

**DOMINIC LAWSON**

Monday 2 September 2013

## Dominic Lawson: So who still thinks Israel is the root of Middle East problems?

When regimes in the Middle East feel threatened by their own people, they immediately seek to blame the insurrection on Israel or 'the Jews'



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Forget the massacre of thousands in Syria and Egypt, whether by chemical weapons or more conventional methods of mass slaughter. The Middle Eastern issue galvanising some of our musical mega-stars and their followers, even now, is the treatment by Israel of Palestinians. A fortnight ago the violinist Nigel Kennedy told the audience at a Proms concert that Israel should "get rid of apartheid" – his tendentious reference to the treatment of the Arab minority within that country.

Kennedy's remarks were cheered by many in the audience at the Royal Albert Hall, but the BBC cut them from its later television broadcast of the concert, allegedly following a complaint by Lady Deech, a former governor of the corporation. The London-based Palestine Solidarity Campaign fizzed into action, declaring that "suppressing free speech and political dissent is the norm for state broadcasters under dictatorships. It is worrying when we start to see this kind of suppression being practiced by our own state broadcaster."

This remarkable suggestion that the BBC was acting as state censor on behalf of government (rather than merely demonstrating its own determination not to see its great music festival turned into a platform for contentious political slogans) is an example of how the state of Israel makes so many people lose all sense of perspective.

So it goes with Pink Floyd's Roger Waters who immediately issued a call to arms "to my colleagues in rock'n'roll" over the treatment given to "my brother Nigel Kennedy." Waters denounced "one Baroness Deech (née Fraenkel), who disputed the fact that Israel is an apartheid state". What's with the "née Fraenkel"? Presumably this is the rock star's way of letting us know that Deech is – aha! – a Jew. Enough said – although Waters did go on to say: "I have many very close Jewish friends".

Perhaps some of those friends – whether or not they adhere to Jewish dietary laws – might be tiring of his latest porcine stunt, in which Pink Floyd's pig balloon is imprinted with a Star of David before being "symbolically" shot down. With a delightful irony, this active boycotter of all things Israeli is now himself facing calls to be boycotted, from the admittedly small Jewish population of Dusseldorf, which German city is Waters' next destination on his current tour.

You might dismiss this as completely irrelevant to the slaughter on the streets of [Damascus](#) – and in any rational sense it is – were it not for the fact that the Syrian Free Press, one of Bashar-Al Assad's propaganda outlets, has been extolling Waters in recent weeks (when not too busy claiming that the murder of hundreds of children by Sarin nerve gas was actually organised by the CIA on behalf of Israel).

Given the longstanding iconography of anti-Semitism within the Middle East, it is perhaps not surprising that when regimes in the region feel threatened by their own people, they immediately seek to blame the insurrection on Israel or "the Jews". When the wave of popular uprisings sometimes known as "the Arab Spring" reached Syria, Damascus's envoy in London went on BBC's *Newsnight* to tell a clearly startled Jeremy Paxman that "the Israelis could be behind it...they could be behind any bad thing in the world."

Actually, the Israeli government was most discomfited by the uprisings in the region, rather preferring the dictators it knew to the possibility of Islamist regimes in their place. It is Israeli citizens who are now stampeding for gas masks, not those of the US, in preparation for what might follow if President Obama does unleash part of America's vast arsenal in the direction of sites believed to hold Assad's chemical weapons.

It is true that Israel in 2007 sent eight fighter jets laden with 17 tons of high explosives to demolish the Dair Alzour site in [Syria](#), which the International Atomic Energy Authority has since concluded was the base of a "gas cooled graphite moderated nuclear reactor not configured to produce electricity...built with the assistance of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." So Israel is indeed ferociously single-minded in pursuing its self-defence within the region.

Yet the idea that Israel is the proximate cause of any tension within that part of the world – and therefore of the sea of blood sweeping through [Egypt](#) and Syria – is paranoiac when not deliberately mendacious. In many cases, the origins of the problems go back to the death of the prophet Mohamed, and the split between the followers who believed his successor should be appointed under Arab tribal tradition –later known as the Sunni – and those who insisted his successor should be from his family, and nominated Mohamed's cousin and son-in-law Ali – the group which became known as Shia muslims.

In certain Arab countries, power had been held for generations by the Sunni, even while a majority of the population might have been Shia. This was the case in Iraq, where a sectarian civil war was precipitated by the disastrously misconceived US invasion. The opposite is true of Syria, a majority Sunni country, yet ruled by Alawites, a branch of the Shia. Not surprisingly, the rebels

there are overwhelmingly Sunni, backed by the Sunni regimes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar; and Bashar's main backer is the Shia regime of Iran.

This tribal and sectarian dispute, which has the potential to become the Muslim equivalent of the Thirty Years War, has about as much to do with Israel as did the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. And the peoples involved care very little, if at all, about the fate of the Palestinians – certainly much less than do Nigel Kennedy and Roger Waters.

Yet some western governments still fall for the bizarre idea that if the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians were to be sorted, then this would help to solve all the other conflicts in the region. Thus the French foreign minister Laurent Fabius declared last week, following a meeting with the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas: “The Israeli-Palestinian issue is ... perhaps the central issue of the region.”

To be fair to Fabius, that is the sort of thing visiting dignitaries are expected to say when in Ramallah. But, in the midst of the conflagrations in Egypt and [Syria](#), it does bring to mind the remark of the late French ambassador in London, Daniel Bernard, who in 2001 delivered himself of the view that “all the current troubles in the world are because of that shitty little country Israel.”

Hyperbole has surrounded that little nation ever since it was created in 1948 and the secretary of the Arab League pronounced, as five Arab countries launched a joint attack on the one-day-old state: “This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre.” Now the exterminations and massacres are Arab on Arab; but somehow it will still be said to be all to do with Israel.

I think I made a similar point on this page over six years ago – but unfortunately this is the last of my columns for The Independent. To those readers who have enjoyed reading them as much as I did writing them, I'm sorry to desert you; to those who did not – you can calm down now.



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