

Confessions of an American Intellectual

A dangerous moment in US hegemony



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On January 31, Thomas Friedman, ambassador-at-large of the US imperial power, delivered a new pitch from his perch at *The New York Times*, bravely acknowledging "the seriousness and complexity of this dangerous moment" for "American hegemony."

What is this "dangerous moment"? Is it the discovery by the CIA of a Chinese plan to lay siege to Taiwan, or Russian forces advancing on the capital of Ukraine, or thousands of Iranian attack boats blockading the Straits of Hormuz? It's none of these.

Instead, this "dangerous moment" is the result of actions emanating from a tiny sliver of land no larger than the smaller cities in the United States, whose impoverished population of 2.3 million Palestinians have lived in an "open-air prison" since 2007, regularly subjected to carpet bombing by Israel—the US' unsinkable aircraft carrier in the Middle East. It is this tiny enclave, Gaza, that has Thomas Friedman running scared.

What is it about the human spirit (note to self: Palestinians are human, not "human animals") that compels a weak, ethnically cleansed, terrorised people to resist the might and power of the world's most powerful nation? Friedman admits obliquely that it is an act of resistance by Gazans that now disturbs the US, Israel, and their Western accomplices.

Until the morning of October 7, 2023, the US, Israel, and their Arab protectorates were blithely convinced that the "juggernaut" of the so-called Abraham Accords would bury the Palestinians forever.

Yet, after nearly four months of the most destructive bombing in recent history, the esteemed *NYT* columnist is forced to acknowledge

that October 7, 2023 "is forcing a fundamental rethinking about the Middle East within the Biden administration." Is the human spirit still capable of such miracles?

A "rethinking" is underway in the highest councils of the US establishment, Friedman somberly warns the Iranians of an awareness growing "that we can no longer allow Iran to try to drive us out of the region, Israel into extinction and

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our Arab allies into intimidation by acting through proxies." The added italics are perhaps unnecessary. A question arises: why has the US allowed Iran to challenge its power?

The inestimable Thomas Friedman uncharacteristically makes a dangerous confession. Once again, he writes, there is an awareness "that the US will never have the global legitimacy, the NATO allies and the Arab and Muslim allies it needs to take on Iran in a more aggressive manner unless we stop letting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hold our policy hostage..." Did *The New York Times* really allow these words to slip onto its op-ed pages? Did Friedman just



US President Joe Biden during a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas, in Tel Aviv on October 18, 2023. PHOTO: REUTERS

acknowledge that the United States allows an Israeli prime minister to "hold our policy hostage"? Isn't this a libel against Israel? Isn't this pure anti-Semitism, pure evil?

However, cleverly as always, Friedman is blaming only one bad Israeli apple, only one Israeli prime minister for holding US policy hostage. In reality, Israel has been holding the US' Middle East policy hostage ever since the six-day war in 1967. This is what all Israeli governments have done over many decades.

If the US has been letting Israel subvert its policies for decades, what has changed since October 7, 2023 that will allow it now to stand up to Israel's bullying? Far from standing up to Israel, Joe Biden and Anthony Blinken have been spending even more time genuflecting before Israeli leaders.

Why, then, did Friedman take the trouble to outline what he claims is the new Biden Doctrine purportedly taking shape in Washington?

Arguably, that is because Friedman likes his job as ambassador-at-large of US imperial power, and he is clever with words,

too clever by half. With help from an Iranian native informant—Nader Mousavizadeh, a former executive at the World Economic Forum—Friedman concocts a Biden Doctrine that he thinks will save the US hegemony for a thousand years.

So, what does Friedman's Biden Doctrine require Joe to do? The US President must mount a "robust military retaliation against Iran's proxies." He must come up with "some form [yes, some form] of US recognition of a demilitarised Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza." This will happen only after Palestinians convince Israel that their state "would never threaten Israel." Thirdly, Joe must give Saudi Arabia the security guarantees it is demanding as quid pro quo for normalising its relations with Israel.

If this reads like a sophomoric fantasy, that is because it is.

Friedman assumes that October 7, 2023 never happened; that today's Middle East hasn't changed since June 1967; that the two-state solution is *not dead*, despite the 720,000 Jewish colonies and 256 settler-colonies in the West Bank and East Jerusalem; and that the

politics that drove the US' Middle East policy for five decades will magically disappear as soon as the US announces this Biden Doctrine. Yet, these are not the only fantasies that underlie the Biden Doctrine.

The Doctrine also assumes that US' "robust military retaliation" will destroy Hezbollah, the Houthis, and multiple resistance groups in Syria and Iraq; that Israel will destroy Hamas and pacify the West Bank; that the vigorous actions of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza will return the Middle East to where it was after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Israel could bully the United States on nearly all fronts, but there is a red line the latter has refused to cross. The US has persistently resisted Israeli pressures to start a war against Iran or join it in attacking Iran's nuclear assets.

Over more than three decades, the US military has vetoed US neoconservatives demanding war against Iran. US bombs did not descend on Iran after the Ayatollah removed the Shah, or after the fall of the Soviet Union. After the 9/11 attacks, under pressure from

neocons, the US attacked Iraq, not Iran.

Will the US attack Iran now when it has grown its economy, technology, military, and proxies to become the leading power in the Middle East, barring the United States? Will the US military risk saving its reputation again after its disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? Can the US simultaneously wage a war in the Middle East and the South China Sea?

Is it too much to expect Friedman to get real and do a dozen interviews to understand what October 7 actually says about all the ways in which the Middle East has changed since Operation Shock and Awe?

Let Friedman ask what is it that has enabled Gazans and the Houthis to make the world turn on a time; what is it that is exposing Israel's narrative of victimhood, for the face that it is; and why people across the world have been mounting daily protests against Israel's genocide of Palestinians.

Let him also ask why the United States is so openly, brazenly funding and arming the perpetrator of a genocide, when it should be working very hard to play down its history of war-mongering against the Global South. Can a US that bombs compete with a China that builds?

What is the lunacy that leads Western leaders, at a single cue from Israel, to collectively defund UNRWA and, thereby, worsen the famine-like conditions forced upon the Gazans by Israel's genocidal war? Are Europe's leaders trying to neutralise the Gazans *before* they begin showing up on Europe's shores, once Israel drives them out of Gaza?

Since Thomas Loren Friedman has now dared to stand up to Israel, let him also summon the moral courage of Aimé Césaire, a Martinican poet and revolutionary, to remind Western leaders that "a civilisation that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilisation."

But that would be asking a leopard to change its spots. Is there a chance that this might happen? We have witnessed a few miracles lately. Will Thomas Friedman surprise us with another minor miracle?

US AIRMAN SETS SELF ON FIRE OUTSIDE AN ISRAELI EMBASSY

A devastating act of reason



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Amid widespread, near-daily protests in the US demanding a ceasefire in Israel's attacks on Palestine, an active-duty member of the US Air Force set himself on fire outside the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC on February 25. The man, identifying himself as Aaron Bushnell, said, "I will no longer be complicit in genocide," in a video of the incident obtained and reviewed by CNN. His words are significant; an active-duty member in the US Air Force knows far more than an ordinary protester. Before lighting himself on fire, Bushnell said that what he was about to do was minimal compared to the suffering of Palestinians. Bushnell yelled "Free Palestine" repeatedly, till he collapsed.

The video—which he live-streamed on Twitch—and the act itself, speak volumes. Allegedly, police were in the scene from the beginning but were only able to extinguish the fire after Bushnell collapsed, as "some officers pointed guns at the protester, while others called for fire extinguishers," according to the Atlanta Community Press Collective. This particular information has not been reported by major media outlets. One cannot simply shun this self-immolation as an act of "anti-Semitism," or "terrorism," or as a personal case of "insanity." Questions need to be asked and many questions come to mind. Did this man protest to his peers and seniors in the US Air Force? Did he see things that led him to think, "I will not be complicit"? Why did he reach this level of despair in a democratic country like the US?

This is the second time that a person has set themselves on fire in front of an Israeli official building

in the US. In December last year, a woman set herself on fire in front of the Israeli consulate in Atlanta, Georgia. A Palestinian flag was recovered from the scene, and the police deemed the incident as an "extreme act of political protest." Further reporting on the incident and the identity of the person was not pursued by most Western media outlets. In the aftermath, the Consul General of Israel to the Southeast US, Anat Sultan-Dadon, had stated that "it is tragic to see the hate and incitement toward Israel expressed in such a horrific way." They offered their prayers to the security officer who was injured—not to the protester—and even stated that "the sanctity of life is our highest value." The sanctity of nearly 30,000 lives brutally cut short in Gaza, however, seem to be not part of their farcical moral value.

When referring to self-immolation in other countries, particularly in non-Western countries, experts

For a US military man to light himself on fire and say what's happening to people in Gaza is much worse than what he's doing to himself must have significant motivating factors, wherein the personal is political. Preceding this, two US officials publicly resigned, uttering similar frustration over Biden's brazen support for Israel's genocidal mission.

quoted in Western media reports have sympathised with it as a form of protest. For example, when a growing number of Tibetans self-immolated in China in 2012, Voice of America published an article titled "Social injustice fuels self-immolation protests." In the report, Rodger Baker of the global intelligence firm Stratfor, explained that self-immolation is "an attempt

to Vietnamese Buddhist monk Quaker Duc, who offered to burn himself in Saigon to protest against the persecution of Buddhists by the US backed Catholic Diem Regime in 1963. One of the most historically significant acts of self-immolation is perhaps that of Mohamed Bouazizi—a 26-year-old street vendor in Tunisia, toiling in chronic poverty—who set himself on fire

to Palestinians? Or will it also be disregarded as an "extreme form of protest"? The way US foreign policy has unfurled in favour of Israel, we can predict some tale will be told to shut this down straight away—to ensure the questions that need to be asked are not asked. Regardless, for a US military man to light himself on fire and say what's happening to people in Gaza is much worse than

Washington, DC, told *The New Yorker*, "Fire is the most dreaded form of all forms of death... so the sight of someone setting themselves on fire is... an assertion of intolerance." He added that "this isn't insanity, it is a terrible act of reason." Inarguably, protests with "reason" have not worked to stop the US' complicity in facilitating the genocide in Gaza. US citizens have protested against the squandering of taxpayer money to aid Israel's genocide, and there has been widespread dissent within Democrats regarding the violation of US laws which don't allow the transfer of weapons to forces engaged in human rights violations. Still, despite every logic and reasoning, and despite the fact that the International Court of Justice has ruled that Israel is committing "plausible genocide," the US vetoed a permanent ceasefire in the United Nations Security Council, for the fourth time, this week.

In 2019, Petula Dvorak, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, wrote, "Self-immolation near the White House or on the steps of a government building is not the final, selfish rage of someone committing a mass shooting. And it is not a lonely suicide by someone who simply wants to disappear. These acts are an unmistakable protest, the loudest, most spectacular cry that people in pain can come up with. And we owe it to them to listen." In the same vein, the two recent incidents of self-immolation in the US specifically in front of Israeli official buildings should be viewed as the ultimate protest; by those in a state of grave despair. But the first of these was largely portrayed as an act of extremism. According to the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, "oppressive regimes are eager to portray self-immolation as an outcome of mental illness or religious extremism." How the US reacts to the Air Force member's self-immolation, chanting "Free Palestine," will reveal how much further its own democratic values have eroded in its blind support for Israel since October 7 last year.



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Police were on scene within seconds of the self-immolation beginning. Some officers pointed firearms at the protester, while others called for fire extinguishers.
Police were not able to extinguish the fire until after the protester collapsed.

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to draw attention to, in a very drastic manner, some form of political change or political injustice. So, when you see it with the Tibetans, it is about the Chinese domination of Tibet...the idea of lighting oneself on fire is beyond the level of pain that most people are willing to endure."

One must understand the history of self-immolation to gauge what the two incidents signify regarding the US' role in the genocide of Palestinians, against the interest of its own citizens.

Self-immolation is a millennia-old practice in both the West and the East, from Greco-Roman mythology

in January 2010, after ten years of harassment by police officers. With his fruits and cart confiscated, and with officials at the governing office refusing to hear his pleas, Bouazizi stood on the road and doused himself in gasoline, crying "enough." His self-immolation ignited the Arab Spring, inspiring pro-democracy movements and uprisings which saw the toppling of one Arab dictator after another.

As the self-immolation of the US airman makes news headlines, will it ignite further outrage? Will it be seen as an attempt to bring attention to the injustice being done

what he's doing to himself must have significant motivating factors, wherein the personal is political. Preceding the US airman's self-immolation, two US officials publicly resigned over Biden's handling of the situation in Gaza, uttering similar words. Josh Paul, director in the US State Department's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, resigned in October 2023, stating, "I fear we are making the same mistakes as we have made in the past decades, and I decline to be a part of it for longer."

Decoding the "motives" behind acts of self-immolation, Timothy Dickinson, a scholar based in