

Sympathy for the Devil: Why Iran's Leaders Should See Reflections of Themselves in Israel

by [Thomas Buonomo \(/experts/thomas-buonomo\)](#)

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Brief Analysis

If Iranian leaders want to advance a world governed by the relative justice of international law, which however imperfect is better than a world in which "the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must", they will have to cede the same implicit claims of exceptionalism that they loathe the U.S. and Israel for.

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In his book on the improbably successful 1978-79 Israel-Egypt peace process, Thirteen Days in September, Lawrence Wright notes that by 1978 the two countries had engaged in four wars over the previous thirty years -- five, if one counts the 1969-1970 War of Attrition. All but the 1956 Suez War were defensive, existential conflicts for Israel.

Neither Egypt nor Israel was primed for peace. Wright recounts that after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust museum, Begin stated to him, "With your own eyes you saw what the fate of our people was when this homeland was taken from it. No one came to our rescue....And therefore we, this entire generation, the generation of Holocaust and resurrection, swore an oath of allegiance: never again shall we endanger our people."

In his first meeting with Carter, Begin emphasized that Israel had lost one percent of its population in [the 1948 war]: 6,000 people. Begin's grandchild was the victim of a bombing in Jerusalem.

Wright characterizes Begin as "intransigent...passionate, riven with guilt, and full of rage." One autobiographical quotation he excerpts is especially insightful concerning the emotions that drove Begin: "We had to hate first and foremost, the horrifying, age-old inexcusable utter defenselessness of our Jewish people, wandering through millennia, through a cruel world.... And in our case, such hate has been nothing more and nothing less than a manifestation of that highest human feeling: love."

Balancing empathy with a sense of tragic irony, Wright notes that Begin “was deaf to the same argument made by Palestinians about their own struggle to overcome weakness and achieve justice. His life had hardened him to the suffering of others.”

”He told Carter that his earliest memory was of Polish soldiers flogging a Jew in a public park.... One day [Begin's father], Ze'ev Dov was walking with a rabbi in the street when a Polish policeman tried to cut off the rabbi's beard. ‘My father did not hesitate. He hit the sergeant's hand with his cane, which, in those times, was tantamount to inviting a pogrom.’ The rabbi and Ze'ev Dov got off with a beating. ‘My father came home that day in terrible shape, but he was happy...because he had defended the honor of the Jewish people....”

Begin honored his father's example. ““We returned home bleeding and beaten, but with the knowledge we had not been humiliated.”

Despite their own profound and visceral experiences of repression under the Shah, Iranian leaders, with too few exceptions, seem to believe that any expression of empathy toward Israel –or even acknowledgement of the historical tragedies the Jewish people have had to endure – would somehow be a betrayal of the Palestinian and Muslim cause.

The consensus among American analysts is that Iranian leaders believe they need the U.S. and Israel as enemies in order to justify their own continued political existence. It is worth questioning this theory, however. Iran will always need wise leaders to navigate the complexities and dangers of international relations and to advance the country in a way that safeguards the integrity of its Islamic principles, which form the foundation upon which its security and independence rests.

As long as the international system remains to a greater or lesser degree anarchic, threats to Iran will arise whether they come from the West, the East, or from the region itself. Iranian leaders must be wary of drifting from vigilance into paranoia, however, which inhibits them from recognizing and taking advantage of opportunities to strengthen their country's position in the world.

There is no reason why communicating a willingness to compromise on the Israeli-Palestinian issue should weaken Iran's national resolve and international diplomatic efforts to advance Palestinian statehood; in all probability, it would actually improve the effectiveness of these efforts as well as advance Iran's own national interests.

The compromise Iran would have to make, of course, would be a shift in its categorical opposition to the existence of Israel, which was legitimized by the UN General Assembly itself in 1947. Iran could do so by aligning itself with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, making its cold peace -- if not normalization of relations -- with Israel contingent upon its implementation of a two-state solution, including assured Muslim access to shared religious sites.

If Iranian leaders want to advance a world governed by the relative justice of international law, which however imperfect is better than a world in which "the strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must", they will have to cede the same implicit claims of exceptionalism that they loathe the U.S. and Israel for. And they will have to recognize that the only way there will ever be peace between the West and Muslim world is not through territorial conquest and exclusivity but through mutual accommodation of the other's right to exist and honor the spirit of their religious traditions. This is the only principle worth defending. ❖

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