

What Do Journalists Do All Day? (continued)

Continued from this [blog posting](#) by Hugh Fitzgerald

Here is how this man, who does not control words (they control him) begins:

“The greatest mistake Israel could make at the moment is to forget that Israel itself is a mistake. It is an honest mistake, a well-intentioned mistake, a mistake for which no one is culpable, but the idea of creating a nation of European Jews in an area of Arab Muslims (and some Christians) has produced a century of warfare and terrorism of the sort we are seeing now. Israel fights Hezbollah in the north and Hamas in the south, but its most formidable enemy is history itself.”

Greatest mistake...itself is a mistake...honest mistake..well-intentioned mistake...mistake for which no one is culpable...

Is that Israel? Is Israel a “mistake”? That’s not what Georges Clemenceau, Jan Christian Smuts, Tomas Masaryk, and all the great men who assembled after the World War, whether as heads of state, or as lesser political figures, thought about the Mandate for Palestine, which was created by the victorious Powers, acting through the League of Nations’s Mandates Commission. It is not what Winston Churchill thought. It is not what Andrey Sakharov thought, or Vladimir Nabokov, or Jorge Luis Borges, or Igor Stravinsky. Go look up what they said, in poems, or in letters, or in remarks noted by others, about Israel. They thought it a wonder, a miracle, but no mistake.

The most history-haunted journalist of the past century, the late Indro Montanelli, who had lived through Mussolini’s rise, through the Ventennio, the Ethiopian War (in which he was a correspondent), through World War II, through the post-war period in Italy and through Italy, all of Europe, who was also a historian and not only a ses heures, once wrote, in words I may not have exactly but I have them very close: “The best thing – perhaps the only good thing—to come out of the twentieth century was the rebirth of Israel.” Montanelli, who wrote about the ancient Greeks, and Rome, and Garibaldi, who had not only a grasp of history of the kind that comes with having begun with the kind of linguistic and

historical education he would necessarily have received in the old days, in the liceo classico, and who continued to read history, and to ponder the meaning of men and events throughout his life, so that even in the last decade of his life, his responses to reader's inquiries about Italy's own history, in the anni di piombo, in the years of the Boom, in the years of post-war misery and at the same time post-war optimism and povera-ma-bella happiness, so different from today, provided, as a journalist, never "mere reporting" (as so many American reporters do, writing in the flat house style, in which not a hint of history, and not a flash of individual wit, is ever detected), and never mere vaporings (in the manner of Tom Friedman or the appalling example of Richard Cohen above) but he reported and then he made sense of things, so the reader understood.

Richard Cohen has forgotten or overlooked so many things that one hardly knows where to begin. The article by Metzav deals with some of them. There are so many more. Cohen essentially appears to believe that Jews left the Middle East, and that the Land of Israel (or the Holy Land) became for all time "Muslim Arab." He does not know, it appears, or chooses to forget, the four hundred years of Turkish rule, over an area that slowly but surely was emptied of its population, and a land once of milk and honey became a wasteland. He thinks, one assumes, that this is all just 20th century Zionist propaganda, that it just can't be true. He thinks that there was this bustling place, full of "Arabs" – and does not realize that in the tiny population (Jerusalem had a total of 15,000 people in 1850) there were not only Arabs, a word that is now used, but once was not, to describe all kinds of people who were not ethnic Arabs, but who were appropriated, as Arabs, through having an identity thrust upon them, for islamization often accompanied arabization. How many of those "Arabs" in Egypt were, just a few centuries or even a few generations ago, Copts? How many of those "Arabs" in Algeria were, just a while ago, Berbers who were, during the last two centuries, in moving out of the Berber regions, and using Arabic, convinced or made to believe that they were "Arabs"? Indeed, when the Mandate for Palestine was carefully crafted, the Mandate which was intended quite deliberately to rectify not only a historic wrong, but a present wrong, a wrong present at the very moment the Mandate was created, and which was intended to rectify that wrong not only for Jews in Europe, but for the Jews living under Muslim rule, with all that that implied.

What was the "mistake" that the entirely non-Jewish membership of the League of

Nations's Mandate Commission, or that Arthur Balfour in his Declaration, or Lord Salisbury, or Laurence Oliphant, or all of the other Christian Zionists (their story is told in Barbara Tuchman's "Bible and Sword"), made in deciding that it made sense to create an "Arab state" and "an Armenian state" and "a Kurdish state" and a "Jewish state"? Was the idea of an "Arab state" a mistake? Why not? Was it because the Arabs were more numerous and that they dominated so many places, so that they should be the first to be considered? What about the "Armenian state"? In the end the plans for that were changed, though an Armenian Soviet Republic would later appear, as a kind of insufficient consolation prize. Was the fact that there was an Armenian diaspora, and that there were only a few million Armenians left after the 1894-96 massacres, and then the 1915-1920 genocide, that this lessened the claim to an "Armenian state"? And that "Kurdish state" – the one which it now makes sense to bring at long last into being, moral and geopolitical sense, if you wish are an Infidel – what of that? Had that been created, would that have been a "mistake"?

Metzav (and others) have shown the general problem with Cohen's imperfect grasp of Middle Eastern history. But his imperfect grasp is not his alone. It is that of Tony Judt (he of the dramatic man-in-black costumes, and strangely twisted mouth), the man who enjoys pretending that Israel is entirely peopled by European Jews, that the supposed longing for the Land of Israel and the place of that land in Judaism is some kind of big joke, not to be taken seriously (on the other hand, for the Tony Judts of this world, we are all supposed to take very seriously the belief that once upon a time a certain Muhammad rose up into Heaven on his fabulous winged steed Buraq and returned from the Seventh Heaven within 24 hours, takeoff and return occurring on top of the Temple Mount – yes, this we are required to believe happened in order to establish a Muslim connection to Jerusalem beyond that of primitive belief, whereas the Jewish connection to the area, and Christian connection, are not matters of belief but of history. There really was a Jewish commonwealth and Jewish kings for several millennia; there really was a man named Jesus who was born, lived, and died in the same land, and after whose death there really was the founding of a new world religion, right there in the same tiny sliver of land). To Tony Judt, and to others, the transparent Arab argument that pretends to give the "suffering of the Jews" its due and at the same time, after the crocodile tears are shed, to turn it around so as to win sympathy for the Arabs – "Yes, the Jews may have suffered from terrible things by the Germans and others but why should we be made so suffer?"

In such a way, the entire history of Muslim conquest, and imposition of the Shari'a on the Jews in the area known to Western Christendom as "Palestine" (for Muslims, the area was never treated, conceptually, or in any other way, as a separate entity – and from the point of Islam, why would it be?).

One suspects that Richard Cohen does not know the demographic or cadastral (land-record) history of what is modern-day Israel. He should take the trouble to find out. He should also find out about why the Mandate for Palestine insists that, while it was created for the explicit and sole purpose of "facilitating Jewish immigration" and "close Jewish settlement on the land" in order to create the "Jewish National Home," nothing in it should mean that the "civil and religious" (but carefully left out was the word "political") rights of "other communities" should be abridged. Why did the Mandates Commission use the phrase "other communities"? Why didn't it simply use the word "Arabs"? It didn't, because the non-Jews in the area consisted of many more different kinds of people – Ethiopians and Armenians and Circassians and representatives of every conceivable Christian denomination, as well as Muslims from North Africa (veterans of Abd el-Kader) and Egypt (veterans of Mehmet Ali – Turkic rather than Arab), including at least one Berber community, and Islamized Slavs (transferred to this waiting emptiness by the Ottoman government once the Christians reasserted control in Bulgaria and the Balkans), and so many others. Yet for Richard Cohen, the real nature of the population of the area, or for that matter of many places under Ottoman rule – for god's sake, look at the population of Constantinople itself just before World War I, when it was 50% non-Muslim and non-Turk – escapes him. He is a child of his age, and he no doubt just learned in the last few years about the Kurds, and has yet to find out much about the Maronites (to him they are just one more group of Christians), or about the Berbers (who they? And why should we care?), just as so many who presume to tell us things about the Middle East learned only yesterday about the existence of Sunnis and Shi'a, and still haven't the faintest idea of the sources of their hostility (and what would Richard Cohen do if we asked him to tell us clearly who the "Alawis" of Syria are, and why it matters – matters in making plans for changing Syria's plans?).

Richard should listen to Ludwig. He may, he is, insufficiently ardent to see the poetry of Israel's re-establishment. In the more intelligent past, all sorts of great men had no difficulty recognizing and supporting the reconstruction, against all odds, of a Jewish commonwealth, on a sliver of land that had fallen

into ruin. That he hasn't a trace of the necessary poetry, this Richard Cohen, is clear. But he also hasn't a trace of the necessary knowledge that would at least allow him to have an opinion.

He is not allowed to have an opinion. He is too ignorant. "Whereof we do not know, thereof we should not speak."

He should listen to Ludwig. But he won't.

He's in the business of instructing, *ex cathedra*, the particular *cathedra* in question being the Chair of Self-Assured Ignorance, is Richard Cohen. Over many decades he must have written hundreds of times on the subject of Israel or the Arab opposition. But what does he know? What does he know of Islam? The most absurd, if not the most intolerable, is this:

"This is why the Israeli-Arab war, now transformed into the Israeli-Muslim war (Iran is not an Arab state), persists and widens. It is why the conflict mutates and festers. It is why Israel is now fighting an organization, Hezbollah, that did not exist 30 years ago and why Hezbollah is being supported by a nation, Iran, that was once a tacit ally of Israel's."

This is telling. Cohen believes that the war against Israel was once a war by the Arabs alone. In a sense, it was. For before the state was founded, many of the Muslim peoples lived quietly in villages. They knew, more or less, that it was their duty to fight Infidels – so that if you were a Muslim in India you certainly would try to do what you could to kill neighboring Hindus. See the Moplah Insurrection of 1921. Or if you were a Muslim in Xinjiang, in the Gobi Desert, you might join the Jihad of 1930, that was crushed by a Chinese general – the kind of Jihad, the English missionary spinster Mildred Cable reported, that would be declared every 30 years or so in the area, then be crushed by the Chinese, only for the cycle to resume. He is right only in this sense – until the past 40 years, most Muslims did not possess the political, financial, or military strength to openly declare not only their opposition to Israel as an Infidel sovereign state, but also to other Infidels.

It was not that the doctrine of Jihad suddenly disappeared. It was only that the wherewithal was lacking. And Cohen's breezy idea that Iran used to be a friend but had turned into an enemy of Israel, with the clear implication that somehow this was Israel's doing, shows a deliberate inattention to the most obvious facts of recent history that he should be fired forthwith, for that kind of ignorance and idiocy. For every educated person knows that the Shah of Iran was attempting, like his father before him, to treat the dhimmis of Iran with decency, and even to undo the old dispensation. The Shah tried to minimize the power of Islam as a political and social force, though he did so without having the acuity, or the authority that Ataturk possessed as a war hero, to steadily and systematically construct a legal framework to contain the power of Islam. The Shah understood that Iran and Israel had mutual interests, for both worried about Arab power. But that unofficial understanding, and quasi-friendship, depended entirely on the lack of Islamic fervor of the Shah's regime. It was not Israel that did anything to change Iran's attitude. Rather, it was the coming to power of real and committed Muslims like Khomeini and Khamenei after him, that explain the Iranian determination to be the leaders of the Lesser Jihad against Israel. And the same is true for the very narrow alliance, made far too much of, with Turkey – which was entirely a function of the Turkish military, always the defender of the Kemalist legacy and by deliberate self-selection its officer corps was always the most un-Islamic part of the entire Turkish polity.

As for the notion that the war against Israel was an "Arab" war that somehow metamorphosed into a "Muslim" war, Cohen gets it backwards. The war against Israel was always based on Islam. The fact that some local "islamochristians" (Christian Arabs who, treated as dhimmis, tried to find their own accommodation by accepting, and parroting, the demands and attitudes of the Muslims among whom they had to live) were useful in the early days, especially in presenting a disguised version of the Lesser Jihad against Israel to what the Arabs still saw as "Christian" powers in the West (for they assumed that the non-Muslim world was as completely defined by its historic religion as the Muslims were, and always will be, by Islam).

But it is false. All over the non-Arab world – particularly in Pakistan – anti-Israel sentiments were expressed, were part of the normal assumptions of life. The only two narrow, and temporary exceptions, were in Turkey (and then only recently, and among the most committed secularists), and in Iran (and then only

in the later years of the Shah's regime). If the Islamic "aspect" of the Lesser Jihad escaped Richard Cohen, so that he was convinced that the opposition to Israel was a matter of "competing nationalisms" – "Arab" is it, or "Palestinian" – that merely testifies to his willingness to accept the disguised Jihad offered up for Western consumption. The real change has been a different one, one that Richard Cohen does not see.

What is that change? It consists of three things:

First, the OPEC wherewithal that has since 1973 provided the Arabs and Muslims with ten trillion dollars, all for happening to sit on deposits of oil and gas – the largest transfer of wealth in human history. That has permitted the financing of Arab and Muslim propaganda, the subventions to an army of Western hirelings, the building and maintenance of mosques and madrasas all over the Western world and the transformation of formerly syncretistic, and therefore slightly less menacing and more easy-going, local practices of Islam, chiefly in West Africa (the changes in the practice of Islam in Niger over the past few years have horrified students who returned recently from France and seen the transformation with their own eyes – a transformation that would naturally escape the notice of the Richard Cohens or for that matter the Nicholas Kristofs and Tom Friedmans and of course the oily Gucci-loafered Joseph Wilsons of this world). And that money pays for all kinds of instruments of dissemination – audiocassettes (so important in Khomeini's seizure of power), videocassettes, the Internet, satellite television. And then there are all the instruments of war, including planes and tanks and bombs, and the money to pay for all kinds of nuclear and other projects intended to allow Muslims to acquire weapons of mass destruction. And the "wealth weapon" (as it is described in texts on Jihad) not only can buy influence and collaborators among the Infidels, but can pay for bribes to officials, or journalists, or academics whose chairs and "centers" can be paid for (John Esposito boasts of the Arab, even Saudi, money he attracts for his "Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding"). And money, in the form of contracts dangled before Western businessmen, or in the boycott of goods (Israeli goods, American goods of companies doing business with Israel, and recently, Danish goods because of those cartoons). Ten trillion dollars can change a lot – it can give new life to what had never gone away: Jihad to spread Islam all over the globe.

The second change was the mass migration of millions of Muslims into the Bilad al-kufr, the Land of Infidelity, the Lands of the Infidels. In Islamic teaching,

the world is divided between the Dar al-Islam, the Domain or House of Islam, and Dar al-Harb, the Domain or House of War, where Infidels still dominate, and Muslims do not yet rule. Between Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb there must be continuous warfare, until the former manages to enlarge at the expense of the latter. Now that there are tens of millions of Muslims, living behind the very lines that they are taught to regard as enemy lines (a belief about which those innocent or denying Infidels scarcely have a clue), the money that the Muslim states and some individuals possess can be used to help those Muslims in the Infidel lands conduct campaigns of Da'wa, starting with identified populations of the economically or psychically marginal or alienated, such as prisoners or some racial or ethnic minorities who might welcome a seemingly respectable vehicle for the expression, and justification, of that alienation, of that hatred of The System or of Capitalism, Amerikkka, the European colonialist power – which is now the enemy, but the enemy under a new identity as The Infidel.

The third transforming element, that caused such local Jihads as that against the Hindus in Kashmir and against the Jewish state of Israel (and of course all along, whatever the perception of Jihad directed at Infidel states outside Dar al-Islam, within the Muslim states of Dar al-Islam, there was continuous discrimination, persecution, even mass murder, of all kinds of non-Muslims, such as the Hindus in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Christians in Sudan and Nigeria and Indonesia, and even Buddhists and Confucians wherever they could be found. It was not the absence of the phenomenon of Jihad, as Cohen seems to think, but rather the absence of those able to recognize, and properly label, the behavior of Muslims toward Infidels. It was not seen as "Jihad" because so few people knew a thing about Islam (so few do today, even after all that has happened), and the very idea that a "world religion" could be so very different in its main character (compare Muhammad with Jesus), could be so violent and aggressive, could be so heavily political in its thrust, could be so very totalitarian in its purported Total Explanation of the Universe and in its Total Regulation of Life, could be, in short, most unlike either Christianity, or Judaism, or Hinduism, or Buddhism, or any other belief-system called a "world religion," was something that inhabitants of the Western world were, and are, quite slow in grasping. A whole generation of great Western scholars of Islam died out, and were replaced by others, not nearly so great, not great at all, people who tended to be confuse all kinds of things (colonialism, "post-colonialism," the Guilt of the West), or their own anti-American or anti-Western sentiments which made them sympathetic

to, receptive of, Islam as a vehicle for anti-Western attitudes. At one time everyone in the West, from many different traditions and countries – Spinoza and John Wesley, Tocqueville and John Quincy Adams, Churchill and Bertrand Russell – understood Islam, grasped its essential nature, in a way that today requires unusual ability, as we all swim in a swamp caused by the lowering to unheard-of depths of the level of instruction, and the inability to distinguish mere credentials from achievement or authority, and furthermore, the sport that consists in the beating down of the wise, and the refusal to recognize great differences in intellect, or even to attack the very idea (the word “elitism” used as an all-purpose pejorative), have helped create this situation in which what were once obvious truths about Islam to be scarcely believed – by so many whose duty it is to know and to instruct, which includes, or should, journalists.

In fact, in 1948, in the Arab countries, it was understood why “the Arabs” as the “best of peoples” to whom Islam had been revealed first, and whose Islam is their claim on the world, their gift to the world, had to destroy the Infidel state. That this was overlooked in the West, given the Cold War, and the stout belief that Islam was only a “bulwark against Communism” and hence a Good Thing, was hardly surprising. Later, after the Six-Day War, all the Arab states individually, and in the Arab League collectively, worked to promote the just-invented notion of a “Palestinian people” (to fit the place called “Palestine”), and to insist that this was merely a “tiny people” wishing for its own national rights, or so it was presented constantly in the West. Of course, in the Arab and Muslim countries, none of this nonsense was necessary. The maps showed a world without Israel. Israel is a cancer, Israel is a dagger in the heart of the Arab Muslim lands, were the two metaphors, and of course one does not take out part of a cancer, one does not pull a knife out only part-way when it is lodged in your heart.

Now we have come full circle. The war of the Arabs against Israel can be seen, far more clearly, as a Jihad – one of the Lesser Jihads that, together, make up the single world-wide Jihad that is everywhere prompted by the exact same texts, attitudes, atmospherics of Islam. Cohen, apparently having been born if not yesterday, then at least after the Six-Day War, when the “Arab” war against Israel – which was simply the Arab Muslim war against Israel, supported from a distance by Muslims everywhere, even if the secular Muslims-in-name-only Muslims, whether in the Turkish military, or the Iranian upper classes, or even in distant

Indonesia, where those who were least Muslim and most secular, could precisely to the extent that they were secular find that they could accept, and possibly contemplate an alliance with, Israel). Cohen can't understand any of this. Five years after the attack of 9/11/2006, he hasn't yet, it seems, cracked a book about Islam. Of course, many people in the government and in the press haven't. That does not excuse him. That indicts them.

The notion that Richrad Cohen might actually have to have detailed knowledge about something is not fair. He has to write once or twice a week, a column of about 900 words. It takes a lot of work. I've just written a column in reply right here. It is 2,500 words. It took me about 45 minutes to post this, anacolutha and all.

But in the day's other minutes, I read. And I read things that help me to understand what would otherwise be confusing – and all this stuff about Hezbollah and Hamas, about Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jemaa Islamiyya (now replaced by the Ikhwan in Egypt), and who the Alawites are, and why it matters, and who the Maronites are, and why it matters, and what kinds of Arabic-speaking Christians are more, and which less, likely, to be “islamochristians,” and why Saudi Arabia could now make the Alawites an offer they had better not refuse, and how an independent Kurdistan could help divide and demoralize the camp of Islam. And so do many others – they read, they study, and then they try to take fully into account rather than lazily ignore, the central role of Islam, in everything that happens in the Middle East, and indeed wherever Islam, or Muslims, collide with Infidel states or peoples. And this is certainly true in understanding why Israel's size is irrelevant to the Muslim Arab acceptance, for its borders do not matter. Or, put another way, Israel's borders matter only in the sense that the only way to keep the piece (rather than make a “final peace settlement” with “its Arab neighbors” which would be, under Islamic rules governing the law of war and peace with Infidels, completely impossible).

That's what people ordinarily do in their work. They do what may be called their homework. It could be narrow, or broad, depending on what the audience can bear, by way of a universe of allusion and of how lightly the learning is to be worn by the possessor, borne by that intended audience.

But this is not what Tom Friedman or Nicholas Kristof or Robert Novak or Georgie Anne Geyer or Antony Lewis or a hundred other journalists in the exalted world of

the “columnist” think they need do. They are exempt from ordinary requirements. Mere reporting – breathless reporting, as with Kristof from Darfur, where for all of his endless heart-on-sleeve pathos, never managed to comprehend why the Arab Muslims of Khartoum not only tolerated but funded and supported the Janjaweed, and why Egypt and other Arab countries so stoutly protected the Sudan in any plausible way they could, from any effective outside intervention. Kristof can report on the misery, endlessly, but cannot bring us a coherent explanation for the reasons that misery is being so determinedly, and systematically, inflicted – and that is because for Kristof, the fact that both the Arab militias and their victims are Muslims means that Islam can’t possibly have anything to do with it. If, however, Nicholas Kristof understood the Arab supremacist ideology that is part of Islam, and that can be seen demonstrated not only in the Arab attitudes toward the massacres in Darfur, but in the Arab treatment of many other non-Arab Muslims, including the Berbers and the Kurds, than he, Nicholas Kristof, would be going on mere reporting and making sense of what he reports on. He’s not up to it. He’s not up to it because sitting and reading, and thinking about what he has read, and making sense of a belief-system and how it is taken to heart, is simply beneath or above or beyond him. And that is why, in the end, the dispatches of Nicholas Kristof from Darfur, the ones that won him some kind of prize from fellow journalists whose standards are as low as his are, will not survive, will not transcend their time, will be seen as pitiful not merely by posterity – but by readers of them a year or three hence. Unless those writing about Sudan, Israel, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, West Africa, East Africa, and alas Europe today, begin to study Islam and show some understanding, their reports will be confused, and confusing, and in the end, of little value.

Let me come, by a commodius vicus, full circle and ask that Richard-Scarry question with which I began:

What Do Journalists Do All Day?