

Thomas Friedman Has Learned Nothing and Forgotten Nothing

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Thomas Friedman, who has spent decades at *The New York Times* preaching to the Israelis as to what they must do, has managed to find fault with, while so many others are cheering, the Israel-UAE-Bahrain agreement. The story is [here](#).

Thomas Friedman, the New York Times pontificator on the Middle East, and especially Israel, could not resist. In a column titled “The Love Triangle That Spawned Trump’s Mideast Peace Deal” between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain (Sept. 15), he rightly praised “anything that makes the Middle East more like the European Union and less like the Syrian civil war.”

As is usual with Friedman, he has things backwards. It’s not

the UAE-Israel-Bahrain agreements that “spawned” (i.e., produced, brought forth) Trump’s Mideast Peace Deal, but Trump’s Deal that brought forth the normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE, and then the diplomatic recognition between Israel and Bahrain. But obviously for Tom Friedman it would not do to credit the troglodytic Trump or his son-in-law Jared Kushner for any such achievement.

Seizing the opportunity, Friedman cited his 40 years as a chronicler of Arab-Israel diplomacy to segue from an engaging analysis of the new agreement to his long-favored trope: Israel’s occupation of “Palestinian” land. “Maybe the most important unintended consequence of [Jared] Kushner’s peace endeavor,” he imagines, was its exposure of the fact that the Israeli government “is completely incapable of accepting any kind of two-state solution with the Palestinians.”

Isn’t Friedman missing something? He says Israel is “completely incapable of accepting any kind of two-state solution.” But the Israelis have repeatedly proved themselves perfectly capable of accepting a few possible two-state solutions, including the latest one proposed by the Trump Administration, which Tom Friedman himself is “completely incapable of accepting.”

Wasn’t it the Palestinians who kept refusing a “two-state solution,” first when Yassir Arafat refused to accept almost the entire West Bank offered to him by Ehud Barak in 2000, and again when Mahmoud Abbas refused to accept a near-total Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, and a relinquishment of Israeli control over Jerusalem’s Old City from Ehud Olmert in 2008? And the Trump Peace-To-Prosperity plan has been accepted by Israel. It again provides for a “two-state solution,” with a state of “Palestine” including 100% of Gaza, 70% of the West Bank, and two large enclaves of territory in Israel’s Negev to compensate for the 30% of the West Bank that Israel, mainly for security reasons, will retain. Yet here is Friedman who,

after Israel has just accepted “the two-state solution” crafted over many months by the Americans, blandly claims that the Israel government “is completely incapable of accepting any kind of two-state solution with the Palestinians.” But it just did.

Kushner’s plan would allow Israel to annex “about 30% of the West Bank” (biblical Judea and Samaria), where most of the settlements that Friedman despises are located. In Friedman’s rendition, “hardline settlers in Bibi’s coalition” – referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – unable to secure sovereignty over the entire West Bank, opposed yielding the remaining 70% for a Palestinian state. But Netanyahu, as he is wont to do under pressure, abandoned his annexation plan in return for the UAE promise to normalize relations with Israel.

This misstates the facts. Netanyahu agreed to “suspend,” not to abandon forever, the extension of Israeli sovereignty – not that tendentious “annexation” – to the Jordan Valley and the five large settlement blocs.

For Friedman, never a fan of settlers, that is cause for celebration. He foresees that Palestinians – frustrated by the absence of statehood and unrelenting Israeli control – “will eventually demand equal rights and Israeli citizenship.” That would “pose a direct threat to Israel’s Jewish and democratic character in a way no Arab army ever has.” He imagines, with evident glee, that this would be Netanyahu’s “true legacy.”

The “absence of statehood” can be rectified in a New York minute if the Palestinians were willing to accept the state offered them – along with, let’s not forget, \$50 billion in aid – in the Trump Plan. Let us remind Tom Friedman that Israel has a claim to the entire West Bank, based on the express terms of the Mandate for Palestine, established by the

League of Nations. According to that Mandate, the Jewish state was to include all the territory from the Golan Heights in the north to the Red Sea in the south, and from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean. The Palestine Mandate remained in force even after the League of Nations itself had been replaced by the United Nations: Article 80 of the U.N. Charter committed the U.N. to recognize and fulfill the terms of any remaining Mandates. Friedman has managed, in 40 years of commenting on the Arab-Israeli question, to avoid discussing either the express terms of the Mandate for Palestine (especially the Preamble, and Articles 4 and 6) or the territories assigned to it by the League of Nations. An astonishing omission in his hundreds of columns about Israel, no doubt deliberate, because Friedman doesn't want to draw attention to the Mandate's provisions, including that which calls for "close settlement by Jews on the land" (Article 6) or to its maps, that clearly show the territory set aside for the future Jewish state.

When he talks about "unrelenting control" by the Israelis in the West Bank, Friedman forgets that Israel has already given up that "unrelenting control" in Areas A and B of the West Bank. Area A is exclusively administered by the Palestinian National Authority, while Area B is administered by both the Palestinian Authority and Israel. Only in Area C do the Israelis still maintain total control. This is the most important thing to know about the West Bank's current division of sovereignty, but apparently, Tom Friedman has forgotten all about it. It must be wonderful to be a famous pundit like Tom Friedman, impervious to criticism, and able to get away, it seems, with the most ignorant and absurd remarks.

It may be, however, that Friedman and not Netanyahu "flunked" the test. A brief summary of his Brandeis University leadership in a "Middle East Peace Group," his stint as a UPI reporter in Lebanon, and his decades as the New York Times Jerusalem bureau chief and columnist indicate why.

The Peace Group published a statement, signed by Friedman,

discounting Palestinian terrorist attacks as “clearly not representative of the diverse elements of the Palestinian people,” as though that mattered to Israeli victims. Co-chaired by Friedman, the Peace Group joined Breira (“alternative”), an organization of left-wing rabbis and Jewish intellectuals who favored Palestinian statehood, and blamed Israel and the United States for Middle East instability.

Forty years have gone by, and as Talleyrand once said, Tom Friedman has learned nothing and forgotten nothing. He still holds to the same recipe for Middle East “peace” that he did as a Brandeis undergraduate. Nothing that he saw as a journalist in the Middle East, in Beirut and Jerusalem, has caused him to reconsider his youthful prescription: Israel should go back to the 1949 armistice lines, the Palestinians should be given their state, and a treaty between Israel and “Palestine” should take care of any little contretemps that might arise in the future. So simple, and so obvious, which is why Friedman is so angry with the Israelis: why can’t they see things the way he does?

Hired by UPI after Middle East studies at Oxford, Friedman was posted to Beirut, where he quickly learned the importance of “keeping on good terms with the PLO.” In 1981, he was hired by the New York Times, returning to Beirut in time to cover the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps by Christian Phalangists. The massacre, he concluded, was “a blot on Israel and the Jewish people.” Indeed, he confessed, it demolished “every illusion I ever held about the Jewish state.”...

While at Oxford Friedman studied at St. Antony’s College, one of the most notorious centers for pro-Palestinian Arab propagandists posing as academics. It gets a lot of Gulf Arab financial support. Its most famous professor has been Tariq

Ramadan. After Oxford, Friedman then went to work for UPI in Lebanon,, at a time when Beirut was controlled by the PLO, and any journalist who wanted to be able to travel about freely in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon needed to keep “on good terms with the PLO.” Having already been indoctrinated at St. Antony’s with pro-Palestinian views, Friedman found that in Beirut it was not hard to get with the program. He internalized the fear journalists felt with the PLO constantly monitoring them, practiced self-censorship, and filed UPI stories that pleased the PLO sufficiently for him to be allowed to travel safely around the city, including PLO-held West Beirut. Friedman, of course, was not the only one so co-opted. The methods used by the PLO to terrorize journalists into writing what the terror group wanted have been described in detail [here](#).

There was no need to “correct” Tom Friedman; the PLO found him to be most accommodating.

In Beirut in 1981, Friedman covered the massacre by Christian Phalangists of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps. He blamed the Israelis for those attacks, even though not a single Israeli was inside either camp, and the Israelis standing outside the camps had no idea that the Christian Phalangists were attacking not only fighters, but also women and children. In fact, the Christians had mostly used knives so that the Israelis would not be alerted by the sound of gunfire.

Nonetheless, for Friedman, the Phalangist attack on Sabra and Shatila has remained for nearly forty years an Israeli “war crime.” And though not a single Israeli took part in those attacks, or knew that civilians were also being killed inside those camps – the Israelis thought the Phalange was only clearing the camps of PLO fighters – Friedman’s reaction was characteristically over-the-top. The attacks (carried out by Christian Phalangists who made every effort to hide from the Israelis what they were doing) constituted “a blot on Israel

and the Jewish people.” Why? On what theory must Israel and “the Jewish people” be blamed? What kind of “collective guilt” is being imposed on all Jews? And does Tom Friedman consider that he, too, and his wife, and his children, and his billionaire father-in-law, now have a “blot” on themselves, as part of the Jewish people? I doubt it. Friedman claims that those killings (by Christian Phalangists) shattered forever any “illusions” he had about the Jewish state. Did the last 400 terror attacks by the Palestinians on Israeli civilians shatter forever any “illusions” he had about the Palestinians? No, I thought not.

Now reporting from Israel for the New York Times, Friedman continued to ignore the essential point: the Mandate for Palestine, that recognized the 3,500 year uninterrupted Jewish presence in the territory assigned to the Jews for the future Jewish National Home always included all of Judea and Samaria (a.k.a. the West Bank) The West Bank was “occupied” only by the Jordanians, who had no legal claim on that land, from 1949 to 1967. Israel never relinquished its rightful claim, based on the Mandate, to that territory, but it was only in 1967, after the Six Day War, that Israel was able to assert the right that it already possessed.

Criticism of Israel, especially by Israeli leftists who were his primary opinion sources, identified the Jewish state as the major source of Middle East problems. So, embracing moral equivalence between Israelis and Palestinians, Friedman cited Israeli “occupation” of “Palestinian” land as the explanation for its moral decline. He wondered whether Israel would become “a Jewish South Africa, permanently ruling Palestinians in West Bank homelands.” Or, perhaps, “a Jewish Prussia, trying to bully all of its neighbors.”

Friedman’s social circle when he was in Israel consisted almost entirely of Israeli leftists, always quick to attack their own government and to sympathize with the Palestinian

Arabs. They also insisted that tiny Israel was the major source of Middle Eastern violence and disarray. But Israel was only responding to attacks on it, whether by states, as in 1948, 1967 and 1973, or by terror groups, whose attacks led to Israel's wars with the PLO in 1982, with Hezbollah in 2006, and with Hamas in 2008-2009, 2012, and 2014. In Tom Friedman's view, it is Israel's "occupation" of the West Bank that is the source of most of the Middle East's woes. That, and nothing more.

It's not the mismanagement and massive corruption in virtually every Arab country, and the massive protests that are violently suppressed, that cause the Middle East's problems. It's Israel. Nor is it the murder of 182,000 Kurds by Saddam Hussein in Operation Anfal, and his invasion of Kuwait that caused "problems" in the Middle East. It's Israel. No need to pay attention to the eight-year (1980-1988) Iran-Iraq War, which cost 1.5 million lives. It's still Israel at the center of things. Ignore the sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shia, in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Bahrain. Look instead at those 2,000 new settlers on the West Bank. How can the Arabs be expected to overlook that. Forget the Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, that briefly took power in Egypt, and continues to threaten the reign of General El-Sisi, as well as the Gulf monarchies. Still underneath all that, it's Israel. Ignore the continued threat in the Sinai to Egypt, from regrouped remnants of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Israel. It's not the Saudi-Iranian proxy war in Yemen you need worry about. Yes, you're right again: Israel. It's not the nine-year Syrian civil war, or the five-year civil wars in Libya and Yemen. It's Israel, the "apartheid" state. It's not the spread by Iran of its power and influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, in order to create a "Shi'a crescent" that fills the Sunni states with dread. No, it's none of these things. Always, for Friedman, it's Israel, and its "occupation" of the West Bank, that explains the violence and disarray, the coups and civil wars and terror groups and more wars, all over the

Middle East. It would be fascinating to have Tom Friedman try to explain, for a start, just how Israel is responsible for the three civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, for Iran's Shi'a crescent, and for the missiles fired by Yemeni Houthis at Saudi oil installations.

As for Friedman's dreamy belief that Israel has suffered a "moral decline" because it holds onto the West Bank, there is no evidence presented of this supposed "decline." I don't think the half-million Israelis now living in the West Bank feel the least bit morally inferior to Jews living inside the 1949 armistice lines. Nor should they. They know that they are living, as encouraged by the Mandate, on state and waste lands and, in some cases, on land bought from, or long abandoned by, Arabs. Israel's clear title to the land between the Jordan and the sea is based, it needs to be repeated, on the express provisions of the Mandate for Palestine, especially Article 6 which requires Great Britain, as holder of the Mandate, to encourage "close settlement by Jews on the land, including State lands and waste lands not required for public purposes." And that is what those Israelis in the West Bank have been doing, sometimes enduring great hardship and danger – no "moral decline" there – to stake with their living presence the claim of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel.

Friedman airily dismissed waves of Palestinian terrorist attacks as merely a "constant challenge – like a continual poke in the ribs." Celebrating their emergence as a "people" and a "nation," he seemed surprised that "Palestinian" and "terrorist" were linked. In his rendering of the biblical narrative, they dared "to challenge the Israelis the way David challenged Goliath."

Friedman's remark about terror attacks, that have made life so hard for so many Israelis, is nauseating. He claims those attacks are merely a "constant challenge—like a continual poke in the ribs." A "poke in the ribs"? Is that how we should

describe the 25 hostages, 22 of them children, who were massacred at an elementary school in Ma'alot? The families blown up at the Sbarro pizza parlor, with 15 killed and 130 wounded – was that a “poke in the ribs”? The 30 elderly Israelis who were murdered, and 130 others wounded, as they were celebrating Passover? The Coastal Road Massacre, where a bus was hijacked and 38 Jews, including 13 children, were killed, and 71 wounded? Was the murder of the 4-year-old girl, whose head was smashed in by a Palestinian terrorist's rifle butt in front of her father, before he killed the father too, just one more “poke in the ribs”? Multiply by a thousand those attacks I've just mentioned, and you will have some idea of what the Israelis have suffered, decade after decade, from Arab terrorists. Friedman's dismissal, crude and cruel, of that terrorism as merely a “poke in the ribs” is unforgivable.

The unfeeling Tom Friedman has no powers of empathy when it comes to the Israelis. But when it comes to the Palestinians, it's a very different story. For them he has a ready tear, offering them “the pity and the sorrow.” He enthuses about how the Palestinians became a “people,” supposedly a nation forged in the smithy of their souls, that is, their heroic struggle against their wicked occupiers. That's not what happened. The “Palestinian people” came into being – were deliberately invented – after the Arabs lost the Six-Day War. They recognized that in order to take on Israel again, they would first have to conduct a propaganda war that would force Israel to let itself be squeezed back within the 1949 armistice lines, with a nine-mile wide waist, from Qalqilya to the sea. And at that point, they could again go in for the kill. Friedman is unaware of this deliberate creation of the “Palestinian people”; he never thinks to ask himself why, before 1967, no Arab leader or diplomat ever mentioned the “Palestinian people.” Why is there no record, in the proceedings of the United Nations, of a “Palestinian people” being spoken of in the deliberations of the General Assembly in 1948, or 1954, or 1957, or indeed at any time until after

the Six Day War? How incurious of Tom Friedman not to have pondered that telling absence. And surely Tom Friedman has run across that famous quote from Zuheir Mohsen in 1977, describing the creation of the “Palestinian people”: “The Palestinian people does not exist. The creation of a Palestinian state is only a means for continuing our struggle against the state of Israel for our Arab unity. In reality today there is no difference between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese. Only for political and tactical reasons do we speak today about the existence of a Palestinian people, since Arab national interests demand that we posit the existence of a distinct ‘Palestinian people’ to oppose Zionism.” But in all his years of pontificating, Friedman has never mentioned that quote. No need to wonder why.

Friedman, like his newspaper [The New York Times] , routinely applied a double standard to Israel (that he imaginatively recast as a “unique double dimension”). He preposterously claimed that when Israel no longer was “judged by standards applied to no other country,” it meant that “something very essential in Israel’s character and the character of the Jewish people has died.” He declined to say what double standards revealed about journalistic integrity.

Here Friedman thinks that far from being unfair, it is right and proper that Israel, that has fended off constant assaults on the lives of its people, be “judged by standards” that are “applied to no other country.” This is outrageous. If Israel is not held to these higher standards which, among the nations of the world, should apply only to it, then – *also sprach* Tom Friedman – “something very essential in Israel’s character and the character of the Jewish people has died.” What? Here is an offensive declaration of Jewish moral superiority by Tom Friedman: Jews are better than others, and *must be*, so I am right to hold Israel to a much higher standard than I do other countries. That is not what Israelis, permanently fighting for their right to exist, think, nor what they want. They want

only that their country be held to the exact same standards of behavior as other nations in the advanced West. "Spare us, please, Tom Friedman, your insistence that we must behave better than anyone else because – you think –we are better than anyone else. On both counts, we beg to differ."

Returning to the United States as a Times columnist who could lacerate Israel at will, Friedman believed that there was "no hope for peace without a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank." Yearning for a "total Israeli withdrawal" to pre-1967 lines, he warned that without a two-state solution, "Israel will be stuck with an apartheid-like, democracy-sapping, permanent occupation." Echoing a trope favored by his colleague Anthony Lewis, he feared that "scary religious nationalist zealots" might lead Israel into the "dark corner" of a South African future of apartheid.

Friedman claims that only a "total Israeli withdrawal" to the 1949 armistice lines will bring peace. The very opposite is true. Were Israel to be squeezed back within the 1949 armistice lines that Abba Eban once described as the "lines of Auschwitz," it would again have a nine-mile wide waist from Qalqilya to the sea; a motorized invader from the east could cut the country in two within less than a half-hour. Arab appetites would not be sated, but whetted, were Israel pushed back to the 1949 lines. A much-reduced Israel would be too tempting a target, difficult for many Arab states (and Iran, and Turkey), to resist. Friedman seems not to understand that the only way to preserve the peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors is not through treaties, though they can help somewhat to change atmospherics and create goodwill, but through deterrence – the same strategy used by the West during the Cold War to prevent war with the Soviet Union. If Israel's military remains overwhelmingly stronger– and obviously so – than that of any potential enemy or group of enemies, it will be able to keep the peace.

Friedman has other ideas. He wants Israel to take a huge risk by returning to the 1949 armistice lines, lines that have no particular significance save that they showed where the armies happened to be at a certain time on a certain day when the guns fell silent, and to place its faith in treaties, and especially in a treaty of peace with a Muslim "Palestine." In the West, the Roman rule applies to treaties: *Pacta sunt servanda*, "agreements must be kept" or "treaties must be obeyed" – it is the oldest principle of international law. But in the Muslim lands, treaties with non-Muslims may be broken with impunity. Muhammad made a treaty with the Meccans at Hudaibiyya in 628 A.D. It was a truce, a *hudna*, meant to last 10 years. But after 18 months, sensing that his own forces were now sufficiently strong, Muhammad broke the treaty and attacked the Meccans. That became the model of all subsequent treaty-making, and treaty-breaking, by Muslims with non-Muslims. Given such a history, Israel cannot rely for its security on treaties with Muslim states. In the end, it is only Israel's military power that will keep it safe.

Does Tom Friedman know about the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, and what it means for Israel's reliance on treaties with Muslim states today? Can his ignorance of Islam be this great, given that he has been writing about Muslim countries for forty years, or does he know, but refuses to publicly recognize, the significance of the Hudaibiyya agreement?

Friedman also brings up that red herring, "apartheid." If Israel doesn't go back to the 1949 armistice lines – that's the only "two-state solution" Friedman will contemplate – then it will be "stuck with an apartheid-like, democracy-sapping, permanent occupation."

No, it won't be stuck. Right now there is no "occupation" in Gaza, nor in Area C of the West Bank. There are many candidates for a "two-state solution." One of them is the Trump Deal of the Century. Friedman hates that deal. He, Tom

Friedman, journalist and statesman extraordinaire, will only accept a full Israeli withdrawal to the 1949 lines as the “two-state solution.” Don’t tell him about the Palestine Mandate. That was so long ago. He doesn’t want to hear about it. And don’t mention U.N. Resolution 242, which most deliberately does not call for Israel to withdraw from “all the territories” it had won in the 1967 war, but only from “territories.” Israel is entitled to hold on to those territories that, in its judgment, it needs if it was to have, in Resolution 242’s key phrase, “secure [i.e. defensible] and recognized boundaries.” Friedman may have forgotten the precise wording of that U.N. Resolution; he certainly has forgotten – or did he never know? – the helpful gloss on Resolution 242 provided by its chief author, British Ambassador Lord Caradon. I have the feeling that yet again Tom Friedman’s ignorance is showing.

But Friedman’s dark fantasies about Israel unless it obeys his peace proposals reveal nothing more than his frustration that the Jewish state does not heed his advice for a return to its pre-1967 borders. That, of course, would heighten its vulnerability to new waves of Palestinian terrorism. He remains as he was as a Brandeis undergraduate: yearning for Palestinian statehood and furious at Israel for its determination to rebuild a state within its ancient Jewish homeland.

Friedman is irked that the Israelis for some reason choose not to heed his wise counsel. He knows better than anyone what will bring an end to the Arab-Israeli dispute – Israel need only return to the security of those 1949 armistice lines, and then sign a treaty with trustworthy “Palestine” – but the arrogant Israelis refuse to listen to him. How dare they ignore him, when he – the famous pundit and Middle East expert Tom Friedman of *The New York Times* – has been writing about this subject for more than forty years, and has never been wrong?

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