

Barnett Zumoff

Withdraw from Afghanistan Now

The Obama Administration is currently engaged in an intense debate about what tactics to use to pursue the war in Afghanistan, and specifically how many additional troops to send there. To my mind, this decision is an easy one: We should send no additional troops and should make plans to withdraw all the troops we have there now.

All of the arguments, pro and con, are eerie reflections of the same arguments we had during the Vietnam War. The U.S. lost that war, we should recall, after pouring in more than a quarter of a million troops and vainly expending the lives of nearly 60,000 of them, as well as the lives of some million Vietnamese.

Tactics are only the methodology of attaining a strategic goal. If the goal is unnecessary or unattainable, even the best tactics in the world are inappropriate. In Vietnam, we deluded ourselves into thinking that the poor villagers of Vietnam could be diplomatically sweet-talked or militarily pounded into abandoning their legitimate grievances against a corrupt and oppressive government. We further deluded ourselves into thinking that if that small, geopolitically insignificant country fell to communism, all of the non-communist world would collapse with it like a row of dominoes. This was a preposterous idea, and it didn't happen when we finally did lose in Vietnam.

Long before the end of the war, as early as 1968, our government officials had concluded that the war was lost, yet we nevertheless continued to pour blood and treasure and tens of thousands more

American lives into it. This was nothing less than government-sanctioned murder. Let's not repeat the same mistakes in Afghanistan.

The U.S. made war in Afghanistan for goals that sounded reasonable at the time: primarily to destroy the bases and training capabilities of Al Qaeda, which were the foundations of its worldwide jihadist activities, and secondarily to overthrow the Taliban government in order to deny Al Qaeda a safe haven. It has been argued that the primary goal could have been attained (and could still be attained) through massive manned and unmanned bombing of Al Qaeda's bases, without pouring our troops into the country. The secondary goal, in turn, would have been unnecessary had we accomplished the primary goal by lesser methods — yet it has been the pursuit of that secondary goal that may now undo us.

Why? There are several reasons. Afghanistan is a much larger country than Vietnam, with a far more difficult terrain. That, with our current (and future) inability to field even one-fourth as many troops as we did in Vietnam, makes it impossible to subdue the country; the paltry number of troops we are planning to add in Afghanistan will not change that equation significantly. Second, the Afghan government we are now working with is every bit as corrupt as the South Vietnamese government was, and is equally despised by the people. Third, the Taliban, though many (but not all) Afghans hated its cruel and oppressive laws, are far closer to the Afghan people than are the hated Western "infidels." Their government was less corrupt than the current Karzai government and was often able to secure the loyalty of villagers even without using force. Finally, the Taliban has a bottomless resource for support and resupply from its fundamentalist allies in Pakistan, just as the Vietcong had from Laos, Cambodia, and China.

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It is worth remarking that three of history's mightiest military forces, those of Alexander the Great, the British Empire, and the Soviet Union, were unable to subdue Afghanistan after years of war. Why should the U.S. expect to do so now, with our severely limited military resources and without the support of the American people? Why is the effort necessary, and how can we possibly afford the physical, financial, emotional, and political drain that the war is imposing on the U.S.? Most military authorities believe we could keep

Al Qaeda perpetually weak and off-balance with military measures far short of maintaining nearly a hundred thousand troops in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future.

We should get out now. Any political bogeymen that we are threatened with if we leave — loss of face, loss of political influence in the world, etc. — are no more real than the “domino theory” was in Vietnam. The Afghanistan war is not worth one American life, let alone thousands. **JC**

Sue Swartz

Going Mainstream on J Street

When it comes to politics and general worldview, I get nervous if my opinions get anywhere near “mainstream.” Call it a quirk of temperament. But after attending the inaugural conference of J Street in late October, I'm convinced that not only am I positively mainstream when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that this is a good place to be.

The shift began on Day One. I'm not sure what I expected when I entered the Grand Hyatt Hotel ballroom in D.C., but it certainly wasn't twelve hundred people, mostly Americans, mostly Jews, packed in at round banquet tables. Television cameras. A buzz of excitement. After seven years as an activist in the grassroots Brit Tzedek v'Shalom, I found the view from the back of the room to be one giant WOW.

The wow kept coming: when former Shin Bet head Ami Ayalon declared it was time for a new Zionist narrative; when Knesset member Nitzan

Horowitz said that “we, you and us, represent the true face of Judaism”; when Rabbi Melissa Weintraub described Encounter, an organization that brings Jewish communal leaders to meet settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank; when Bassim Khoury, minister in the Palestinian Authority, declared that “moderates have a future.”

In the weeks leading up to the conference, rightwing pundits and bloggers described J Street and its supporters with phrases like “fifth column,” “terrorist sympathizers,” “self-hating,” and — in a stroke of self-restraint — “naïve.” What I found at the conference, of course, was none of the above, but rather students (lots of them) and retirees, academics, social workers and accountants; secular and religious Jews, including several dozen rabbis; Zionists, non-Zionists, and folks somewhere in the middle; veteran activists alongside newbies drawn to J Street because they needed to do something. Everyone I spoke with expressed a deep connection to Israel and to Jewish values of justice and democracy.

By the second day, three hundred more people had registered, making it almost impossible to get easily from place to place. Afternoon desserts ran out. People found workshops closed for lack of space. During breaks, folks compared notes and argued about Iran, Gaza, and the usefulness of the phrase, “pro-Israel.” It was very noisy.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie was booed when he attacked

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Find important follow-ups at the websites of J Street (<http://conference.jstreet.org/>), Jewish Peace News (<http://jewish-peaceneeds.blogspot.com>) and Brit Tzedek v'Shalom (http://btvshalom.org/ga_messages/ga_20091023.html).

the Goldstone Report and Richard Goldstone himself. Rabbi Yoffie was enthusiastically applauded several times in the same session for making statements like “Jews should be able to live anywhere in Greater Israel — if they’re willing to live in a Palestinian state.” I had to remind myself that this man, who agrees with about three quarters of J Street’s positions, is president of the largest synagogue denomination in the U.S.

The speech by General James Jones, the Obama Administration’s Middle East national security advisor, similarly disoriented me. I think most of us in the ballroom were unaccustomed to applauding

four-star generals, but applaud we did. “The time has come to relaunch negotiations without preconditions on final status issues,” he said. “This is about the dignity of all human beings.”

The dignity of all human beings. Wow. If this is what a military man says from the *bima* of the Grand Hyatt, perhaps all of our work to build a new consensus — one that is both pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian — has made a difference. No, I didn’t love what everyone said during those three days, and yes, being in the solid middle did make me occasionally nervous. But that’s okay, I can change. **Jc**

Nicholas Jahr

The Grind of a War Crimes Trial

Back in May I wrote to a friend of a friend, a defense attorney with one of the international tribunals set up to try war crimes and crimes against humanity, to say I was considering heading to the Hague to see Charles Taylor take the stand in his trial by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. I wanted to know whether this attorney thought three weeks would be enough time to catch Taylor’s testimony in its entirety. “Three weeks is a long time in a criminal trial,” he wrote, “even these mega trials.”

Twenty weeks later, it looks as if the prosecution will finally get a shot at cross-examining Taylor. After an initial postponement of two weeks, a few sick days for

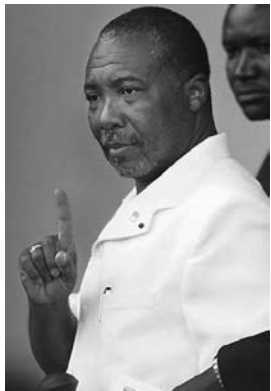
Taylor’s attorney, a three-week recess, and the fact that the Taylor was granted three day weekends due

to the demands of being on the stand at such length, Taylor has still spent more than fifteen weeks presenting his side of the story.

His testimony has meandered across more than two decades of West Africa’s tortured history. Taylor is allegedly one of the chief torturers, but he’s not being tried for what he did in his native Liberia (after setting off a brutal eight-year civil war, Taylor was elected president in 1997, but the fighting never really stopped, and he was forced from office in 2003). Instead, Taylor is charged with supporting the major rebel group in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front, notorious for mutilations and child soldiers, among other crimes.

It’s a little like nabbing Al Capone for tax evasion, or George W. Bush for invading . . . Afghanistan.

For the first two days of Taylor’s testimony, the public gallery was packed. By day three, the audience was about half the size, perhaps two dozen people. By the second week, most of the other reporters had left — perhaps because this is an “African” story or international justice is too dry a topic or reporting on either is too expensive — which brought our numbers down to about a



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dozen. After that week, our numbers halved again, and for much of weeks four through fifteen I've been alone with one other reporter and one or two legal monitors.

Every once in a while, a group of law students or high school kids will plod in and pack the house; if they're lucky they get to hear Taylor deny eating someone (rumors of cannibalism swirled around the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and Taylor and his commanders have been charged by more than one prosecution witness with the practice). The young woman who works the front desk for the court tells me that visitors will say to her: "That was really interesting — who is he?" That the Court is highly accessible to the public is commendable, but at these moments it feels as if Taylor is an animal at the zoo.

Much of his testimony has consisted of his attorney reading large swaths of one document after another into the record, pausing every paragraph or so to have Taylor comment. I struggle to pay attention to the relentlessly dull language of diplomatic cables and meeting minutes and political boilerplate. I strain to hear the faint ring of the court manager's phone, the technical crew calling to alert her that there are only five minutes of tape remaining. After a month in West Africa while the court was in recess, I return to find that Taylor has abandoned his usual suits for boubous and kufi caps. The rest of the regulars and I enjoy speculating about what this could possibly mean. On the fourth day he's back in a suit. It's less the banality of evil that's on display than merciless boredom.

Hannah Arendt's phrase wasn't meant to refer only to the drab functionary dispatching people to their deaths, but to the habits of language and thought by which Adolf Eichmann concealed from himself the reality of what he was doing. Stripped of this fuller meaning, "the banality of evil" is itself now at risk of becoming one of the "elating phrases" that Arendt decried, one that obscures more than it illuminates.

Applying it to Charles Taylor is nonetheless tempting. In the courtroom he doesn't rant and rave, as Milosevic reportedly did, and he hasn't pretended to be senile, as Pinochet did. For the most

part, he's calm and focused, deferential to the judges and occasionally drawing a laugh from the gallery. He speaks with a pleasant amount of gravel in his throat and the soft syllables of Liberian English. Not so far removed from the bureaucrat Eichmann, Taylor was trained as an accountant, which must have proved useful in managing the \$200 to \$250 million a year that, according to one early estimate, he expropriated from Liberia. Still, no aura of malice surrounds him. I find myself wondering if the banality of evil is nothing more than a product of the courtroom itself, of the context in which we choose to confront these acts.

Taylor, however, was no bureaucratic functionary. At least in Liberia, if not also in Sierra Leone, he is almost certainly responsible for the creation of a context in which 'Thou shalt kill' became the law of the land. Clearly, it's the need to set the moral order straight, and the promise of impartiality, that make international justice so potentially valuable.

That value depends, in part, upon the cooperation of the accused. Unlike Eichmann, however, Taylor has denied everything, whether relevant to his indictment or not. One veteran observer of Liberian politics tells me that Taylor is "one of the world's great bullshitters." If so, his virtuosity is on full display. It's prodigiously comprehensive — denials come nested within each other like matryoshka dolls — and his story has been consistent for more than a decade. Given the nature of his alleged crimes, documentary evidence is virtually nonexistent; much of the prosecution's case depends on hearsay and testimony from alienated former allies. Even more than the court in Jerusalem, this Special Court for Sierra Leone faces what may be the central dilemma of international justice: What does it mean when guilt is difficult to prove yet the verdict is preordained?

For me, witnessing this trial touches on the essence of what it means to be a secular Jew, an identity that has nothing to do the minutiae of ritual and everything to do with a rich moral tradition bound up in an often-traumatic historical experience. It's a tradition that demands that we simultaneously stand for the rule of law internationally and subject it to rigorous scrutiny. And that I stay awake. **JC**