

Modi's Moment, If He'll Seize It: Getting To No (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Why is this a good time for Modi to cement his ties to Israel, even beyond what was accomplished in Israel during his visit? The Arabs have so much to preoccupy and worry them, so many different interests, with shifting alliances and feuds among both state actors and terrorist groups, and see-sawing power relations within countries (see Egypt Iraq, Libya), that “Palestine” is no longer at the top of their To-Do List. In fact, it's pretty far down, though you'd never know it from all the anti-Israel activity on American college campuses. The other Arabs are getting tired of the “Palestinians” – whether the Fast Jihadists of Hamas (a group even Saudi Arabia now opposes), or the Slow Jihadists, corrupt as all get out, of the “Palestine Authority.” They have bigger fish to fry.

To summarize the at times kaleidoscopic and bewildering situation:

In Egypt, Mubarak was in and the Muslim Brotherhood was out; then Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was in, and Mubarak was out; now Al-Sisi is in, and Morsi is not just out of power but in prison. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood continues its hit-and-run attacks on Egyptian police stations and on soldiers. And lately there have been similar attacks by Islamic State fighters. Al-Sisi is a despot, but an enlightened one, on the Middle Eastern scale, who may have Morsi in prison, but still has to worry constantly about attacks on the police and soldiers and on the hapless Copts, by both IS and Muslim Brotherhood fighters, who have proven adept at hiding in the Sinai's under-patrolled expanses.

In Syria, the Alawites have defied every prediction of their defeat and have held on, but only with the help of both Russian airplanes and Hezbollah and Iranian militias. Meanwhile, the "secular" rebels are supported by the Americans. The Americans also support the Kurds, who have proven to be the best fighters against the Islamic State, but also have their own agenda in Rojava, which may include elevating their de facto autonomy into de jure independence, or possibly becoming part of an independent Kurdistan centered in Iraq. Meanwhile, Turkey, ostensibly an ally of the Americans against the Islamic State, bombs the Kurds, while continuing to fight the same enemy the Kurds are fighting, that is, the Islamic State.

In Iraq the once-dominant Sunnis lost power when Saddam Hussein was toppled, and are dominated now themselves by the Shi'a, who greatly outnumber them. The Shi'a will not relinquish the power they now have, and the Sunnis in Iraq give no signs of accepting their loss of power. Iranian forces are helping the Shi'a militia in Iraq, reluctant to pull out, but by remaining increase the fury of Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, the Sunnis in Iraq allowed the Islamic State, based in Mosul, to present its fighters as defenders of the Sunnis, who fought the Shi'a as the worst kind of Infidels. But the horrific sadism of the Islamic State was then blamed partially on those ordinary Sunnis, who may never recover in the eyes of the Shi'a, Christian, Turcoman, Kurd, and Yazidi victims of IS.

Despite their deep differences, both the Shi'a and the Sunni Arabs view with alarm the plans announced by the Iraqi Kurds for a referendum on Kurdish independence but, at the moment, there is not much they can do to stop the battle-hardened, American-supplied, Kurds in Northern Iraq. It is impossible to predict whether Iraq will remain in one piece, whether a Kurdish state will emerge, whether Iraq's Sunnis and Shi'a can continue to exist in the same state, or if it will impossible to put Iraq back together again. And who will dominate, and

who be dominated? Will Iranian militiamen remain in Iraq? Will the Saudis feel compelled to send aid, including possibly Pakistani Sunni mercenaries? And who can possibly envisage, too, what Syria will look like in a year or two? Or Libya? Or Qatar, if it continues to defy Saudi Arabia? Or Yemen? So many things that once seemed impossible now seem entirely possible. Everything is in flux, nothing is stable.

And casting a shadow over the whole Middle East is the deep enmity between Shi'a Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia. What this war, both of words and of weapons, means is that the Saudis now have an unstated de facto alliance with Israel, whose formidable air force they quietly hope will "solve" the Iranian nuclear problem. At the moment, it would not make sense for Saudi Arabia to try to deprive Israel of what strategic depth it now possesses, which would merely make it more difficult and dangerous for Israel to take on Iran. The Saudi rulers, the other Gulf Arabs, and Al-Sisi, all have a stake in not weakening Israel's strategic position as long as they have the same enemy – Iran. And Iran is likely to remain that common enemy for a very long time. And Modi surely knows this.

The decision not to visit Ramallah nor to utter a word either about the "Palestinian people" or the "two-state solution" shows that Modi did not think it necessary to offer even a symbolic gesture to the Arabs to counterbalance his embrace of Israel. India is looking at Israel now through a very different lens, one with a much larger focus that extends beyond the confines of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. It also suggests that Modi does not believe he need worry about a backlash from Arab countries. The message was made even blunter when Modi made an unscheduled visit to the tomb of Theodore Herzl, the founder of the modern Zionist movement.

The Arab oil weapon that bothered Modi's predecessors clearly no longer exists. There are three developments that explain this. First, there is much more non-OPEC oil available, thanks

especially to the phenomenal success of fracking (which now provides 50% of America's oil production, while it provided only 2% in 2000). Second, the ever-larger share of world energy production that comes from renewables – biomass, wind, solar, hydro and geothermal – puts constant downward pressure on oil prices. To take just one example: solar energy capacity has increased by 5,700 percent since 2002. Third, technological advances, such as electric cars, more efficient batteries and more efficient solar collectors, keep coming on stream at an accelerated rate. All three developments force Arab oil producers to cling to whatever customers they have. It is India that brandishes an "oil weapon" – that is, its ability to keep decreasing its use of OPEC oil – and not the Muslim oil producers who desperately need to hold onto India's business.

And Modi knows that other Muslim threats are hollow as well. In Kashmir, for example, aside from lip service, Arabs can't do much to support the Kashmiri Muslims. Furthermore, Narendra Modi has not forgotten the mass expulsions and killings of Kashmiri Pandits by local Muslims. There is nothing in Modi's history that suggests he feels he needs to placate Indian Muslims by taking an anti-Israel line. Quite the contrary, he is a great and unabashed admirer of Israel, as he has repeatedly stated, with real feeling, during his trailblazing trip.

Aside from all the greetings, and the ceremonies, and the wreath-layings, and the bear hugs, and the agreements that have been signed about weapons and water and trade that have been made public to great fanfare, and other deals, just as important, that have been kept quiet, there is one more thing that Narendra Modi could and should do. In the U.N., at UNESCO, and at the meetings of the U.N. Committee on Human Rights, India has voted consistently with the Muslim Arabs and against Israel – until recently. In 2015, India changed its vote on several anti-Israel resolutions from Yes to Abstain.

In May of this year, India similarly moved from Yes to Abstain on a UNHRC resolution denying Israel sovereignty of any part of Jerusalem. Given all the strife within and among so many of the Arab lands, in Yemen and Syria, in Iraq and Qatar, in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, there is no better time than now for Modi to go further still at the U.N., and as each of those hideous anti-Israel resolutions again comes up for a vote, to change those Yeses and those Abstains into resounding Noes.

The “Palestinians” will rage. A few Muslim states will say how “disappointed” they are. Perhaps a few will threaten retaliation, but how and with what? There is no longer – if there ever really was – an “oil weapon.” Modi owes the Muslim electorate in India exactly nothing. That will be the end of it. The Arabs now have much bigger worries than “Palestine” – they’re worried about themselves, their regimes, their economies, the persistence of IS terrorism now directed at them, the stability of the region, the threat from Iran.

Let Modi make a clean break with the previous policy, and insist that from now on, as the anti-Israel resolutions, each more outrageous than the next, are presented at various U.N. committees, such as those on Human Rights or World Heritage Sites, India will vote No. No longer will India be counted among the history-deniers. Instead, as itself a victim of Muslim invasion and conquest, India will stop upholding the farcical claim that “Palestine” belongs to the Muslim Arabs, while the Jews, who were living in the Land of Israel thousands of years before Islam existed, have no claim at all. The latest travesty was the resolution passed by UNESCO to assign both the Old City of Hebron and the Cave of the Patriarchs to the “Palestinian territory.” Hebron is no ordinary city. It is the second holiest city, after Jerusalem, in Judaism. Jews lived in Hebron continuously from antiquity until 1929. In that year mobs of hysterical Arabs, having heard false rumors that the Jews were trying to take over the Al-Aksa Mosque, engaged in a pogrom, killing 69 Jews, while

those who survived the massacre then fled Hebron. They returned in numbers to the Old City only after Hebron was captured during the Six-Day War. As for the Tomb of the Patriarchs, that site was sacred to Jews long before Islam existed. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, were Jews, later appropriated – like Noah, like Jesus – for the Muslim narrative. With this vote on the Old City of Hebron and the Cave of the Patriarchs, the U.N. for the first time declared a Jewish holy site to be exclusively “Palestinian.” What’s more, it was declared to be a World Heritage Site requiring “protection” because it was “endangered,” presumably because Jews might damage it, though no one thought to explain why Jews would damage a site that is sacred in Judaism. This vote came within weeks of UNESCO’s annual vote on Jerusalem, the one calling for a halt to Jewish archaeological digging (which has had the result, unwelcome to the Muslims, of finding too much Jewish history), in essence denying Israel’s claim to sovereignty over Jerusalem, the holiest city in Judaism. In the resolution, Israel is called “the Occupying Power.”

India was not on the World Heritage Committee this year, but will certainly be in the future, as it has been in the past. It serves on the U.N. Human Rights Council for the rest of this year, and of course in the General Assembly. It would be fitting if the Indian ambassador would offer the same steadfast support for Israel that American ambassador Nikki Haley, an Indian-American (her parents were Sikhs, not Hindus), has been eloquently – and indignantly–presenting, these past few months. The Muslims who conquered most of India tried to efface its non-Muslim history; Hindu, in the main, but also Jain, Sikh, Buddhist. They destroyed thousands of Hindu temples and temple complexes, using their ruins as building material for mosques. Narendra Modi knows this well, knows how, for example, Muslims destroyed the famous Ayodhya temple and built the Babri mosque over its ruins, as part of the Muslim attempt to physically efface the Hindu past. Modi

surely knows that Muslims engaged in similar destruction of Jewish sites in the Land of Israel. Some of this destruction took place within living memory. When the Jordanians controlled the Old City of Jerusalem, between 1948 and 1967, they razed to the ground 34 of its 35 synagogues, some dating back many centuries, and uprooted the ancient tombstones in the Jewish cemetery at the Mount of Olives to line Jordanian army latrines. Not a syllable of protest came from the United Nations, then or since, about this “endangerment” – that is, destruction – of these sites.

Then there are the host of other anti-Israel resolutions, about “war crimes” during the Gaza War, or the building of settlements on “occupied Arab land,” that are annually passed by one U.N. body or another. Until quite recently India always voted “Yes” on all of these resolutions, but beginning in 2015 there were the first signs of change: on the “war crimes in Gaza” resolution, India changed its “Yes” to an “Abstain,” and has continued to “Abstain” on that particular resolution ever since. It has still voted “Yes” on other anti-Israel resolutions, such as three resolutions also passed in 2015 on human rights in the “occupied Syrian Golan,” “the rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination” and on the “human rights situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including East Jerusalem.” The most disturbing new resolution that passed in 2015 set up a database of Israeli and international firms working in the “illegal Israeli settlements,” which will make it easier for the BDS movement to put pressure on those firms, and on that, India voted “Yes.” But this year, when UNESCO’s Jerusalem resolution came up for a vote, which as always disavowed Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, calling Israel the “occupying power,” and insisting that “legislative and administrative measures and actions taken by Israel, the occupying power, which have altered or purport to alter the character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and in particular, the “basic law” on Jerusalem, are null and void and must be

rescinded forthwith" India changed its former "Yes" to an "Abstain." That infuriated the "Palestinians" and raised Israeli hopes.

The latest outrage was the vote by the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO to name the Old City of Hebron and the Tomb of the Patriarchs as a World Heritage Site in the state of "Palestine." The significance of Hebron in Judaism, and the damage the city and its Jewish inhabitants underwent in 1929, are described above. As for entrusting the "Palestinians" with protecting from "destruction" the Tomb of the Patriarchs [by the Israelis], there does not exist a single example of such destruction of religious sites by Jews, though there are many examples of destruction of Jewish and Christian sites by Muslim Arabs (and of Hindu and Buddhist sites by non-Arab Muslims). The most recent example dates from 2000, when Arabs set ablaze the Tomb of Joseph, near Nablus, later filling what remained of the tomb (the third most sacred site in Judaism) with burning garbage to ensure that nothing would be left. Not a peep from the World Heritage Site committee, then or since, about that destruction.

This could be Modi's Moment.

In abandoning the previous Indian pandering to the Arabs on "Palestine," in refusing to accept the Muslim re-writing of history (in Israel as in India) with this claim that Jews have no ancient connection to Jerusalem (for it is according to the U.N., "occupied Palestinian land"), in denying that Hebron and the Tomb of the Patriarchs are "Palestinian" and in need of "protection" from Jews (who revere the site), Modi could at long last do justice to, and strike a decisive blow for, history and the truth. Not everyone gets so spectacular a chance to right a wrong. Modi might even shame some other countries into following suit.

What more can one ask of him? What less can he do?

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