

SAMSON AND CASSANDRA

By Norman G. Finkelstein – April, 2024

My Mother once told me the story of an emaciated woman in the Warsaw Ghetto who would wail from her window sill that all the Jews in the ghetto would be killed. She came to be called Cassandra, after the prophetess of doom in Greek mythology. Everyone just assumed that she was mad. My Mother speculated in retrospect that somehow she had become privy to the truth: Jews weren't being "relocated" in the East; they were being transported to their deaths.

I have hesitated thus far to sound the alarm. But at the risk of being thought mad, it must, as an act of political responsibility, be said out loud: Israel is hurling toward the precipice and dragging the rest of the world with it.

A rational analysis of the current predicament must begin with this bedrock fact: Israel is a crazy state. Not a "bad actor." Not a "rogue" regime. A crazy state. The full range of Israeli elite opinion, itself reflective of Israeli society at large (which overwhelmingly supports the genocidal war in Gaza; only a handful of Israelis have refused to serve), spans a mere flea's hop:

AT ONE POLE stand "crackpot realists," of whom sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote in the American context: "they have come to believe that there ... is no other solution but war, even when they sense that war can be a solution to nothing ... they still believe that 'winning' means something, although they never tell us what." (1) Professor Benny Morris is cut squarely from this mold. He is urbane, educated, secular—and a crackpot. He once even "proved" that Israeli Jews couldn't coexist with barbarian Palestinians by inter alia mustering stats on how many more road accidents Palestinians got into! (2) Morris exhorts the US to join in an attack on Iran and then rattles the threat that if Washington doesn't rise to the occasion, Israel will go it alone by nuking Iran. He must be cognizant as he breezily proffers such counsel that an attack would not only incinerate tens of millions of Iranians—he reckons they have it coming—but also trigger a terminal retaliation. Hezbollah alone is alleged to possess 150,000 missiles. It's a circuitous auto-da-fé. That prospect, however, doesn't appear to faze Morris one bit.

AT THE OTHER POLE stand full-blown crazies—or those just one step short of this threshold. **"The greatest danger facing Israel right now," Noam Chomsky presciently observed already four decades ago, "is the 'collective version' of Samson's revenge against the Philistines—'Let me perish with the Philistines'—as he brought down the Temple in ruins."** The Samson clones ensconced in Jerusalem have either already gone mad—"we shall kill and bury the Gentiles around us while we ourselves shall die with them"—or pretend to "go crazy" so as to terrify enemies and allies alike into submission. Feigned lunacy, be it noted, easily transmutes into the real thing as the imaginary phantoms one repeatedly conjures seep into the psyche's inner

chambers. The upshot is that this madness, real or contrived, “renders rational calculations ... questionable” as Israel “may behave in the manner of what have sometimes been called ‘crazy states.’” (3) A report in yesterday’s paper fleshes out in real time this Israeli propensity to unhinged outbursts: when one senior Israeli official counseled caution, if only in the immediate term, after Iran’s symbolic retaliation, a far-right cabinet minister demanded on the contrary that Israel go “crazy.” (4)

The April 14 speech at the Security Council emergency session by Israel’s representative, Gilad Erdan, brought home just how lunatic Israel has become. Presenting a master class in—if nothing else—proximate projection, Erdan was seemingly persuaded to the bone of his being that “the Islamic regime of today is ... no different than Adolf Hitler’s Third Reich.... Just like the Nazi regime, the Ayatollah regime sows death and destruction everywhere.... For years, the world has watched the rise of this Shite Islamist Reich, yet just like during the rise of Nazism, the world has been silent”; that “Iran’s hegemonic ambitions of global domination must be stopped before it drives the world to a point of no return, to a regional war that can escalate to a world war”; that Iran was “barreling towards nuclear capabilities ... its breakout time to produce an arsenal of nuclear weapons is now weeks, mere weeks.” If the world didn’t rein in Iran, then Israel had no recourse except to bear this crushing burden on its own of stopping Hitler’s Third Reich: “We are being fired upon from all fronts, from every border. We are surrounded by Iran’s terror proxies.... All of the terror groups attacking Israel are tentacles of the same Shiite octopus, the Iranian octopus. So, I ask you, and be honest with yourselves, what would you do? What would you do if you were in Israel’s shoes? How would you react if your existence was threatened every single day? Israel cannot settle for inaction. We will defend our future.” Holding up his iPad to display an image of Israel allegedly intercepting an Iranian drone over al-Aqsa mosque, Erdan even claimed for Israel the mantle of the true guardian of Islam’s holy sites—“look at this video that shows how Israel intercepts Iranian drones above the Temple Mount and al-Aqsa mosque”—against the defilers of them in Teheran. The tonal register of his rhetorical delivery was as if a defiant accusation, Who dares doubt me?! “In every speech and in countless letters,” Erdan further recalled, “I rang the warning bell regarding Iran.” He got right that the bell must be sounded; but he got wrong from whence the madness emanates. *Medice, cura te ipsum*. If Erdan represents even half of the Israeli state and society—the fraction is arguably much higher—a catastrophe looms. True, Israeli leaders have in the past uttered certifiable lunacies. It is sufficient to recall Prime Minister Netanyahu holding up a Loony Tunes-like cartoon of the Iranian bomb at the UN and his pronouncement that it was not Hitler but the Palestinian Mufti of Jerusalem who masterminded the Final Solution.

Indeed, already as far back as the 1978 Camp David negotiations, President Carter mused about Israel’s head of state, “It’s becoming clearer that the rationality of [Menachem] Begin is in doubt.” (5) All the same, a civilizational leap backwards separates the Israel that once was from what it has become. Israel’s UN representative at the time of the 1967 (“Six-Day”) war, Abba Eban, could serially prevaricate—albeit with consummate eloquence, as befitted the triple-first graduate of Cambridge—without batting an eyelash. But still, it was

possible to rationally parse his propositions (as I once endeavoured) to prove them wrong. (6) It is no more possible to parse Erdan's speech than a psychopath's rant.

It might be urged upon Iran to tread lightly so as not to agitate the lunatic in the room. But alas, that is not, in my opinion, a viable option. The documentary record demonstrates that, once Israel has fixed a country in its crosshairs, nothing short of abject submission will bring it to desist. If the "enemy" power resists initial provocation, Israel will keep escalating with another and another provocation until it proves politically untenable for the targeted entity to passively absorb further blows. That's what happened when Israel targeted Egypt's Gamel Abdel Nasser in the early 1950s. (7) (It was feared by Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion that the "radical nationalist" Egyptian president might one day preside over a modern state able to check Israel's regional ambitions.) That's what happened when Israel targeted the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon in the early 1980s. (8) (It was feared by Israeli Prime Minister Begin that the PLO's "peace offensive"—the Palestinians supported but Israelis opposed a two-state settlement—would bring international pressure on Israel to withdraw from the West Bank.) That's what happened in 2002 during the second intifada when Israel carried out targeted assassinations of Palestinian leaders. (9) (It was feared by Prime Minister Sharon that the Palestinians would stop armed attacks in exchange for a negotiated ceasefire.) That's what happened in 2008 when Israel broke a ceasefire with Hamas in order to launch Operation Cast Lead. (10) (It was feared by Israeli Prime Minister Olmert that Hamas would gain international legitimacy as it moderated its political program.)

The lamentable truth is that, short of national suicide, Iran cannot exercise the option of inaction: Israel will almost certainly keep ratcheting up the provocations until Teheran has no choice but to respond. It wouldn't surprise were Israel to assassinate Ayatollah Khamenei then (wink, wink) deny it.

The Israeli government has ever been on the alert to exploit opportunities in order to implement its preconceived plans. In 1989, during the Tiananmen Square massacre, Benjamin Netanyahu urged his government to exploit this media distraction by carrying out a mass expulsion of Palestinians in the West Bank. On November 4, 2008, when the United States elected its first Black president, Prime Minister Olmert exploited this media distraction by breaking the ceasefire with Hamas. On July 17, 2014, when a Malaysian airliner flying over Ukraine was downed, Prime Minister Netanyahu exploited this media distraction by launching the murderous ground invasion of Gaza in Operation Protective Edge. The pretexts of October 7 and now Iran's "retaliation" present the lunatics in Jerusalem with an unprecedented opportunity to rid Israel of the triple challenge to its regional domination: by destroying Gaza, Hezbollah, and Iran; the "fog" of such an explosion would also enable Israel's ethnic cleansing of the West Bank. If it is hoped that a sane cabal among the Israeli leadership will crystallize to stop this headlong lurch over the precipice, then it must be said that the odds are against it. Hitler's biographer, Ian Kershaw, observed that, if it took so long for coup plans to hatch against the Fuhrer, it was because of "a deep sense of obedience to authority and service to the state," the belief that it

was “not merely wrong, but despicable and treacherous to undermine one’s own country in war,” and “even as the military disasters mounted and ultimate catastrophe beckoned, the fanatical backing for Hitler had by no means evaporated and continued, if as a minority taste, to show remarkable resilience and strength.”(11)

It’s hard not to notice cognate factors at play in elite Israeli circles. On the last point, whereas Netanyahu’s critics have been writing his political obituary for years, he too keeps bouncing back notwithstanding his missteps. Why? Because Israelis see their reflection in him. Indeed, Netanyahu IS Israel: an obnoxious, narcissistic Jewish supremacist for whom only Jews reckon in God’s grand design. It must, finally, be acknowledged that not all Israeli fears are unfounded—the wish is by now widespread that Israel vanish from the map while its capacity has diminished to terrorize its neighbours into submission. But, for the most part, it is a corner that Israel has boxed itself into. Before October 7 Hamas had gestured toward a two-state settlement while Iran consistently voted with the UN General Assembly majority in support of the two-state consensus. Israel rebuffed it.

Will Prime Minister Netanyahu resist the irresistible temptation to cut the Gordian regional knot or, like Samson, will he bring down the Temple—the rest of us—with him? Cassandra would probably say: All bets are off!

References

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3. Chomsky, Fateful Triangle. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh later elaborated on Chomsky’s insights in The Samson Option.
4. New York Times, April 15, 2024.
5. Carter, White House Diary.
6. Finkelstein, Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict.
7. Benny Morris, Border Wars.
8. Robert Fisk, Pity the Nation.
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10. Norman Finkelstein, Gaza.
11. Kershaw, Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis