

Ehud Barak's 'New York Times' Bibi-bash was anti-Zionist



CENTER FIELD
• By GIL TROY



EHUD BARAK wrote a column here. Was it anti-Zionist? (Reuters)

Ehud Barak recently wrote an alarmist op-ed claiming that Prime Minister Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu's "ultra-nationalist government" threatens Israel's "very future, identity and security." As an Israeli citizen, Barak is free to express his views, no matter how hysterical. But one wonders, as a Zionist, why he submitted his Bibi-bash to *The New York Times* rather than an Israeli newspaper.

I take no joy in questioning the Zionist credentials of Ehud Barak, Israel's most decorated war hero, and a former chief of staff and prime minister. When he was defense minister, many of us relaxed, knowing that a mature, intelligent leader was in charge. Moreover, I share Barak's frustration with Netanyahu's "capitulation" to the ultra-Orthodox, Netanyahu's silly attempt to handcuff police investigations, which he finally abandoned, and his tendency to value the land of Israel over the people of Israel.

I don't worry about Barak's op-ed making Israel "look bad." Anybody with intellectual integrity will notice that this essay eulogizing Israel's democratic character proves Israel's democratic character. Israel is the only country in the Middle East where no authorities will knock on the door of his high-priced high-rise to question him for questioning the country's leaders.

Nevertheless, it is fair to question Barak's motives in exporting his domestic political argument. Why appeal to "Big Daddy" in America to fix us?

In *Der Judenstat* (The Jewish State), his founding Zionist manifesto, Theodor Herzl complained that "The Jewish people are at present prevented by the Diaspora from conducting their political affairs themselves." In calling for the "Maccabeans" to "rise again" Herzl envisioned Jews maintaining "our own welfare." For Barak, once a model Maccabean, to whine to Americans about the Israeli prime minister's flaws violates the Zionist precept of self-determination as key to self-respect.

It's as ridiculous and unpatriotic as Hillary Clinton blasting President Donald Trump and the sorry state of American democracy in *The Times* or *The Jerusalem Post*.

Actually, it's worse. It's worse because Jews are a still-traumatized people who for centuries had to petition outsiders to help us – and occasionally settle our arguments. Despite our ancient heritage we are adolescents in the nation-state game, still learning how to wield power and rely on our own internal democratic processes. Outsourcing our problem-solving is a step backwards in our necessary development.

It's worse because Barak's behavior feels craven, as if he is auditioning for the role of the Good Jew, the one whom others will like because he bashes his own. Isra-

el has enough pathetic professors doing that, snaring fellowships and book contracts by playing the Politically Correct Israeli turncoat, betraying his people. We don't expect our war heroes to stoop so low.

And it's worse because, beyond triggering ancestral traumas, it fits a more recent pattern. For decades now, rather than learning how to court Israeli voters, too many Israeli leftists have courted America's intellectuals and diplomats. These people believe that Israel must be bullied into compromising with the Palestinians – and that only an America mobilized by Israeli liberals can accomplish that.

Moreover, as a December 3 *New York Times* editorial parading as a news article showed, these leftists have helped the

professional peace processors treat the Palestinian starting points as non-negotiable end points. In "Talk of a Peace Plan that Snubs Palestinians Roils Middle East," rather than viewing a rumored Saudi-supported Trump plan as a creative assault on decades of stale thinking – or summarizing it and the reactions objectively – the journo-propagandists called the plan "alarming" and "more tilted toward the Israelis than any ever embraced."

They used the word "only" twice in two sentences to paint Palestinians as being shortchanged, mocked the new Saudi leadership as ignorant and validated threats of another "Palestinian uprising." Essentially, the article treated the "consensus among international peacemakers" – which even most Zionist Union members would reject – as holy and logical, despite its repeated failures failed to bring peace. Barak's bellyaching abroad feeds that approach.

That anti-Zionist strategy is also counterproductive. It encouraged the Barack Obama-John Kerry Middle East misread. Obama and Kerry believed Israel needed "Tough Love" to make peace. They therefore hectored Israel, while coddling Palestinians. The result was stalemate.

As I have argued before, Bill Clinton understood that Israelis need "Love Love." When reassured, Israelis have compromised – as in the early 1990s, when the UN repudiated its offensive Zionism is Racism resolution and Israel then made the Oslo concessions. Clinton failed because he also gave the Palestinians and Yasser Arafat "Love Love," which backfired – triggering the terrorism which lost Ehud Barak the prime ministership: no left-leaning coalition since has won an Israeli majority.

Some days, US President Donald Trump seems to understand that dynamic. When he doesn't pick up the phone to call Palestinian Authority chairman Mahmoud Abbas for weeks after his inauguration, and when he follows American law to evict the Palestinians from their Washington, DC, offices or acknowledge the obvious fact that Jerusalem is Israel's capital, Palestinians swear – but sweat. Too many "experts" give them the violence veto – fearing unrest but actually risking more unrest by validating their behavior.

It's time to try a consistent policy of pressuring the Palestinians – regardless of their threats and their UN enablers' enabling. Alas, with serious people like Ehud Barak Bibi-bashing from New York, not Jerusalem, the chances are that the finger-pointing will remain frozen in Israel's direction, and the stalemate will continue. That's on Barak and his allies, not on Netanyahu and his.

The writer is the author of The Age of Clinton: America in the 1990s. His forthcoming book, The Zionist Ideas, which updates Arthur Hertzberg's classic work, will be published by The Jewish Publication Society in Spring 2018. He is a Distinguished Scholar of North American History at McGill University. Follow on Twitter @GilTroy.