



ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel
From the Bet El Twinning / Israel Action Committee of
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identified and are now on the radar. The flow of arms shipments from Syria to Lebanon is alarming. It will be probably take only a year, if not months, for the Lebanese army to be shadowed by a better-trained and well-armed parallel force, much like

Commentary...

Iran Incensed Over Mabhohu Hit By Azar Azadi

If one were to take the temperature of the Iranian regime's who's who right now, one would detect a slight rise. The regime cared about Mahmoud al-Mabhohu and others of his ilk who are key to keeping the arms flowing, so that resources can be in place should Iran be hobbled by sanctions or even attacked. While it is unknown who caused Mabhohu's demise, it is a certainty that the arms supply chain to Gaza and potentially to Yemen has been affected.

Iran needs well-armed proxies to spin out some provocations now and then. The reasons are twofold: First, the Iranian regime needs to deflect some of the world's attention for a little while longer until it successfully assembles a bomb on its long-range rockets; Second, every time Israel goes to war there is a build-up of global negative emotion toward it, in particular, and Jews, in general.

Keeping the Mabhohu story alive takes some effort, though. Iran is leaning on the United Arab Emirates, in particular, rather heavily. The PR firms, reporters, politicians, and bureaucrats on the payroll globally are doing their best to keep the story alive, but the magnitude of Mabhohu's demise has certainly put a small dent in arms smuggling to Gaza and preparation for the eventual multi-front attack on Israel.

The potential options for such attacks are either when and if Iran is attacked prior to having built the bomb, or when it has completed the building of the bomb and the regime is secure in the knowledge that it would not be attacked, no matter what it does in the world.

When the Iranian foreign minister raises the issue at the UN, it illustrates that they are attempting to keep the story alive, since most European politicians received appropriate intelligence briefings on the matter and are now back-pedaling to distance themselves from their initial reactions. Fanning the flames further benefits Iranians in ensuring such eliminations do not happen in the future, as they would like to protect their network of arms dealers. These select reliable agents and facilitators are quite valuable, not to mention extraordinarily expensive to sustain. Even with a large delegation of foreign nationals on their payroll across the world, it is difficult to groom stable contacts and facilitators to replace Mabhohu.

At present, the situation is starting to become intolerable for the Russians as well. It's been fun and games, and certainly billions in arms deals. But the Russians are starting to realize that they are going down the same path as Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s and early '80s – humoring the regime. The significant shift from autocratic to military dictatorship is also putting most of the "stans," along with Georgia, Turkey and Armenia at risk. Most importantly, Iranians have the inside knowledge and connections to the Russian arms black market throughout the old Soviet bloc.

Russia has had close calls like that in September 2009, when the Iranians had reportedly secured high-grade black market weapons such as X-55 cruise missiles and S300 anti-aircraft rockets without their knowledge and loaded them on board a ship, hidden in secret compartments, destined to be delivered to Teheran. The embarrassment caused by the Iranians, and particularly by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which has infiltrated the Russian underworld, caused the Kremlin to spare no expense in sending destroyers, subs and elite forces, with the Mossad's help according to The Sunday Times, to secure the ship and return the shipment.

Indeed, the elimination of Mabhohu, has shown that some of these facilitators, arms dealers and terrorists connected to the regime have been

the IRGC.

Certainly for Israel, the likelihood of the next engagement being a multi-front war is high, especially with Washington at its weakest (morally, intellectually and financially) and the Iranians and their satellite states at their strongest. While most of us hope for peaceful solutions, others, like Syria, are either interested in wars (ideological or physical) or stand to gain financial benefits from it.

Although no one knows at present who caused the demise of Mabhohu and we can only speculate why, we can all agree that the controversy has benefited Islamists, terrorists and rogue nations. Israel has yet again been lambasted and public opinion has swelled against such extrajudicial and extraterritorial killings. While European and Australian politicians fell over themselves chastising and singling out Israel, their miscalculated selective domestically-oriented actions have fed the controversy, benefiting the Iranians by creating further instability in the region and furthering arm smuggling into these troubled regions.

The price of this misstep, particularly by Britain, portrays weakness before these rogue nations and the underworld and makes it difficult to unify nations against arms shipments to Hamas, Hizbullah and the Yemeni Shi'ite separatists.

Consequently, nations like the UK or Australia, France and the US may have to clean up the aftermath that ensues from arms shipments to terror organizations. There is no doubt that we will be facing a significant mopping up period in the near future. One hopes that we may be able to lessen its severity through unified global action now.

(Jerusalem Post Mar 9)

The writer's name has been changed to protect his/her identity.

We All Live in Shimon Hatzaddik By Danny Hershtal

Every neighborhood in the country could one day face the same challenges and protests the east Jerusalem neighborhood, also known as Sheikh Jarrah, faces today.

A traditionally Jewish territory, with historical significance to the Jewish people, was violently conquered and settled by foreign Arabs, and is now being reclaimed by rightful Jewish owners. Now this territory is becoming a source for international condemnation and denial of Jewish rights. Sound familiar?

The Shimon Hatzaddik neighborhood, also known as Sheikh Jarrah, is an area of Jerusalem just north of the Old City. The neighborhood is named for, and centered around, the tomb of Shimon Hatzaddik (Simon the Just), a venerated high priest who served in the Second Temple (in either the fourth or second century BCE). The tomb and its compound were purchased in 1876 and settled in 1891 as a Jewish neighborhood, at a time when the Old City had become dangerously overcrowded.

In 1936, the neighborhood was attacked by Arab rioters and later conquered by the Arab Legion in 1948, before being annexed to the kingdom of Jordan in 1950. The Jordanian conquerors allowed Arab families to occupy abandoned Jewish homes, in violation of the rights of the property owners. When Israel retook the area in 1967, the committee that originally purchased the land began working to evict Arab tenants and to resettle the neighborhood with Jewish residents, as intended at the time of the original purchase.

Israel's Supreme Court has upheld these evictions. However, left-wing activists and Arab supporters have recently made these legal evictions a flashpoint issue in the general Israeli-Arab conflict. And why shouldn't they?

The entire country of Israel was brutally conquered by Rome in 64 BCE and, later, by the Arabians of the Islamic Caliphate. Between these conquests, the Jewish residents repeatedly attempted to regain their sovereignty, but were slaughtered and expelled in stages after each revolt against the foreign occupiers.

Since the mid 1800s, our struggle to wrest back our property has received international legitimacy through the Balfour Declaration and the San Remo Conference, to name two examples. However, the Arabs, various anti-Semitic groups, and even the anti-Zionists in our midst have consistently opposed these efforts.

If we cannot uphold our rights against squatters from the 1950s, how can we effectively defend our claims against those of the seventh century?

The very foundation of Zionism has to be that we, as Jews, have been dispossessed of our land and have every legal, historical and moral right to reclaim it, by force if necessary.

While we can generally agree to give basic freedoms to non-Jews who wish to live peacefully under Jewish sovereignty, we cannot grant anyone extralegal rights to our territory without compromising the fundamental right of Israel's existence.

People may be upset, protest or even riot, but there is no justification to forego this right. Temperance in justifying one's existence is no virtue and, in fact, threatens the state's very existence. Shying away from controversy only encourages violent confrontation and further historical revisionism.

On Saturday, the prime minister of Turkey encouraged the Arabs to riot because of Israel's inclusion of ancient religious sites in Hebron and Bethlehem on a list of heritage sites slated for restoration. The Turkish leader also denied any Jewish connection to these sites, which Jews used as sites of pilgrimage and prayer continuously since the Second Temple period.

The audacity of such a statement shows that even the slightest hesitation in asserting our fundamental right can cause an immediate threat to our existence. The American and European governments also criticized the inclusion of these sites on the National Heritage list as problematic and counterproductive to peace efforts.

Clearly, such comments are not as biased or anti-Semitic as the statements issued by the Turkish government, but they point to the same central issue: In the world's eyes, Israel cannot make peace with the Arabs without giving up its fundamental claim to the territory. A peace based on our denial of our own rights cannot last and will bear tragic results, especially since our claim to sovereignty in Hebron is sounder than our claim to sovereignty in Haifa, Ashdod or the Shimon Hatzaddik neighborhood in Jerusalem.

Every neighborhood in the country could one day face the same challenges and protests that Shimon Hatzaddik faces today. We are all residents of some "Shimon Hatzaddik" neighborhood.

So, for the sake of our entire country, the most prudent move is to give our complete support to the residents of Shimon Hatzaddik today. (Jerusalem Post Mar 9)

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Look Out! By Barry Rubin

Watching the Obama administration handle Syria and Iran is like watching a horror movie where a monster is creeping up behind someone.

The stories of the US engagement with Syria and the sanctions issue regarding Iran's nuclear program are fascinating. Each day there's some new development showing how the Obama administration is acting like a deer standing in the middle of a busy highway admiring the pretty headlights of the automobiles.

It's like watching the monster sneak up behind someone. Even though you know he won't turn around, you can't help but watch in fascinated horror and yell: "Look out!" But he pays no attention.

Briefly, the Syrian government keeps punching the US in the face as Washington ignores it.

On March 1, a new record was set. The place: State Department daily press conference; the star, spokesman Philip J. Crowley. A reporter asks how the administration views the fact that the moment a US delegation left after urging Syrian President Bashar Assad to move away from Iran and stop supporting Hizbullah, Syria's dictator invited Iran's dictator along with Hizbullah's leader to visit.

In other words, the exact opposite of what the US requested. Is the government annoyed? Does it want to express some anger or issue a threat?

Let's listen. Crowley: "Well, I would point it in a slightly different direction... We want to see Syria play a more constructive role in the region. We also want – to the extent that it has the ability to talk to Iran directly – we want to make sure that Syria's communicating to Iran its concerns about its role in the region and the direction, the nature of its nuclear ambitions..."

In other words, I'm going to ignore the fact that the first thing that Assad did after Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns's visit was a love fest with Iran and Hizbullah. But even more amazing, what Crowley said is that the US government thinks Syria, Iran's partner and ally, may be upset that Iran is being aggressive and expansionist. And it actually expects the Syrians to urge Iran not to build nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, as the administration congratulates itself on explaining to Syria that it should reduce support for Hizbullah, IDF military intelligence releases an assessment that Syria is giving Hizbullah more and better arms than ever before.

Meanwhile, on the Iran front, it is now March and still – six months after the first administration deadline and three months after the second deadline – no major sanctions on Iran. Remarkably, even former Democratic presidential candidate and head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee John Kerry has taken a stronger stance than the administration.

He supports the congressional call for tough sanctions to block Iran's energy industry which easily passed both houses. "I believe that the most biting and important sanctions would be those on the energy side." But the Obama administration wants far more limited sanctions focused on a small group in the regime elite.

Yet sanctions are getting further away rather than closer. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hinted at this by pulling back from her early prediction of sanctions by April, now saying it might be "some time in the next several months." At the same time, we have endless evidence that the claim the Russians (and Chinese and others) are coming to support sanctions is nonsense. Just before meeting with Clinton to discuss the issue, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva explained, "Peace in the world does not mean isolating someone." (Quick, invite him to explain this to the anti-Israel forces in Europe and elsewhere.)

But it's outright amusing to see the efforts to spin the Russian and Chinese position. In this regard, the prize for this week should be won by an AP dispatch whose headline read: "Russia moves closer to Iran sanctions over nukes." And what is the basis for this claim that there has just been "the strongest sign to date that the Kremlin was prepared to drop traditional opposition to such penalties if Teheran remain obstinate?" This statement from President Dmitry Medvedev: "We believe that [engagement with Iran is] not over yet, that we can still reach an agreement. But if we don't succeed, Russia is ready – along with our partners... to consider the question of adopting sanctions."

Get it? When Russia decides that talking with Iran won't work, at that point – how long from now would that be? – it will "consider" sanctions. Actually, he said the same thing last August, a statement trumpeted in September by The New York Times as proving Obama's policy was working.

There is more clarity with the Chinese, though the pretense is also made that they might do something. But Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang put it this way: "We believe there is still room for diplomatic efforts and the parties concerned should intensify those efforts." At most, the optimists suggest, in the words of this Reuters dispatch: "China will resist any proposed sanctions that threaten flows of oil and Chinese investments, but most believe it will accept a more narrowly cast resolution that has more symbolic than practical impact." Yes, that's the kind of thing that already existed four years ago. Some progress.

Is it too much to ask policy-makers to pay attention to what's going on occasionally?

So let's leave it to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to sum up how things seem to Iran, Syria, Hamas, Hizbullah and many others. The Americans, he said, "not only have failed to gain any power, but also are forced to leave the region. They are leaving their reputation, image and power behind in order to escape... The [American] government has no

influence [to stop] the expansion of Iran-Syria ties, Syria-Turkey ties and Iran-Turkey ties – God willing, Iraq too will join the circle.”

I think this suggests that the radicals think that the US is weak, in retreat, and that the future belongs to them. In other words, US President Barack Obama’s policy isn’t moderating the radicals, it’s making them more aggressive and confident. (Jerusalem Post Mar 8)

Obama Talks, Syria Mocks By Elliott Abrams

The wages of appeasement.

The Obama administration has from the start seen Syria as a leading case for engagement. Barack Obama said so during his presidential campaign (announcing he would meet Bashar al Assad without preconditions) and repeated this policy view again last summer:

“We’ve started to see some diplomatic contacts between the United States and Syria. There are aspects of Syrian behavior that trouble us, and we think that there is a way that Syria can be much more constructive on a whole host of these issues. But, as you know, I’m a believer in engagement and my hope is that we can continue to see progress on that front.”

The engagement with Syria continues apace. Here are the key elements.

* High level envoys have been sent to Damascus: Under Secretary of State William Burns visited Syria in mid-February, the highest ranking U.S. official to set foot there in more than five years, and Middle East envoy George Mitchell has visited three times. High-ranking Central Command officers have been sent to Damascus to discuss cooperation against terrorism.

* President Obama has now nominated an ambassador to Damascus, the first since Margaret Scobey was withdrawn in 2005 after the murder of former prime minister Rafik al-Hariri in Lebanon (which was widely blamed on the Assad regime).

* The president has also removed the American block to Syria’s attempt to join the World Trade Organization.

* The United States has eased some export licenses for Syria, mostly in the area of aircraft.

* Syria’s deputy foreign minister was invited to Washington in October, the first such visit in several years.

So there is certainly “progress on that front,” to use the president’s words. But when does “engagement” become “appeasement”? The case of U.S. policy toward Syria suggests that, here at least, the two approaches may not be far apart.

“Engagement” constitutes “appeasement” if it fails to change Syrian conduct, and the failure to change is overlooked while the “engagement” continues and accelerates. This would not just be fooling ourselves but condoning, rewarding, and thereby inducing even more bad conduct by the Assad regime.

Which is precisely what has happened during this year of American engagement.

* Syrian support for terrorism continues. Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas, the DFLP, and the PFLP continue to be housed and protected in Damascus. Last August Iraq actually withdrew its ambassador from Damascus in protest over Syrian involvement in deadly explosions in Baghdad. Our commanding general in Iraq, Raymond Odierno, stated as recently as November that Syria continues to facilitate the movement of jihadists and explosives into Iraq.

* Syria continues serving as the route for Iran’s rearmament of Hezbollah, in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions prohibiting such trafficking in weapons into Lebanon. And Syria’s activities in Lebanon remain aimed at diminishing that nation’s sovereignty, even though Syrian troops were forced to leave Lebanon in 2005.

* Internal repression in Syria remains as vicious as ever. Human Rights Watch reported that “Syria’s poor human rights situation deteriorated further in 2009.”

In fact, however the Obama administration views its overtures to Syria, the best evidence that these steps now constitute appeasement is found in Syria’s response. On February 25, Assad hosted an Axis of Evil party, meeting with Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah and Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The Washington Post reported that “the presidents of Iran and Syria on Thursday ridiculed U.S. policy in the region and pledged to create a Middle East ‘without Zionists,’ combining a slap at recent U.S. overtures and a threat to Israel with an endorsement of one of the region’s

defining alliances.” More striking was the headline the Post put on the story: “Iran, Syria Mock U.S. Policy.”

Assad’s conduct is surprising only if you view him as a seeker after peace, waiting merely for the hand of friendship from Washington to reorient his regime toward the West. That appears to have been the Obama approach. But Assad’s reaction is entirely predictable if you view him as a vicious dictator dependent on Iran’s regime for political, financial, and military support. Similarly, the notion that American “engagement” is the road to a Syrian-Israeli peace deal over the Golan Heights is sensible if you believe he needs only a bit of American encouragement to ditch his alliance with Iran and turn West. But the terrorist trilateral just held in Damascus should be all the proof anyone needs that George Mitchell may as well stay home: A Golan deal is not in the cards. No Israeli prime minister is foolish enough to hand the Golan to a Syria whose main allies are Israel’s two most dangerous enemies: Hezbollah and Iran.

What has the engagement of Syria actually produced, besides mockery in Damascus? Depression in Beirut, where Sunnis, Christians, and Druze only a few years ago defied Syria, but now see an American policy that appears willing to abandon them. Incredulity in Baghdad, where our willingness to engage Syria while it helps jihadists blow people up in Iraq must seem incomprehensible. Resistance in Jerusalem, which only three years ago blew up a North Korean-supplied nuclear reactor Assad was building along the Euphrates and must see our continuing blindness to Syria’s actual conduct as stubborn—and dangerous.

What is to be done? First, the United States should acknowledge that engagement has failed and end it. No more high-level visits, no ambassador, no WTO. If the Obama administration insists on crawling forward, the Senate should not confirm the nominee for ambassador, and Congress should by legislation prevent any further weakening of our economic sanctions against Syria. Second, the United States should loudly and frequently condemn continuing Syrian human rights violations; there are fish in this barrel and we should start shooting them. Third, we should raise in the United Nations Syria’s continuing violations of Security Council resolutions 1559 and 1701 (barring violations of Lebanon’s sovereignty and arms supplies to Hezbollah).

None of these steps will change Syrian policy; that will only happen if and when the regime in Iran, Assad’s mainstay, falls. But they will restore to U.S. policy the element of self-respect and respect for facts that is now missing. In Damascus in January, George Mitchell said, “I look forward to building on the positive relationship we have formed to make tangible progress on our effort toward peace and on the bilateral relationship between the United States and Syria.” At the very least, let us have no more such statements, whose willful ignorance of Syria’s actual conduct—and the victims of that conduct—is embarrassing to American honor and damaging to American interests and allies. (Weekly Standard Mar 15)

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Rainy Truths By Herb Keinon

Those matters which preoccupy a country speak volumes. The US follows the NASDAQ, Saudis follow the price of oil; and we, well, we follow the Kinneret’s water level.

Coming from , a land of hurtling rivers and mountain lakes, icy glaciers and four-foot April snowstorms, I grew up taking water for granted.

You never had to worry about it; it was always there. Sure, once in an odd summer there were dry spells when you could only water the lawn on even- or odd-numbered days of the month, but all in all water was not a concern that gnawed at the mind.

Until I moved here in the early 1980s. Then I became enamored of the country’s preoccupation with its water level. It was almost a national pastime, watching to see how high it would rise in the winter and how low it would drop in the summer.

This was back in the ‘80s, when people would watch the Kinneret with keen eyes. Everything else could be falling apart the war in Lebanon going badly, inflation galloping, Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres feuding over who would rotate with whom and when but if the Kinneret rose a centimeter, there was a grand sense of national achievement.

I liked that feeling. There was something refreshingly primordial about it, a sensation that in this super technological era the age of frozen

broccoli and microwavable dinners you were still connected to the elements. If it rained, you felt good; if it didn't, you were concerned. When my kids were in preschool and their long Israeli-socialization process began, the importance of the Kinneret was drummed incessantly into their heads.

I'd wash the dishes and fail to turn off the water when soaping up a glass, and one of the kids would yell, "Abba, you're going to dry out the Kinneret." Same chorus if I'd keep the water running while brushing my teeth.

In our home we divided the country into the good and considerate those who fixed leaky faucets and the bad and selfish, those who washed their cars with a hose.

"Abba," my daughter remarked as a child, "I'll never marry someone who washes his car with a hose."

Once the Internet made it into the house, we watched the Kinneret's water level each day via an animated yellow rubber duck floating upon a diagram of the lake on Ynet. We could sit there for hours the whole family, eating popcorn and just content as could be watching that little rubber ducky on the computer bob up and down, up and down.

Those matters which preoccupy a country speak volumes about that country. The follows the NASDAQ, which gives a peek into its capitalistic psyche. The Saudis follow the price of a barrel of oil, and for good reason. And we, well, we follow the Kinneret's water level.

There are two things we can discover about ourselves while looking at the way we look at the Kinneret. First, our red lines are flexible; and secondly, we are never happy.

Regarding the red lines, it actually takes some investigation to understand the Knesset's water lines. There is the top red line (kav adom elyon) and the lower red line (kav adom tachton). This itself is kind of weird, because isn't a red line supposed to mark a point beyond which there is no passage? How can you have two red lines?

One would think that the Kinneret's red line would be the level beyond which no further pumping of water could take place. And, actually, that was the case until a few years ago, when the lower red line was reached but the country still needed Kinneret water. So instead of stopping the pumping and initiating rationing, we just established a new line, called it a black line (kav hashachor), and defined that as the point beyond which any pumping would irreversibly damage the lake.

Until, of course, we reach that point, and then we'll just create a lower black line to accommodate the new reality.

All of this is obviously just a metaphor for the country's diplomatic situation. First, we never really set a red line because as a country we can't agree to where it should be. And second, every time we do set a red line, we show a little later that we are willing to move it. The good news is that this illustrates a healthy ability to adapt to reality; the bad news is that it sends confusing signals to everyone, friend and foe alike.

As to never being happy, just note the reporting of last week's abundant and blessed rainfall.

"The Kinneret's level rose by three centimeters over the past three days, and for the first time since July 2008 is above the lower red line," Israel Radio reported Tuesday morning, leading my heart to skip, my legs to want to leap in exaltation. But then the other shoe dropped: "The level is currently four meters and 18 centimeters below the upper red line."

Actually, this is better than it was in years past, when it seemed that no matter how much it rained, it never fell in the right spot. If it rained so hard that parts of southern Tel Aviv flooded and rubber rafts were sent to rescue people, we were told that the rain was wasted, as it all ran off into the sea.

If Fureidis flooded in the North, as it often does, we were told it was just too much water to be absorbed. No matter what happens, we're always told that the water situation is dire. And therein lies the unique Israeli/Jewish component to this rain watch. You think we're doing well? Forget about it. Celebrate not; rest not; strive for more; complain.

Or, as a headline writer summed it up beautifully in last Tuesday's Jerusalem Post, "Rains no cause for celebration as Kinneret reaches lowest red line." Those seeking to understand would do well to study that headline, because it conveys two important truths about this country: There is no such thing as plain good news; and there are always other red lines. (Jerusalem Post Mar 8)

Shedding Light On The Imbroglia By Moshe Arens

Out of everyone - whether Jewish or Muslim - who has been raising a hue and cry over the Israeli government's decision to add the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron to the list of national heritage sites, how many have actually visited the place? No doubt, many Muslims have visited the ancient Herodian structure and, incited by Muslim extremists in various parts of the world, are taking to the streets to protest a move by the Israeli government that they are being led to believe is liable to prevent them from visiting the building and praying there. They believe that the structure houses the grave of Abraham, whom they consider an ancestor of the Arab people. On the other hand, most Jews who are raising their voices in protest against the government's decision have probably never been there and have little intention of visiting there in the future.

The Tomb of the Patriarchs - believed to house the graves of the patriarchs and matriarchs of the Jewish people Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and Leah - is located in Hebron in a structure built by Herod in the first century B.C.E, about the same time the Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. (The tomb of Jacob's second wife, Rachel, is located near Bethlehem, which also appears on the list of heritage sites.) The Tomb of the Patriarchs is a site of great historical and archaeological importance, held sacred by the Jewish people since biblical times, second only to the Temple Mount. Jews have come to pray there throughout the ages, except for the periods when Muslim rulers have denied Jews access. Since the Six-Day War, when access for Jews became possible, hundreds of thousands come to the Tomb of the Patriarchs to pray each year.

Those who have visited the tomb know well that the structure and its interior have suffered from neglect over the years and urgently need repair and refurbishment. The government's decision is long overdue. So why the protests from Arabs and some Jews against a decision that would benefit all people, Jews and Arabs, who venerate this important site?

The answer looks clear when considering the reaction to the government's decision to include the Tomb of the Patriarchs on the list of national heritage sites. It is as if the government's decision shone a light that is penetrating the darkness and revealing the emotions of Arabs and some Jews regarding this site held sacred by the Jewish and Muslim religions.

For Arab propagandists it is one more occasion to announce to the world that there is no historical connection between the Jewish people and this land. As Yasser Arafat told Bill Clinton at Camp David some years ago, there never was a Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. So now similarly, according to them, the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron has nothing to do with the Jewish people. The Palestinians were here before the Jews, who according to this propaganda are just Johnnies-come-lately with no historical claim to the land. Well, we have heard that song before in all its absurdity, but Arab propagandists see no reason not to repeat it ad nauseam and to use it to incite the Arab population of Jerusalem and Hebron to riots, which are broadcast throughout the world.

But what about the Jewish Israelis who are joining the Arab protests and castigating the Netanyahu government for including the Tomb of the Patriarchs on the list of heritage sites to be repaired and preserved? Just what is eating them? Most of these critics have never been to the place and have no intention of visiting it. So why should they care if it needs refurbishment? What's more, although they are highly respectful of religious Muslims and their places of worship, and also respectful of religious Christians, although somewhat less so when it comes to evangelical Christians who fervently support Israel, they seem to have little regard for religious Jews and the hundreds of thousands who come to Hebron each year to pray at the Tomb of the Patriarchs.

It would be wrong for the government to give in to Arab propaganda and the hypocrisy of its Jewish critics. The structure of the Tomb of the Patriarchs is in dire need of repair and refurbishment. And the days during Ottoman and British rule when Jews coming to pray at the site were not allowed to ascend beyond the seventh step on the stairway leading to the prayer area, and during Jordanian rule when they were denied access altogether - these days are gone forever. (haaretz Mar 9)