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## The "Root Cause" of the Middle East Turmoil

### Would peace descend if the Arab-Israeli conflict were resolved?

Many are convinced that the conflict between Israel and its neighbors in the predominantly Muslim Middle East is the "root cause" of the ongoing violence in the region and of worldwide acts of terror. Some leading politicians and many pundits have attempted to establish linkage between the Arab-Israeli conflict and the turmoil prevalent throughout the Middle East. But does this linkage really exist?

#### What are the facts?

Israel is a tiny country, with fewer than eight million inhabitants (1.6 million of whom are Arabs). It is surrounded by 22 Arab countries with 400 million people. Nonetheless, Arab propaganda has convinced the world that Israel is an aggressive invader in the Middle East—a mighty Goliath compared to helpless Arab states. It is a supreme irony that tiny Israel, the size of New Jersey, outnumbered 50 to 1 and encircled by implacable enemies obsessed with its destruction, is considered a mortal danger to Muslims and to peace on earth. The linkage theory is that if Israel would make peace with the Palestinians, peace would descend upon the world and Islamist terror would cease.

But Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict are clearly not the root cause of the strife and turmoil in the Middle East. Israel was not involved in the deaths of the millions who perished in the Iraq-Iran war, nor in the current Sunni-Shiite civil war in Iraq. Peace between Israel and the Palestinians would do nothing to stop Iran's headlong development of nuclear weapons and its goal to achieve Middle East hegemony. Israel has no part in the Syrian civil war, which has so far killed more than 60,000 people, nor has it played any role in the chaotic "Arab Spring" that is still roiling Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia. Neither does Israel have any influence over the intractable conflict between warring Palestinian factions—Fatah in the West Bank and the terrorist group Hamas in Gaza.

**Is Israel an intruder in the Middle East?** The state of Israel resulted from the same process that created a dozen or more nations in Europe and the Middle East from the remnants of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires by Western democracies and the United Nations. For three thousand years Jews have continually inhabited what is today Israel and Judea and Samaria, the so-called "West Bank." In short, few countries born in the 20th century have a stronger claim to national self-determination than does Israel—and certainly not the Arabs, who have never had a state in Palestine nor a capital in Jerusalem. Yet it has been Arab

nations, unable to countenance a Jewish state, that have waged numerous unprovoked wars against Israel.

**And how about terror?** Many believe that Israel is the root cause of the terror that Islamists have visited—and visit to this day—upon the world. But consider the attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, murderous attacks on the London subway

system and in Mumbai, India, as well as the assassination of a U.S. diplomat in Sudan and most recently the U.S. Ambassador and three other consular officials in Benghazi, Libya. These and dozens of other acts of cowardly terror would have taken place even if there were no Israel. Rather, they are a reflection of

the hatred that radical Islamists harbor against the West and its institutions. That hatred has nothing to do with Israel. Yet many believe that if only the United States would withhold its support of Israel—or "force" Israel to make peace with the Palestinians—Middle East terror would cease and we would no longer have to fear the scourge of suicide bombings, a uniquely Arab invention. Israel's role and responsibility in Arab discontent is an illusion. Arab and Islamist hatred toward the West and their deadly internal struggles would continue even if Israel ceased to exist.

Many claim that Arab and Islamist terror is the result of despair, hopelessness and poverty. But the facts prove otherwise. While Middle East Arabs are some of the richest people in the world, instead of using their enormous wealth to benefit their people, they squander it in luxurious excesses for a privileged few. The nineteen 9/11 hijackers were not poor or desperate. They were, without exception, well-educated people, members of upper-middle class families. The leaders of such Arab-Muslim terror organizations as Hamas, Hezbollah, al Qaeda and Islamic Jihad are educated people, from the upper reaches of their societies. No, terror is not a response of Arab-Muslims to alleged injustice by Israel, but is rather a customary strategy used by Arabs and Islamists to express their grievances against any enemy, even their own brethren. This pattern would not be any different if Israel had never existed or would cease to exist.

The cause of violent revolution and attacks on the U.S., Israel and other Western states is dysfunctional Arab-Muslim governments and the exploding influence of radical Islamism. This lust for war and terror will not end with an Israeli-Palestinian peace, but rather will cease when Arab-Muslims come to terms with the Jewish state's right to exist and the West's leadership role in the fight for human and democratic rights.

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again." His sight was clear not because his vision, metaphorically or otherwise, was in any way special, but because he'd endured what most men of his station had endured: the clarifying fires of war.

World War II, the catastrophe that plunged the West into the dark hole of modernity that World War I had exposed, is another preoccupation of the novelist. Harry returns to Manhattan in 1946, after distinguishing himself in the 82nd Airborne in Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. His mother died when he was a child, and his father died while the son fought in Europe; the 32-year-old now owns an apartment on Central Park West and a business, Copeland Leather, that produces high-quality goods purchased by the elite.

But Harry isn't interested in his inheritance—or anything else, really. Having done for four years only what he was told to do, in freedom he finds himself lost, with nothing he *wants* to do. But he passionately resists pressure from the intelligentsia he aimed to join before the war sabotaged his studies. "People like that always want to show you that they're wise and worldly, having been disillusioned, and they mock things that humanity has come to love, things that people like me—who have spent years watching soldiers blown apart and incinerated, cities razed, and women and children wailing—have learned to love like nothing else: tenderness, ceremony, courtesy, sacrifice, love, form, regard," Harry says with a raw eloquence. "The deeper I fell, the more I suffered, and

the more I saw . . . the more I knew that women are the embodiment of love and the hope of all time."

"This is what I learned and what I managed to bring out with me from hell," he affirms. "Love of God, love of a woman, love of a child—what else is there? Everything pales, and I'll stake what I know against what your professors imagine, to the death, as I have." But as a Helprin hero, he must grasp this truth concretely, not merely abstractly. And so he falls in love, immediately and irretrievably, barely at first sight, with a girl he glimpses on the Staten Island Ferry. It turns out he hadn't gone to war just for the 24-year-old Catherine Thomas Hale and everything she represents—he'll go to war for her and them again. The smaller-scale injustices perpetrated by the newly powerful New York Mafia pale next to those of the Nazis, but they're both attacks on the civilization Harry has sworn to defend. (Reading this novel, one might think that civilization was all that was on anyone's mind the year after its survival was secured: Within moments of meeting, strangers engage in colloquies on such subjects as love, honor, and suffering.)

The book brims with contradictions. Harry insists that his appearance—he looks like a young Clark Gable—has nothing to do with his deepest self. Yet the physical charms of the heiress with whom he falls in love send him into flights of wordy fancy. He cares nothing for the niceties of social distinctions, yet believes he's superior to the man who has already claimed Catherine because that lunkhead went to Yale, while Harry graduated from Harvard.

More important is Harry's complicated relationship with—and the author's complicated conception of—war. We can't begin to understand the returning soldier until we get a sense of what he went through on the battlefield. Helprin makes us wait until a third of the way through the book to hear Harry's first war story. The painful details of the brutality and beauty he witnessed as he made his way across Europe constitute the best part of the book.

War destroys the things we hold most dear—but it also grants us the understanding of what's most dear. Helprin constantly uses the metaphors of battle to describe the quotidian struggles of

## HAPPY BAY

Happy Bay is what a beach should be:  
the sea grapes shade a flat of sifted sand,  
an azure sky blends with a turquoise sea.  
The younger tourists, muscular and tanned,  
ride jet skis past the pier by Hunter's Quay,  
play bocce, volleyball, walk hand-in-hand,  
discussing majors, marriages, careers,  
and where they'll be in ten or twenty years.

But older visitors now at the age  
by which they either had or missed the fun,  
spread out like extra props across the stage,  
or plump sea lions, listless in the sun,  
staring blankly at the ocean or a page,  
talking of where we've been or what we've done.  
We rise for cocktails, dinner specials; then,  
we watch the news and fall asleep by 10,

leaving the youth to sea-side tiki bars,  
the pulsing waves, the vodka and caffeine,  
the screeching laughter, muffled by guitars,  
the heat, the thrashing dances, and the sheen  
of sweat; the lamps like fireflies in jars,  
the moon ascending like a nectarine  
to wax as brightly as a varnished stone,  
to shine on them, and follow them alone.

But I've grown up and trained myself to want  
the things that I can have; be satisfied  
with coffee at my favorite morning haunt,  
a morning fair enough to sit outside,  
a newspaper, a buttery croissant,  
my favorite sea-side table occupied  
by one who rose at dawn and left me sleeping,  
who waves me over to the seat she's keeping.

—STEPHEN SCAER

peacetime life, but he also suggests that the soldier must become a civilian if he is to reassemble and rebuild. Human beings can't be at war with the world indefinitely. They must surrender their detachment—much as Helprin has eschewed the cool detachment of contemporary letters—if they are to find the only thing worth finding. As Helprin writes of Harry: “Though he had never stated it, he had felt from early childhood that life was magnificently intense, in splendor overwhelming, in sight demanding, and in time very short. And that therefore the only worthwhile thing other than a noble showing in the face of its dangers was the ravishing connection of one heart to another.”

But this insight, strangely enough, leads Harry to reject, not embrace, most human contact. Harry has his creator's horror of social gatherings: “Making small talk and holding cocktails was somewhat like being burned at the stake.” One doesn't expect the sensitive to enjoy the dissimulation of the dinner party, but Harry is practically terror-stricken by the thought of other people. Helprin doesn't say that salvation is to be found in love severed from the world of action, the sole place we can display the courage that makes us worthy of the gift. To know love—and thus to grasp the holy—one must connect with other people, “one heart to another.”

But can one simultaneously believe such a thing and that, as Sartre had it, “hell is other people”? It's a question too difficult for the romantic who tends to misanthropy to answer. Helprin has avoided it by keeping one element of the fantastical in this otherwise realist novel: his characters. The people at the center of *In Sunlight and in Shadow* aren't really people at all, because they're all sunlight and no shadow. What makes that connection of human heart to human heart so special, like the tree whose branches momentarily and miraculously touch “like clasped hands soon to be pulled apart,” is the near-impossibility of it. None of us is as brave and beautiful as Harry and Catherine; there's something unlovable in every real human being. We're a maddening lot—as maddening as an artist who gives us just a glimpse of the transcendent before bringing us back down to the imperfect but remarkable earth.

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# Outside Philip Roth

EMMY CHANG

**W**RITERS' epitaphs can be unbearably maudlin—Frost's “I had a lover's quarrel with the world”

comes to mind, but there are others—which is why I've always liked the legacy Philip Roth proposed in *The Counterlife*. “If you're from New Jersey,” says his alter ego Nathan Zuckerman, “and you write thirty books, and you win the Nobel Prize, and you live to be white-haired and ninety-five, it's highly unlikely but not impossible that after your death they'll decide to name a rest stop for you on the Jersey Turnpike. And so, long after you're gone, you may indeed be remembered, but mostly by small children, in the backs of cars, when they lean forward and tell their parents, ‘Stop, please, stop at Zuckerman—I have to make a pee.’ For a New Jersey novelist that's as much immortality as it's realistic to hope for.”

The rest stop hasn't happened—yet—but *Philip Roth: Unmasked*, written and directed by William Karel and Livia Manera, will have its nationwide debut on PBS on March 29, just ten days after Roth's 80th birthday. Culled from twelve hours of interviews conducted over ten days, the program was recorded shortly before Roth's surprise announcement in October, to an interviewer for the French magazine *Les inRock's*, that he has retired from writing fiction. He has not, however, put away his papers entirely, and is collaborating on a biography—not because he likes the idea, he told *Les inRock's*, but because biographies are inevitable, and so he may as well have some say over one. “Well,” he tells the camera before the opening titles in *Unmasked*, “in the coming years I have two great calamities to face: death and a biography. Let's hope the first comes first.”

The *American Masters* series began in 1986 and represents pretty much exactly

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the PBS-ifying of Culturally Significant Lives you'd expect. The full roster is bracketed at the high end by names like Rubinstein and Noguchi, at the low end by Harper Lee—and reminds me of a moving scene in Roth's *The Professor of Desire* where David Kepesh's decidedly low-culture immigrant father presents his literature-professor son with an album of collectible “Shakespeare Medals,” each depicting a scene from one of the plays on one side, a quotation on the other. (“That's what's so useful,” the senior Kepesh explains proudly. “It's something not just for the home, but that he can have ten and twenty years from now to show his classes.”) The people who collect sterling-silver commemorative medallions of Shakespeare's plays are not, one cannot but think, the people actually spending much time reading Shakespeare; and anyone who has read much Roth is likely to have the same feeling about *Unmasked*.

That he should be collaborating on it in the first place is surprising: Through a half century of collecting practically every literary award—except, as we're annually reminded, the Nobel Prize—Roth has made few public appearances and granted only occasional interviews. His work habits sound decidedly monastic: a solitary life in Connecticut, lots of quiet, music. He even writes standing up. One thinks of E. I. Lonoff's unglamorous characterization of his craft in *The Ghost Writer*: “I write a sentence and then I turn it around. Then I look at it and I turn it around again. Then I have lunch. Then I come back in and write another sentence. Then I have tea and turn the new sentence around. Then I read the two sentences over and turn them both around. . . .” One could hardly quarrel with the results: The *enfant terrible* who antagonized Jewish leaders—and, at 26, scooped up his first National Book Award—with *Goodbye, Columbus* would go on to produce a body of work of astoundingly high quality. As Booker Prize judge Rick Gekoski put it in 2011: “Tell me one other writer who fifty years apart writes masterpieces.”

If there's not really much unmasking going on in *Unmasked*, perhaps that's only to be expected. Roth gave *The Facts* the subtitle “A Novelist's Autobiography,” for instance, and much of it seems to do what it says on the tin. But in the last fifth of the book, Nathan