
ANNALIS
UNIVERSITATIS MARIAE CURIE-SKŁODOWSKA
LUBLIN – POLONIA

VOL. XX, 1

SECTIO K

2013

Hebrew University, Jerusalem – Israel

RAPHAEL ISRAELI

*On current political situation in the Middle East,
Israel's relations with the United States
and Islamic terrorism (an interview)*

Jakub Nowak: I would like to start with the situation after presidential elections in the United States [the interview was recorded soon after the elections]. What will be possible consequences of the reelection of Barack Obama for the general political situation in the Middle East?

Raphael Israeli: I think that those who were afraid of his reelection were exaggerating a little bit. I think he knows he has failed during the first term, and he does not want to fail again. Moreover, Obama has so many difficult domestic issues to deal with now. Last but not least, he will probably have new Secretary of State [the interview was recorded before John Kerry was appointed for the new SoS]. Hillary Clinton was not good at that position, she never understood what she was doing. Whoever comes after her, he will have to start from the scratch, learn from the beginning. I don't also think that anybody would be ready with some new magic solution for the region. That is why I don't expect any major changes from Barack Obama.

I can say even more: Mitt Romney would have been even worse president in terms of situation in the Middle East. It would probably take him another year just to learn what to do. Obama has at least some general programme and the list of priorities, whereas Romney has no real experience in foreign affairs whatsoever.

By the way, in my opinion Romney would not be more supportive to an open hostility with Iran than Obama. I think Obama is on the record that as long as he's the president of the United States Iran will not have the atomic bomb. But I don't think

that it means an open hostility towards Iran in the future and I don't think that the Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu looks forward to it as hostility means losses for everyone involved. But, of course, if there is no other way and Iran is ready with the bomb and nobody else does anything then Netanyahu would have no other choice but to react. If you want to survive you would do anything for it.

JN: Going back to Obama: that's his second tenure. Does it make him more independent?

RI: By definition yes: the second term-president is always more independent. But while during the first tenure he was very cautious to be sure he would get elected again, now he is more about to ensure his place in the history. Probably he will make some progress in his international actions but I don't think that he will ever be able to justify the Nobel Prize he has got. He will make an effort but he is too busy with domestic affairs. Of course: Obama will try to improve relations with Russia, but even Russia – which is far more important to the United States than the Middle East – will not ever get much of his attention during the presidency.

JN: Now, during the second decade of the 21st century, what is the relation between the elections in the United States and the situation of Israel. Is the connection as strong as it has been some decades ago?

RI: Well, no relationship is eternal. Nothing is eternal. The world changes, people change, political systems can change back and forth. Of course, things are different now than at the beginning of the state of Israel. First of all, in one way the United States and Israel are the closest than they have ever been before. Moreover, under the time of Obama – in terms of intelligence activities, in terms of military aims, in terms of joint military development of new technologies – they are as close as they have never been before. There are many reasons and none of them is because of beautiful eyes of Israel. Simply put: Israel develops many projects that are useful to America as well. Like common weapon projects that cannot be easily given up by the United States now.

Secondly, there is a very strong Israel's link with the American Congress. Netanyahu can go there, make a speech and capture the absolute majority. In some respects he is more popular there than Obama.

As I said, nothing is permanent, but in that regard – institutionally and in terms of the ideological values – the relationship between Israel and America has never been closer. Of course the president of United States can opt for a particular policy that would cause some differences as Israel regards things in slightly different point of view. And the question of Iran is a good example here: both countries agree that Iran should have no nuclear weapons. But the question of a time-table when to react is seen different from these two perspectives. For the United States it's a remote is-

sue as it doesn't threaten America directly and it's one of their many foreign affairs issues. For Israel it's the question of survival. Iran is there. It has declared it wants to wipe Israel out from the map and it's building the weapons to do it. But I should give a credit to Barack Obama, that even he said that Israel has a full right to act on what he called the immediate international security concern.

JN: The last question about the United States: do you think that reelection of Obama can influence the position of Muslim minority in the United States?

RI: No, it's not an issue in America. Unlike France, where Muslims are 10% of population or in Europe in general where it is about 5 or more percent, in America there are less than 2%. It's very insignificant. That's quite similar to Jewish community in terms of pure numbers. But Jewish community is generally more active and prosperous and has been in America for many years. It has the strong position in the elites: intellectual, cultural, and economic one. Muslim community is poorer, so part of the problem is they are jealous and they want to dispossess the Jews from their profound role in American society and political system. It's different in Europe, though. Muslims are a real threat in here. I have written four books on Islamic Europe, I studied the issue a lot and I can say this truly is a threat.

JN: That's what I wanted to ask you about now. According to some of your recent books – like *The Spread of Islamikaze Terrorism in Europe: The Third Islamic Invasion* (Vallentine Mitchell & Co 2008) the immanent feature of Muslim communities in today Europe are fundamentalist groups that are hostile towards societies they live in.

RI: Look, you don't have to guess, just listen to what they say and read what they write and take it seriously. They claim they don't come to Europe to be Europeanized. They came to change you and to Islamize you. And they say in twenty years you will see the green flag of Islam over Downing Street and the Elysee Palace.

JN: Aren't you going too far with this statement? Isn't it too general?

RI: No, it is not. In 2005 when the subway in London was blown up, British prime minister Tony Blair said in public that British authorities were surprised because the act of terror was done by people who were home-grown British citizens and he used the word "criminals". When I heard those words I sent him a letter. In the letter I wrote to him that by not spelling the name of the danger you diminish it. The word "Islamic" never came out in his speech. He used "criminals" and the terrorists were not criminals. Criminals act to get some gain. These people did just the opposite: they lost their lives for the ideological reasons.

JN: You coined the term "islamikaze" for people like those bombers in London.

RI: Exactly. As they did it for ideological purpose. In 2003, two years before London attack, I published my book *Islamikaze: Manifestations of Islamic Martyrology* (Routledge 2003). It was published in London! In the capital of Europe! I sent to Blair photocopies of 30 pages from the book which described the name of their leaders, and how they recruit young British people and send them to Afghanistan to train. And I asked him: why are you so surprised now?

JN: Did Tony Blair reply?

RI: In fact, he did. He sent me a nice answer stating that they believe in a multicultural society. But later, just before he resigned, he gave that speech to the British parliament in which he spelled out all the arguments I brought to him. He had to admit that the multiculturalism has failed. And the Netherlands – the champion of the multiculturalism – is going back from it now.

Part of the problem is that in 20 years the population of Muslims in Europe will double to 20% as they double in every generation. At the same time societies of native Europeans keep shrinking. Not only do not they want to grow. They even don't want to maintain their position. And immigrants come from the outside and they take over. You need young people in order to support older generation economically. And such economical import is coming firstly from Islamic countries.

JN: And you don't consider it good.

RI: Of course! A lot should be done by policy makers of the European Union on this issue. I write about it in the books in which I try to list the recommendation of what should be done. One thing is limitations on immigration and more strict laws and regulations like obligation of knowing the language and history of the host country. Today many of immigrants cannot meet that standard.

Another thing is the right of family reunion for the gastarbeiters. Muslim immigrants often bring whole clans with them. It's not about European countries. It's about all liberal democracies – they are shackled by their own rules. In liberal democracies there is no long term planning and strategic thinking. And in many European countries socialists know immigration is good for them as the resource for votes. And there is no one to look in the long term whereas this is exactly what you should do: look in the long term. That is something that is not built into the system right now.

JN: You are talking about immigrants today. But suicide attackers in London bombings in 2005 were Islamist home-grown terrorists.

RI: You cannot call them home-grown. They are part of Pakistani or Bangladeshi minorities that came to Britain two generations ago. And in the multiculturalism they have the right to teach their children in their own languages, and within their

own cultures. They teach them Islam. They teach that you don't have to owe loyalty to your country. They don't have to change as they don't have incentive to change. They remain in their own culture and you get the bombs as the result. But nobody wants to believe that.

JN: To put it on more general level: multiculturalism is a part and parcel of late modern liberal democracy. Without the rule of multiculturalism it would no longer be a liberal democracy as we know it.

RI: Yes, that's true. But look: you live for better or for worse in this part of Europe. We all still live in national countries. They are members of the EU, but there is no European culture. If one wants to come to Poland that has its own language and culture then one should adopt to them. And then he is welcome. Religion is for the individuals, go to the mosque and pray. But the mosque cannot be a shelter for the individual against democratic state.

Liberal democracy claim everybody has a good heart. Not everybody has a good heart. Or to put it in other way: maybe people are good but ideologies distort they views.

JN: You coined the term "islamikaze". Was it really necessary to coin another word? Does it give any new explanation?

RI: Twenty years ago it has become common by politicians and media to accept this foolish term "suicide bombers". It's foolish because it is simply not true. In Islam suicide is a crime. And these people are supposed to be Muslim fanatics. A Muslim fanatic will not do anything that is criminal in Islam. That's why I tried to find the closest social structure to these so-called suicide bombers and I came across the Japanese kamikaze from World War II. Because they had also a religious ideology: *kami* is the word for God in the "wind of God" term. And they also did not want to commit a suicide. They wanted to kill others. They devote their lives for the cause. You cannot call it a suicide if you sacrifice yourself for the cause. And therefore I coined that term because it was necessary for me to have a term that carries a meaning that had not existed so far. Not only do I stick to this definition but I also think that I anticipated that what it connotes. Therefore I really do think that "islamikaze" is a term that is unfortunately useful and necessary.

BIOGRAPHY

Raphael Israeli: since 1974 lecturer and then professor of Islamic and Chinese History at Hebrew University, with sabbatical periods spent at York University in Toronto, the University of Pittsburg's Semester at Sea program, Harvard University, Boston University, Australian National University in Canberra, Melbourne University and

Naruto University in Japan. Author of 32 books and more than 100 scholarly articles in the fields of Islamic radicalism, Islamic terrorism, the Modern Middle East, Islam in China and Asia and the Opening of China by the French. Professor Raphael Israeli visited Faculty of Political Science of UMCS in Lublin on November 2012 to give lectures on the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East.