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The present stands no chance against the past

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The Palestinians are not only, it seems, an "invented people" – courtesy of Newt Gingrich – but the only Arabs on the Mediterranean not to enjoy a Spring or an Awakening or even a Winter.

And Benjamin Netanyahu has been boasting that he was right about Egypt and Tunisia and Libya. He did not welcome their supposedly democratic revolutions last year – and who, he has been asking, blames him now for his silence? And the Israeli Prime Minister's silence, I notice, continues over Syria. Save for the accusation that the Assad regime was involved in the attempt by Palestinian refugees to cross the border via Golan last year – Netanyahu must be right about that – and a passing comment in June that "the young people of Syria deserve a better future", that's it. Israel, the beacon of democracy in the Middle East, has nothing more to say.

For some reason, we – in the press, on television, in our parliaments – are not discussing this silence. But, as Professor Ian Buruma pointed out recently, the political heirs of "deeply racist traditions" are the new champions of the Jewish state, whose policies now owe more to 19th-century ethnic chauvinism than to Zionism's socialist roots. All kinds of strange people now give their support to Israel. It is disturbing to note that the Oslo mass murderer, Anders Behring Breivik, supported the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from the West Bank. That's not Israel's fault. But Republicans in America are now warning of an Islamic Sharia law takeover in the US. It's an idea fostered, according to The New York Times, by a 56-year-old Hasidic Jewish lawyer called David Yerushalmi and his Society of Americans for National Existence, who now has former CIA director James Woolsey and Republicans Newt Gingrich and Michele Bachmann echoing his views. The last two have actually signed a pledge "to reject Islamic law".

For what? Israel, which in the past could analyse events rationally, if not always correctly, appears, too, to have lost its ability to grasp events, its Prime Minister hiding behind self-delusional speeches when he should be understanding the typhoon sweeping across the Arab states around him. People who will no longer tolerate dictators are not going to accept peace treaties with an ever more expansionist Israel – 2,000 more colonisers' homes, Netanyahu decided last autumn, would be the latest punishment for the Palestinians who dare to demand statehood.

Obama is also silent. When Netanyahu and the king of Saudi Arabia could line up to plead with Obama to save Mubarak, you knew something had gone terribly wrong. Gideon Levy, one of the finest of Israeli journalists, writes with biting eloquence of his government's folly, its failure to see that Arab democracy is a cause for good, not bad, that its relationship with the United States is – in a grim and almost colonial way – even more dangerous to Israel. And, all the while, the settlements continue. Which is why the Palestinians will not resume peace talks with Israel under the grubby neutrality of the United States.

Liberal Jews in America are ever more outraged at this phenomenon. They have often seen something faintly fascist about the right in Israel. Indeed,

I have a letter beside me as I write, sent to The New York Times on 2 December 1948, warning of the visit to the US of the young Menachem Begin whose "Freedom Party", said the letter's authors, was "closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties". Among the authors of this letter was Albert Einstein. Today, brave Israeli leftists like Miko Peled, son of the legendary Israeli General Matti Peled, have been touring the States, trying to warn of the dangers presented by Israel. In a recent speech, he described the fearful start of the bombardment of Gaza on 27 December 2008 (total dead about 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis) as "a date that will forever be etched in our memory as one of the darkest and most shameful days in the long history of the Jewish people".

Now, said Peled, at Silwan just outside East Jerusalem, thousands of Palestinians may be evicted from their homes "so that Israel can build a park to glorify a conquest that took place 3,000 years ago, never mind that not a shred of scientific evidence exists that such a king (David) ever lived, any more than there is evidence the world was created in six days. The past trumps the present in Israel – a state that wants to eliminate the existence of people who live on

their land to solidify the myth of a glorious past". Strong stuff indeed.

But is it any surprise that the Palestinians believe this when the president who told them they deserve a state vetoes their demand for statehood at the United Nations, while his country deprives them of millions of dollars for daring to believe him, withdraws its funding from Unesco when it bestows a kind of statehood on the Palestinians – and then remains silent when Israel says it will keep money legally owed to the Palestinians of the West Bank? But since Obama's re-election counts for more than "Palestine", what chance is there of peace in the Middle East? Maybe Israel is ensuring that the past also trumps the present in the United States. If only we could ask the one rabbi Netanyahu chose to quote in his UN speech against Palestinian statehood last year: the very same rabbi who inspired the murderer Baruch Goldstein to kill so many Palestinians 18 years ago.

But, of course, we remain silent.

Post-scriptum :

The Independent, 28 january 2012.