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Mitt Romney's Mormonism: Why It's a Serious Issue

By Renato Wardle

It comes as no surprise that Mitt Romney is poised to secure the GOP nomination for the 2012 elections. The current Republican Party is dominated by right-wing extremists hell-bent on galvanizing the United States into a militant Christian hegemony. Because of this fanatical atmosphere, it is completely natural that a Mormon would not only be running for president, but would also be poised to win the GOP nomination. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (aka the Mormons), with its history of religious severity, appears to be a perfect fit for the über-orthodoxy of the Tea Party-controlled GOP. Despite misgivings that many non-Mormon Republicans may have (most Christian groups don't consider the Mormons to be Christians), the history and doctrine of the Mormon faith seem to go hand in hand with the kind of derelict bigotry and racism that the current GOP espouses.

Mitt Romney is a lifetime member of the Mormon Church, with deep roots that stretch back to the earliest days of Mormonism. Romney's great grandfather practiced polygamy in Mexico in Colonia Juarez, Chihuahua, where many Mormon polygamists fled to evade the Edmunds Act of 1882. Romney has served in leadership positions in the church throughout his life, including being a bishop (the pastor of a church) as well as spending 30 months proselytizing in France as missionary from 1966-1969. These are all well-known facts that can be found through a variety sources, as well as from statements made by Romney himself. However, many facets of his involvement with the notoriously enigmatic sect re-

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Advancing the Policy of "Aggressive Diplomacy" Iran in Obama's Speeches

By Sasan Fayazmanesh

The best way to understand the Middle East policies of U.S. officials is to study their speeches at the annual policy conferences of American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), where nearly every political figure must pay homage to Israel and its most powerful lobby. True, some of the speeches are exaggerated because, when it comes to Eretz Yisrael, the more blood and gore in the speech, the louder the applause. Nevertheless, these speeches are usually indicative of policies that will be pursued, because they are written by some of the same advisors who have come out of the Israeli lobby groups.

President Barak Obama is no exception. His speeches at AIPAC policy conferences, as a senator in 2007, presidential candidate in 2008, and president in

2011 and 2012, have been quite consistent with the "liberal" wing of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), an offshoot of AIPAC. As far as Iran is concerned, these speeches have been time and again in line with the policy of "tough" or "aggressive diplomacy" that Dennis Ross – former director of WINEP, advisor to the Secretary of State Clinton, special assistant to President Obama, and now counselor at WINEP – advocated. It was Ross who partly wrote the speech delivered by Senator Obama at the 2007 AIPAC conference, where the policy of "aggressive diplomacy" was enunciated. Here I will analyze Obama's speeches at these conferences and show how they intend to advance the policy of "aggressive diplomacy."

With the exception of the 2011 speech,

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In Defense of Gilad Atzmon

By Jean Bricmont

Pro-Palestinian friends had repeatedly warned me: Gilad Atzmon is anti-Semitic, he is bad for the Palestinian cause, he may even work for Israel. I must have a contrarian turn of mind, because that kind of talk never stopped me from regularly reading his blog (quite the opposite) with a mixture of fascination and amusement. It struck me that an Israeli Jew living in the U.K., a voluntary exile, who is accused of anti-Semitism, among others by pro-Palestinian Jews and Palestinian militants, and whose conferences draw protesting demonstrations from "anti-racist" organizations, was at the very least an interesting curiosity. Moreover, having myself "escaped" from the religion in which I

was forced to grow up (Catholicism), I have an instinctive sympathy for all those who break, often brutally, with the myths and constraints of their childhood. Atzmon's themes, the politics of identity and memory, are at the very heart of our contemporary social debates. It ought to be possible to listen to a *truly* politically incorrect viewpoint on these issues, that of someone who defines himself as a "proud self-hating Jew."

But coming from a non-Jew like me, isn't there something suspect, or downright unhealthy, in such an interest? When Atzmon's editor asked me to write the preface to the French edition of *The Wandering Who?*, I told myself that this would be an opportunity to answer that

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main completely unknown not only to most Americans but to many Mormons as well.

Mormonism has an extensive history of secretiveness, deception, and malfeasance. The clandestine nature of this religion is as prevalent as ever, as much with its extra-religious business affairs, as with its secretive religious practices. The Mormons have two distinctly different buildings that they use in the observance of their religious practices, namely, chapels and temples. Chapels are open to all members of the congregation plus visitors, and are the location of normal Sunday services such as “sacrament meeting” (Sunday mass) as well as Sunday school. Temples are only open to those members who adhere completely to the strict standards of Mormonism, including unwavering loyalty to the president of the church, regular church attendance, and, of course, paying full tithes (10 per cent of gross income, as well as monthly donations known as “fast offerings”).

Within the temples, various liturgies known as “temple ordinances” are carried out. These rites derive from Masonic rituals (Mormon founder Joseph Smith was a Mason) and include “baptism for

the dead,” the so-called endowment (for living and dead), and “temple sealings” (temple marriages for living and dead). The level of secretiveness surrounding the temples is extraordinary, so much so that members of the Mormon Church who have not been to the temple have virtually no idea as to what they entail. Several details regarding these ordinances not only make Mitt Romney incapable of upholding the First Amendment, but also call into question where his true allegiances really are.

Before Mormons are allowed to enter a temple (there are well over 130 temples in operation today, and more being built), they must be interviewed by two separate tiers of ecclesiastical leadership to determine their worthiness to enter these edifices. These temple recommend interviews are the first issue of concern regarding Mitt Romney. Among the various questions asked of a member, one particular question goes as follows: “Do you support, affiliate with, or agree with any group or individual whose teachings or practices are contrary to or oppose those accepted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” The very nature of this question, coupled with several others regarding complete obedience to the president of the church (or “prophet”), put into question the overall allegiance of Mitt Romney (and, indeed, all Mormons).

If members are found to be in violation of this question (or any other from the list of questions), they will not be allowed to enter the temple. Being blocked from entering the temple is tantamount to being blocked from Heaven, albeit temporarily (they can always repent). The divisive nature of that particular question, coupled with its inherent ambiguity, provides the ecclesiastical leaders with carte blanche to blackmail members into complete obedience. The church leadership has proven to be quite draconian in the enforcement of member fealty (just put this question to Mormons in California relative to Prop 8).

Among the various ordinances performed in the temples, none are more divisive than the Law of Consecration. This rite requires members to pledge all their time, money, and abilities to the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth (the Mormon kingdom). Couple this with the demand to sustain the president of the church as the only prophet

seer and revelator on earth and a particularly troubling form of absolute obedience emerges. Mormons are devoted to their faith on an extraordinary level. Shackled with the spiritual tyranny espoused by the Mormon faith, members literally must do what they are told by the prophet, and dissent only results in excommunication.

Another interesting facet of Mormonism that has seen some light recently is the White Horse Prophecy. The basis of this prophecy comes from a diary entry made by John Roberts who related that Joseph Smith had prophesied in 1840 regarding the uncertain future of the United States and that, at a certain point, the Constitution would “hang by a thread” and the leaders of the LDS Church would come forth to protect and restore the Constitution. Despite the continued controversy regarding the authenticity of this account, the White Horse Prophecy has been embraced by Mormon culture. Mitt Romney has denied that it is part of his own beliefs, despite his father’s own stance on the subject (he felt that Mormons would, in fact, save the Constitution). Glenn Beck has referred to this in his own crazed rants over and over. The White Horse prophecy is embedded into the very fabric of Mormonism.

Mitt Romney has said that he feels that voters do not need be concerned as to where he goes to church on Sunday. This is an incredible statement, given the secretive nature of Mormonism. With this secretiveness, it is impossible for voters to recognize the deception inherent in Romney’s statement. Voters may not be concerned if the church in question doesn’t demand absolute fealty, or employ various coercive means to control its members, or even place loyalty to the leaders of that church above allegiance to the United States. Unfortunately for Romney and for the U.S. Constitution, if he becomes the president, the Mormon faith is all those things and more.

CP

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question and, above all, to explain why Atzmon should be heard and discussed.

It is ever so easy to “demonstrate” the alleged anti-Semitism of Atzmon. Frequently, including at the very start of his book, Atzmon makes a distinction between three meanings of the word “Jewish.” It can apply to persons who adhere to the Jewish religion, with whom he has no quarrel; to people of Jewish origin, with whom he has also no problem; and, finally, to what he calls the third category, that is, those who, without being particularly religious, constantly stress their Jewish “identity” and set it before and above their simple membership in the human race. It suffices thereupon to interpret in the first sense (people of Jewish origin) the word “Jewish” when Atzmon uses it in the third sense, in a style that is often extremely polemical, to “prove” that he is anti-Semitic.

However, when a French essayist, Bernard-Henri Lévy, uses all his immense influence to push his country into a war against Libya and then declares afterward that he did so “as a Jew” and “faithful” to his name – which is not exactly a rational argument, but are wars ever waged for rational reasons? – people who are not of Jewish origin should at least be allowed to wonder about that Jewish identity in whose name they are dragged into a war which, whatever one may think about it, was clearly not a war of self-defense for France.

Is it legitimate to criticize Jews in the sense of Atzmon’s third category? To start with, it is obvious that each individual has a perfect right to “feel” a sense of belonging to a group of which he or she is proud, or which he or she thinks contributes something important to the idea the person has of himself or herself, whether Jewish, Breton, French, Catholic, Black, Muslim, etc. Since all these identities stem from the hazards of birth, such feelings of pride are irrational, but who would try to force human beings to be rational?

The problem arises when these identities acquire a privileged political status, exactly as when religions acquire such a status. When a community, grouped around its “identity,” demands certain rights – or compensations, or privileges – others who do not share that identity should be allowed to challenge the justification of those claims. Just as when a religion seeks to impose its own moral-

ity on society as a whole. Identity politics is to be found among blacks, Muslims, women, etc. One may even suggest that politics today is more and more *reduced* to a conflict between identities, socioeconomic questions having been relegated to the management of nonelected experts. But there is also a Jewish identity politics, whose implications go far beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and which affects, among other things, freedom of expression or relations with Muslims.

But whereas identity demands, especially by Muslims, are regularly attacked in public, the great merit of Atzmon is to recognize the existence of Jewish identity politics and to criticize it – something practically nobody else dares to do.

The way to put an end to identity politics would no doubt be to extend the concept of secularism to the separation of identity from the state, as well

It ought to be possible to listen to a truly politically incorrect viewpoint on these issues, that of someone who defines himself as a “proud self-hating Jew.”

as the separation of sacred things, such as memory, from the state and even from politics. Each individual should be able to define the group to which he or she belongs and the events considered important or sacred in history. But the state and all its public institutions, such as schools and universities, should be strictly neutral in regard to these choices. In a secular democracy, politics should deal with the collective management of the *civitas*, with laws and regulations, with social and economic measures, but not with what citizens should think (unless the idea is to move toward what everyone claims to disapprove of, that is, totalitarianism). In a period marked by proliferation of memorial laws, when individuals are dragged into court for insults or offenses against some group in particular, or for denying certain historical facts, and when a clumsy expression can let loose a deluge of protests usually followed by public apologies (in other periods, they were called “confessions” or “self-criticisms”), the least one can say

is that such a modest proposal risks appearing as revolutionary as well as utopian.

But if everyone should be able to enjoy his or her favorite identity, it should also be possible for persons who have been raised in a given identity or religion to break with it, to rebel against it, and to criticize it, so that to speak “from inside.” There is no lack of writers of Catholic, Muslim, French, German origin, among others, who become hypercritical of the culture they were born into. Generally, they are considered free thinkers. But not when they are of Jewish origin like Atzmon. No doubt that he is obsessed by Jewish identity and his criticism of it; he is often excessive, provocative, even irritating. But on what basis is it unacceptable for a Jew to be hypercritical of his culture, and why can’t he be excessive, provocative, irritating? I know from personal experience that Atzmon is far from being unique among Jews, even if he is rare in saying publicly what he thinks. Isn’t it a subtle form of anti-Semitism to prohibit a Jew from rebelling against his origins, when that type of rebellion is accepted and even respected in the case of someone of another origin?

One of the most important questions raised by Atzmon’s writings is whether what he says is good or bad for the Palestinians (which is separate from the question of whether what he says is true or false). A sizable fraction of the Palestine solidarity movement seems to think that it is bad and tries to distance itself as far as possible from this “dubious character.” In my opinion, this is a huge mistake, which reflects a more basic error. This movement often gives the impression that its “solidarity” with Palestine takes place above all *over there* and requires more and more missions, trips, dialogues, reports, and even sometimes “peace processes.” But the plain facts of the matter are that the Israelis do not want to make the concessions that would be needed to live in peace and that a main reason for that attitude is that they think they can enjoy Western support *ad vitam aeternam*. Therefore, it is precisely this support that the solidarity movement should attack as its priority. Another frequent error is to think that this support is due to economic or strategic considerations. But, at least today, Israel is of no use to Western interests. It turns the Muslim

world against us, doesn't bring in a single drop of oil, and pushes the United States into a war with Iran that the Americans clearly don't want. The reasons for this support are obvious enough: constant pressure from Zionist organizations on intellectuals, journalists and politicians by endlessly manipulating the accusation of anti-Semitism and the climate of guilt and repentance (for the Holocaust) kept on artificial life support, in large part by those same organizations. As a result, the main task of the Palestine solidarity movement should be to allow free speech about Palestine, but also to denounce the pressure and intimidation by various lobbies. Which is what Atzmon does. Far from rejecting him, the solidarity movement should make it a priority to defend the possibility of reading and listening to him, even if one is not in total agreement with what he says.

By his all-out attack on Jewish "tribalism," Atzmon's essential contribution to solidarity with Palestine is to help non-Jews realize that they are not always in the wrong when conflicts with Jewish organizations arise. The day when non-Jews free themselves from the mixture of fear and internalization of guilt that cur-

rently paralyzes them, unconditional support for Israel will collapse.

However, if it is normal and even noble for Atzmon to give priority to attacking the identity of his origins, he seems to overrate the particularity of its characteristics. Feelings of superiority and the will to dominate exist in many peoples and groups, throughout history. As the American pacifist A.J. Muste remarked, the problem of all wars is the winner: victory has taught him that violence pays. One generally finds more human feelings among the defeated – the Germans and Japanese after 1945, or the French after the loss of their colonial empire. But Israel's military superiority – as well as the impunity, which certain representatives of the Jewish community assume they have when they defame whomever they please – only reinforces the attitudes denounced by Atzmon, but which are not necessarily specifically "Jewish." They are, unfortunately, the universal human traits of people who feel themselves in a position of strength. Actually, the greatest service that non-Jews could perform for the Jewish community would be to resist pressures instead of giving in, as they usually do.

Finally, what about authentic anti-Semitism? Doesn't what Atzmon (or I) say encourage it, and isn't it necessary to combat that evil? Before answering, let's see what that "combat" means in practice. In France, there is a law against questioning the existence of facts relating to the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War (but not of facts relating to any other historical event). People are prosecuted for calling for boycott of Israel (but not of any other country). Shows or writings which hurt the feelings of all sorts of people are countless, and it is banal to insult things that are sacred to Muslims or Christians, but only those considered anti-Semitic are regularly canceled. It is risky to mention publicly the pro-Israeli lobby. During a French radio broadcast on that subject, John Mearsheimer recalled that the late historian Tony Judt had warned him that France would be the hardest country for him to speak in, which at first Mearsheimer didn't believe but later found out was true.

It seems to me that if one is democratic, as most claim to be, the first thing to do is to call for equality, in principle, for all human beings, at least concerning the

right to express oneself. But that is not the case concerning Israel and organized Jewish communities. It is impossible to combat the division of society into rival communities if there is no such equality.

In regard to accusations of anti-Semitism, a democratic approach should be based on three principles:

–The term "anti-Semitism" should be defined clearly enough to allow for criticism. For example, if what is meant by anti-Semitic is to "defend the freedom of expression for Holocaust revisionists," or to "challenge Israel's right to exist" (as a Jewish state, denying the right of return of Palestinians), it should be replied that the issue is not anti-Semitism but freedom of speech or international law.

–Accusations should be based on what was actually written and not on rumors or interpretations.

–Persons accused should be allowed to defend themselves, which is particularly difficult before the court of public opinion, unless one manages to cultivate a healthy skepticism as to that sort of accusation, which Atzmon's writings encourage.

That said, it is probable that genuine anti-Semitism (understood as general hostility toward persons of Jewish origin) is growing, and to a disturbing extent. But that rise of anti-Semitism is due primarily to the incredible arrogance of Israeli policy, to the behavior of its supporters in France, to their suicidal determination to impose on the French people both a policy that they don't want and a de facto censorship which prevents them from protesting. The way "combating anti-Semitism" is actually carried out at present – even with the best intentions in the world – only provoked by any kind of censorship and, in this case, increases anti-Semitism. Really combating anti-Semitism requires giving up the way the "fight against anti-Semitism" is waged, through intimidation and censorship. Those who fail to understand that should reflect a bit more on the history of "real existing socialism" and of Catholicism in its heyday. **CP**

Jean Bricmont teaches physics at the University of Louvain in Belgium. This text is adapted from the preface to *La parabole d'Esther* (Editions Demi-Lune 2012), the French edition of Atzmon's book, *The Wandering Who? A Study of Jewish Identity Politics*.

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when the most burning issues were the Palestinian question and the so-called Arab Spring, Obama's speeches at AIPAC policy conferences are like painting-by-number. They follow a formula, a set of lines that appear in the following order: 1) The government of Iran, i.e., President Ahmadinejad, denies the Holocaust and wishes to "wipe Israel off the map." 2) Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons. 3) The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran will destabilize the Middle East, because countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey will also try to acquire nuclear weapons, and this will start an arms race. 4) Iran supports terrorist groups and, with nuclear weapons on its side, Iran will provide a nuclear umbrella for these terrorist groups. 5) Iran will provide nuclear weapons know-how to these terrorist groups, or will actually give them a nuclear bomb. 6) The Iranian government must give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons. 7) Our policy of tough or aggressive diplomacy will make the Iranian government forsake its nuclear weapons program, but if it does not, all options are on the table.

Let us look at the truth and/or logic of each line in the argument.

1) **The Iranian government and wiping Israel off the map:** President Ahmadinejad does not represent the views of the Iranian government as a whole. He is actually a weak president, whose views are seldom shared by other members of the Iranian government, particularly those in the Iranian Parliament (Majlis). His loose and uninformed talk about the Holocaust has at times been criticized by some members of the Majlis. It is, therefore, a fallacy to identify the views of the Iranian government as a group with those of Ahmadinejad. Moreover, while Ahmadinejad has questioned the historical narrative of the Holocaust and how the Palestinians fit into this narrative, he has never said that he wants to "wipe Israel off the map." Numerous individuals, including this author – who have read the original text of Ahmadinejad's speech allegedly containing "wipe Israel off the map" – have pointed out that there is no such phrase in it. Indeed, such an idiom does not even exist in the Persian language. Obama's speechwriters know this, and probably Mr. Obama himself knows it as well. But the falsehood is perpetuated in

Israel and the U.S.A. in order to portray Iran as an "existential threat" to Israel.

2) **Iran pursuing nuclear weapons:** Note that there is no logical transition between arguments 1 and 2. It is left to the imagination of the audience to connect Iran wishing to "wipe Israel off the map" to "Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons." In other words, it is not explicitly stated that Iran intends to wipe Israel off the map with a nuclear bomb. But the implication is there.

The claim that "Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons" is another falsehood. The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), the most authoritative U.S. assessment conducted by the director of National Intelligence, declared in 2007 – and has reiterated ever since – that "we judge with high confidence that in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weap-

As far as Israel is concerned, it is Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah that is the crux of the matter and not the issue of Iran's nuclear program.

ons program." Setting aside the contention that Iran had a nuclear weapons program until 2003 – which seems to be based mostly on the alleged information found on a mysterious laptop in possession of the U.S. government – the message of the NIE, gathered from a series of reports from the nation's 16 intelligence agencies, is quite clear and unambiguous: the U.S.A. does not have any proof that Iran is building nuclear weapons. This same message has appeared in every quarterly report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since 2002. Even the most recent reports, issued under the leadership of Yukiya Amano, the new director general of the IAEA who has politicized these reports, contain the same message. The speechwriters of President Obama, and probably Mr. Obama himself, know this fact. But they perpetuate the falsehood to appease Israel and its lobby groups in the U.S.

3) **Destabilizing effect of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and the arms race in the Middle East:** Let us set aside the

previous point and assume that Iran has a nuclear weapons program that will lead it to acquire such weapons. The Middle East has lived for many decades with a nuclear-armed power in its midst, Israel, a power that is most belligerent, expansionist, and warmongering. Yet, despite this fact, there has been no nuclear arms race in the region. Why would a nuclear-armed Iran, a country that in its modern history has never threatened its neighbors, cause other countries in the region, such as Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to rush to acquire nuclear weapons? The arms race argument makes no sense, and President Obama and his speechwriters know it. Yet, they push this illogical argument that has been put forward by the Israeli government.

4) **Iran's support for "terrorist groups" and the nuclear umbrella:** By terrorist groups President Obama is referring to Hamas and Hezbollah, two parties that, under heavy pressure from Israel and its neoconservative brethren, were classified by U.S. State Department as terrorist groups in November of 2001. Hamas and Hezbollah are, however, parties whose members were democratically elected to serve, respectively, in the Palestinian and Lebanese governments. Not all nations agree with the U.S. classification of these parties as terrorist groups. This is certainly true of the Iranian government, which considers these parties as legitimate forces of resistance against Israel's expansionist policies. The Iranian government supports these groups openly. It has never needed a nuclear umbrella to do so, and a nuclear umbrella will not enhance Iran's support for these parties. President Obama and his speechwriters can easily figure out the lack of logic in their own argument. But they do not wish to do so because they must please Israel and its lobby groups.

It should be noted that as far as Israel is concerned, it is, indeed, Iran's support for Hamas and Hezbollah that is the crux of the matter and not the issue of Iran's nuclear program. Without Iran's support for these parties, the Israeli government believes, there would hardly be anything standing between Israel and Eretz Yisrael.

5) **Iran providing nuclear weapons know-how or even nuclear weapons to Hamas and Hezbollah:** This is probably the most illogical argument that appears

in President Obama's speeches. Many in the U.S. intelligence sector, as well as military forces, have held that Iran is a "rational actor," including the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey. The same must be said of Hamas and Hezbollah. Even if these parties could have access to a nuclear bomb, or even a "dirty bomb," they would not use it, since they and everyone else around them would be annihilated, either by their own bomb or by Israel. But let us suppose that they are "irrational actors" and want to obtain nuclear weapons know-how. They do not need Iran for that. They can obtain the know-how from any nuclear physicist, or even the Internet. The know-how, however, does not do them much good. They must build a nuclear weapon; and that, as Iran's torturous, tumultuous, long and costly experience with enrichment of uranium shows, is impossible. Even if Hamas and Hezbollah could obtain a nuclear weapon from an "irrational" Iran, they have no means of delivering such a weapon.

We are left with one possibility: an irrational Iran could give a "dirty bomb" to an "irrational" Hamas or Hezbollah. But Iran does not need to wait any longer to do that. Currently, Iran has a total of "5451 kg of UF6 enriched up to 5 per cent U-235" and a total of "95.4 kg of UF6 enriched up to 20 per cent U-235" (IAEA Report of February 24, 2012). These are not only enough for many "dirty bombs," but enough for at least four nuclear bombs.

Even if we assume that the logic of the above argument escapes President Obama's speechwriters, it is hard to see how it eludes the president himself. After all, Mr. Obama could consult the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to see if his argument makes any sense.

6) The Iranian government giving up its pursuit of nuclear weapons: As stated above, there is no proof that the Iranian government has a nuclear weapons program, and Iran has consistently maintained that it has no desire to build such weapons. So, what is it that Iran must give up? Should it give up its nuclear enrichment, something that Iran has been doing for nearly a decade and can, according to Article IV of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, do legally? President Obama's speeches at AIPAC policy conferences are quite am-

biguous on this point and do not exactly state that any enrichment must stop or else.

It is interesting to note, however, that the Israelis and their surrogates in the U.S. Congress, such as Senator Joseph Lieberman, have been pushing to lower the threshold by arguing that Iran must give up its pursuit of "a nuclear weapons capability." If that is the case, Iran has long passed this Israeli "redline" and the time for a military action against Iran is overdue. It is also interesting to note that in his 2008 speech at AIPAC policy conference, presidential candidate Obama stated that Iran "pursues a nuclear capability that could spark a dangerous arms race and raise the prospect of a transfer of nuclear know-how to terrorists." In his last two speeches as president, Obama has not mentioned "nuclear capability."

7) The policy of "tough" or "aggressive diplomacy" and "all options being on the table": The policy of "tough" or "aggressive diplomacy" was never meant to have any diplomacy in it to begin with. All that it was supposed to do was to unify the Europeans behind the U.S. belligerent policy. It was designed to arrange some face-to-face meetings with Iran, forcing Iran either to accept U.S.-Israeli demands or face aggression, including more severe sanctions, a possible naval blockade and military actions. President Obama and his speechwriters know all this, and, if the speeches at AIPAC policy conferences, particularly the 2007 speech, are read carefully, the intent of the policy is quite clear. Yet, Obama and his speechwriters try to create the illusion of diplomacy.

It should be pointed out that so far the policy of "aggressive diplomacy" has proceeded along the lines originally planned, and President Obama was correct to brag about the result in his last AIPAC speech. The policy has managed to unite the Europeans behind the U.S.-imposed "crippling" sanctions, which are destabilizing the Iranian economy and creating much hardship for the people of Iran. One sign of this is the rising rate of inflation that, according to Iranian media, is now over 21 per cent. Another sign is the wave of fear and anxiety created in the Iranian currency market in the fall of 2010 and, again, in the winter of 2011-2012. However, these economic difficulties have not yet trans-

lated into what the architects of the policy of "aggressive diplomacy" have been waiting for: widespread discontent in Iran. Nor have the sanctions resulted in a complete collapse of the Iranian economy. That is why President Obama is cautioning against launching a "premature strike" against Iran. In order to launch a successful strike, the economic conditions in Iran must become as dismal as in Iraq before it was invaded.

In sum, the speeches of Barack Obama at AIPAC policy conferences are filled with statements that are either false or illogical. Yet, if one wants to understand the policy of "tough" or "aggressive diplomacy," reading these speeches is a must. CP

Sasan Fayazmanesh is professor emeritus of Economics at California State University, Fresno.

The Anatomy of Hopelessness **Scenes from Martinsburg South Middle School**

By JoAnn Wypijewski

Trailers are not uncommon in West Virginia, and they are such a facile joke outside the vast pools of people who live in them everywhere but New York City that I almost hate to mention them. But until I drove up to Martinsburg South Middle School, I had never seen a school before that wasn't in trailers because of natural disaster. The school is not all trailers; the main building of brick and mortar has been there for generations, but, like every school in Martinsburg, this one needs more space, and there's no money for building, hence the trailers. Ten years ago, they were called temporary. Next year Nicci Matthews, who teaches seventh-grade language arts, will move from the big school to a trailer. She is excited because each trailer has an air conditioner/heater, so teachers can control the temperature. In the main building, if a classroom is muggy or hot or cold, the kids just have

to bear it. The downside is that the trailers have no phone lines; teachers use walkie-talkies, so everything, no matter how private, is broadcast for all to hear.

The trailers have windows. The room in the big school where Jessica Caldwell, the other seventh-grade language arts teacher, conducts class has none. The children have painted a bright, bustling dream of outdoors on the wall in its place. It was Jessica's way of coping. And it's fine the way the trailers are fine; the way anything is fine if the kids are safe and the teachers care enough, and Nicci and Jessica both seem to; the way school is fine to the kids whose trip here each day takes them past the nearby juvenile detention center, which floats in the imagination as a too likely alternative.

Nine hundred kids attend this middle school; 200 have at least one parent in prison. The teachers aren't told about this. That is for the sake of the children's privacy, except it also means that when a kid comes to class late, without his homework, unruly or distracted, she might shout at him to shape up, not knowing that the night before his house was raided by cops, or his mother finally called 911 on her man, or he'd been on a bus half the night, returning from a family visit. When Nicci first discovered that some in her class had incarcerated parents, she asked Guidance whether maybe the school should organize a support group. "A support group for 200?" the counselor said.

Nicci is young. She started teaching three years ago. She is passionate and smart, and trying to maintain some integrity in a situation she had never envisioned when first embarking on the path that brought her here. Her seventh-graders range in age from 11 to 15. Almost none of them read and write at grade level. They cannot possibly compete on standardized tests and cannot possibly all perform at grade level by the time the year is up. "I keep telling myself, all I have to do is bring them up. If I can, just bring each one's work up at least one grade, from second to third, from fourth to fifth. If there are students who do come in at grade level, great." But that's not most of them.

"And this is the hardest thing," she says. "Because I'm a perfectionist, but it's just not possible. Every day I think to myself that I'm part entertainer, part teacher. I start with whatever skit I'm going to do

and work the lessons in there, or slide the lessons in after the entertainment, at which point maybe the kids will grasp something. I'm not a linear thinker and that's almost okay, because neither are the kids. I have a lesson plan for every day. The goal is to achieve the day's aim, whatever way I can."

"Education by improvisation?"

"You could call it that, and maybe that sounds bad, but the teachers who just lecture get nothing from the kids."

Tracking is illegal in West Virginia, but the kids are tracked. The honors kids move through the school in their own pod. They have little cognizance of anyone not in their pod of 60 out of 300 sev-

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enth-graders. Those kids can write in full sentences, maybe. I read a personal essay by one of them: the writing was vapid, yearning and full of misspellings and grammatical errors. Within honors there is another, higher group. The best of the best are "gifted"; the worst of the worst are "inclusion," meaning special ed kids, borderline special-ed, and slow kids. Neither pod will ever know the names of students outside their group in school. They won't play or eat together. The top group will roll along to high school, then college, at least community college, and some kind of job. For the lowest kids, there might be some kind of social program. For the kids in the middle, the majority, those in seventh grade who read at a second- or third-grade level, or fourth or fifth, it's a crapshoot.

Nicci has all of her students keep in-class journals. The exercises let them practice writing at their own level, and open a window onto their internal lives. "At Christmas time I ask them to write what they want for Christmas. There are children who put down 'electricity,'

'child support from my father.'" A student named Daryl wrote that all he really wanted was to get out of West Virginia and live with his father in New York. He knew it wasn't likely; "it's not something that can be wrapped up and put under a tree," he wrote.

I flipped through the journals. On some pages the children describe their dream house. Daryl's is a bunker made entirely of glass, with its own private army, snipers, and a 72-inch plasma TV in every room. On other pages, they imagine themselves as a pencil. One boy's penmanship was awful and spelling atrocious, but he had created a miniature world contained in a pencil box, with himself jostling for position among the pens and rulers, and flirting with another pencil: "Nice eraser."

Nicci and Jessica had left me alone with their students' fears and fantasies. I read the words scrawled across the pages, excavated the ideas half-articulated or fully formed, but sometimes with only the barest grasp of grammar – sentences without verbs and not for stylistic effect, adjectives where adverbs belonged, "it's" instead of "its," and a dozen other misplaced homonyms. Mostly, I was struck by the collision of want and desire, the teachers' fire-sale ambitions, and the children's hungry language driving a beat, crowding out every other thought in my head, tapping out a warning. *The kids are dying.*

Imagining what he would do with a million dollars, a boy named Michael wrote that he would buy his dad a truck, himself a truck, and pay off his uncle's credit card and property bills. A few pages on, he wrote that often he feels as if he has left his brain behind: on the bedside table, somewhere in the house, anywhere but in the skull his legs have carried along to school. He doesn't want to leave his brain behind. He doesn't want to get Ds. He wants his dad and mom to be proud of him. He knows he cannot leave his brain behind one day, when he has a job. "When," not "if": it is the one note of certainty in a syntax of anxiety.

Nicci says 2011 has been the worst year of her short career: the children don't care if they've missed class or done their work, if they get Fs, if the teacher is upset. They don't think they are failing, or else they don't face it. They are listless, idle zombies; she has not seen this before, not to the same extent. She has

return service requested

talked to parents, and many are similarly abstracted. At least three generations have gone to Martinsburg South Middle School, and for a portion of that alumni, everyone in a family is out of work and has been, more or less, for forty years. Grandparents had told their children, “I wasn’t good at math; you won’t be either” – or English or science – and now the parents say the same to their children, Nicci’s students. They don’t mind if the kids skip school. The grownups have too much time; they’re bored, and the kids make interesting distractions. Nicci asks her students what they did instead of coming to school. They hung out with their parents, watched TV, went to Wal-Mart, played games.

Martinsburg is in the eastern panhandle of West Virginia, two hours from D.C. Not “real West Virginia,” I’ve had some people in the state tell me: less country, more city, without mountaineers or mines. It is not rich, though some individuals are, and, like the rest of the state, it has the years of Bobby Byrd’s federal earmark largesse, in the form of highway projects, a Coast Guard headquarters, an IRS regional center, an Air

Guard, to thank for its survival once the railroads diminished and the mills shut down, once GM became a barren warehouse opened once a year for a sock sale, and the apple orchards got ground

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up for housing developments that now go begging for buyers. The schools here are probably better than in much of the state, but the social structure follows the economic structure, and it is like a yoke, determining the station of the people as

surely as it does coal country.

Next year Nicci’s students – those she doesn’t hold back – will reach the pinnacle of middle school, and maybe of their youth. They will wear special T-shirts in school, Class of 2012. They will have a prom and a graduation. For the prom, 13-year-olds paw through the same racks that bear the homecoming gowns of college girls; parents hire limos; there are after-parties. The entire year strains toward this climax. Some teachers say proms have inflated into such a major middle-school convention because high schools have been doing away with them – mostly because of gay kids wanting in, and grownups deciding it’s better to cancel the prom than let the queers come with dates. But Nicci thinks there is a simpler, cruder reason for this premature rite of passage: no one expects all of these kids to graduate from high school. If not the genuine article, they will leave with at least mementoes of an education. **CP**

JoAnn Wypijewki has been driving America’s roads in these hard times for three years. She has been reporting regularly to CounterPunch.