages, and thousands of Iraqi Kurds were killed. We don't recall that very often but that essentially was part of the genocidal operation that Saddam Hussein was conducting against the Kurds. What happened in the period of the 1960s through 1975? Wasn't Israel providing covert support for the Kurds at that time and why did it end?

Frantzman: As you said, in the 1960s and 1970s, Israel at that time was really looking for allies—any allies it could get because, in those days, it had an iron wall of enemies surrounding it committed to its destruction. The policy of Israel at that time was, okay, you have a whole bunch of Arab countries that hate us but all the countries

outside of that ring of Arab countries basically are non-Arab. Many of them are people we can do business with. Then, Israel was very close to Turkey. Israel was also close to Iran in those days, under the Shah. Israel had close relations with the Kurds in Iraq and Israel reached even further had close relations with most of Sub-Sahara in Africa up until the '73 Yom Kippur War. I think the Kurds were one of those relationships. Israeli state leaders knew little about Kurds at the time. There were Kurdish Jews, but they did find this common cause. The Kurds and Jews have faced similar enemies. They faced, you know, the genocidal aspirations of people like Saddam Hussein. They both had to fight against Arabization and Arab extremism and in those days Arab nationalism. The Israelis feel that they have shared enemies over the years. Many of the Kurds look to Israel as a model of a country that successfully obtained independence against all odds. That is something they have wanted to do for the last sixty or a hundred years since the Western powers basically denied them that right.

Gordon: Seth, the Trump White House is dispatching a team consisting of the President's son-in-law Jared Kushner, Jason Greenblatt, and a new name, Dina Habib Powell, to check on the pulse of the Middle East peace process between the PA and Israel. What is going on there?

Frantzman: The Trump Administration has been bitten by the peace bug. The role of any American administration is that they always think that wouldn't it be great if they could (pull) off a peace deal. The Trump people paid lip service to that. Some of these people like Jared Kushner and US Ambassador Friedman know that there is no peace process. The reality is that there is peace without a peace process because, in fact, things are quite peaceful. The Israel/Palestinian conflict is the most peaceful part of the whole region. Chicago is far more dangerous apparently, in terms of murders, than anything you see with the conflict here. That doesn't mean of course that there couldn't be another Intifada. There could be eventually. Obviously, Hamas and Hezbollah know what issues are involved. I just don't see anything happening on this and I don't know why anyone would imagine

that anything will happen.

Bates: Well, speaking of the White House, Seth, what is the Israeli view of National Security Advisor General McMaster and his impact on maintaining the U.S. Strategic Alliance with Israel?

Frantzman: I am sure that the Israeli view is complex and has lots of different voices. However, I think there was a campaign that was launched briefly against McMaster connected to the Zionist Organization of America and some other pro-Israel voices. More recently, all that has been walked back because Ambassador Friedman, Sheldon Adelson and many other voices have basically put the brakes on this and said H.R. McMaster is a friend of Israel. He's not anti-Israel, he's not connected with all these radical leftists that people claim he is. There is a feeling that the attacks on McMaster actually would really be bad for Israel because it means that it will offend both him and other members of the Trump administration. That is not actually helpful in the long run. This U.S. Administration is friendly to Israel; basically, all U.S Administrations have been friendly to Israel in the last decade notwithstanding the fact that in every U.S. Administration there is usually one or two people that don't love Israel that much but their non-love for Israel doesn't translate into fewer weapons, deals, or less support. It just means they don't have a warm feeling for the country.

Bates: Seth, you just said that all recent administrations were friendly with Israel. Would you include the Obama administration in that? It seemed to me that it was pretty contentious.

Frantzman: I would say the same thing about the Obama Administration; that you could say that McMasters isn't loving of Israel. The Obama administration was critical of Israel. Obama personally didn't like Bibi Netanyahu but actually the Obama Administration signed off on forty billion dollars of weapons and military support. You know, John

Kerry waited until the last day of his term as Secretary of State to give a speech about the settlements. If you read his speech it's all about how, you know, he loved Israel so much that it's all about tough love. I mean the narrative of these people is never anti-Israel. It's always, we have Israel's best interest at heart and of course you could reply to that and say, yeah, well if the road to hell is paved with good intentions . . . That could be it, but the fact is they don't do anything against Israel. It's just that (the) Obama administration people, I think, didn't really like the Israeli leadership. They basically preferred what's called, like, liberal Zionism or that kind of leftist thing. That is the kind of Israel they like. It's not that they hated Israel, they disliked Netanyahu.

Bates: Well, the Obama administration we know interfered with Israeli elections trying to oust Benjamin Netanyahu and then, late in his Presidency, abstained in a UN Security Council resolution proposed by New Zealand and threw Israel "under the bus" through that abstention.

Frantzman: From their perspective, their refusal was good for Israel because they think that the settlements will lead to the bi-national state. That would destroy Israel and turn Israel into what happened in South Africa. From their perspective, they're "saving" Israel. Now, you could make all the arguments you want, but their perspective doesn't come from a place of hatred of Israel. It just comes from a place of hatred of what happened in the West Bank and a feeling that it is not helpful for Israel's policy. It's like if I am opposed to America's involvement in Afghanistan I'm not necessarily anti-American I just think that the policy there is stupid. My reading of these people is not that they dislike Israel. My reading is that they may be misguided and only like Israel in a certain way.

Gordon: What are the views of Israelis about the several police investigations into allegations of corruption and the impact on the continuity of the Likud government of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu?

Frantzman: Corruption scandals are kind of slowly working their way through the investigations as they tend to do in Israel. The current Defense Minister, Avigdor Liberman, was under investigation for like a decade. Netanyahu is at the center of two different investigations but neither of them actually tag him as personally corrupt. They mostly think the people around him are corrupt. There are allegations against his wife, and allegations against people involved in the submarine deal. However, if you read through the small print it doesn't usually reach the highest office. It could be that he gets brought down by this but I am skeptical. I think that he's a survivor. Netanyahu seems to have survived a lot of controversies. He wants to be the longest serving Prime Minister in Israel's history and that will happen next year so he wants to hang on. Netanyahu has sort of a Messianic kind or Churchillian complex. He thinks that he is basically saving Israel and he has to keep fighting so that he can save it because the other people around him can't do it. When you ask who do you think will replace him you know the problem is that many Israelis think that others are (up) to the task. That being said, of course at the end of the day, many countries in the world end up being lead by people that are not up to the task. I think that America had a president named Millard Fillmore so, and America still exists.

Bates: Seth, it was very easy for me to dismiss the allegations against Bibi Netanyahu in the beginning but then he recently had an aide that turned against him.

Frantzman: Yes.

Bates: At that point I thought, well, they wouldn't have granted the aide immunity if he didn't have something to say. Is there cause for concern there?

Frantzman: There is cause for concern. But, if he's proven to be corrupt then he's corrupt and he probably shouldn't hold his office. However, you know, it's a question of what eventually comes out in all of this. As I said, I think Ari Harrow is the person who has been turned but, you know, we just don't know what will actually come out and what the allegations fully are. I mean, is it kickbacks or who knows where it will lead? We have to wait. These disputes just go on and on.

Bates: Time will tell. But time is something we don't have anything left of for this program but Frantzman thanks so much for joining us.

[Listen](#) to the 1330amWEBY interview with Seth Frantzman.

Jerry Gordon is a Senior Vice President of the *New English Review*.

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