

Why Iran's Shia Land Bridge Threatens Israel

An Interview with Seth J. Frantzman and Shoshana Bryen

by Jerry Gordon and Mike Bates (January 2018)



Land Bridge (source: *Washington Times*)

On December 6, 2017, US President Donald Trump signed an executive order [recognizing](#) Jerusalem as Israel's capital, delivering a 2016 election campaign promise largely made to his Christian Evangelical base. While expressing the hope that this might lead to moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, he nevertheless signed another six month waiver under the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act as his predecessors had done. Secretary of State Tillerson suggested it would take several years before such a move could be a reality. The

announcement by President Trump was greeted by outrage from Arab and Muslim leaders across the Ummah with calls for summits to unleash a campaign of resistance claiming East Jerusalem as the future capital of a Palestinian State.

Protests occurred at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; Israeli security forces fought Palestinian protesters in Ramallah and Bethlehem. Hamas leaders issued a call for a new intifada, while Iran-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched rockets against southern Israel resulting in retaliatory IAF raids and IDF discovery and destruction of a terror tunnel resulting in Palestinian casualties. Israeli PM Netanyahu flew off to visit French President Macron in Paris and EU High Representative for Foreign Relations Mogherini in Brussels. They defended Trump's move as simply recognizing the realities that Jerusalem has been Israel's national government center for 70 years.

Is Iran putting the finishing touches on the Shia land bridge to the Golanlet alone to the Mediterraneanwas the [question](#) asked in a November 18, 2017 *Jerusalem Post* oped by Jonathan Spyer. That seemed to be on the mind of many analysts as the Iran-controlled Iraqi Hashd Al Shaabi Popular Mobilization Force and Iraqi National Army breached the last bastions of the Islamic State on the Iraqi Syrian Frontier. Meanwhile, the US backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Force with coalition air support was sealing its conquest of Syria's major oil field at Deir al Zour on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. Only pockets of Islamic fighters remained in the largely desert areas of eastern Syria, where perhaps among them was the leader of the defeated Islamic State, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi.

Iraqi Premier Haidar al-Abadi [announced](#) on December 9, 2017 the defeat of the Islamic State by the Iraqi National Army and Iran-controlled Hashd al-Shaabi Popular Mobilization force (PMF) supported by over 5,900 US military advisers. He was asked by US Secretary of State Tillerson to disband the Iran-controlled PMF, a number of whose leaders were active in

opposing US forces during the Second Gulf War. Their actions resulted in hundreds of US casualties from Iran-produced Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDS). IEDS that ironically claimed US casualties during the war against the Islamic State. A PMF militia leader suggested that President Trump's Jerusalem decision was [justification](#) for attacking US advisers.

The US was accused of having abandoned the Iraqi Kurds in mid-October 2017, when the combined Iran-controlled PMF and Iraqi National Army task force suddenly swept into the oil-rich Kirkuk region routing the Peshmerga and sending hundreds of thousands of Kurds and others streaming into the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) area. US officials such as Special Envoy Brett McGurk, Pentagon Secretary Mattis and Secretary of State Tillerson [warned](#) the Kurds of "consequences" if they went ahead with the Independence Referendum on September 25, 2017. They argued that US security interests lay with maintaining the questionable unity of Iraq.

Al-Abadi faces the Herculean effort of finding the hundreds of billions in funding to restore ruined cities and generating employment for half of the country's population under the age of 19, whose ranks might harbor future Sunni and Shia extremists.

On December 11, Russian President Putin flew into a Russian airbase in Syria and [announced](#) victory over rebels and the Islamic State eclipsing his host Syrian President Abbas. Russia is building a naval base on the Mediterranean at the port of Tartus, while ostensibly withdrawing some air assets. He then flew off to Ankara to brief Turkish President Erdogan and flew on to Cairo to sign a nuclear development deal with Egyptian President El-Sisi. He appears to be holding some important cards to play in the Middle East in contrast to the

US.

Meanwhile, Iran is beavering away insinuating and building permanent bases and weapons factories in Syria and Lebanon. These were targets of Israeli air and missile [strikes](#) on December 2, 2017 producing Iranian casualties. Quds Force Commander Gen. Soleimani has brought in thousands of Shia proxies like Hezbollah from Lebanon, the Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi Popular Mobilization Force, Hazara Shia from Afghanistan and Shia from Pakistan perhaps intent on turning Syria into another Islamic Republic. Further, Soleimani [announced](#) on December 12, 2017 support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza opposing Israel. Iran was flexing its military muscle.

On December 8, 2017, Qais al-Khazali a powerful PMF commander was brought in by Hezbollah. [He peered](#) at Israeli communities from across the Lebanon border. This infuriated Lebanon PM Saad Hariri who had banned him raising the question of how weak was his leadership in the face of this Iran threat. Former US Middle East negotiator for both Republican and Democratic Presidents. Ambassador Dennis Ross [noted](#) in a *Wall Street Journal* op ed on December 4, 2017 that an Israeli IDF commander during a visit to the Golan frontier pointed out a Quds Force/Hezbollah command post less than 4 miles from the Israel/Syrian Frontier.

Meanwhile, the US has a conundrum facing it with regard to the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria. Whether it should abandon training and supply of equipment to Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan after the debacle in mid-October ending possession of Kirkuk, overrun by PMF and Iraqi National Army units equipped with US weapons and vehicles. Then there was the announcement by Secretary of Defense Mattis that we would take back heavy weapons and vehicles from the Kurdish-led Syrian

Democratic Force.

Subsequently, that policy was changed to leaving US troops in Syria on a “conditions” rather than “calendar” basis, adapted from his war strategy in Afghanistan. Commentators in Israel [suggest](#) that the Jewish nation take on that responsibility as Israeli PM Netanyahu went on record supporting an independent Kurdistan before a visiting US Congressional delegation in August, 2017.

Because of the risible Iran threat to Saudi Arabia and others in the Gulf Cooperation Council, notably the UAE, there were indications that a tacit alliance with Israel might become a reality. On November 16, 2017, The *Jerusalem Post* reported that IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot in an on-line Arab publication [suggested](#) that some intelligence sharing might be a possibility.

Against this background, another periodic 1330am WEBY Middle East Roundtable discussion was held with Seth J. Frantzman, opinion editor of the *Jerusalem Post* and Shoshana Bryen, senior director of the Washington, DC-based Jewish Policy Center.

Mike Bates: Good afternoon, and welcome to *Your Turn*. This is Mike Bates. We are going to have our periodic Middle East Roundtable discussion today and I have with me in the studio for that Jerry Gordon, Senior Editor of the *New English Review*. Welcome Jerry.

Jerry Gordon: Glad to be back Mike.

Bates: And joining us by telephone, Shoshana Bryen, Senior Director of the Jewish Policy Center in Washington. Shoshana, welcome.

Shoshana Bryen: Nice to be here.

Bates: And also by telephone, this time from Jerusalem, Seth J. Frantzman, Opinion Editor at *The Jerusalem Post*. Seth welcome to Your Turn.

Seth Frantzman: Thanks a lot.

Bates: Seth, my first question is for you. It has to do with the war in Syria, specifically ISIS in Syria. The American press has not been giving it much attention as they have been hyper focused on the Mueller investigation into the alleged Russian collusion. A lot of people are unfamiliar with what the current status is in Syria. Can you give us an update?

Frantzman: It seems that basically ISIS has been totally defeated in Syria. It runs in a few big pieces of desert near the Iraqi border and some of those that run in Syria. One of which is under siege by the Syrian Democratic Forces which are U.S. backed. Another piece of it is under siege by the Syrian regime which is obviously backed by the Russians. On the maps some of these areas might be quite big. It's primarily mostly open desert which they don't really control. They control very few villages and we don't know exactly what's going on in those open desert spaces. There is thought to be two thousand fighters or so according to the coalition. There is probably some ordinance that they evacuated from Raqqa. We don't know what's happened with their leader Baghdadi. He may be somewhere in there. We don't know what has happened to all the Yazidi women who are missing. There are still a lot of questions that are supposed to be answered about what's going on and what the map looks like. Then you have another small piece of ISIS that's next to the Israeli Golan border which is a small triangle area that borders Jordan and Israel. On the other side are the Syrian rebels and an ISIS affiliate. They were jihadists who became a part of ISIS two years ago. It clashes every once in a while with the rebels but it doesn't really seem to do anything. That is the map of what exists of

ISIS in Syria.

Bates: Do you think with the practical defeat of Islamic state in Syria that Iran has put the final touches on its land bridge to the Mediterranean that it has sought for so long?

Frantzman: Yes, basically the land bridge is there. It exists because you have the Iraqi regime on one side and basically the Shia Militias that are backed by Iran some of which are run by people like Hadi Al-Amara or Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who actually fought with the Iranians in the 1980s. Those militias now have a role on the border and are able to link up with the Syrian Regime forces that also have Iranian backed militias. Especially organizations like Hezbollah which is supposed to be in Lebanon. Hezbollah has been fighting alongside the Syrian Regime. Hezbollah has some members that have gone to Iraq. It should be seen as one large state including Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. It's not a super state because these are different countries but it is one large alliance system.

Bates: Shoshana, a follow up to that. Is Syria sharing its land with Iranian military bases? What has been the Israeli reaction to that?

Bryen: It's sharing them for the moment. The Israeli reaction is, "Don't do that." Israel has had three red lines in Syria from the beginning and, most importantly, the Russians seem to agree that Israel can have those red lines. One is no permanent Iranian bases, no military industry, and no deep seated Iranian troops. Israel has made it clear that they will enforce the lines militarily. They killed twelve people over the weekend who appear to have been actual Iranians. Seth was talking about the militias. One of the things to remember about those militias is the foot soldiers are not always, or even mostly, Iranian. Some of them are Pakistanis, some are Afghans, and some are Sudanese. They are not very good militias and they are not necessarily reliable in the long

run. That is one set of problems. What was happening at this military base was actual real life Iranians and the Israelis won't tolerate that.

Gordon: Speaking about that we had an Israeli missile strike on that suspected Iranian base in Syria possibly producing revolutionary guard casualties. What message is Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu sending to Syria, Iran, Russia and the U.S. about crossing those very same red lines you just talked about Shoshana?

Bryen: Don't! If you do we will make sure that we wipe it out.

Gordon: Seth any comment?

Frantzman: I think there is a very dangerous game being played on the Golan right now in terms of Israel saying we would like the Iranians to stay forty to sixty kilometers away. Of course there has been something like a reported one hundred or more airstrikes in the last two years targeting weapons transfers to Hezbollah. I think that is a very dangerous situation. Any wrong move or miscalculation by one of the groups could lead to a major incident up there.

Bates: The Golan Heights are very strategically important to Israel. Of course they acquired them in the Six-Day War and then subsequently annexed it much to the consternation of the world. It is obvious to anyone who understands military tactics and the geography of the region that the Golan Heights are critical to Israel's security. What is the global reaction to Israel's defense of the Golan since it acts as a buffer to Israel proper? What has been the world reaction to these Israeli military strikes? Normally when Israel does something in its defense Israel is condemned. I haven't heard much condemnation and I'm curious as to why?

Frantzman: I think because the world has fatigue about what's going on in Syria and I think there is also a feeling that

kind of anyone can do whatever they want in Syria. Let's look at who is involved in Syria. The Turks have taken over a slice of Northern Syria. The Americans and their allies or partners have taken over parts of Eastern Syria. You have got the Russians, you have got the Iranians, the Jordanians and the British are involved in the South. I mean find a country that's not involved in Syria. The U.S. lead coalition has seventy countries that are part of it. The Israelis have basically been involved for the last several years. It is understood that Syria is the country where existing rules of international law don't apply. The normal round of condemnations aren't there, because we're finding Syria is not normal in the sense the Arab League is not unified on the Syria issue. The West, I think, generally just doesn't care. The Americans understand what is going on. Israel usually doesn't take responsibility for the airstrikes. You may remember back when Syria had a nuclear program that all of a sudden one night kind of vanished. Israel doesn't take responsibility for its unilateral actions. How can you condemn a country that didn't actually do something?

Gordon: This question goes to both of you. Why did the Trump administration suborn Kurdish independence in Iraq and why did Pentagon Chief Jim Mattis abandon the U.S. backed Kurdish lead Syrian Democratic Force in Northeast Syria? Seth? Do you want to start with that?

Frantzman: We just have to understand American policy generally seemed pro-Kurdish. However, some people read between the lines in terms of who are the policy makers in the State Department? What is really going on is that of course America is wedded to the concept of a united Iraq. In some ways you know modern Iraq was created by the Americans in 2003. Thus, the Americans would be quite reticent to see that country allow Kurdish separatism. That is the normal Washington view of things. There was some idea that Trump would do things differently. However, we see with Trump that

there are a lot of Obama holdovers and at the end of the day people like McMaster and Mattis are not revolutionaries, they are military people. They look at things from a military perspective. It is not a question of morals and ethics which morally the Kurds should have a country. When it comes to military doctrine, America is partnered with Baghdad. America has trained a hundred and twenty-four thousand Iraqi soldiers of which twenty-two thousand are Kurdish Peshmerga. Once there were clashes, it was clear that America had to side with Baghdad. I think that the Kurds correctly read that as a betrayal. It is a betrayal in many ways because America should support self-determination. However, America generally doesn't actually do what pays lip-service to doing. In Syria it is a more complicated because the relationship with the Syrian Kurds is relatively new. It is only in the last few years that America has been arming them. They always say no, no, we are arming the Arab coalition. The writing was on the wall if you wanted to be pessimistic and cynical but eventually the Americans would probably walk away especially from any idea of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. They will slowly wind down their partner forces. That could be read as a betrayal, however, the Syrian Kurds are adults so they have to decide exactly how they are going to fit into the future of Syria. They just can't rely on the Americans and if someone was advising them I think you should definitely tell them not to rely on the Americans.

Bates: Shoshana, did you want to weigh in on that?

Bryen: I do and I want to disagree a little bit with Seth, not in the outcome but in how we got there. The United States didn't have the leverage with the Iraqi government to do two things at the same time. One was to keep a unified Iraq and the other was to support Kurdish independence. Seth, you mentioned that the Kurds are adults; they didn't behave like adults. They went ahead with the referendum after we told them, "We can't bail you out on this. We can't do this for

you.” They went ahead and did it anyway. All the repercussions come from having done that. Now the Kurds are asking us to help them negotiate with Baghdad. That’s what the Kurds should have done *before* the referendum, not *after* it. They left the United States in an impossible position. I don’t think it was betrayal so much as people not recognizing the limitations of U.S. policy.

As for General Mattis: he is fixed on the war in Afghanistan. It’s the war he wants to win for historical, Mattis reasons. I don’t think it’s winnable. It’s a whole other conversation but he is not going to let anything, including the Kurds, distract him from what he sees as his mission in Afghanistan.

Bates: Shoshana, why would Baghdad be so reluctant to allow Kurdish autonomy or independence? It’s not like it’s an oil rich part of Iraq other than just keeping the status quo and gee, it’s our land. What’s in it for Baghdad?

Bryen: You could say the same thing about Turkey, Mike. You could say why doesn’t Turkey just let the Kurds cut loose? I happen to be a believer in Kurdish independence across all four countries, but nobody wants to give up a chunk of what they believe is theirs. Autonomy for the Kurds in Northern Iraq was pushed on the Baghdad government. We had an obligation to make that work but nobody wants to give up a chunk. Even when people say California is going to secede and lots of us say yeah fine, go ahead, nobody really wants it to happen. And there is oil up there by the way.

Bates: Just not as much in the South is what I meant.

Bryen: Not as much as in the South but you don’t want to give up one nickel of that revenue when oil is about sixty dollars a barrel.

Bates: A very good point Shoshana.

Gordon: Shoshana, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot broadly

hinted in an Arab on-line publication Interview that Israel might share intelligence with the Saudis. CIA Director Mike Pompeo basically said there already is in existence some sort of exchange of intelligence. Is that an indication of an emerging tacit alliance of Israel, Saudi Arabia, perhaps some of the emirates against Iran?

Bryen: I wouldn't call it an alliance. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend. He may just be less of an enemy than the other guy and maybe just for now. On the other hand, there is some hope for this kind of Saudi reformation, partly because it comes from the top-down—unlike the Arab Spring which came from the bottom up and was a disaster. It is too early to tell how they are going to see life together in the future. I would say that one of the first things that Mohammad bin Salman did with this relationship, to the extent there is one, was try to start a war between Israel and Hezbollah which is not a very friendly thing to do. It wasn't successful and it was a really bad idea. I would say that you have some interest in common, but I wouldn't call it an alliance.

Gordon: Seth, your comments?

Frantzman: I think we can describe what is happening with the Saudis and the UAE as a different degree. Whereas Jordan's and Israel's interests dovetail. I think increasingly where Saudi Arabia and UAE interests dovetail with Israel is against Iran. It is a question of what exactly is going to happen with Hezbollah and whether or not Israel is willing to go against Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia and UAE don't have military forces that do much. They have been fighting in Yemen for years so they are not actually going to confront Hezbollah. It is interesting to see how these three countries and others come together. Israel is in a sense becoming part of the region because of these shared enemies, Iran and its allies.

Gordon: Related to that is a question about what is behind the turmoil that occurred in Lebanon with Premier Hariri's

return from supposedly enforced solitude in Saudi Arabia? We had the Christian President of Lebanon; Michel Aoun's warning that the country stands ready to resist possible Israeli action against Hezbollah. Seth do you want to start with that?

Frantzman: We don't know what we don't know. However, we know that Hariri already went to Saudi Arabia, we know that he resigned. We don't know he was kept under house arrest or all the different rumors. We also know that he then went to Egypt, France and Cyprus. Then he returned to Lebanon and walked back his resignation. I think at the end of the day he doesn't want to end up like his father. But he's basically a weak man as the Prime Minister. It is not really clear what is going to happen to him. I think the Saudis would like to put pressure on him as the nominal Sunni head of the Sunni block in Lebanon. Michel Aoun is just a figurehead. The Army of Lebanon is not going to fight Israel. Hezbollah would fight Israel and the Army would do what it usually does which is. sit behind Hezbollah. It is nice that Aoun likes to talk tough. He was a former military commander but I don't think it really means much except for bluster.

Gordon: Shoshana, do you have any comment?

Bryen: I would agree with that and those reports of the missile story that you mentioned came on both sides. The Lebanese were told that the Israelis were preparing to fire missiles into Lebanon. The Israelis were told that Hezbollah was preparing to fire its arsenal into Israel. Again, I say the Saudis were stirring the pot. They would have very much liked to have Israel fight Hezbollah on the assumption that Israel will take out Hezbollah and it won't be a problem for Saudi Arabia. It didn't work.

Bates: Speaking of Saudi Arabia, what's happening with the purge and arrests of the various Saudi Princes?

Bryen: But they are starting to let them out now which

indicates that they have made some kind of deal, some kind of arrangement that bin Salman thinks he can live with. It's not a bad thing.

Bates: Are they returning the billions that were seized?

Bryen: Are you kidding?

Bates: (laughs) Well it was a legitimate question actually so they let them out of their prison at the Ritz Carlton Hotel which had to be pretty lavish conditions I would think for a prison. However, are you saying that they have not given back the billions that were allegedly taken illegally?

Bryen: No, this is one of those things where we don't know what we don't know. I have no indication that they did or they didn't give them back. What is pretty clear is that some of those guys have made their peace with bin Salman and they have been released. You have got to wait to see where the money goes.

Bates: How much of that stemmed from President Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia earlier this year? Shoshana, do you think there was any connection?

Bryen: I would say there is a lot of it. The Saudis believe that Iran is the fountain of all evil in the region. They knew they couldn't talk to President Obama about it because he had the opposite view. With the Trump administration, they would very much like to have the United States back in on the side of the Saudis and Israel against Iran. If you have to pay for that then you have to pay for that and he's paying.

Bates: Jerry what do you think of that?

Gordon: I think what Prince Salman has been doing is trying to push this country forward with some reformist activities mainly social and the corruption charges. He is extremely popular, apparently with the basic demographics. I mean when

half the country is below the age of thirty and many of them are virtually unemployed with the exception of state subsidies, they're pretty happy about his anti-corruption moves. I am sure the women are because they are now being able to drive or to hold certain classes of jobs. I think to that extent he is popular.

Bates: It will be interesting to see what happens in the Saudi Kingdom especially with this new mega city they are building in the Northwest. Neom I believe is the name of it. The announced intent is to rival Dubai in its modernity and tolerance. We'll see how that develops.

Bates: Seth. I have got a question for you about the PA reconciliation agreement brokered by Egypt with Hamas. It seems to be falling apart over control of weapons and Iran backed Palestinian Islamic jihad has engaged in cross-border rocket and mortar attacks triggering some IDF retaliation. What options does Israel have to deal with those threats on its Southern frontier?

Frantzman: The thing that I see about having Gaza completely controlled by Hamas was you had an address to blame when things went wild down there or when Islamic jihad wanted to stir things up with rocket attacks. The problem with the reconciliation agreement that Israel has always feared is now the Palestinian Authority is in Gaza. The Palestinian Authority is naturally weak and Hamas can hide behind it and stir up trouble. Islamic jihad and all sorts of other weird groups don't have an address to blame so, what I mean, you have to retaliate and then you get sucked into a conflict. The real fear at the moment is that it has been three years without a conflict in Gaza. The nature of things here is that people start to think, "Yeah, okay well that means there is going to be another round of violence." As you correctly pointed out, the Iranians are involved in this because the Iranians are connected to Islamic jihad, they are also connected to Hamas. Iran would like to take a poke at Israel.

Gordon: Shoshana, aren't the Iranians doing that? We saw a senior Hamas leader who went to both Beirut to talk to Sheikh Nasrallah and then to Tehran.

Bryen: Yes. Whenever you think that the Sunni Shia divide in the Middle East is the biggest divide remember that the Iranians are Shiites. They are supporting Hamas which is the Muslim Brotherhood which is Sunni. The Iranians like to put their finger everywhere they can to aggravate Israel. I would also point out that the problem of Hamas Fatah reconciliation is not just about weapons. Weapons are what you see. The disagreement is how to deal with Israel and who gets to run that show. They both want to run the show. Hamas in one way and Fatah in another way and that's the disagreement.

Bates: Shoshana, I do have a question about the weapons however coming out of Gaza. They have been relatively crude in terms of they just shoot them and wherever the trajectory takes it takes it. They are not guided. Are the Iranians providing more advanced guidance technology to rockets that may be fired from Gaza into Israel?

Bryen: It's a possibility. The Islamic Jihad ended up with weapons that we didn't think they had either, and those clearly came from Iran so it is possible. I'm sure that the Iranians would like to up the ante but not too much because again they like to poke at Israel. They really don't want Israel to come back and take over the Gaza strip or feel that there is some existential crisis. They just want to poke to see what they can get out of poking.

Bates: Do we know where those advanced technology rockets would be coming from? Is it by sea? Israel has a pretty decent control over what gets in and out of Gaza.

Bryen: This is the story about the Sinai by the way. We were going to talk about the Egyptian problem in the Sinai but we look at that as a North Sinai problem. There are weapons in

the north of Sinai. Where do they come from? Those weapons come from the Red Sea. The Iranians are offloading in Sudan; they are offloading in the Sinai. There is a constant stream of weapons from the Red Sea and they go across Sinai which is very difficult to police and you end up with them in North Sinai and some of them end up inside the Gaza Strip. Egypt's problem here is to figure out where the weapons are coming from and go there. They keep fighting them although the weapons are already here. It's a loser.

Gordon: Shoshana, given the large toll in Egypt's Sinai with the Sufi Mosque Massacre, how tough will it be for the el-Sisi government to defeat the Islamic state affiliate and how dependent is Egypt on intelligent sharing with Israel?

Bryen: There again you break the question into those two parts. Egypt has got to get a handle on weapons that come across the Sinai from elsewhere and they have not been very good at this. They also have some problems with counter-terrorism. However, as long as you have an unimpeded flow of weapons into the Sinai you have a problem that will not go away. Israeli intelligence is very important, very necessary. It protects Israel as much as it protects Egypt and so it's a win-win there.

Gordon: Seth, what are your thoughts on the question of whether or not the el-Sisi government is capable of defeating the Islamic state affiliate in the Sinai? Shoshana just commented on whether Egypt is going to stanch the flow of weapons that seemingly come from Iranian sources out of the Red Sea.

Frantzman: It's interesting with Sisi because they have a massive Army in Egypt. However, I think in general they have a counter insurgency just like America had in Vietnam. You can send hundreds of thousands of soldiers to stand at checkpoints everywhere but you don't actually end up defeating anything. Egypt needs to find another way to do this which I guess

involves special forces. The insurgency just seems to kind of be getting worse. Perhaps in the end Sinai is a failed piece of a state like parts of Yemen or other kind of ungoverned states. It is like parts of Pakistan or Kashmir ungoverned spaces. I don't have a lot of optimism about it. In terms of the arms flow, you know, it's interesting, obviously the arms used to go to Gaza. Now the arms just kind of end up in Sinai. Large quantities of arms and equipment that ended up there apparently after the Libyan Conflict in 2012. If you look at the statistics for Egypt's war on its Western border with Libya, you know they are talking about hundreds and hundreds of jihadist sites being hit every year by airstrikes. It's not a small amount of weapons, people and material. Much of this is a shadow conflict which we in the media are not exposed to. We have no way of knowing the actual quantities of weapons and equipment transfers which I think is troubling in terms of threats to security.

Bates: Speaking of what we know in the news business, the American Press does a dismal job, I think, frankly reporting on what is going on truthfully in the Middle East. Particularly as it pertains to Israel—which is why I rely so heavily on JPost.com for my information. You do have an outstanding website there with the Jerusalem Post. Seth. I do have a question about Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law. He spoke at the Saban Middle East Policy Forum in Washington about the peace efforts. There are rumors about a possible plan with Egypt ceding Sinai space for expansion of Gaza and some kind of an Egyptian connection to Jordan via the Negev. Is there anything to that?

Frantzman: I think these ideas are just utter nonsense. These are myths like unicorns or flying horses. I just think that every few years we hear some sort of weird magical concept that says this is the way in the Middle East everything will be solved. I just think it's like anything else in life: if it's too good to be true, it is not true. A country like Egypt

can't just suddenly unilaterally decide to get rid of part of itself to a non-state like Gaza. Wait—you mean that country we call Palestine? Okay so how does that work, because people don't recognize the Palestinian state? How can Egypt give a whole chunk of the Sinai to a country that doesn't exist? That can't happen until Palestine actually exists and then you can actually give them a piece of Egypt—which most Egyptian people would never accept. Look at how the Egyptian people responded to el-Sisi giving away a small island to the Saudis. They went crazy. These ideas are almost nonsense. They are the kinds of ideas that people like academics like to play with or get lots of clicks online. Given how complex these conflicts just moving like concrete to Gaza going through Erez Crossing or allowing Gaza to export some sand. Even that's complicated. How are you going to give away tens of thousands of acreage or create passageways through the Negev?

Gordon: Shoshana, there is also something that appeared in the Wall Street Journal—a proposal by a Likud member and famous criminologist in Israel, Anat Berko. It is about disentangling Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem and other connections including annexation of Area C. How mind-blowing is that?

Bryen: Mind-blowing, but it is one of Seth's unicorns. If it looks too big to be done, if it looks too weird to be done, it's not going to be done. It would be impossible for Israel to look at those Palestinians who have Israeli residency in Jerusalem—who see themselves as Jerusalemites and, after 50 years, with some connection to the State of Israel—and tell them, “No not you, now you are something else.” It would be almost impossible and I don't think it's realistic. You can talk about it but I wouldn't think it's going anywhere. Of much greater concern was Jared Kushner's idea that you have to settle the “Palestinian problem” before Israel can have peace with the Arab countries. That's a lot more worrisome than unicorns.

Gordon: The reality of all of the peace negotiations even prior to 1993 and the now moribund, if not dead, Oslo Accord is that, increasingly, Arabs don't buy that. Talking about the Saudis, the UAE's and others because they have an overriding threat called Iran across the Persian Gulf and a lasso around Yemen, why is Mr. Kushner pushing something that has failed innumerable times and is now failing with Arabs?

Bryen: That is one of those things to which I don't think we have an answer at the moment. It was really distressing to see it come up. We know it doesn't work. We know the Arabs and Israel, and everybody, operates according to their own view of their priorities, their needs, their threats. The Saudis made it very clear what the threat looks like to them. It's not Israel.

Gordon: I think it's the perennial canard that peace runs through Jerusalem. That has been perpetuated by U.S. negotiators for decades. Now it appears that the Arabs don't care about Jerusalem, so to speak. They care about their immediate threats on their borders and, so therefore, the question is: why is Mr. Kushner promoting this ancient canard?

Frantzman: I think anyone in Washington who is given the Israel file, is told to solve this age old conflict as if he was a messiah. When he solves this conundrum, then the whole Middle East will somehow come together. It's entirely logical that people like John Kerry and anyone who gets bitten by the Israel Palestine peace bug ends up with the same narrative. As you correctly pointed out, if someone told you this about some another place in the Middle East, like Yemen, then all the problems in the Middle East relate to Yemen. Jerusalem obviously is an important holy city and this conflict does have many pieces attached to it. I think it's clear that many people these days know that things have moved on. Now other things in the Middle East are far more important than what's happening right here in Jerusalem

Bates: I have long been of the opinion that the Arab states don't truly care about Jerusalem except to the extent that it could be used to bash Israel which may happen if President Trump announces moving the Embassy to Jerusalem. Will the American Embassy be moving from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and, if so, what will be the consequences of that? Shoshana, it is U.S. law that the American Embassy in Israel is to be located in Jerusalem but it is in Tel Aviv and the reason for that is the president can waive that law every six months should he deem it in the national security interest of the United States. A six month deadline is rapidly approaching. [The President signed a new waiver] Do you see the American Embassy moving to Jerusalem?

Bryen: I do not see the Embassy moving to Jerusalem. I do not see that anytime soon. The President made an announcement that Jerusalem is the capital of the State of Israel. I think what he is really doing is sending a message to the Palestinians that they are expected to give something in this conversation. Remember, he almost closed the PLO Mission in Washington because it was here in violation of the terms of its establishment. He's poking at the Palestinians in various ways and he's succeeding in making them angry. They are furious. They said they are going to cancel the "peace process" if Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, but there is no "peace process" and there won't be one until the Palestinians figure out how to play. It is possible that what you are seeing is the Trump administration poking at them and saying. "Look, you have something to lose here. It's not just that we beat up Israel on your behalf. You could lose something." I don't think they want to lose things—particularly the support of the United States. Maybe it will work out; I'm not sure. I'm a great skeptic on this but it's possible that it could work out.

Bates: Shoshana, Mahmoud Habbash who was an advisor to the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, said in the

presence of Abbas that, if the United States recognized Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel, "the world will pay the price" for any change in Jerusalem's status. What kind of price could he be alluding too?

Bryen: I don't think there is a price the Palestinians are able to make the world pay. They can increase terrorism in Israel to the extent that they are able. They are able to make certain people pay some of the time. But really? Do you think you would notice if the peace process fell apart?

Bates: As you said a moment ago, what Peace Process?

Bryen: Right. I think they are shooting blanks here with the exception of their ability to foment terrorism at some level against Israel—and that I do think is worth noting and worth worrying about.

Bates: Seth, how important is it to the government of Israel? That's question number one. Question number two, how important is it to the population of Israel? How important is it that the United States recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move its Embassy there?

Frantzman: It's extremely important because, obviously to America, that would be symbolic. That would give cover for many other countries to do the same. It would really be extraordinarily historical to have a country whose capital is not recognized by the international community. It is incredibly bizarre that somehow Jerusalem is not recognized as the capital of Israel. Like a lot of things in Israel, the country keeps going and the international community can say what they want.

Bates: So the Palestinians have called for an emergency meeting of the Arab League. What do they expect to accomplish at such a meeting?

Bryen: Basic Israel bashing because really the Arab League

has no ability to alter the facts on the ground either. I think the Palestinians are looking for political support in a way, but t they may not get it. The Saudis think the Palestinians are in the way of Saudi fundamental interests.

Gordon: I agree with Shoshana given what's happened there and the over-arching threats from Iran. I think the Arab league is neutered in terms of this discussion. Final question for you both: does the Trump administration have any cards to play in the Middle East,-facing Russian regional interests there and Iranian hegemony?

Bryen: Well there is one kind of basic card. A lot of what the Russians do is intended to get out of the sanctions that the West has imposed because of Ukraine and Crimea. One of the things they would like from us is to help them do that. It's a card. I don't think it's a great card. I don't think it's necessarily a winning card, but we have very little in the way of leverage. It is conceivable that it may be the only card we have—and we can't play it by the way because the Europeans won't let us at—so it's not an effective card.

Gordon: Seth from your vantage point in Jerusalem what is the U.S.'s ability to leverage anything?

Frantzman: I'm pretty pessimistic. The Americans have made a bunch of bad decisions in recent years. They are stuck with an alliance with Baghdad and Baghdad has been partly taken over by the Iranians. They have ditched their Kurdish allies. Turkey is close to Qatar, is closer to Iran now and is part of the Russian camp. The allies in Lebanon are weak. America has Israel and Saudi Arabia as allies. America is in a bad situation and it doesn't have many cards to play. It will take a decade or more to find if America wants to get back in the game. I'm sure there are ways they could do it. You could start to destabilize the Iranian regime, you could support dissident groups, you could arm them, and you could do all sorts of interesting things the Americans used to do during

the Cold War. However, America is not predisposed to return those strategies. That's where we are.

Bates: Thank you for this great conversation with Jerry Gordon, Senior Editor of the New English, Shoshana Bryen, Senior Director of the Jewish Policy Center in Washington and Seth Frantzman, Opinion Editor at *The Jerusalem Post*. Thank you all for joining the discussion here on 1330 WEBY.

[Listen](#) to the original 1330amWEBY interview.

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