

REUVEN RIVLIN'S ODYSSEY

The Israeli President returns home
from Australia to confront an election
and a seemingly insurmountable
political impasse

"DEAL OR NO DEAL?"

Analysing the fine print in the Trump Administration's long-awaited Israeli-Palestinian peace plan **PAGE 18**

VICTORY THROUGH DEFENCE

Inside Israel's vital air defence systems, and the people who make them work **PAGE 30**

BUSHFIRES AND CONSPIRACIES

Arabic-language commentators spin dark theories about our fire tragedy **PAGE 27**

REGIME ON THE ROPES?

The 41st anniversary of the Iranian Revolution has exposed Teheran's vulnerabilities ... **PAGE 24**

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This *AIR* puts the spotlight on Israeli President Reuven Rivlin for two separate reasons – his historic visit to Australia in late February, and his vital role in trying to forge a viable government for Israel after the election there on March 2.

Amotz Asa-El explores both these elements of Rivlin's recent odyssey, and this *AIR* edition also tries to provide background in terms of where his visit fits into the seven decades of the Australia-Israeli relationship. Plus, Israeli political columnist Anshel Pfeffer fleshes out the political complexities Rivlin will likely have to navigate throughout March, with a probable hung parliament yet again and an acting prime minister on trial for corruption.

Also featured this month is analysis of the details of the US Trump Administration's "Vision" for Middle East peace released on Jan. 28. Jacob Magid details what the peace plan actually says; Israeli pundit Dan Diker puts the plan into the context of principles going back to the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin; while former Israeli lawmaker Einat Wilf looks beyond the Palestinians to the wider Arab world for the plan's key impact.

And don't miss Yoav Limor's enlightening encounter with Brig. Ran Kochav, the man charged with the vital task of protecting Israel from aerial and missile attacks, and Ran Porat's exposé on some Arabic-language conspiracy theories in Australia about the recent horrific bushfire crisis, plus much more.

We invite your feedback at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

CONTENTS

FEATURE STORIES

FROM AUSTRALIA TO A MAELSTROM

BY AMOTZ ASA EL



Hectic though this [Australian] journey will be for [President Rivlin], it will be easier than the challenge that will await him once he returns home PAGE 12

ISRAEL SET FOR "MARCH MADNESS"

BY ANSHEL PFEFFER PAGE 15

DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

What the Trump peace plan actually says
BY JACOB MAGID PAGE 18

A RETURN TO THE "RABIN DOCTRINE"?

BY DAN DIKER PAGE 20

WHAT THE TRUMP PLAN CAN ACHIEVE

BY EINAT WILF PAGE 23

COULD THE 41ST ANNIVERSARY BE THE LAST?

BY SHARYN MITTELMAN PAGE 24

INSIGHTS AND ADMONITIONS

BY AHRON SHAPIRO PAGE 26

THE BUSHFIRE CONSPIRACY

BY RAN PORAT PAGE 27

ESSAY: VICTORY BEGINS WITH DEFENCE

Inside the IDF's air defence program
BY YOAV LIMOR PAGE 30

REGULAR COLUMNS

FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN PAGE 4

WORD FOR WORD PAGE 5

SCRIBBLINGS

TZVI FLEISCHER PAGE 6

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

EVELYN GORDON PAGE 7

ASIA WATCH

MICHAEL SHANNON PAGE 8

AIR NEW ZEALAND

MIRIAM BELL PAGE 9

BEHIND THE NEWS PAGE 10

STRANGER THAN FICTION PAGE 11

NOTED AND QUOTED PAGE 35

IN PARLIAMENT PAGE 36

MEDIA MICROSCOPE

ALLON LEE PAGE 39

THE LAST WORD

JEREMY JONES PAGE 40

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ON THE COVER

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin speaks during the Fifth World Holocaust Forum at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, Israel, 23 January 2020.
(Photo: Ronen Zvulun/AAP)

PHOTO: RONEN ZVULUN/AAP



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Level 1, 22 Albert Road,
South Melbourne, VIC 3205, Australia
Telephone: (03) 9681 6660
Fax: (03) 9681 6650
Email: aijac@aijac.org.au

SYDNEY OFFICE

140 William Street
East Sydney, NSW 2011, Australia
Telephone: (02) 9360 5415
Email: ldemesquita@aijac.org.au

SUBSCRIPTIONS

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FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN

SPECIAL FRIENDSHIP IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The special friendship between Australia and Israel has been in the spotlight in recent weeks, especially with the historic visit of Israeli President Reuven Rivlin to Australia in late February.

Rivlin's trip followed on from Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu's highly successful visit here in February 2017 and then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's return visit to Israel, together with numerous bipartisan colleagues, for the Battle of Beer Sheva centenary in October of that year.

Rivlin's visit sends a clear message that Jerusalem cherishes the irreplaceable and long-standing friendship between our two countries and is very willing to continue investing in that bond.

And Israel does indeed have much to be grateful for with respect to the unique Australia-Israel relationship – going all the way back to the invaluable efforts of Australian Foreign Minister H. V. "Doc" Evatt in steering the Partition Plan resolution through the UN in 1947.

The current Morrison Government has certainly continued the principled international stances which have helped deepen and underpin Australia-Israel relations over the many years since then.

This has been most evident recently in Australia's intervention against a dangerous and politicised decision at the International Criminal Court (ICC), and our leadership in confronting the gross bias at the UN Human Rights Council.

Australia's opposition to the bid by the ICC to investigate alleged war crimes in what it falsely insists is the "State of Palestine" was not a one-off gift to Israel. Rather, it was a principled stance consistent with Australia's longstanding, bipartisan support for a peace between Israel and the Palestinians based on the paradigm of two states for two peoples arrived at through bilateral negotiations.

Australia joins Brazil, Hungary, Austria, Germany and the Czech Republic in filing "amicus brief" opinions to oppose the ICC's assertion it has jurisdiction over the "State of Palestine". The US is not an ICC member, but has also made its opposition clear.

And politicised it is. Palestine is clearly not yet a state under the recognised criteria of international law as codified by the Montevideo Convention of 1933. The ICC's reasons for treating it as a state – which can then request the ICC investigate war crimes on its "territory" – basically boil down to relying on UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions saying Palestine is a state. But not only does the UNGA lack the legal power to make any such determination, it is a completely politicised body dominated by non-democratic states pursuing their narrow political interests – which includes an automatic majority for virtually any conceivable anti-Israel proposal.

As the late Israeli diplomat Abba Eban rightly said about the UNGA, "If Algeria introduced a resolution declaring that the earth was flat and that Israel had flattened it, it would pass by a vote of 164 to 13 with 26 abstentions."

Australia's principled stand on the ICC investigation serves the cause of peace and justice in two major ways:

Firstly, by reminding the Palestinian Authority that the only possible route to gain genuine statehood is through direct negotiations with Israel. Trying to use the automatic pro-Palestinian majority in many UN bodies to impose statehood without negotiating a compromise peace with Israel will not work.

Secondly, the ICC needs to be reminded that its current pathway of politicisation is likely to severely undermine the ICC's legitimacy as a global purveyor of impartial justice.

Canberra's principled stand before the ICC is in keeping with Australia's moral leadership in other problematic international diplomatic forums.

Hillel Neuer, the director of the important and respected NGO UN Watch, recently said Australia has been effectively serving as "leader of the free world" at the UN Human Rights Council. As a current member, we have been leading the charge in calling out bias, injustice and cronyism in that deeply problematic body.

The latest outrage from that outrageously biased body is an unprecedented "blacklist" of companies doing business in the West Bank – something which is completely legal. It's a witch hunt that recalls Nazi-era boycotts of Jewish people.

Israel should be very grateful that Australia has been taking the principled route rather than following the numbers on these issues – and, almost certainly, President Rivlin has conveyed these sentiments to Australia's leadership.

Meanwhile, Australia's relationship with Israel is demonstrably highly beneficial to both sides. In areas such as technology, defence, water efficiency, environment and business partnerships, it has never been better. Perhaps

nothing symbolises this soaring future more than El Al's trial of nonstop flights between Australia and Tel Aviv, starting in April.

Of course, there is one large and very significant fly in the ointment on the criminal justice front.

Rivlin is expected to be a sympathetic messenger to convey the painful and entirely justified frustration of Australians in general, and the Australian Jewish community in particular, at the completely unacceptable delays affecting the extradition of accused child sex offender Malka Leifer.

With Israel's third election in the past 11 months looming on March 2, Rivlin came to Australia in his ceremonial capacity, but will return to Israel needing the wisdom of Solomon to help negotiate an end to Israel's year-long political impasse.

Almost universally liked and respected, Rivlin will be looked to after the election to somehow find a magic formula allowing Israel's deadlocked political factions to produce something the country has not seen in over a year but desperately needs – a functioning government coalition.

Hopefully, President Rivlin will have returned to Jerusalem from his important Australian sojourn rested, energised and inspired to succeed in this extremely difficult yet immensely important task.

AIR

WORD FOR WORD

"My vision presents a 'win-win' opportunity for both sides, a realistic two-state solution that resolves the risk of Palestinian statehood to Israel's security. Today, Israel is taking a giant step toward peace... Today's agreement is a historic opportunity for the Palestinians to finally achieve an independent state of their very own."

US President Donald Trump on the release of his Administration's "Vision" for Israeli-Palestinian peace (Whitehouse.gov, Jan. 28).

"Mr. President, I believe that down the decades ... we will also remember January 28th, 2020, because on this day, you became the first world leader to recognise Israel's sovereignty over areas in Judea and Samaria that are vital to our security and central to our heritage. And on this day, you too have charted ... a brilliant future for Israelis, Palestinians, and the region – by presenting a realistic path to a durable peace."

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on the Trump Administration peace plan (Whitehouse.gov, Jan. 28).

"We say a thousand times: No, no and no to the 'deal of the century.' We just heard President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister

Netanyahu talking about the slap of the century. If God wills, we will strike them back with slaps."

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on the peace plan, (Times of Israel, Jan. 29).

"Australia welcomes the release of the US "Vision for Peace" by President Trump today. We welcome any initiative that can assist the resumption of direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians for an end to this conflict, and the agreement of a durable and resilient peace settlement."

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne on the Trump Administration's peace plan (DFAT.gov.au, Jan. 29).

"Today, the epitome of rebellion, arrogance and tyranny is the US government, which is controlled by the wealthy Zionist individuals and corporate owners."

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei (Twitter, Feb. 20)

"To be here, among the children of Holocaust survivors and members of the Jewish and Islamic communities, is both a sacred duty and a profound honor. The unconscionable crimes to which we bear witness today are... a violation of us all, an affront to all of God's children."

Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, Secretary-General of the Muslim World League, leading an Islamic delegation at Auschwitz for the 75th liberation anniversary (Arab News, Jan. 23).



SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

THE EPITOME OF LEFT-WING ANTI-ZIONISM

A statement at a New York rally opposing the Trump Administration's Mid-East peace plan seemed to me to epitomise the bizarre, nonsensical view of Israel and Zionism that has entrenched itself in much of the global far-left.

The small "Say No to the Steal of the Century" protest in Manhattan's City Hall Park on Jan. 31 was organised by a number of different American Islamist and far-left groups. Speakers and demonstrators were pretty clear that they were not just against the Trump peace plan, but Israel's continued existence. Predictably, demonstrators chanted, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free." Speakers praised Hamas, spoke about the coming end of Zionism and liberation of all of Palestine, and called for "resistance", a euphemism for terrorism.

But what was particularly striking was a statement by Bill Doares, representing the Marxist Workers World Party:

"We must all stand with the people of Palestine because Israel is part of a global apartheid that keeps the world divided into rich and poor, exploiters and exploited, oppressed and oppressors... And when the State of Israel goes, that whole edifice will fall, Free, free Palestine!"

That statement is an illustration of the far-left view of Israel which is striking because of how completely divorced from any normal concept of reality it is.

It is one thing to believe Israel is a usurpation of Palestinian or Islamic land, which should be returned to its rightful owners, as most at the rally appeared to, and many Palestinians clearly do. This view is extreme, but at least it makes some intrinsic sense once you understand the stolen land premise – untrue and ahistorical as it is.

But to believe that destroying Israel is the key to ending a whole global system of "apartheid that keeps the world divided into rich and poor, exploiters and exploited, oppressed and oppressors" takes the craziness to a whole other level.

Israel is a tiny sliver of land containing nine million people. Even if you believe, ridiculously, that Israel is the most evil regime in the world, or think, also ridiculously, that the 11 million or so Palestinians are the most oppressed people on earth, this claim makes no sense.

This one conflict, directly affecting some 20 million people – 0.27% of the world's 7.5 billion human inhabitants – and concerning 0.0146% of the world's total land area, is the key to ending all oppression, exploitation and inequality in the world? Seriously?

However, this nonsensical claim has its origin in some-

thing I have written about before in this column – antisemitic conspiracy theories about the terrible secret global power of "Zionists" acting behind the scenes to prop up imperialism, colonialism and capitalism that were vigorously propagated by the KGB and other Soviet bodies during the Cold War. Archival sources show that key Soviet leaders really believed in "Jews secretly control the world" conspiracy theories straight out of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Many on the left and in international "liberation movements" came to accept this belief – that Israel is the lynchpin of imperialism – as an article of faith, so that Marxists like Doares are still claiming it today, despite its obvious absurdity. And even those on the far-left who did not directly or fully imbibe this belief from Soviet sources and their many echo chambers would have picked up the general belief in left-wing circles that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the most urgently important issue in the world.

This explains the ridiculously excessive focus on Israel in far-left circles even today, such as huge amounts of energy put into the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel on university campuses and elsewhere.

Proponents of this movement deny that their obsessive focus on alleged Israeli wrong-doing has anything to do with antisemitism – despite the frequent invocation of traditional antisemitic tropes in pro-BDS circles. Yet the bottom line is that, even when no such tropes are invoked, the obsessive focus on Israel by such groups and individuals largely has its ultimate origins in beliefs about Israel's key role in "global imperialism" that are a direct product of a traditionally antisemitic worldview.

TERRORIST WATER WALLIES?

Here's a fun fact. Israel's Public Security Ministry is having to spend NIS 2.3 million (A\$1 million) to install water control systems in all the maximum security prisons in Israel.

Why? Because Palestinian security prisoners (eg. those charged with terrorism-related offences) in those prisons are apparently seeking to sabotage Israel in perhaps the only way available to them – by leaving the water running all day long.


Israeli Prison Service (IPS) data shows that security prisoners use about 3.5 times more water a year than the average Israeli – 250 cubic metres compared to 70 cubic metres.

They also use many times more water than prisoners convicted of non-security related crimes.

Security prisoners spend much of the day in their cells and often have showers and lavatories in them. The only reason the IPS can think of for the water discrepancy is that these prisoners are deliberately letting the water run for hours daily.

In all, the 5,800 Palestinian security prisoners in Israeli jails were wasting an average of 750,000 cubic metres of water a year, costing taxpayers some NIS 5.6 million (A\$2.45 million) annually.

This behaviour cannot help but recall the largely false claims frequently made by Palestinian representatives and advocates that Israel is constantly stealing water that rightfully belongs to the Palestinians.

It also cannot but make one wonder about the strange zero-sum and ultimately self-destructive behaviour that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often seems to inspire. 



DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

Evelyn Gordon

TURNING HUMAN RIGHTS INTO A BAD JOKE

If you want to understand just how outrageous the UN Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) blacklist of businesses operating in Israeli "settlements", released on Feb. 12, really is, forget for a moment about its anti-Israel bias and its warping of international law.

Instead, simply evaluate it on its own terms, as a compilation of companies engaged in "activities that raised particular human rights concerns."

So what horrendous activities do these 112 companies engage in? Well, there are several supermarket chains, which sell groceries to both Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank, Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem. There are several fuel companies, which operate petrol stations where both Israelis and Palestinians fill up their cars.

There are several bus and rail companies, which provide public transportation used by Israelis and Palestinians alike. There are phone companies (mobile and landline) that provide general communications services. There are banks, which provide basic banking services. There's a water company, which provides potable drinking water and sewage solutions.

There are also several food and clothing manufacturers, like General Mills, Angel Bakeries and Delta Galil, whose crime seems to consist of nothing but the fact that their cereals, bread and underwear can be found on supermarket shelves in the West Bank, Golan Heights and eastern Jerusalem.

In short, almost all the companies on the so-called blacklist simply provide the most fundamental human necessities – food, water, transportation, communication. Some of these are defined by the United Nations itself as inalienable rights: Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone" has a right to "food,

clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services"; there's no asterisk saying "except for settlers". Others, like transportation and communication, aren't considered rights, but they are considered positive goods in any other context.

In contrast, the UNHRC couldn't find a single company engaged in "captivity of the Palestinian financial and economic markets" or "practices that disadvantage Palestinian enterprises, including through restrictions on movement, administrative and legal constraints" – something that might actually raise human rights concerns. And only three were involved in providing "surveillance and identification equipment for settlements, the wall and checkpoints directly linked with settlements," which at least sounds sinister if you don't realise that such equipment is merely intended to prevent terrorists from slaughtering children in their beds (see the cases of the Fogel family, Hallel Ariel and many others).


To realise how absurd this list is, try a simple thought experiment. Syrian and Russian soldiers have been slaughtering civilians in Syria on an almost daily basis for nine years now; the death toll is more than half a million and counting. But does anyone think the supermarkets that sell these soldiers food, or the water company that supplies their bases with running water, are engaged in "activities that raised particular human rights concerns"? Of course not; we believe that even the worst murderers are entitled to food, water and clothing. That's precisely why all countries provide such basics to criminals in jail.

Human rights violations used to refer to grave crimes like murder, rape and ethnic cleansing. But now, along comes the UNHRC and says that actually, even the most essential human activities – food, water, transportation, communication – raise "particular human rights concerns." This turns the very idea of "human rights concerns" into a bad joke – if every human activity is a "human rights concern," then nothing is.

There has been a lot of concern among Israel and its supporters that the blacklist will lead to boycotts and sanctions on the listed companies. That's one reason for the wall-to-wall condemnation it has elicited in Israel.

Yet precisely because most of the targeted companies are basic service providers, the economic impact will likely be small. Most of these companies neither export, nor attract much foreign investment. And since their businesses depend almost exclusively on selling or providing services to Israelis (and Palestinians), the only way to boycott them would be for the boycotters to actually move to Israel.

Rather, the real danger comes from the way this blacklist cheapens the very idea of human rights. According to the UNHRC, there is effectively no difference between mass murder and selling groceries; both raise "particular human rights concerns." That's a standard that no minimally moral human being could take seriously.

It turns “human rights concerns” into a laughing stock, and thereby undermines respect for all human rights. 

Evelyn Gordon is a journalist and commentator living in Israel. © JNS.org, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

THEY SAID IT

Reflexive hostility towards Israel and sympathy for the Palestinians has been institutionalised into the foreign policies of Malaysia and, in a different way, Indonesia for several decades. Whenever the Israeli-Palestinian issue flares into the international arena, one can expect pro forma official statements of condemnation/support along with the odd tirade from a zealot. Then there is the occasional outlier or voice of reason.

There was a certain predictability in the response to the release of the Trump Administration’s peace plan for the Middle East.

In Malaysia, condemnation of the plan and reaffirmed support for the Palestinians was almost unanimous.

Taking the lead, naturally, was Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed, describing the plan as “utterly unacceptable” and “grossly unjust” to the Palestinians.

“This deal will only bring more conflict to the region, and will antagonise billions of people around the world,” Mahathir said in Kuala Lumpur at the third conference of the League of Parliamentarians for Al-Quds, which was attended by senior Malaysian politicians as well as parliamentarians from Muslim and African countries.

Dr. Mahathir added that keeping quiet over the Israeli “massacres” of the Palestinians is like being complicit in the crime. “If we, too, choose to be silent, the blood from the murders and killings of the Palestinians by the Israelis is on our hands as well.”

Similar sentiments came from his notional ally Anwar Ibrahim, who told the conference that the Trump peace plan “confers and supports the dispossession of people’s land, robbing people’s land.”

Anwar also criticised fellow Muslim countries for supposedly allowing Israel to defy United Nations resolutions pertaining to the Palestine-Israeli conflict. “Muslim countries and developing countries must answer why we are complicit, abdicating our moral responsibilities (in seeking justice for Palestinians),” he said.

Deputy PM Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar’s wife, told the Al-Quds conference, “While Malaysia remains supportive to any genuine effort made by any party aimed at achieving just and comprehensive peace to the Palestine-Israel conflict, Malaysia stands by its position that the

creation of an independent State of Palestine is by way of a two-State solution and be based on pre-1967 borders.”

Nothing particularly surprising about the previous comments, but there was not complete unanimity.

A comment piece in the *Malaysian Chronicle* by Francis Paul Siah, who heads the Movement for Change, Sarawak, asked why should any Malaysian take sides in Israeli-Palestinian issues when they do not impact life in Malaysia. “If it is only because we share the same religion and believe in the same God as one of the warring parties, that reason sounds pretty shallow to me,” he said.

“I wish to proclaim here that my prime minister, Mahathir, does not speak for me, a Malaysian, in his never-ending tirades against Israel... When others say that Mahathir has a personal vendetta against the Jews, I believe they were not wrong... We, Malaysians, must surely be aware that there is nothing in our *Rukun Negara* or constitution, declaring that all Malaysians must consider Israel as their common enemy. I am still at a loss today as to why Malaysians are barred from visiting Israel.”

In neighbouring Indonesia, reaction to the Trump peace plan was muted, and the language measured and formal.

Concerned that the peace plan did not adhere to “internationally agreed parameters”, a Foreign Ministry statement to the *Jakarta Post* said, “The issue of Palestine shall be resolved based on the principles of the ‘two-state solution’ that respects international law.

“Indonesia once again encourages the resumption of dialogues among relevant parties to achieve stability and lasting peace,” the ministry said.

Interestingly, a January article in the *Jakarta Globe* by Ari Aprianto, a diplomat in the Foreign Ministry, argued (in a personal capacity) that Indonesia should look at other means of supporting the Palestinians and promoting peace, chiefly through facilitating “grassroots dialogues” between ordinary Israelis and Palestinians.

Acknowledging the “tricky” problem of Indonesia having no diplomatic relationship with Israel, Aprianto suggested that programs could be run through networks of non-state actors:

“The trickiest part would be managing the sentiments of certain elements of the Indonesian society since the program will likely include the visits of Israeli citizens to Indonesia...”

“It is high time to educate the Indonesian public about the realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Israeli occupation and violence toward Palestinian people is a fact, there is also the fact that there are people from both sides who seek peace.

“It is also high time for many Indonesians to learn that a lot of their sentiments about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may no longer be valid. Islam is not the only religion in Palestine. The Middle East and the Arab world is changing.”



Miriam Bell

POIGNANCY AND CONTROVERSY IN HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATIONS

Six candles, each one representing a million of the Jewish people who perished in the Holocaust. Six young people, each one the grandchild of a survivor lighting a candle each. Around them a 400 strong crowd watched in silence.

It was a poignant, highly evocative moment. And it was this moment that New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern referred to as she began her address to those gathered at this year's UN International Holocaust Remembrance Day event in Auckland on Jan. 27.

The fact that each of those candles represents one million lives lost is unfathomable, Ardern said. "It's a horrific reminder of what happens when extremist ideology is unchecked and shows us what humans, unfortunately, are capable of when left unchecked."

In a heartfelt speech, she emphasised that antisemitism is an assault against our shared humanity and has no place in our global society. "And yet we find ourselves in a world that seems to have forgotten the horrors of history."

Ardern pointed to the defacing of Wellington's Temple Sinai with antisemitic graffiti just a week before Holocaust Remembrance Day as an example. "This is not the legacy of a nation or the legacy of a world that has learnt and understands fully the impact of the Holocaust."

For that reason, it is critical that work to educate and inform about the Holocaust continues both in New Zealand and overseas. Ardern said the work of the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand and Holocaust survivors "helps us to become the nation that we aspire to be".

The Prime Minister's presence at the event represented a stepping up in the official commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day this year. While former prime minister John Key launched the "Shadows of the Shoah" exhibition on Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2013, government representation at subsequent commemorations has been sparse.

However, this year the day also marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and, as such, was more widely recognised around New Zealand.

Besides Ardern, a number of government ministers attended commemorations. Minister of Ethnic Communities Jenny Salesa went to the Auckland event, Finance Minister Grant Robertson hosted an event at Parliament, and Minister of Housing Megan Woods attended the Christchurch event.

Additionally, National MP Alfred Ngaro, the chairman of the Israeli-NZ Parliamentary friendship group, attended

several events, and various local government politicians turned out around the country.

While the improved recognition of the day was notable, the lead-up to the day also saw the Government hit by criticism for failing to send any representative to the Fifth World Holocaust Forum in Israel, one of the few Western nations not to do so (although New Zealand's Governor General Dame Patsy Reedy did send an official message to the forum which will be included in the commemorative publication).

Opposition MP Gerry Brownlee of the National Party described the non-attendance as disgraceful, while National Party leader Simon Bridges asked whether antisemitism was behind New Zealand's absence.

Foreign Minister Winston Peters told the media that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAT) had advised him of the invitation just a week out from the event. Efforts were then made to send the Parliamentary Speaker, Trevor Mallard, but ultimately it was not possible to do so, he said.

MFAT confirmed that Peters' office was not advised of the invitation until Jan. 16, despite the invitation having actually been received in September last year.

Israel Institute of New Zealand co-director David Cumin said the delay played a large role in New Zealand's conspicuous absence. He also suggested it was, unfortunately, just the latest in a concerning pattern of behaviour from MFAT officials which puts New Zealand out of step with its traditional allies in regard to its relationship with Israel.

Holocaust & Antisemitism Foundation Aotearoa New Zealand co-founder Sheree Trotter said not sending an official representative showed poor judgement, but was also indicative of the broader issue of New Zealand's problematic historical relationship with the Holocaust. Among the historical issues she cited was Wellington's unwillingness to take significant numbers of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, its decision not to prosecute suspected Nazi war criminals residing in New Zealand and the fact that one of New Zealand's major universities holds a Holocaust denial thesis in its library.

She also added, "In recent years New Zealand has taken a hostile attitude towards Israel. Co-sponsoring UN Resolution 2334, which led to the withdrawal of the ambassador for several months, is just one example. We have no Embassy in Israel and the relationship continues to be uneasy. It's hard not to see a link between the attitude towards Israel and the lack of appreciation of the Holocaust."

"The memory of the Holocaust is under attack from many quarters – from deniers to those who would distort the history through re-writing, relativising and universalising," Trotter said. "In an age of increasing extremism, New Zealand needs to grapple with the meaning and significance of the Holocaust – the prime example of what can happen when toxic ideas gain a foothold in a nation's psyche."



BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

Rocket fire from Gaza increased after the US Administration released its “Vision” for Middle East peace on Jan. 28. From Jan. 15 to 28, five rockets were fired into Israel from Gaza. From Jan. 29 to 31, seven rockets and three mortars were fired, and in the first half of February there were eight rocket and two mortar attacks. Israel has responded with airstrikes against Hamas targets.

Waves of balloons carrying explosives targeting Israeli communities drastically increased in February, although Hamas and Islamic Jihad reportedly agreed on Feb. 11 to cease launching them after a meeting with Egypt. Yet the balloons continued after that, prompting a warning from Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

On Feb. 6, three terror attacks took place in quick succession. Twelve soldiers were injured in Jerusalem when a Palestinian rammed them with his car. Near the Temple Mount, a man opened fire on police officers, wounding one before being shot and killed. Outside the Dolev settlement, a drive-by shooter targeted Israeli security forces, lightly injuring one.

MUTED RESPONSE TO TRUMP PLAN

In response to US President Donald Trump’s peace plan, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and other Ramallah-based officials called for “days of rage”, hoping for a large surge of demonstrations in the West Bank. Instead there was a relatively muted response in Palestinian streets, disappointing the PA leadership.

Abbas announced in a speech on Feb. 1 that, in response to the plan, the Palestinians would cut all ties with

Israel and the US, including security cooperation. However, EU officials and Western diplomats confirmed in subsequent talks with senior Palestinian officials that the PA was not breaking existing security arrangements.

On Feb. 11, a UN Security Council resolution critical of the peace plan – formally sponsored by Indonesia and Tunisia – that the PA was promoting, was withdrawn after it looked unlikely to gain the nine out of 15 votes needed to secure its passage and necessitate a US veto.

HAMAS STEALSTECH

In early February, Hamas forces broke into a warehouse in Gaza, stealing millions of dollars worth of state-of-the-art communications equipment that had been provided by Israel to the PA for civilian use, such as providing internet connections. Hamas will reportedly instead use the equipment to improve its military communications, including in tunnels into Israel.

In January, Hamas had also misappropriated heavy machinery that Israel had allowed to be imported into Gaza to repair flood damage, instead using the machinery to build military fortifications.

On Feb. 13, Israeli security company Cybereason announced that it had uncovered several cyber-attacks by a Hamas hackers unit targeting various Palestinian organisations and individuals in the West Bank and Gaza, including PA officials.

ALLEGED ISRAELI STRIKES IN SYRIA CONTINUE

On Feb. 13, warehouses, headquarters and other infrastructure owned by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) at Damascus Airport were destroyed or

severely damaged in airstrikes. Turkish media reported that the strikes, which occurred shortly after an Iranian cargo plane landed, killed four IRGC officers and three Syrian soldiers. Syrian regime media blamed Israel.

The attack came a week after a series of strikes on several targets near Damascus, which were attributed to Israel by Syrian state media, reportedly killed 15 pro-Iranian militia fighters and eight Syrian soldiers, and destroyed air defence batteries and weapons and ammunition depots.

IRAN AGAIN FAILS TO LAUNCH

On Feb. 9, Iran again failed to put a satellite into orbit. The Simorgh (“Phoenix”) vehicle carrying the Iranian-produced Zafar (“Victory”) satellite failed to reach the required speed and fell into the Indian ocean.

In Jan. and Feb. 2019, Iran suffered two unsuccessful attempts to launch satellites. Subsequently, a fire at the Imam Khomeini Space Centre killed three researchers in February and a rocket exploded on the launch pad in August.

The US and EU have warned that the Iranian satellite program is actually cover for developing ballistic missiles for military use.

CYBERATTACKS THWARTED

As Israel hosted dozens of world leaders on Jan. 23 for the World Holocaust Forum, officials from Israel’s Airports Authority Cyber Division revealed at least 800 distinct cyberattacks from Iran, China, North Korea, Russia and Poland had targeted Israeli aviation, attempting to disrupt the flight paths of the more than 60 planes carrying visiting heads of state, royalty

and presidents. All the attacks were successfully countered, officials said.

TURKEY-LIBYA DEAL SPARKS MEDITERRANEAN TENSIONS

A recent accord between Turkey and the Turkish-backed nominal government of Libya, purporting to divide economic control of a broad expanse of the eastern Mediterranean seabed between them, has potentially damaging repercussions for several states in the region.

Under threat is a proposed undersea pipeline that would link large natural gas fields off the coasts of Israel, Cyprus and Egypt with Europe. These three countries, together with Greece, Jordan, Italy and the Palestinian Authority, have established the East Mediterranean Gas Forum to facilitate exports to Europe. Turkey is now seeking to block any such energy exports that are not under Ankara's control.

EU members Greece and Cyprus, with the support of EU leaders, have denounced the Libya accord as void and in violation of international maritime law. Egypt has called it illegal, and Israel says it could jeopardise peace and stability in the region.

Meanwhile, Turkish vessels, escorted by warships, have been drilling in Cypriot waters, a right Turkey claims as a result of its 1974 occupation of Northern Cyprus.

ISRAEL-SUDAN DEVELOPMENTS

On Feb. 3, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu held a historic meeting with Sudanese leader General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in Uganda to discuss normalisation, as part of a recent push by Israel to build relations with African Muslim states.

Although normalisation efforts reportedly began under deposed leader Omar al-Bashir, this is the first time the current heads of government have met.

Both countries have established teams to continue working on normalising ties, but the most immediate outcome was that Sudanese airspace is now open to commercial flights to and from Israel.

WARMING SAUDI ARABIA-ISRAELI TIES?

According to reports published on Feb. 9, discussions are under way between the US, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to hold a summit in Cairo, which would include a meeting between Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. These plans come amid reports of Israeli delegations quietly visiting Saudi Arabia for the past two years and senior Saudi Arabian government officials openly hosting a delegation of 30 American Jewish leaders in Riyadh for a four-day summit in February.

Meanwhile, a Feb. 9 tweet by former

Qatari prime minister Hamad bin Jas-sim AlThani predicted "a non-aggression pact between Israel and Gulf Cooperation Council countries as well as Egypt, Jordan and possibly Morocco" to follow the release of the Trump peace plan. Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said in January that Israel was working on negotiating such non-aggression treaties with Arab countries.

AUSTRALIA TO PURCHASE ISRAELI SPIKE MISSILE

Australia's Department of Defence announced on Feb. 5 that the Australian Defence Force will purchase the Spike LR2 anti-armour guided missile system, manufactured by Israel's Rafael Advanced Defence Systems.

In a joint venture between Australia's Varley Group and Israel's Rafael, the Spike system will be integrated with the Boxer armoured vehicle, 211 units of which are now on order for the army.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

A SPACE ODDITY

In a ceremony held on Feb. 4, Iran's Minister of Communications and Information Technology (ICT) Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi, took to the podium to announce that his country was taking its first steps toward a manned space program.

The Iranian MEHR News Agency reported that Jahromi stated, "this project is carried out in cooperation with the international organisations and will have a major impact in progressing Iran's space knowledge with regards to the spatial explorations [sic]."

On Twitter, he illustrated what the future would look like.

But economic sanctions on Iran must be biting deeper than anyone thought, because the silver spacesuit branded with an Iranian flag that featured in the Minister's



The future of Iranian space exploration

illustration can be purchased online from a Florida-based kids' supplier, Wonder-Costumes™. The costume would have set the Ministry back a mere US\$20 – which should leave plenty of change left over to put into efforts to build a nuclear warhead.

One can even see the two outlines on the front of the costume where patches bearing NASA logos had been removed.

An Iranian flag was added to a sleeve, while the original American one is gone, presumably stamped on and then burnt, as is the custom of the Iranian regime.

While the cost-saving strategy is undoubtedly brilliant, the timing of the announcement and tweet was a little unfortunate, coming just days before yet another failed Iranian satellite launch.

Yet the fledgling Iranian space agency can boast one significant achievement. It managed to evade sanctions and successfully order its space apparel – from Miami!

COVER STORY

RIVLIN'S ODYSSEY

OUT OF AUSTRALIA, INTO A POLITICAL MAELSTROM

by Amotz Asa-El

The only place where I am allowed to put my nose is my handkerchief," complained Israel's first President, Chaim Weizmann.

The greatest Zionist statesman since Theodore Herzl was in the twilight of his years when Israel was established. He also did not belong to the ruling Labor Party. Even so, out of reverence for his record, he was elected president of the newborn Jewish state, which thus instituted the presidency as a symbol of the citizenry's unity and the state's authority.

The result was the creation of a ceremonial office whose holder meets foreign leaders upon their arrival in Israel, regularly meets with the prime minister, accepts foreign ambassadors' credentials, formally appoints office holders like judges or the governor of the Bank of Israel, and addresses official events like the opening of the new Knesset session or the annual ceremony to commemorate the Holocaust.

Israeli presidents also travel abroad to promote Israel's foreign relations, in some cases very effectively. For instance, Weizmann's visit to US President Harry Truman in the White House ten days after Israel's establishment helped convince doubters that the Jewish state had become a firm reality. Similarly, Israel's fifth president, Yitzhak Navon, visited Egypt in 1980 and addressed the ruling party's leadership in Arabic, thus helping consolidate Israel's young peace with Egypt.

Less dramatically, and much more regularly, Israeli presidents visit friendly countries, including Australia, where the sixth president Chaim Herzog arrived in 1986, the eight president Moshe Katsav visited in 2005, and President Reuven Rivlin was due to arrive late February.

A planned visit to Australia four years ago was canceled



President Reuven Rivlin: Diplomatic opportunities abroad and challenges at home

abruptly as Rivlin was rerouted for a meeting in Moscow with Russian President Vladimir Putin, under circumstances that have never been fully disclosed.

That turn of events, which upset both Australian officials and the Australian Jewish community, was obviously not a result of a decision by Rivlin. An Israeli president's journeys abroad, like those of the British Queen, are approved by the government, as are any cancellations. That certainly went for the Australian cancellation, which, it is widely assumed, was Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's decision as part of his broader, and delicate, relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Rivlin was to be greeted in Canberra by Governor-General David Hurley before meeting with Prime Minister Scott Morrison and other senior officials. In Sydney, he was to meet New South Wales Governor Margaret Beazley and visit the Garvan Institute where Israeli and Australian scientists conduct joint cancer research.

Rivlin was also scheduled to visit areas in the ACT

afflicted by the recent bushfires, and meeting Victorian Governor Linda Dessau. As is customary in such visits, Rivlin was joined by a delegation of business leaders, who used the occasion to promote bilateral deals, while the President also visited Jewish communities and attended fundraising functions.

He had a short stopover in Fiji, designed to help consolidate improving ties in recent years between Israel and Pacific island nations.

Yet hectic though this journey will doubtless have been for him, it will be easier than the challenge that awaited him once he returned home. With the March 2 general election looming amidst a year-long political crisis, he will soon likely face the most testing situation of his seven-year term in office, which ends next year.

Israeli presidents have only two genuine executive functions: they can pardon convicted criminals, and they select the prime minister. While the exercise of the power to pardon is fully up to them, asking someone to form government after an election is meant to be primarily a formality – and ordinarily it indeed is.

The process begins with all the parties elected to the Knesset visiting the president and officially informing him or her which lawmaker they think should be prime minister. The president then summons the legislator who re-

ceived the recommendations from the factions representing the largest number of Knesset members and asks him or her to form a government. After the nominee forms a coalition and wins the Knesset's approval, the new cabinet visits the president for his or her formal approval and then begins its work.

In the approaching election, however, polls indicate that it is likely no candidate will be able to form a majority governing coalition. This is why last year's two elections, on April 9 and Sept. 17, produced nothing but a third trip to the polls on March 2, 2020.

This impasse has two causes.

Mathematically, neither the bloc consisting of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and the conservative parties that orbit his Likud Party, nor that of Opposition Leader Benny Gantz's Blue and White party and the Zionist parties to its left (this election running as a united list called "Emet") have added up to a majority of the Knesset's 120 seats.

Politically, two puzzle pieces don't fit in either configuration. One is the right-wing, secularist Yisrael Beiteinu party, headed by former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman.

This party's electorate includes many Russian-speakers, and is hawkish on Israeli-Palestinian issues but staunchly liberal on religious policy questions. Yisrael Beiteinu is now

REUVEN RIVLIN: TENTH PRESIDENT OF ISRAEL

Reuven Rivlin was born in Jerusalem on September 9, 1939. A lawyer by profession, he holds an L.L.B. degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is part of the extended Rivlin family which has lived in Jerusalem since 1809.

Rivlin studied at Gymnasia Rehavia High School and in 1957 enlisted in the IDF, serving as an intelligence officer. During the Six Day War, he fought in the forward command post of Brigade Commander Mordechai "Motta" Gur at the Police Academy in Jerusalem, which captured the Western Wall. He completed his service in the IDF as an intelligence officer with the rank of major and then went on to study law.

During the 1960s, Rivlin worked as a legal advisor for the Beitar Jerusalem Football Club. Later he worked as the team manager and chairman of the club. He was a member of the Jerusalem Municipal Council (1978-1983), and a member of the El Al Executive Council (1981-1986). He is a former member of the Board of Trustees of Jerusalem's Khan Theatre and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. He also served as Chairman of the Jerusalem Branch of the Herut Movement (1986-1993).

Rivlin was first elected to the Knesset in 1988, and served on a wide range of Knesset committees, among them: Foreign

Affairs and Defence; Constitution, Law and Justice; State Control; Anti-Drug Abuse; Education and Culture; Ethics; Finance; House; and Advancement of the Status of Women. He also was a member of the Committee for Appointing Judges; the Committee for the Examination of the Maccabiah Bridge Disaster in 1997 (an issue of particular relevance to Australia given the victims of that disaster were mostly Australians); and the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee on Violence in Sports.

Reuven Rivlin served as Israel's Minister of Communications from March 2001 until February 2003. He served as Speaker of the Knesset from 2003-2006 and again from 2009-2013.

In February 2013 he was re-elected to the Knesset on the joint Likud - Yisrael Beiteinu list.

On June 10, 2014, Reuven Rivlin was elected by the Knesset to serve as Israel's 10th President. He assumed office on July 24, 2014 and his seven-year term will expire in 2021 (since 2000, Israel law has limited each president to a single term).

In 1971, he married his wife Nechama – a university researcher until her retirement in 2007 – and was known to be devoted to her until her death last year. The couple had four children.

Rivlin has been a vegetarian since the 1960s and is fluent in Arabic, as well as Hebrew and English.



A much younger Reuven Rivlin



Rivlin's efforts to broker a unity government after the September election did not succeed

raising legislative demands – like much increased conscription of ultra-Orthodox men – which Netanyahu's religious partners, the United Torah Judaism and Shas parties, object to vehemently.

The other puzzle piece which is not part of either bloc is the United List, a federation of parties pitched at Israeli Arab voters, whose lawmakers include some outspoken and extreme anti-Zionists. These attitudes have made it impossible for either Netanyahu or Gantz to count them as potential coalition partners.

Hovering above this already complicated situation is Netanyahu's legal predicament.

Unlike the last two elections, where he ran while a suspect, this time Netanyahu is running as a defendant, having been formally indicted on Jan. 28 on charges of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust in three different cases. Had it not been for this circumstance, the crisis could likely have been solved by creating a broad unity government.

However, Blue and White refused to sit in a Netanyahu government while a recommendation for indictment hung over him, saying he could not run the country in such a situation. Now, it

cannot backtrack from that stance, given that the Prime Minister's legal situation has only worsened.

This, then, is where the President comes in, barring a decisive election result that no poll currently predicts.

There was a somewhat similar situation once previously in Israeli history, and the president of the day proved pivotal in its solution. It happened in 1984, when the election ended with the Knesset vote split evenly between the Likud-led and Labor-led camps. After long weeks in which the two major parties realised neither could form a narrow

HISTORICAL MILESTONES IN THE FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN ISRAEL AND AUSTRALIA

- **November 1947** – Australia's Foreign Minister H.V. Evatt served as Chairman of the UN General Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine and helped push through the UN Partition Plan passed on Nov. 29. Australia was the first country to vote in favour of the plan.

- **28 January 1949** – Israel and Australia established diplomatic ties when Australian Prime Minister Ben Chifley recognised the new State of Israel.

- **May 1949** – Australia supported a UN resolution calling for Israel to be admitted as a UN member state.

- **November 1986** – Israeli President Chaim Herzog visited Australia. It was the first visit by a serving Israeli President to Australia.

- **January 1987** – Prime Minister Bob Hawke visited Israel, the first visit by a serving Australian Prime Minister to Israel. During the 1980s, the Hawke Government played an important role in the successful campaign to rescind the "Zionism is racism" UN resolution, which was achieved in December 1991.

- **November 1995** – Prime Minister Paul Keating travelled to Israel for the funeral of assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

- **May 2000** – Prime Minister John Howard visited Israel, and also held a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

in New York in September 2005. For his friendship towards Israel and the Jewish people, Howard received a number of honours from Israeli and Jewish organisations, including having the Jewish National Fund announce the establishment of the "John Howard Negev Forest" in Israel in 2007.

- **February-March 2005** – Israeli President Moshe Katsav visited Australia.

- **February 2017** – Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu visited Australia. It was the first visit to Australia by a serving Israeli Prime Minister. Netanyahu previously visited Australia in August 2001.

- **October 2017** – Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull visited Israel. During the visit, a Memorandum of Understanding on industrial cooperation in the field of defence was signed. Together with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Turnbull also participated in the centenary events commemorating the WWI Battle of Be'er Sheva in 1917. Around 3,000 Australian dignitaries, politicians, public officials and members of the public went to Israel for the centenary commemorative ceremonies.

- **December 2018** – Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that Australia recognised west Jerusalem as the capital of Israel but would not immediately move its embassy from Tel Aviv.

- **February 2020** – President Reuven Rivlin visits Australia. He previously visited Australia while serving as Knesset Speaker in November 2005.

coalition, then President Chaim Herzog summoned Labor leader Shimon Peres and Likud leader Yitzhak Shamir, and coaxed them to agree to rotate the premiership between them.

It was an inventive idea that at first sounded bizarre, but then worked wonders, as the government the two led then succeeded in rescuing the Israeli economy from its worst crisis ever.

On the legal front, Herzog also set a precedent when he ended a cover-up scandal involving the head of the Shin Bet secret service, Avraham Shalom by granting him pre-trial immunity in return for his immediate and full departure from public life.

After March 2, this kind of creativity will, in all likelihood, be expected of Rivlin.

An 80-year-old lawyer, widower, vegetarian, former Likud lawmaker and former Speaker of the Knesset, the humorous and outgoing Rivlin is popular – even among political opponents from the left, who appreciate his liberalism in general, and his defence of Israeli Arab civil rights in particular. But what history may now demand of him will be more profound than all these qualities.

After the September election, Rivlin tried to produce a magic formula, but unlike Herzog's, Rivlin's solution didn't end up succeeding.

Rivlin suggested that Netanyahu and Gantz create a broad coalition in which Netanyahu would serve as prime minister first, but once indicted he would be declared "incapacitated" and make way for Gantz – who then would serve as acting prime minister, while Netanyahu would formally remain PM.

The two parties held negotiations on Rivlin's proposal, and at one point Likud proposed that Netanyahu assume the premiership for five months and then hand over to Gantz. Blue and White ended up rejecting that idea, reflecting its leaders' mistrust of Netanyahu whom they suspected might not keep his promise.

Now Rivlin's previous proposal is no longer relevant, because Netanyahu has already been indicted.

Israeli law allows an indicted prime minister (unlike any other minister) to serve until not only convicted, but until all appeals of that conviction have been exhausted.

Moreover, an immunity-for-retirement deal of the sort Herzog created for Avraham Shalom has been informally discussed with Netanyahu, only to be reportedly rejected.

No one seems to know just what kind of a rabbit Rivlin might manage to pull out of the presidential hat this time around. What all agree, however, is that if he somehow manages to cut the Gordian Knot of the current year-long Israeli political impasse, it will be the crowning achievement of an already successful presidency.

AIR

ISRAEL SET FOR MARCH MADNESS

by Anshel Pfeffer

Next month will have plenty of big days for Israel's democracy. On March 2, Israel will have a general election. On March 8, the parties will begin arriving at the President's Residence for consultations about who President Reuven Rivlin should confer the mandate to form the next government upon. On March 16, the newly elected members of the 23rd Knesset will be sworn in, and on the very next day, at the Jerusalem District Court, a serving Israeli prime minister will go on trial for the first time.

The only thing we can't say for sure will take place in March – in fact, chances are right now it won't – is the swearing-in of a new government. The polls have barely budged in the five months since the last election and neither Binyamin Netanyahu of Likud nor Benny Gantz of Blue and White is expected to have enough Members of the Knesset (MKs) to form a government. Unless the polls are drastically wrong or enough of a shift in public opinion takes place just before the election, more months of political deadlock beckon.

But the news that Netanyahu's trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust is set to begin on March 17 could change the political dynamics – probably not voting intentions, but the calculations of the MKs.

Politics may have been at a standstill for over a year now, but the legal proceedings against Netanyahu that were grinding forward excruciatingly slowly throughout the three long years of his multiple investigations and the Attorney-General's deliberations have suddenly picked up speed. Since Netanyahu withdrew his request for parliamentary immunity in late January, the charges have been filed in court, a three-judge bench has been selected and a date has been set – much closer than anyone expected.

This will just be the arraignment, and long months of wrangling will ensue over disclosure, the necessity of Netanyahu to actually be present at all the sessions, and the beginning of the trial's evidentiary stage.

But by summoning the sides for a date already in March, the presiding Judge, Rivka Friedman-Feldman, is proving true to form. She has a track record of tough sentencing on high-profile defendants, including Netanyahu's predecessor, Ehud Olmert. She's not about to wait around for anyone, not even a serving prime minister.

March 17 is about the earliest the trial's starting date could have been set – immediately after the election and the day after the new Knesset's swearing-in. This means that unless the election result is drastically different than what



the polls are telling us, the parties will only have begun their wrangling and horse-trading over coalition permutations. It means that if Netanyahu is endorsed by a greater number of MKs than Gantz (because the Joint List of Arab parties might not endorse anyone), Rivlin will have an acute dilemma over whether he can award the mandate to a candidate about to be charged in court in a matter of days.

WITHOUT BIBI?

The March 17 date means that this time around Blue and White can't even begin to entertain the prospect of a national-unity government in which Netanyahu serves first as prime minister, not even for a short period of a few months, as Rivlin proposed last September. That's simply not an option for Gantz's party anymore. The only national-unity government it can enter now is one where Netanyahu steps down and, at most, is promised the second half of the term, and only if he has been exonerated by then. Netanyahu isn't going to do that willingly.



Much hinges upon the outcome of Netanyahu's trial

The most obvious conclusion from the early date of the Netanyahu trial seems to be that the grim prospects of a fourth election have grown. But that doesn't take into account the exhaustion of the entire political system, including Netanyahu's allies.

Netanyahu's staunch coalition partners, the ultra-Orthodox parties, absolutely can't afford another election, which would mean that all legislation, and most crucially, a new budget, is suspended. The Haredi education system, and especially the stipends for yeshiva students, relies partly on funds that aren't in the "base of the budget" but are authorised separately each year. Another election means that yeshiva money runs out by the end of July.

On the surface, Netanyahu's partners have never been so close to him. In mid-February, the leaders of three parties currently in the governing coalition, Shas, United Torah Judaism and Yamina, signed yet another pledge that they will support only a Likud government under Netanyahu's leadership. Shas has taken the unprecedented step of merging its get-out-the-vote operation with Likud.

This Haredi party's support for Netanyahu is real, but

it's also an alibi. If, as expected, Netanyahu can't form a government yet again after the election, Shas leader Aryeh Deri will finally be able to say to Netanyahu that "we did everything we could." And it will finally be time to search for a compromise with Gantz, which could only mean Netanyahu leaving office. Deri wants to be the godfather of a national-unity government, rather than see Yisrael Beiteinu's Avigdor Lieberman find a way to help form a minority "secular" government.

KING OF LIKUD

The court date isn't the only thing that will make the aftermath of next month's election different from the election in September.

Another major development has been the Likud leadership primary.

Netanyahu's 72% landslide win over Gideon Sa'ar in December put paid to any speculation of an insurrection in his own party. This should add to the prospect of a fourth election, but not necessarily. Netanyahu's undisputed mastery of Likud provides an asset to barter with in the national-unity talks.

Blue and White won't sit in the government of a prime minister on trial, and by law, the only official role an indicted MK can have in government is prime minister. But there are other ways Netanyahu's position as Likud leader can be acknowledged. For a start, he can divide up the cabinet posts with Gantz and decide which Likudniks to appoint to each portfolio the party receives. That way, he can continue to hold sway over them. He can be given a veto over the cabinet's agenda and all government legislation, including the budget.

In many ways, this could be an ideal position for him during the long months of his trial – power over the government and no responsibility. When anything goes wrong, and things will, he can quietly brief journalists how he would be doing things differently.

And he'll portray anything short of a prison sentence and a ruling that his actions contained "moral turpitude" – which would block him from running for office for seven years – as winning the case outright. His way back to power will be much shorter than if he relinquished the Likud leadership and resigned from the Knesset, as he regrets doing after losing the 1999 election. It took him 10 years to get back into office.

There's a slim chance that March could turn out to be the month when Netanyahu is forced out. The court date makes that just a bit more likely.

AIR

Anshel Pfeffer is a senior correspondent and columnist for Haaretz and the Israel correspondent for The Economist. He is the author of Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu (Basic Books, May 2018). © Haaretz (www.haaretz.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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Devil in the Details

What the Trump peace plan actually says

by Jacob Magid

US President Donald Trump released his Administration's long-awaited peace plan on January 28, describing it as a "realistic two state solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Following a festive announcement from the East Room of the White House, the US Administration released a 50-page document which details the previously unseen political facet of the plan, along with the economic portion that was introduced in Bahrain last year.



US President Trump announces his long-awaited peace plan, with Israeli PM Netanyahu by his side

Below are key excerpts from the "Peace to Prosperity" plan:

- The plan says that Israel is not legally bound to provide the Palestinians with 100 percent of pre-1967 territory, a departure from previous plans which called for near one-to-one land swaps.
- The plan envisions a high-speed transportation link that will enable efficient movement between the West Bank and Gaza, crossing over or under Israel's sovereign territory.
- Israel will benefit from having secure and recognised borders. It will not have to uproot any settlements, and will incorporate the vast majority of Israeli settlements into contiguous Israeli territory.
- Approximately 97% of Israelis in the West Bank will be incorporated into contiguous Israeli territory, and approximately 97% of Palestinians in the West Bank will be incorporated into contiguous Palestinian territory.
- Land swaps will provide the future State of Palestine with land reasonably comparable in size to the territory of pre-1967 West Bank and Gaza.

- Fifteen Israeli enclaves – currently isolated settlements deep in the West Bank – located inside contiguous Palestinian territory will become part of the State of Israel and be connected to it through an effective transportation system.

- The Jordan Valley, which is critical for Israel's national security, will be under Israeli sovereignty.

- Subject to agreement by the parties, the deal proposes redrawing the border to allow for the ten Arab Israeli villages in the so-called Triangle just west of the Green Line to be included inside the State of Palestine.

- The security barrier between Israel and the West Bank will be realigned to match the new borders.

- The borders drawn in the plan's map shall be without prejudice to individual claims of title or rights of possession traditionally litigated within the Israeli judicial system.

JERUSALEM

- The plan praises Israel for safeguarding religious sites and calls for maintaining the status quo at them, particularly at the Temple Mount.

- However, in the next paragraph, the plan says that people of all faiths should be able to worship at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Under the current conditions of the status quo, Jews are not allowed to pray at the compound.

- The plan says that a division of Jerusalem would be inconsistent with the policy statements of the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 of the United States.

- "While a physical division of the city must be avoided, a security barrier currently exists that does not follow the municipal boundary and that already separates Arab neighbourhoods in Jerusalem from the rest of the neighbourhoods in the city. This physical barrier should remain in place and should serve as a border between the capitals of the two parties."

- "Jerusalem will remain the sovereign capital of the State of Israel, and it should remain an undivided city. The sovereign capital of the State of Palestine should be in the section of East Jerusalem located in all areas east and north of the existing security barrier, including Kafr Aqab, the eastern part of Shuafat and Abu Dis, and could be named Al Quds or another name as determined by the State of Palestine."

- The plan would allow the Arab residents of Israel's capital, Jerusalem, beyond the 1949 armistice lines but inside the existing security barrier, to choose one of three options: Become citizens of the State of Israel, become citizens of the State of Palestine or retain their status as permanent residents in Israel.

- The embassy of the United States to the State of Israel will remain in Jerusalem. Following the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, the embassy of the United States to the State of Palestine will be in Al Quds,

at a location to be chosen by the United States, in agreement with the State of Palestine.

SECURITY

- The plan aims to achieve mutual recognition of the State of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, and the State of Palestine as the nation-state of the Palestinian people, in each case with equal civil rights for all citizens within each state. The United States would only ask Israel to make compromises that it believes will make Israel and its people more secure in the short and long term.

- Although each party will be in charge of setting zoning rules and issuing building permits in their own countries, zoning and planning of the State of Palestine in the areas adjacent to the border between the State of Israel and the State of Palestine, including without limitation, the border between Jerusalem and Al Quds, will be subject to the State of Israel's overriding security responsibility.

- The State of Palestine shall be fully demilitarised and remain so.

- The State of Palestine will have security forces capable of maintaining internal security and preventing terror attacks within the State of Palestine and against Israel, Jordan and Egypt.

- As a complementary measure to the bilateral security coordination, a security review committee will be established that will consist of security representatives appointed by the State of Israel, the State of Palestine and the United States.

REFUGEES

This plan envisions three options for Palestinian refugees seeking a permanent place of residence:

- 1) Absorption into the State of Palestine (subject to the limitations provided below);

- 2) Local integration in current host countries (subject to those countries' consent);

- 3) The acceptance of 5,000 refugees each year, for up to ten years (50,000 total refugees), in individual Organisation of Islamic Cooperation member countries who agree to participate in Palestinian refugee resettlement (subject to those individual countries' agreement).

CONDITIONS FOR PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD

- The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement will provide that the parties recognise the State of Palestine as the nation state of the Palestinian people and the State of Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people.

- The Palestinian Authority or another national or international body acceptable to the State of Israel is in full control of Gaza; Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and all other militias and terror organisations in Gaza are disarmed; and Gaza is fully demilitarised.



- If efforts to return all Israeli captives and the remains of Israeli soldiers have not previously been successful, then upon the signing of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, all Israeli captives and remains must be returned.

- If Hamas is to play any role in a Palestinian government, it must commit to the path of peace with the State of Israel.

- The Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement will provide for the release of Palestinian prisoners and administrative detainees held in Israeli prisons, except (i) those convicted of murder or attempted murder, (ii) those convicted of conspiracy to commit murder (in each case murder includes murder by terrorism) and (iii) Israeli citizens.

- Significant improvements for the people in Gaza will not occur until there is a ceasefire with Israel, the full demilitarisation of Gaza, and a governance structure that allows the international community to safely and comfortably put new money into investments that will not be destroyed by predictable future conflicts.

- The Palestinians shall have ended all programs, including school curricula and textbooks, that serve to incite or promote hatred or antagonism towards its neighbours, or which compensate or incentivise criminal or violent activity.

- The PA shall refrain from any attempt to join any international organisation without the consent of the State of Israel.

- The PA shall take no action, and shall dismiss all pending actions, against the State of Israel, the United States and any of their citizens before the International Criminal Court and all other tribunals.

- The PA shall take all necessary actions to immediately terminate the paying of salaries to terrorists serving sentences in Israeli prisons.

Israel will in the interim:

In areas of the West Bank that are not contemplated by this Vision to be part of the State of Israel, Israel will not:

- 1) Build any new settlement towns, expand existing settlements or advance plans to build in those areas;
- 2) Expand any of the Israeli enclaves referred to in Section 4 or advance plans to expand those enclaves in those areas beyond their current footprint;
- 3) Demolish any structure existing as of the date of this plan and secure the necessary legislative and/or legal decisions to ensure such an outcome.

AIR

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A RETURN TO THE RABIN DOCTRINE?

by Dan Diker

Much has already been written about the US Administration's "Vision for Peace" in the Middle East published on Jan. 28. Most commentary has focused on the unprecedented US recognition of Israel's legal rights east of the 1967 lines and, simultaneously, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's willingness to operationalise his 2009 Bar Ilan University speech supporting a two-state resolution.

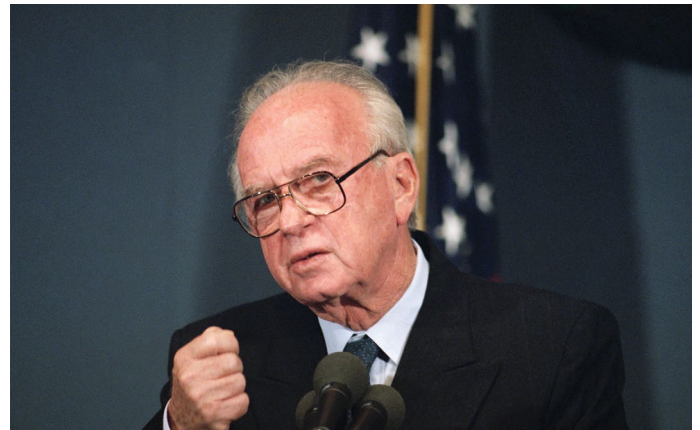
In Washington, Netanyahu acceded to the establishment of a sovereign demilitarised Palestinian state in some 70% of the disputed West Bank, located in the centre of the West Bank, the heart of Israel's biblical homeland.

However, few observers have recognised the major paradigm shift that the US Administration's peace plan signals in the long and largely failed history of Palestinian-Israeli diplomacy: a return to the security-first approach of the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and specifically, the concept of defensible borders.

The US plan should be closely compared to Rabin's

defensible borders approach to the Oslo Peace Accords that were first signed at the White House in 1993, and then detailed in the 1995 interim accord between Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, under the stewardship of US President Bill Clinton.

On Jan. 29, 2020, the day after the Trump peace plan was published, Shimon Sheves, former Director-General of Prime Minister Rabin's office and one of his closest advisors, told Israel's *Army Radio's* evening news program, "The Trump plan is essentially the Rabin plan." While critical of Prime Minister Netanyahu's unilateral acceptance of the plan, Sheves still noted that the Trump plan is a "continuation of Rabin's legacy."



Yitzhak Rabin: His vision of peace arguably not unlike the Trump Administration plan

Similarly, Ben Caspit, one of Israel's leading journalists, and known for his unrelenting criticism of Netanyahu, penned a generally positive assessment of the Trump plan in the *Maariv* daily, calling it "a modern incarnation of Rabin's plan from 25 years ago."

What were the principles behind Rabin's defensible borders approach to Oslo that today anchor the US Administration's approach to a peace deal with the Palestinian leadership?

Rabin had presented his vision of a final status peace deal during the ratification of the Oslo Interim Accords at the Knesset on Oct. 5, 1995, just three weeks before his tragic assassination. Speaking from the Knesset podium, Rabin told the packed plenum, "The borders of the State of Israel during the permanent solution will be beyond the lines that existed before the Six Day War. We will not return to the June 4, 1967 lines."

It should be noted that since 2017, when the Trump plan was initiated, US peace interlocutors undertook a two-year "listening tour" in Israel and the Middle East, and had been advised that Rabin, in line with every Israeli prime minister since the fateful days of the 1967 war, had rejected an Israeli return to the unstable and indefensible pre-1967 war lines, providing an important point of reference for the current US vision. Former Foreign Minister Abba Eban had famously referred to the pre-1967 lines as "Auschwitz borders."

In 1995, Rabin further declared to the Knesset plenum, “The security border of the State of Israel will be located in the Jordan Valley in the broadest sense of that term.” And serving as a precursor to the Trump vision, Rabin also emphasised that Jerusalem would remain Israel’s united capital.

THE DOCTRINE OF DEFENSIBLE BORDERS

Rabin’s insistence, 25 years ago, on Israeli control of the strategically vital Jordan Rift Valley, was an antecedent to Trump’s proposal of Israeli sovereignty in the Jordan Valley, both of which were rooted in the *doctrine of defensible borders*.

The Israeli strategic doctrine of defensible borders at Oslo, now readopted in the Trump proposal, constituted a return to a “security first” approach to peace negotiations. This term was referenced by former Defence Minister and IDF Chief of Staff Moshe “Bogie” Yaalon following several failed attempts at reaching diplomatic agreements with the Palestinians.

These Israeli peace proposals, beginning with former Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s offer at the Taba Summit in 2001, had shelved the defensible borders approach in favour of the far riskier plan of “security arrangements,” which Palestinian negotiators also rejected.

The US re-adoption of Rabin’s defensible borders doctrine also helps explain why Yaalon’s fellow leaders of the Blue and White Party, former IDF Chiefs of Staff Benny Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi, also embraced the Trump plan’s call for Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea basin in the context of the overall vision. Notably, both Gantz and Ashkenazi have even incorporated Rabin’s nomenclature, calling for the Jordan Valley to be Israel’s “eastern security border.”

Some commentators have mistakenly focused on the issue of settlements intertwined in the Trump plan’s proposal for the Jordan Valley. However, the Jordan Valley is one of the least populated areas in the West Bank and only includes some 5,500 Israeli residents, and approximately three percent of the West Bank Palestinian population. That is why the *strategic importance* of the Jordan Valley has been emphasised by Israel’s political and military leadership since 1967 – including the leadership of both major political parties.

The defensible borders concept that Rabin embraced was first formally outlined as a national security plan following the 1967 war by Gen. Yigal Allon, Rabin’s commander in the pre-state Palmach strike force, who subsequently served as Rabin’s foreign minister. Allon emphasised the importance of defensible borders to Western audiences in a 1976 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. He posited that Israel needs to retain a topographical barrier to defend itself from attacks from the east, a move that would con-

stitute an additional defensive measure beyond insisting on the demilitarisation of Palestinian independent areas or, in today’s terms, a proposed sovereign Palestinian state.

Allon and Rabin were particularly concerned at the prospect of hostile forces, and today terror groups or individual terrorists, firing rockets and anti-aircraft weaponry from the hilltops of the steep 975-metre high West Bank mountain ridge. That ridge overlooks Israel’s narrow coastal plain that contains Israel’s major cities, 70% of Israel’s residents, 80% of its industrial capacity, major highways and infrastructure, and particularly, Israel’s major airport.

Allon had insisted on Israel annexing the entire Jordan Valley, including the hilly terrain facing eastwards toward Jordan as well as the valley below, constituting some 33% of the West Bank. This is virtually identical to the 30% of the territories the US plan calls for today to remain under Israeli sovereignty. While Rabin had been less specific about annexing the entire area, the Allon plan, Rabin’s security doctrine at Oslo, and the current US plan are all anchored in the concept of defensible borders. They saw that the Jordan Valley and the adjoining eastern hill ridge formed a natural topographical security wall that would protect Israel’s main airport and Mediterranean coastal cities from rocket, mortar, and anti-aircraft assault by terrorists firing down from West Bank hilltops.



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Rabin believed the Jordan Valley formed a natural security wall, and thus had to be held by Israeli forces

Rabin's Oslo plan opposed Palestinian sovereignty. Rabin told the Knesset plenum, "We would like this to be an entity that is less than a state, and which will independently run the lives of the Palestinians under its authority."

The Trump plan's defensible borders concept for Israel is anchored in proposed Israeli sovereignty in the Jordan Valley and northern Dead Sea area. In contrast, Rabin had envisioned an Israeli "security border" in the Jordan Valley, which did not require full Israeli sovereignty. Israeli defensible borders notwithstanding, the current US plan,

departing from Rabin's vision of Palestinian autonomy, also establishes a blueprint for a sovereign Palestinian state, with a land connection to Gaza and additional swapped sovereign territory in the Western Negev. For his part, Rabin had sought to maintain an Israeli security presence and Jewish communities in parts of Gaza. Rabin also did not entertain land swaps from pre-1967 Israel.

WHY SIX NEGOTIATING EXPERIENCES FAILED

While defensible borders anchored both Oslo and the current US plan, the past 25 years have witnessed six failed attempts by three US presidents to reach a peace agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Israel since the signing of the Oslo Exchange of Letters in September 1993. In each instance, the Palestinian leadership turned down US-mediated offers for sovereign independence. The Palestinian rejections of diplomatic compromises included: Clinton's Camp David Summit in 2000, the Taba talks in 2001, US President George W. Bush's Road Map in 2003, the US-brokered Israeli Gaza withdrawal in 2005, the Annapolis peace summit in 2008, and the Kerry peace initiative under President Barack Obama in 2014.

The US Administration's latest approach, therefore, has shifted the paradigm for peace by recognising Jewish historical and legal rights to sovereignty on both sides of the 1949 armistice lines in the context of the overall plan, thereby eliminating the false international assumption that the Palestinians exclusively possess legal rights in the disputed territories.

Second, the Trump peace plan's re-adoption of Israel's national consensus doctrine of defensible borders for Israel via the proposed application of Israeli law over the Jordan Valley, as part of the overall plan, will enable Israel to secure its sovereignty while enabling Israel to "defend itself by itself."

This ironclad national security principle has always been an essential Israeli pre-condition to making any substantial concessions and taking significant additional risks for peace. Today, with the publication of the US plan, Israel is taking unprecedented risks in considering the prospect of living next to a sovereign Palestinian state, particularly in a Middle East region that is plagued by radical regimes, proxy forces, political instability, and failed states. That is why defensible borders are critical in providing the essential protections that are a guarantor of an Israeli-Palestinian peace that will be lasting and durable.

AIR

Dan Diker is a foreign policy fellow at the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs and a research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at IDC Herzliya. © Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs (www.jcpa.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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T +61 3 9866 3066

F +61 3 9866 2766

Level 14, 10 Queens Road
(PO Box 7638 St Kilda Road)
Melbourne Victoria 3004

WHAT THE TRUMP PEACE PLAN CAN ACHIEVE

by Einat Wilf

President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan will probably not achieve its stated goal of bringing peace between Israel and the Palestinians, but it might just bring about peace between Israel and more of its Arab neighbours. Here's why.

Over the past several years, Israel has become an appealing partner to Arab states for two main reasons.

Since the revolutions known as the Arab Spring toppled several regimes and undermined and threatened the stability of others, Israel's stability in the region has become ever more apparent.

Moreover, as Arab countries in the Gulf increasingly came to perceive Iran as a threat, Israel's stability, military power and political will to limit Iran's power became ever more attractive to those states.

So behind the scenes, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states grew closer, sharing intelligence and cooperating on security to confront Iran. Precarious Israeli ties with Jordan and Egypt were further cemented by the joint battle against ISIS and, more long-term, by the discovery and mining of substantial gas reserves on Israel's Mediterranean coast.

As all of this cooperation became more visible, these Arab countries had to find a way to do so without appearing to abandon the Palestinian cause altogether.

It is easy to dismiss the concerns of non-democratic regimes and argue that they can pursue their economic and security interests with utter disregard for how the public views them. But this opinion betrays a misunderstanding of the extent to which even non-democratic regimes have to navigate public opinion to ensure their continued survival. In fact, for many decades, the positive sentiment in the Arab world towards the Palestinians and the negative one towards Israel was actually used by many regimes to deflect anger away from their own shortcomings.

The dramatic events of the Arab Spring made it ever more necessary for Arab regimes to remain attuned to public sentiment for their survival, but it also began to change that sentiment, as publics increasingly focused on domestic demands. This means that while empathy for the Palestinian cause remains strong across the Arab world, it is no longer uniform, and in some places it is fraying.

There is growing evidence of decreased willingness to place the Palestinian cause above domestic Arab interests. Voices that in the past would have never been heard in the Arab world now appear on local Arab television and social media, questioning why their countries continue to hitch their wagons to the Palestinians, who are prone to rejecting compromise. In some cases, these voices even express open support for Israel.



Support for the Palestinians at the Arab league does not disguise their growing political isolation

In the past, Palestinians could generally count on the Arab countries not just to openly fight wars for their cause, as they did in 1948 and 1967, but to stand firmly behind them, accepting what the Palestinians accept and rejecting what the Palestinians reject. This is no longer the case.

So although the Palestinians were still able to rally the Arab League, a group of Arab countries which is a shadow of its former powerful self, to join in their rejection of Trump's plan, their isolation in the Arab world is growing more apparent.

“Not only does the plan reflect the political preferences of the vast majority of Israel's Jews... but it has been cautiously welcomed by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar”

This is the most important aspect, and the greatest news, to come out of the plan's introduction. Not only does the plan reflect the political preferences of the vast majority of Israel's Jews with the Likud, Blue and White and Yisrael Beiteniu parties endorsing the plan, but it has been cautiously welcomed

by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar as at least a legitimate basis for negotiations.

It also makes vital regional cooperation more likely to continue and strengthen over time.

Israel, for its part, must endorse and adopt the plan in its entirety if it is to serve as a framework that enables the Gulf countries to pursue ever closer cooperation with Israel. It is crucial that even if Israel ultimately annexes the territory designated for Israel in the plan, it does so while making it clear that the remaining territory, assigned in the plan to a Palestinian state, would not be annexed and will be kept for a future Palestinian state.

It is tempting to ridicule the American President's vision, but the plan does offer the prospect of greater peace and prosperity for those countries in the Arab world who accept that Israel and that the sovereign Jews have come back to their ancient homeland to stay.

AIR

Einat Wilf is a former Labor member of the Israeli Knesset, and together with Adi Schwartz, is the author of the upcoming book The War of Return (St. Martin's Press). This article originally published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (www.jta.org). © JTA, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

COULD THE 41ST ANNIVERSARY OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION BE THE REGIME'S LAST?

by Sharyn Mittelman

Iran celebrated the 41st anniversary of the "Islamic Revolution" on Feb. 11, with thousands of people showing their support in public celebrations. Such rallies are organised each year to showcase support for the Revolution, which replaced Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's government with an "Islamic Republic" under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979. However, in recent months, Iran has experienced increasing confrontations between hardliners, reformists and those calling for the end of the Islamic Republic.

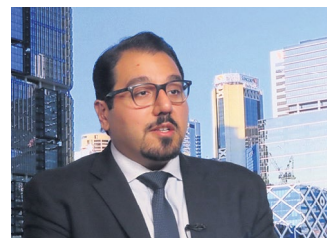
Last November, thousands of Iranians protested against the regime in centres across the country, with around 1500 Iranians killed by a regime crackdown according to *Reuters*.

While the November/December anti-government protests were quashed by Iranian security forces, public demonstrations were revived in January in response to Iran

admitting responsibility for accidentally shooting down a Ukrainian passenger plane, killing 176 people, after initial denials. Footage from the January protests shows Iranian students refusing on masse to walk on US and Israeli flags, people in the streets tearing down posters of the Supreme Leader, and women publicly removing their veils (a punishable crime in Iran), all of which were widely shared on social media.

In light of these contrasting public demonstrations, *AIR* asked Behnam Ben Taleblu, an Iran expert at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington DC, for his insights into the levels of popular support for the Iranian regime, as well as his estimation of the Islamic Republic's prospects for survival.

As to whether the regime has popular support, Taleblu said, "The truth is... most Iranians aren't celebrating, and 41 years later, there is little to felicitate. Given the increasing number of protests, it's safe to say that the majority of Iranians don't support the current government in Iran, and have sought to use political or economic events – or even tragic accidents, as was the case with the downing of the Ukrainian airliner – to voice their discontent."



Behnam Ben Taleblu

Expect more protests in the future, as the state and society continue to grow apart."

Given the growing frequency of the anti-government protests in Iran, as well as the economic collapse resulting from the US sanctions campaign to pressure Iran to negotiate an improved nuclear deal, the *AIR* asked Taleblu whether he believes we are seeing the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic or whether it would be able to remain in power despite its unpopularity. He commented, "It's always challenging to predict, but given the use of weapons of war against the Iranians' own people, as we saw by the regime in November and December of 2019, the Islamic Republic certainly is acting like it knows the end is near. Fundamentally, given the past century of Iranian history, as well as the general drift among the rural and urban poor toward riot and revolution rather than reform since 2009, this becomes a matter of when, not if."

Despite domestic pressures, Iran has continued its aggressive regional approach. Recently, a former leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Mohsen Rezaei, warned that Iran is looking for an excuse to attack Israel and "raze Tel-Aviv to the ground", blaming Israel for allegedly helping the US to kill Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Major General Qassem Soleimani in January.

AIR asked Taleblu whether he believes an Iran-Israel confrontation is looming, and whether the removal of Soleimani will have an impact on Iran's desire to "export the revolution". He noted, "There have already been sev-

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The regime's use of weapons of war against its own people suggests leaders fear the end may be near

eral iterations of an Iran-Israel confrontation. The Islamic Republic is seeking to use the chaos of the Syrian conflict to traffic weapons, particularly guidance kits to turn rockets into missiles, to bolster the arsenal of neighbouring Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel's strikes against Iranian assets in Syria have aimed at slowing or stopping this from happening.

"Another thing Iran seeks to do is to grow the quantity and quality of forces belonging to its proxies and partners – both of which fall under the term 'Axis of Resistance' – that are on Israel's border. This strategy is the latest measure of Iran's 'export of the Revolution' policy. The loss of Soleimani is sure to slow its pace, but Iran has an entire regional network that remains devoted to its ideologi-

"Governments cannot afford to signal to Iran that they will not step up pressure, not just economic, but political, against the Islamic Republic, for its reversion to hostage-taking"

cal and strategic aims, and sadly, that means continuing to pursue anti-status quo and destabilising policies in the region."

These destabilising policies include Iran's commitment to its nuclear program, which risks setting off an arms race in the region. In January, Iran announced that it will no longer abide

by its uranium enrichment commitment, leading Germany, France and the UK to trigger the dispute-resolution mechanism of the Iran nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This could lead to the reimposition of UN sanctions on Iran.

Iran is also continuing work on its satellite program, recently failing in an attempt to send a satellite into orbit to celebrate the anniversary of the Revolution. Taleblu says regarding the links between the satellite program and Iran's nuclear ambitions, "Iran's interest in satellites and space-launch vehicles more broadly is a measure of its interest in long-range strike capabilities. While Iran doesn't have a full-blown ICBM program, it does have

a robust ballistic missile arsenal and an interconnected space and defence industry. As a reminder, India went from satellite launch-vehicles to ICBMs, so it is not impossible for Teheran to follow suit."

Meanwhile, Iran appears to have returned to old tactics of arresting and imprisoning foreign nationals and using them as "hostages" in bilateral relations. Australia is very concerned about the imprisonment of Australian-British academic and lecturer in Islamic Studies at the Uni-

versity of Melbourne Dr. Kylie Moore-Gilbert – tried and convicted in secret last year on charges of espionage and sentenced to ten years in prison. Moore-Gilbert had letters smuggled out of prison in which she called on the Australian Government to act, she wrote, "I beg of you, Prime Minister Morrison, to take immediate action, as my physical and mental health continues to deteriorate with every additional day that I remain imprisoned in these conditions."

According to reports in the *Guardian*, Dr. Moore-Gilbert also rejected Iran's offer to spy for the regime in exchange for her release. Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne said, "The government has been working extremely hard in relation to the ongoing detention of Kylie Moore-Gilbert," adding, "We don't accept the charges

on which she has been held and are concerned for her protection and the conditions under which she is held."

AIR asked Taleblu how governments should respond to apparent Iranian hostage-taking tactics. He said, "Governments cannot afford to signal to Iran that they will not step up pressure, not just economic, but political, against the Islamic Republic, for its reversion to hostage-taking. When these events happen, national governments should do everything in their power to shine a light on Iran's bad behaviour rather than remain silent. They cannot afford to vindicate Iran's treatment of dual and foreign nationals as political pawns."

On the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian regime seems to have little to celebrate. Its increasingly aggressive behaviour both towards other nations and its own people may, as Mr Taleblu suggests, be a sign, not of confidence, but that the regime's leaders sense its days may be numbered.



Dr. Kylie Moore-Gilbert: Imprisoned by the Iranian regime

INSIGHTS AND ADMONITIONS FROM EHUD YAARI

by Ahron Shapiro

Israel's March 2 election, its third in the past 11 months, is likely to lead to another hung parliament, complicating Israel's security at a time when Israel and Iran are on a path towards confrontation in Syria, Iraq and most dangerously, Lebanon.



Ehud Yaari

These were some of the worrying insights shared by award-winning Israeli commentator, author and analyst Ehud Yaari in discussions with journalists, Members of Parliament and in public forums during his current visit to Australia.

Yaari explained that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who has been formally indicted on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust, is taking advantage of a long-standing Israeli law that allows a prime minister to serve even in the event of a conviction, until the end of the appeal process.

Neither Netanyahu nor his challenger, Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz, has emerged from the past two elections with a 61-seat majority. While Gantz's party is polling one or two seats ahead of the Likud, one hope would be for Gantz to lure away religious parties from Netanyahu's bloc, a prospect that Yaari sees as "not very likely."

Otherwise, "Gantz needs a massive defection of Likud voters," Yaari told journalists in Melbourne on Feb. 6. "According to our polls – it's very strange now – about a quarter to a third of Gantz voters support Bibi's policies, including [partial West Bank] annexation [in accordance with the recently released Trump Administration "Deal of the Century" plan]. Meanwhile, polls say [Netanyahu] has a similar number of voters who have great doubts about the wisdom of having an indicted person serving as prime minister."

About the Trump Administration's peace plan, Yaari said that one of the positive things that emerged from it was the reaction of the Israeli Arab community to its proposal that some 250,000 Israeli Arabs living along the border of a future Palestinian state be potentially annexed to that state.

"There was an uproar. [They said] no way are we going to become citizens of a Palestinian state. We were born in

Israel, we are going to stay in Israel. You cannot deprive us of our identity as Israeli Arabs... in every interview, there was not one who was willing to do it. It was very telling. And the Palestinian Authority was taking it very badly, because that was a statement."

Yaari added that the flap presented an opportunity for Israeli Jews to better understand their Arab neighbours who are overwhelmingly "exemplary" fellow citizens.

He noted that Trump advisor Jared Kushner, one of the authors of the plan, had made clear the proposal was intended to be only a starting point for negotiations, "open for improvements, modifications and alterations", but also ushering in a new era of open Israeli relations with Sunni Arab countries.

"People mistook the Trump plan as if it was designated to reach out to the Palestinians. It was not," Yaari said. On the contrary, he continued, the Palestinian leadership had "made it clear for the past two years that they would not even look at the plan, and certainly not discuss it."

Rather, the Trump plan was devised "with the aim of creating a platform for negotiations between Israel and the Sunni Arab states" including the Saudis, several Gulf states,



The Arab League: Trump plan was to be accepted, but key states got "cold feet"

Egypt and Morocco.

In the end, however, these states "got cold feet" at an Arab League meeting on Feb. 1 following the announcement, openly criticising the plan. Yaari said this was the result of strong populist positions against the plan by Iran and Turkey, Israeli moves to begin West Bank annexations, as well as in response to the failure of the US to retaliate against Iran's stunning missile and drone attack on the Saudi's flagship oil processing facility at Abqaiq and Khurais in September.

Speaking further on the Iranian threat, Yaari revealed the extent of the game of cat and mouse being played out between Israel and Iran in Syria.

"Over the past three and a half years, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) has mounted very close to 1,500 raids and other attacks against the Iranians in Syria," he said, in an

attempt to stymie Iranian efforts to create a virtual land bridge from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, to Lebanon. Until now, Iran has had to use aircraft to move material into Syria, which is relatively easy to track. Should Iran succeed in securing a land bridge, arms could be easily hidden amidst the traffic of consumer merchandise that is trucked

“A confrontation between Iran and Israel is looming “not today, and not tomorrow,” but down the road, in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, or all three”

around the region.

According to Yaari, the IAF’s campaign has succeeded in reducing the Iranian military presence in Syria to 400 soldiers from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, and he holds out some hope that Russian President Vladimir Putin could eventually be persuaded to pressure the Assad regime to send the Iranian forces in Syria back home.


At the moment, he said, Russia benefits from Iranian forces, and especially their Shi’ite militia allies, in Syria as “cannon fodder” against the rebels. However, after the fall of the rebel stronghold of Idlib, which is likely to happen soon, Russia – which already gives Israel freedom to attack Iranian targets in Syria as long as it does not harm Assad – may view continued Iranian presence in Syria differently.

If Russia doesn’t act, and Yaari is somewhat pessimistic it will, a confrontation between Iran and Israel is looming “not today, and not tomorrow,” but down the road, in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, or all three, he said. A key impetus prompting Israeli action would be whether Iran succeeds in building a substantial arsenal of precision guided missiles within range of Israel that could accurately pinpoint any target in Israel.

Today, Iran has several dozen such missiles in place, Yaari said. If that number developed into hundreds, Yaari said, Israel would be forced to pre-emptively act to destroy the threat. The worst case scenario would be an intense war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, which currently targets Israel with 140,000 rockets. In such a case, Yaari said, Israeli defence officials estimate 300 alert sirens a day could disrupt Tel Aviv alone, and Israel’s missile defence systems would not be able to stop all of them.

The result would be catastrophic, especially for Lebanon, which would face the full wrath of the Israeli Air Force.

“There is no other way to deal with the 140,000 missiles because of where they are placed, in densely populated areas. If there is a war with Hezbollah, Israel would launch as many sorties of aircraft as fast as she can, while Hezbollah would try to launch as many missiles as it can,” he said.

For now, Yaari doesn’t see a war with Hezbollah in the offing, because “everybody realises what would happen.” 

THE BUSHFIRE CONSPIRACY

by Ran Porat

Australian Arabic-language commentators are spreading conspiracy theories about Australia’s summer bushfire emergency and the corona virus outbreak.

Grave ecological and biological threats often result in the spawning of conspiracy theories. This “fake news” offers comfort to those experiencing confusion and fear by presenting simple and plausible explanations for the danger and trauma, laying the blame for them on a malicious actor, real or imagined.



Australia ablaze: Victim of an international plot, according to some

My research has uncovered two Australians with relatively wide access to Arabic-speaking Australians on media platforms who actively spread conspiracy theories about both the tragic bush fires and the corona virus COVID-19 epidemic. In both cases, these conspiracy theories were accompanied by antisemitic tropes or lies about Israel and the US.

‘WHOEVER CONTROLS THE WEATHER, CONTROLS THE WORLD’

Pierre Sema’an, a Maronite Christian of Lebanese origin, is the senior columnist for the *El-Telegraph* newspaper published in Sydney. The newspaper prides itself on being the “Largest Lebanese and Arabic Daily Newspaper in Australia” and is edited by Antoine Kazi OAM.

As I have previously exposed in the *AIR* (“The Columnist as Conspiracist”, October 2018), Sema’an has a long history of spreading conspiracy theories, fabrications and antisemitic tropes in his columns. His favourite topic is the evil world government, made up of the UN and world leaders, including in Australia, all of whom are either atheists, or Zionists, or perhaps even aliens or lizards (as can be inferred from his supportive mentions of British antisemitic conspiracy-monger David Icke, who promotes theories about shapeshifting alien lizards

controlling the world). Repeating notoriously widespread lies from the Arab world, Sema'an has claimed that the US, the West and Israel created and operated ISIS and that Iran and Israel conspire together to control the Middle East.

Now Sema'an is claiming, in his "Australian fires ... is there a hidden agenda?" (Dec 12, 2019), that the bushfires were caused by those trying to impose an evil world government. In his article he posits that:

"Fires that destroy many coastal and regional areas in New South Wales and Queensland are not innocent fires, resulting from drought. It is part of a global plan to redistribute land as a prelude to abolishing private property and working on the reduction of the [global] population by many means and methods, varying between the ability to control the climate, fabricating wars and spreading epidemics, family beating and elimination of differences between nationalities, etc."

Sema'an throws into the plot everything in his conspiracy theory arsenal. He begins with "chemtrail" – the conspiracy theory that chemicals are being spread from airplanes to generate and manipulate weather and environmental events such as rain, tsunamis and global warming.

He claims that chemtrail is used because "whoever controls the weather, controls the world", as part of the "Agenda 21" master plan. This non-binding 1992 UN eco-plan, he alleges, is promoted and implemented by the evil Club of Rome supergroup of towering world figures, including former US presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, as well as billionaire Microsoft founder Bill Gates, CNN founder Ted Turner and Hungarian-born tycoon George Soros. Australian PMs Paul Keating and the late Gough Whitlam also appear in Sema'an's dubious list, along with Russell Zimmerman, former head of the Australian Retailers Association.

"Agenda 21 is not a science fiction theory, but rather a well-defined conspiracy, with an archive and history [...] They are powerful people behind this system that map out world politics". Their aim is "to destroy humanity" and "reducing its population by 90% and keeping only 300 million people," Sema'an says in his column.

To achieve these goals, clarifies Sema'an, additional methods are needed. For instance, waging unfounded wars in the Middle East by falsely "arguing against extremism and lethal weapons, and finally counterterrorism under President Trump." Fear of climate change, championed by former US Vice President Al Gore, by Greenpeace and the Australian Greens party (he specifically names Australian Greens leader Adam Bandt), political correctness and even the vegetarian movement

– all are abused by governments to advance Agenda 21, he argues.

Australian farmers, concludes Sema'an, are the latest victims of this global-domination ploy. "Globally, some governments committed to Agenda 21 have resorted to creating difficult conditions for farmers and promoting the lie of Climate Change, to besiege farmers and push them towards cities, where they turn from producers to consumers."

The hidden agenda is finally exposed: "The droughts and the arson of fires are aimed at displacing farmers and giving their lands in the future to international companies or countries that adhere to the club's agenda."

CORONAVIRUS 'A US BIO-WEAPON'

The outbreak of the novel COVID-19 corona virus has also given Sema'an more impetus to spread conspiracy theories.

Repeating stories popular in the Middle East, he claimed in his article "Is the world ready to deal with a germ warfare?" (published Feb. 6), that the virus "is biological warfare that is classified as a weapon of mass destruction, no less than nuclear and chemical warfare." Referring to a warning (Dec. 2018) by Bill Gates (a member of the Club of Rome, according to Sema'an) about a lethal virus that might kill millions, Sema'an asks rhetorically: "Was he [Gates] aware that it would inevitably happen [the death of millions from a virus] due to international conflicts and the intentions of reducing the world's population?"

Quoting allegations made by extremist Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Sema'an had hinted in an article published a couple of weeks earlier that the US had crafted the viral epidemic to fight China: "If this hypothesis is correct, we are facing a new reality where the spread of epidemics turns into a military and economic weapon to fight opponents and prevent their economic growth. So is this state of affairs meant to stop the prosperity of China, which has become a great power that poses a threat to the unilateralism of world leadership by the United States of America?"

'US CREATED ISIS'

Shi'ite cleric Youssef Nabha is the imam of the Arrahman ("The Merciful") mosque in Sydney and the director of the Al-Mabarar charity. In September 2019, the *Daily Telegraph* exposed ties between Al-Mabarar and the Lebanese terrorist organisation Hezbollah. At the same time, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission revoked Al-Mabarar's charity status for unspecified reasons.



Pierre Sema'an of *El-Telegraph*

Nabha is an open supporter of the Iranian regime, staunchly anti-US and Israel and does not shy away from conspiracy theories. He claimed, for example, in one of his Friday sermons (Sept. 28, 2018) that the US created and funds ISIS. In a show of support to the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hamas on Jan 20, 2018, Nabha also read out loud to worshippers a letter sent from Hamas senior leader, Ismail Haniyeh, to Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, proudly pronouncing that this is proof that Iran "is present in the arena of liberation of Palestine."



Sheikh Nabha (right) expressed his condolences on the death of Gen. Soleimani to Iran's Ambassador to Australia, Fereidoun Haghighi, in January

On Jan. 3, Nabha labelled as "pure martyrs" the Iranian arch-terrorist, Qasem Soleimani and the commander of pro-Iranian militia in Iraq, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis – both killed by the US that day. He promised that their blood "yields victory, and provides our peoples with dignity, power, and endurance, in the confrontation with the Americans and the Israelis". A few days later on Jan. 7, Nabha met Iran's Ambassador to Australia, Fereidoun Haghighi, to extend his "sincere condolences" over the "martyrdom" of Soleimani and al-Muhandis.

'PM'S TIES WITH ZIONISTS MADE THE BUSH FIRES WORSE'

Al-Mabarar donated \$10,000 to the NSW Rural Fire Service in November 2019. Presenting the cheque, Nabha described the donation as springing from "the value of mateship" and the responsibility "to extend our hand to the Government institutions" helping to fight fires and protect people's homes.

Nabha's views on Prime Minister Scott Morrison are very different. During his Dec. 6 Friday sermon at the Arrahman mosque he noted the awarding of the Jerusalem Prize to the PM by the Zionist Federation of Australia (ZFA) a few weeks previously. In an innuendo referencing antisemitic tropes about Jewish influence, Nabha suggested that Morrison's ties with the "yarn spinning" ZFA had made the fires worse:

"We commend the efforts of the firefighters, who work day and night to extinguish the fires in various regions in Australia while Prime Minister Scott Morrison has fuelled the fires by his participation at a celebration of the Zionist Federation of Australia whose aim is to support Israel, spinning its yarn [around] Morrison. Morrison courted [the ZFA], sang praise and stressed the historical ties [between] Australia and Israel over the last years. He did not mention the rights of the Palestinians to live in dignity, and [did not] mention their daily

tragedies and torments due to the Israeli occupation. The tears of the Palestinian women and children continue to haunt all the arrogant, the occupiers and those [hanging on their] tails, asking for power and leadership on the blood of the Palestinians and their wounds."

Spreading conspiratorial and arguably antisemitic views to law-abiding Arabic-speaking Australian citizens while cynically taking advantage of the bushfire tragedy and the corona virus threat is both morally repugnant and an insult to all Australians. Both the general public and law enforcement agencies

should be aware of the dangerous and ugly beliefs people like Sema'an and Nabha are introducing into Australia's multicultural society.

AIR

Dr. Ran Porat is an affiliate researcher at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University, a research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Centre in Herzliya, Israel and a research associate at the Future Directions International Research Institute, Western Australia.

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ESSAY

Victory begins with Defence

Inside the IDF's air defence program

by Yoav Limor

“Victory begins with defence,” says Brig. Gen. Ran Kochav, commander of the IDF's air defence program.

“It's not the victory itself, but that's where it begins. My role is to allow the captain to stay calm while making decisions – not to attack based on public opinion or casualties, but calmly. The air defences have racked up some 2,000 interceptions. Imagine what would have happened if those missiles had fallen and each one of them had killed someone. We would have been at war long ago.”

Yoav Limor: Have we become addicted to defence?

Brig.-Gen. Kochav: “The division and brigade commanders are angry with me. They say that I'm the reason they aren't on manoeuvres. I think they're wrong. We should [undertake ground operations] in the Gaza Strip for every rocket fired from Gaza? We should head to Damascus over every missile fired at Mount Hermon? If missiles are fired from Iraq, should we deploy there? The courage in launching an action isn't in the action itself, but in making the decision.”

Perhaps your phenomenal success has freed the captain from having to make a decision.

“The fact is, in Operation Protective Edge [in 2014] we launched an offensive. This year, too, with Operation Black Belt [in the Gaza Strip]. But we decided when we would launch the attack, and we were well-pre-

“The air defences have racked up some 2,000 interceptions. Imagine what would have happened if those missiles had fallen and each one of them had killed someone.”

pared, and we succeeded. That's proof we aren't addicted.

“Defence is the base. You can't win in soccer or basketball without defence. It's the starting point that allows for victory.”

You are aware that the populace are convinced that the next war will take place above Iron Dome, which will intercept everything, and they can go about their lives as usual.

“That won't happen. We'll need to set priorities, like we do with a thousand other things, because at the end of the day, in theory, I'll have to decide whether to defend Kiryat Shmona or Eilat. I don't have enough

for both places. These are the decisions we'll have to make.”

Who makes them?

“The senior military echelon makes some, and the government makes others.”

MANAGING THE PUBLIC'S EXPECTATIONS

Israel's multilayered air defence includes Iron Dome, designed to intercept and destroy short-range rockets and artillery shells; David's Sling, which counters medium- to long-range rockets and missiles; the Arrow 2 short- and medium-range ballistic missile interceptor, and the Arrow 3 long-range missile interceptor, which is one of the most advanced of its kind in the world.

What do you need for better defence?

“More batteries, more interceptions, more people, and maybe to be more efficient. I need a good defence because if someone wrecks a battery, there goes a city's protection. We also need variety. When I'm asked

why we need so many different systems – Iron Dome, Patriot, David's Sling, the Arrow, and soon lasers, the answer is that we don't want to put all our eggs in one basket. We need variety, we need to spread out. We mustn't be dependent on one system or one industry.”

How do you envision the [potential] third Lebanon War?

“As very challenging in terms of the amount, variety, and extent of defences that will be required. We'll be asked to do more from moment to moment. We are preparing for 1,000 missiles a day, maybe more, and we think that we'll be well-equipped to respond, but it [the war] won't be like Gaza.”

Which means?

“That people won't be able to do their shopping as usual. They'll have



Brig-Gen. Ran Kochav with Israeli PM Netanyahu and some of his equipment and soldiers

to go into shelters, and know how to behave, and understand that in the next war people will be killed and there will be property damage. And that's not because we didn't do the work, but because nothing is perfect. Even with Gaza, I can't promise that we'll see the same rate of success. My job isn't to make promises, but to look at all this modestly and do the maximum to meet people's expectations of me."

The public might not understand that.

"I'm convinced the public is intelligent, but that's why I'm giving this interview and saying, 'air defences aren't everything.' There is also how the public handles itself, there is the Homefront Command, there are shelters, there's luck – and yes, there will be hits and people could be killed. I'm not saying that to cover myself, but to manage expectations. And aside from all that, we also have intelligence and offence and additional capabilities.

"I don't want to get into statistics and models, but I want to hand the dilemma over to the other side. He should decide whether, given these rates of interception, it's worthwhile for him to start a war, knowing that most of the rockets he fires won't hit their targets."

You're saying that Israel's air defences have become a deterring factor.

"Yes. It's not a question of capabilities, because last May we saw Hamas fire nearly 800 rockets in a day. It's a matter of making decisions because it's forced the other side to weigh every incident carefully."

One of the main challenges facing the IDF today is Hezbollah's precision missile project.

"They want to be able to hit any point in Israel within 10 metres," Kochav explains. "That's a significant threat, which Israel is trying to eradicate in any way it can."

Will you be able to handle it?

"We have a response, mainly in David's Sling system, but there are certainly challenges – for example, knowing which missile out of a volley is the precision one that can hit us."

PEOPLE BEFORE MACHINES

Kochav loves military history in general and the history of air defences in particular. His eyes light up when he talks about the changes in the program he oversees since the time he became attached to the IDF's Artillery Corps.

"It took Israel time to decide to invest in defence, and maybe reality dictated that decision," he says.

"Building shelters, erecting fences. There are still arguments in the General Staff about where to invest stray shekels – in defensive or offensive capabilities. The answer, like always, is both. It's all a question of amounts."

Kochav says that for years, Israel worked on finding solutions to problems. "Was the Al-Hussein missile posing a threat? We'd bring in the Patriot. Scuds? We'll develop the Arrow. Katyushas in the Second Lebanon War? We'll invent Iron Dome. Precision missiles? We'll make David's Sling. Does Iran have Shahab missiles? We'll build the Arrow 3."

But he wants to pioneer a systemic solution, one that focuses on the nation as a whole. "It would be multi-layered integrated defence, with a single uniform infrastructure... with a uniform management of interceptions. That way, we can add one and one and get three. Today, we get to two, at best."

Kochav also knows that such an initiative would demand sweeping changes. Infrastructure, systems, people, and countries would have to be integrated. And a lot of money would have to be invested.

"People say to me, even here at home, that I'm crazy. They ask why we need it. That if I ended the year with a 94% interception rate, why make changes? And I say that if we don't change and don't adapt ourselves, we won't meet the challenge."

Which is?

"To win. There is a lot of discussion of defeats. I think the word 'victory' is more appropriate. For that to happen, my mission is to protect the nation's skies."

Kochav says that everyone talks about the role of air defence in intercepting rockets. He stresses the role it plays in deterrence.

“That saves more lives than interceptions, because it allows people a chance to get to shelters. Our job is to see that we issue the correct warnings, and avoid false alarms.”

He gives credit to the personnel first, and then to the systems. “My mom is sure that the Colour Red siren [warning of an incoming missile attack] is automatic, and so is Iron Dome. She really thinks that. I go nuts when I hear on the radio that Iron Dome intercepted something. What is Iron Dome? There are soldiers behind it. It’s not automatic.”

“Do you remember the mother in Beersheva who ran into a shelter with her kids in the middle of the night, a moment before a rocket hit their house [in October 2018]? It was someone named Lt. Romi Nativ who saved her life. He made the decision to sound an early, slightly longer alert in Beersheva. They are in the 40 second range, and he gave them 57 seconds, and that’s apparently what saved them. Incidentally, he also decided not to wake up the entire Tel Aviv metropolitan area, even though they were targeted, too.”

Still, it’s quite some technology.

“No doubt. Every one of the systems is a wondrous creation. This summer, I went to Alaska to take part in the test of the Arrow 3. I used to command the Arrow program, and here they intercepted at a distance of hundreds of kilometres, in space, and it wasn’t a fluke because they had three successful interceptions. It’s like you’re watching a movie. It’s incredible. Still, it all comes down to people.”

In January, there were reports of successful tests of the Iron Dome. What were they?

“Another upgrade to the system that will allow it to rapidly intercept low-level targets – short-range, as well as rocket volleys – because our goal is to intercept as many as possible over enemy territory to avoid sirens and people being wounded by debris

– not to mention [founding Israeli PM David] Ben-Gurion’s concept of bringing the fight to the enemy’s territory.”

Another major breakthrough reported last week was lasers. Israel is now capable of intercepting rockets using a laser. The laser system will undergo a series of tests over the course of this year, and should become operational in the next few years.

“Lasers are our future,” Kochav says. “For years, we’ve been talking about them as a cheaper, available solution. The technological model that has been developed uses electricity, not chemical fuel, and that’s the breakthrough. But in its early stages, the laser will provide localised defence. In any case, it won’t supplant the existing systems – it will add to and complement them.”

Ten or 20 years from now, do you envision a laser screen that intercepts everything fired at us?

“There will be a screen, but it won’t be comprised of just lasers. There will be physical interceptors, and it will cover almost everything and force the other side back to the problem of whether it’s worth their while to invest in a battle that won’t achieve its goals.”

In 2019, Israel’s air defence program found itself facing new challenges. Hamas was constantly trying to test the systems with rockets fired from different ranges, at different heights, and in different numbers. Rockets were fired at one target from a few directions simultaneously, or from one point at several different Israeli towns. Still, the interception rate was impressive – nearly 500 interceptions with a rate of 94.2% for the year and 94.7% during Operation Black Belt, which came after the targeted killing of senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad commander Baha Abu al-Ata in November.

“The results were fantastic, but I can’t rest on my laurels, and that

won’t always be the case. The fact is, in 2018 we intercepted less than 90% of the rockets.”

What changed?

“We improved the systems, as well as the training, the level of integration, and our ability to work together. We improved the time from identification [of a rocket fired] to the alert, and we also have more advanced interceptor missiles. Yes, we’re better, but the threat is more dangerous. We’re in a race, and my job is to always be ahead.”

To do that, the nation’s air defences are always on alert. In 2019, they were the most used program in the IDF, and an integral part of every situation assessment and operational plans. Whether it was preparations for attacks from Gaza or secret strikes in Syria, the importance to the home front demanded that the air defence program be looped in on the decision-making process, not to mention usually being the first to put a plan into action.

“It sounds obvious to the public. They heard on the radio that four rockets were fired on Friday evening, and Iron Dome intercepted three of them, and then they go back to dinner. It’s not obvious. We work very hard to allow people to keep living that way. This success rate is the result of hard work, both by people and technology.”

How do you maintain operational readiness in times of calm?

“A lot of training. We have simulations, including on the operational batteries. I upload a scenario into the simulator, and practice. I do surprise drills. I talk with people. We’ve established a new training unit that is based at the IDF’s air defence school, which trains our people.”

With all the operational alerts, how much do you get to train?

“All the time. We take a battery ‘offline’ and train with it, and not

only interceptions. We also practise defence and supply.”

In order to fulfil all its missions, the air defence program has expanded in recent years – it manages more and more varied types of platforms and additional personnel.

Kochav fights for the highest-level people. New IDF recruits see air defences as “lightweight combat,” and many want to serve there. Some don’t realise that if they make it to an Iron Dome battery, they will be serving in the field, under fire, and others don’t meet the qualifications to operate complex technological systems.

One of his most successful solutions has been to integrate women into all roles in air defence. Over 50% of the recent recruits to the program have been women. “Everything here is 50-50. I have the most [gender]-integrated battalions,” Kochav notes.

LIMITED ISRAELI SUPERIORITY

On Sept. 14, 2019, Iran used drones to attack Saudi Arabia’s national oil facilities, causing extensive damage. The incident prompted a higher level of alert for Israel’s air defences, in the event that Iran might execute a similar strike against strategic Israeli targets.

And what have you learned about Iran’s capabilities?

“In that incident, and in the attacks against American bases in Iraq last week, the Iranians showed a highly coordinated strike capability. Can we counter it? I think so. Can I promise 100% success? No way. But it’s a threat we are definitely prepared for.”

The response, Kochav says, comprises intelligence first of all, and then early detection. “The first rule of air defence is discovery. You can’t do anything without knowing, without seeing. That means I need intelligence, most of which we collect ourselves, but the Americans help with some.



An Iranian Sayad missile fired from a Talash missile system: Israel has to constantly work hard to address developing missile threats

Air defence is the only field in which there is a signed operational directive with the Americans. Nothing else like it exists.”

What does that mean?

“That there is intelligence and operational cooperation in the field of defence. My counterpart was here recently for some practical operational-operative coordination, should we need it.”

As the IDF’s top man when it comes to missile defences, Kochav is keeping close tabs on the systems the enemy has, especially Syria. “There are countless systems there. They invest a lot more in defence than we do. In terms of size. That can be a challenge, but we have solutions.”

And when you factor in the S-300 system Syria got from Russia, and the S-400 system that the Russian military is operating in the region?

“It’s very significant. They see every target that is fired, and we need to take them into account when we collect intel or attack, which limits our freedom of operation. It limits our superiority and requires us to find solutions.”

You have been following the incident of the Ukrainian plane shot down in Iran. Can you

understand how it could have happened?

“Iran was on high alert after the [US airstrike] on Quds Force commander Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani and the attack on American bases in Iraq, and apparently had gotten some warning or intelligence about an American response. That creates tension, at night, and when you add lax open-fire directives and a lack of operational protocol and unprofessionalism to a target that appears to constitute a threat, this is the result.”

Could the same thing happen to you?

“Everything could happen. In terms of facts, after 72 years of operating weapons systems against aircraft and missiles, we have never fired without wanting to. The Israeli Air Force has a centralised command, a high level of professionalism. With us, it doesn’t matter if it’s day or night – we have intelligence and we have high standards. The fact is there is no other place in the world where there are airstrikes and missile interceptions in such a confined space, and civil aviation goes on as usual.”

AIR

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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

SBS CAUGHT MAPPING

An *SBS TV* “World News” (Jan.29) report on US President Donald Trump’s peace plan included four grossly inaccurate maps showing purported changes in the territory at the heart of the century-old dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. They seemed to be based on a series of ahistorical propaganda maps of “shrinking Palestine” widely used in pro-Palestinian circles.

The first map titled “1917 Balfour Declaration” included the territory of what is today Israel, the West Bank and Gaza shaded in yellow.

The second map, called “1947 UN Partition Plan”, showed the map coloured red and yellow.

The third map, “1948 Israeli Independence”, showed large amounts of red and much smaller sections of yellow.

In the last map, “2020”, the ratio of red to yellow was even more pronounced.

While the colours were not labelled, the clear implication was the yellow areas were shrinking Palestinian lands, engulfed by Israel represented as red.

Reporter Helen Isbister’s voiceover confirmed this, stating that, “It comes more than a century since colonial power Britain approved the establishment of a national home for Jews in Palestine, with Palestinian territory shrinking significantly since then, including when the State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948, and with further reductions to come.”

The maps and voiceover claims about “shrinking Palestinian land” are simply grossly inaccurate.

Regarding the first map, until late 1917, the Middle East – apart from Egypt – were parts of the Ottoman Empire and the borders of Lebanon,

Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Jordan did not exist. These were drawn up by Britain and France and only finalised in the early 1920s.

Until Britain was granted the Palestine Mandate by the League of Nations in 1922 with the directive to implement the Balfour Declaration and create a national home for Jews, there had never been a Palestinian state, let alone a consensus on where or what “Palestine’s” borders were.

In fact, until June 1922, the official map of British Mandate Palestine included what is now Jordan.

Moreover, implying that all of the mandate was “Palestinian territory” in this context is wrong. Britain controlled these areas politically and most of the land was state land, although individual Arabs and Jews obviously owned a minority of the land privately.

Regarding map two, the report did not tell viewers that the 1947 Partition Plan map never materialised because Palestinian Arab leaders rejected it and, in collaboration with the surrounding Arab states, went to war to prevent its implementation.

Regarding map three, viewers should’ve been informed that at the end of the 1948 war, Gaza and what is called the West Bank were occupied by Egypt and Jordan respectively. None of it was or became “Palestinian land” as the map and voiceover implied.

The final map with the lowest amounts of yellow purports to show a disappearing Palestine but is in fact the areas of the West Bank Israel handed over to the Palestinians in the 1990s. These areas are actually the first genuine “Palestinian land” – in the sense of land under the political control of a Palestinian governing authority – that have ever existed in history.

Further, if any of Israel’s three offers since 2000 to create a Palestinian

state had been accepted, the map of Palestine in 2020 would have included territory approximating the 1948 map.

PLANTING AND PLANNING

AIJAC’s Colin Rubenstein wrote the Trump Administration peace plan “could plant the seeds of hope for a new fruitful dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians.”

He said “it clarifies that both Trump and Netanyahu support a two-state outcome” which is “important as both... have been criticised for expressing reservations about Palestinian statehood in the past.”

The plan’s positives, Rubenstein wrote, include “overturn[ing] the conventional wisdom that peace requires Israel to return... to the 1967 Six-Day War” armistice lines, and “a new proposal for how... both Israel and the Palestinians [can] have a capital” in Jerusalem.

He said the proposal offers less territory than past offers demonstrating that Palestinian “historic rejections” have “real enduring costs in the long term,” *Age / Sydney Morning Herald* (Jan. 30).

RETURN TO KAZAK-STAN

Former PLO envoy to Australia Ali Kazak’s analysis of the Trump Administration peace plan in the *Age* (Feb. 6) included wild claims and calls for a one-state solution.

Kazak suggested the “absence of Palestinian input” into the plan “shows the extent to which US Middle East policy has been hijacked by Israel”. Of course, the Palestinian Authority refused to offer any input into the plan.

He claimed that “the aims of the Zionist Organisation, from its founding father Theodor Herzl to Israel’s

fathers Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion to its current leader Benjamin Netanyahu... has been to colonise all of historical Palestine" and "ethnically cleanse the Palestinians."

This is just untrue. Herzl's 1902 novel *Altneuland* ("The Old New Land"), imagining a future Jewish state, envisioned Arabs having an important and valued role.

Weizmann supported Britain's first proposal to partition the country into Jewish and Arab states in 1937 which would've created a tiny Israel.

In a letter to Britain's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin in 1947, Israel's future first prime minister David Ben-Gurion endorsed "the establishment of

two States, one Jewish and the other Arab."

Kazak also accused Herzl of writing that Zionists should "try to spirit the penniless population across the border" – a claim based on misrepresentation of a passage from Herzl's diary in which he was clearly talking about a proposal to create a temporary Jewish refuge in an area of Argentina.

Inverting history, Kazak implied Israel ruined the 1947 Partition Plan, and took more land than it was entitled to. Of course, it was the Arab leadership that smashed the plan and went to war, creating the Arab refugees and a loss of territory.

Kazak's claim that UN General As-

sembly Resolution 194 gives Palestinians an "inalienable" right of return to territory that became Israel is also wrong.

Resolution 194, passed in 1949, is not legally binding. The words "right of return" are not part of it and any return was conditional on both the willingness of returnees to live in peace and practicality.

Kazak also said, "to this day Israel does not have defined borders."

Israel has fixed borders with all those neighbours that have made peace with it i.e. Jordan and Egypt. Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinians refuse to make peace and so temporary armistice lines are in place.



IN PARLIAMENT

Senator **James Paterson** (Lib., Vic.) – Feb. 11 – "I rise tonight to mark... the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and commemorate... International Holocaust Remembrance Day. We have vowed never again, and... never forget. Given recent evidence, I sometimes fear that these phrases are hollow echoes... Across Europe, almost 90 per cent of Jews believe that anti-Semitism has intensified in their country over the past five years... Closer to home we are also witnessing the re-emergence of a virulent form of anti-Semitism... We must be united in our rebuke of anti-Semitic behaviour. We must condemn it and vigilantly monitor its symptoms."

Senator **Dean Smith** (Lib., WA) – Feb. 11 – "I, and also on behalf of Senators Chandler, Hughes, Kitching, O'Neill and Wong, move that the Senate—(a) notes that 27 January 2020 marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day, a day where we remember the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime and its collaborators, and reaffirm our promise to 'never forget' the 6 million Jews and 11 million others who were exterminated during the Holocaust..."

Senator **Stirling Griff** (Centre Alliance, SA) – Feb. 5 – "I, and also on behalf of Senators Van, Wong and O'Neill, move that the Senate... (c) pays its respects to the more than 1.1 million men, women and children killed at Auschwitz and the 11 million people killed during the Holocaust including 6 million people of Jewish faith... (e) acknowledges that what happened during the Holocaust should serve as a reminder to all Australians not to be indifferent, to practise acceptance and show compassion for others."

Senator **Richard Di Natale** (Greens, Vic.) – Feb. 11 – speaking about the Trump Administration Mideast peace plan; "This is not

a peace proposal; this is anything but. It's not worth the paper it's written on. It's a direct copy-and-paste of the PR manual of the Israeli Prime Minister, the man who is up on corruption charges. It reflects all of the Israeli government's [asks]. It rewards the theft of Palestinian land by rewarding illegal settlement activity."

Shadow Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) – Feb. 11 – "Labor... acknowledge that this initiative declares support for an independent, sovereign state of Palestine. However, the initiative predetermines a number of final-status issues, which weaken the viability of any future Palestinian state... Labor also acknowledges concerns that the initiative may pave the way for Israeli annexation, which risks further regional destabilisation. We continue to support a just and durable two-state solution to the conflict and encourage both parties to pursue direct negotiations to that end."

Dave Sharma MP (Lib., Wentworth) – Feb. 10 – "I move... (5) expresses regret and concern at the numerous attempts to prevent and delay Malka Leifer facing justice in Australia; and (6) calls for the immediate extradition of Malka Leifer to Australia to face 74 charges of child sexual abuse."

Josh Burns MP (ALP, Macnamara) seconding the motion: "This is about what's right for every victim of abuse in Australia and Israel and all over the world. The Australian Jewish community is united. The Australian parliament is united. The Australian public is united. We are asking our friends a very simple request: do what is right; do what is just; end this farce, and bring Leifer back."

Katie Allen MP (Lib., Higgins), **Mike Frelander** MP (ALP, Macarthur), **Julian Leeser** MP (Lib., Berowra) and shadow Attorney-General **Mark Dreyfus** MP (ALP, Isaacs) also spoke in support of the motion.

Senator **Deborah O'Neill** (ALP, NSW) – Feb. 6 – "The minds of our future generation are the most renewable resource that we have. We see success in places like Silicon Valley and the start-up industries in Israel. Australia should be right up there with them."

RABIN'S VISION

Veteran journalist Tony Walker panned the Trump Administration's peace plan, writing, "In all of this, the year 1995 should be regarded as the reference point... That was the year a Jewish zealot assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The so-called peace process effectively died that day," *Canberra Times* (Feb. 3).

The *Canberra Times* ran a response from AIJAC's Allon Lee (Feb. 6), which noted that Rabin presented his vision for a "permanent solution" to the Israeli Parliament shortly before his death and that it shared remarkable similarities to Trump's peace plan.

Rabin envisaged "a Palestinian entity... which is less than a state... The borders of the State of Israel, during the permanent solution... will not return to the 4 June 1967 lines."

Jerusalem, he promised, would remain united under Israeli control, and "the security border of the State of Israel will be located in the Jordan Valley, in the broadest meaning of that term."

ONE-SIDED

ABC current affairs coverage of the Trump Administration peace plan overwhelmingly favoured critical voices over those who saw merit in it.

Analyst Caroline Rose told *ABC Radio National* "Saturday Extra" (Feb. 1), "The Palestinians don't necessarily get much out of this deal, nor is it within their interests to sign on to it."

Host Geraldine Doogue asked Rose, "Does this plan, in effect, say there will be an independent Palestinian state, like if Netanyahu accepts this?" Rose said it is "incredibly ambiguous". It isn't ambiguous, it just requires the Palestinian Authority to meet its obligations.

On *ABC Radio National* "Religion & Ethics Report" (Feb. 5), US academic David Myers said, if implemented, the plan "really entails the end of Israel as

a Jewish and democratic state."

Host Andrew West said to Myers, "You have always been, if you like, a good faith critic of Israel. And for many years, you have tried to resist this idea of the comparison between modern Israel and apartheid South Africa." Myers concurred, but both West and Myers were being disingenuous.

In Dec. 2014, Myers readily agreed with the proposition put to him during an interview with West that some people say Israeli control over the West Bank has led to "creeping apartheid."

DISASTER ZONE

On *ABC Radio National* "Breakfast" (Jan. 29), academic Samer Shehata denounced the peace plan as "a disaster for the Palestinians and for their cause and for justice, for that matter. And it's not a real peace proposal," and doubted the claims it will double Palestinian territory.

Shehata also said the Old City is "an area that has been in Palestinian hands for centuries". Wrong – until Britain captured Jerusalem in 1917, the Ottoman Caliphate ruled the city.

The next day, former Palestinian MP Mustafa Barghouti told "Breakfast" the plan mirrored apartheid South Africa and Palestinians are "losing about 40 percent of the land that is West Bank that is assumed to be the land of the future Palestinian state."

Barghouti is talking nonsense. The Palestinian Authority would get land almost equivalent to all of the West Bank and Gaza under the plan.

"Breakfast" host Fran Kelly told viewers the program would include "a reaction from Israel to Donald Trump's peace plan" on Feb. 3. This never occurred.

GLASS TOTALLY EMPTY

ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek was extremely critical of the plan's proposals for Jerusalem, telling *ABC Radio* "PM" (Jan. 29), "It

doesn't offer the Palestinians anything that they want regarding Jerusalem. And it's also misleading to say the Palestinians can have a capital... in eastern Jerusalem because that capital would be outside Israel's security barrier. You know, the wall and fences that the... UN found 15 years ago were illegal... it offers them the chance to build a capital in an area that is nowhere near the historic capital, that are in suburbs, that frankly have problems with law and order and infrastructure and access roads. And, you know, they're not they're not nice places... So it doesn't offer them any greater access to the holy sites or control of the holy sites than they have now."

In fact, as per the decision made by the Israeli government in 1967, Islamic trusts already have full control over the Al-Aqsa mosque/Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem.

And as for the wall, it was constructed to stop Palestinian terrorists crossing over into Israel from the self-rule areas of the West Bank, and has been extremely successful. If real peace were achieved, it will presumably be moved or removed. Meanwhile, perhaps the US plan's US\$50 billion in funds could help improve those "not nice places."

MISSING PIECE

A *Daily Telegraph* (Jan. 28) report on Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu's trip to Washington DC for the release of the Trump Administration peace plan included a number of naïve statements.

The story said, "The Palestinians have not been consulted on the much-trumpeted deal and have pre-emptively rejected the US proposal."

In fact, the Palestinian Authority boycotted the process.

The article also said, "Netanyahu has been flirting with plans to annex the Jordan Valley [which] could... extinguish any hope of creating a viable Palestinian state."

There is no reason why annexing the Jordan Valley would extinguish hope of creating a viable Palestinian state other than because the Palestinian Authority says so. Few Palestinians live in the area and it does not prevent territorial contiguity.

12 YEARS OVERDUE

The *Daily Telegraph's* Feb. 13 story on a meeting between Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and former Israeli PM Ehud Olmert said the Palestinian leader would negotiate, but only on the basis of the latter's 2008 offer.

It claimed, "talks between the pair broke down in 2008 amid legal trouble for the Israeli leader and an Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip."

Talks broke down when Abbas refused to meet or respond to then PM Olmert's offer to create a Palestinian state that included land equivalent to 100 per cent of the West Bank, all of Gaza and shared sovereignty over Jerusalem. This occurred before the Gaza war in Dec. 2008 and Jan. 2009.

BRIGHT SPOTS

On *ABC News Radio* (Jan. 29), former Australian Ambassador to Israel and current Liberal MP Dave Sharma downplayed suggestions the US peace plan's announcement was linked to Israel's or the US's election campaigns.

On *ABC TV 24* (Jan. 29) AIJAC's Tzvi Fleischer was able to mitigate some of the claims made by Palestinian activist Samah Sabawi who appeared alongside him.

Fleischer noted that the Palestinian Authority has refused to attend peace talks for five years and boycotted this latest effort too.

Sabawi was asked by the host if it is "a bit rich to reject a plan which Palestinians had an opportunity to help draft but chose not to?" but responded with a list of alleged grievances that had nothing to do with the question.

Fleischer contextualised why

Trump's plan offers less land than previous deals, noting the need for Israel to maintain security to prevent Hamas launching terror and rocket attacks from the West Bank into Israel in a repeat of what has played out in Gaza since Israel withdrew in 2005.

Another welcome voice was the Zionist Federation of Australia's Bren Carlill on the ABC website (Jan. 30), who said, "Palestinians get far less than what they want, and far less than what Israel has previously offered, as a direct result of decades of rejectionism."

AUSTRALIAN VIEWS

Commenting on Trump's plan, the *Australian* offered some vital history (Jan. 30), noting that "In 2000, Bill Clinton brokered a deal in which Ehud Barak, the Israeli prime minister at the time, offered an independent state in all of Gaza and 95 per cent of the West Bank, with Israeli territory to be relinquished for the remaining 5 per cent. Palestine Liberation Organisation leader Yasser Arafat, unwilling to give up the struggle against Israel, rejected it. Palestinians followed up with a four-year suicide-bombing campaign against Israeli civilians. Twenty years on, the conflict remains seemingly intractable."

Columnist Jennifer Oriel said (Feb. 3), "the Trump administration challenged the illusion of peace crafted by the UN. He noted that despite more than 700 UN General Assembly resolutions and 100 Security Council resolutions related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, no peace had been found... [The plan] challenged the denial of Israel's sovereignty over key parts of Jerusalem and made the case for the state to expand its territorial boundaries on the basis of national security."

MANY UNHAPPY RETURNS

US-based Iran analyst and recent AIJAC guest Behnam Ben Taleblu told

SkyNews "Outsiders" (Feb. 09) that, on the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran's leadership is trying to "signal strength" but "it's actually signalling weakness."

He cited as an example the delays and failures by Iran to launch satellites which require the same technology used in intercontinental ballistic missiles and which "many in the West believe... is cover" for the missiles program.

"So, every time the regime is trying to signal strength it is actually signalling failure. And this echoes really what a lot of Iranian people believe, which is that it's 41 years too many," he said.

INFLATED CLAIMS

A *Daily Telegraph* (Jan. 27) news brief on Israel hitting targets in Gaza – including an arms factory – in response to balloons carrying explosives sent from the Hamas-controlled Strip into Israel, was given the inflammatory headline "Revenge for balloon raid."

Unlike Gaza's terror groups which launch indiscriminate attacks aimed at Israeli civilians – which is a war crime – Israel plans surgical strikes to avoid Palestinian civilian casualties. The *Herald Sun* ran an identical report with the more appropriate headline of "Raids reply to bombs".

LOST IN THE AMAZON

In the *Daily Telegraph* (Jan. 23), NSW Jewish Board of Deputies Chief Executive Vic Alhadeff called on online retail giant Amazon to stop selling copies of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Alhadeff accused Amazon of "contributing to this increase in anti-Semitic incidents which has become a global phenomenon, including here in Australia" and said the retailer must be "profoundly aware of the inflammatory and fraudulent content of this vile book."

MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

BAN MORE THAN SYMBOLIC

The 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January, together with reports of increasing displays of Nazi symbols, started a debate over whether Nazi symbols should be banned.

Following an incident in the Victorian town of Beulah where property owners were brazenly flying a Nazi flag close to where a Holocaust survivor lives, AIJAC's Jeremy Jones told *ABC Radio* "PM" (Jan. 14) listeners that the Nazi flag represents "genocidal racism". Jones said that "in recent times people who may have harboured despicable views... have been much more open in their expression of these views and there have also been horrific actions taken by people infected by these views."

The same radio report noted Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews' commitment that a current Victorian inquiry into racial vilification laws would focus on "antisemitic behaviour".

ABC Radio Melbourne (Jan. 14) quoted Anti-Defamation Commission chairman Dvir Abramovich explaining "it's not illegal and that's where the problem lies... They are using the swastika as a rallying cry to celebrate the murderous legacy of the Third Reich, and they have the law on their side."

The *Age* (Jan. 17) backed a ban on displays of the swastika, citing the growing incidence of the Nazi symbol appearing in Australia.

The paper noted many countries prohibit a range of symbols. This includes the hammer and sickle icon which "came to represent the totalitarian regime of the Soviet Union [and] is illegal, along with the swastika, in several countries: Hungary (1993), Lithuania (2008), Poland (2009), Ukraine (2015)." France, the editorial said, "bans displays of symbols, uniforms and insignia that have been utilised by organisations responsible for crimes against humanity."

According to the *Age* editorial, "The political ideals underpinning this symbol have been categorically defeated in war and comprehensively rejected in principle. It is a symbol so notoriously linked to hatred and racism, to state-based mass murder and tyranny, that it can never be allowed to rise again."

In the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (Jan. 18), former Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane backed a ban, arguing that it should be treated with the

same seriousness as displays of the Islamic State flag, which are banned.

Soutphommasane said a ban could be realised through applying Section 18C of the federal *Racial Discrimination Act* which makes it "unlawful to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate other people on the grounds of their race."

He argued that critics of 18C who oppose using legislation to counter hate speech "wouldn't be so tolera[nt] of IS flags; we wouldn't for a moment believe we could only counter IS extremists through 'good speech'."

However, Victorian Reason Party leader Fiona Patten, who has campaigned for the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001* to include vilification on the grounds of sexuality, gender and disability, opposed a blanket ban of the flag.

The *Age* (Jan. 14) quoted Patten saying, "The history of the Nazi party and the extraordinary, horrific acts that they undertook is one thing. I don't think prohibiting something or banning it is the answer, however we do want to prohibit people trying to incite hatred and violence."

In an article on the legacy of Auschwitz (*Age*, Jan. 23), Abramovich wrote, "Auschwitz stands for the ultimate consequence of antisemitism... Sadly, the world has not learnt its lessons. Consider the genocides in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and now in Darfur and the Congo. In Australia, the perversion of Jew hatred is back... If we don't call out anti-Semitism when it happens, it may be too late to turn back the tide."

On Jan. 25, the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted Governor General David Hurley, who visited Israel to participate in the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, endorsing calls for a debate on the feasibility of a ban.

A feature in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (Jan. 27) on Auschwitz survivor Eva Slonim quoted her saying that "people who flaunt Nazi flags or badges are not only offensive, they're dangerous."

In the *Age* (Feb. 2), Victorian MPs David Southwick and James Newbury wrote of the Victorian Liberal party's intention to push for a legislative ban on the public display of Nazi symbols.

They said a ban is needed because, "while Victoria remains a proudly open society where everyone is encouraged to speak their minds freely, we must constantly guard against that openness being abused by some to spread fear and incite violence."

"The Age (Jan. 17) backed a ban on displays of the swastika, citing the growing incidence of the Nazi symbol appearing in Australia"

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

RACIST INSANITY

In more than one recent case, the perpetrators of violent, even murderous, antisemitic acts have been given legal clemency on the grounds of mental impairment.

Meanwhile, reports of irrational, racist behaviour, in the context of the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus and its identification with people from China, have been depicted as constituting a form of hysteria, of madness.

Before considering the implications of equating racism and mental illness, it is perhaps useful to reflect on the historic place of charges of insanity or cognitive disabilities in discussions of racism.



Professor Sander Gilman

Professor Sander Gilman, a prolific author, highly credentialed academic, polymath and seemingly indefatigable participant on the global speaking circuit, was in Sydney recently and addressed this topic.

As Professor Gilman illustrated with example after example, racists have historically found imagined mental deficiencies to be integral to whichever section of humanity they sought to exclude, belittle, enslave or murder.

Be they Africans, Asians, Jews or Irish, racism towards them was justified on the grounds that some biological factor restricted their ability to think logically, clearly or reasonably.

Racists first identified themselves as superior to the target of their racism. Once this was done, they justified this by claiming their targets deserved to be treated as lesser human beings, due to some biological or genetic weakness which merited discrimination and social sanctions.

Of course, this worldview relies on an acceptance of racism as being not just morally but also intellectually valid.

As such, it cannot be sustained when racism is seen as something which is wrong – not only because of the damage it causes to societies, but due to a broader understanding that it is anti-intellectual.

If racism is understood to be wrong, then the template

shifts – problems are perceived as being with the perpetrators and not the targeted victims.

This led to some scholars

turning the “inferior races have mental impairments” concept on its head – interpreting racism as the mental illness.

They asked, what could lead any person to disregard their own subjective observations and objective experiences, and endow entire subsets of humanity with particular behavioural features?

Why would educated individuals endow other human beings with undocumented and undocumentable mythical and mystical powers, bizarre anti-social behaviour and other features which, in their eyes, made the targets of their prejudice unfit for participation in human society?

Taken to another level, the question arose why governments and the communities they represented would sacrifice financial or social well-being by excluding potentially significant contributors to society on racist grounds? Or more dramatically, why would leaders sacrifice national war efforts or the chances at rebuilding damaged political ecosystems by obsessively persecuting individuals who could otherwise be assisting in the interests of the greater good of that society?

It is easy – too easy – to say the answer, quite simply, is insanity on a macro-level, a form of madness driving out the capacity not just for logic, but for self-interest.

On an individual level, people who committed murder because they falsely believed that all members of a particular community were wealthy, or, in another example, were existential enemies of humanity, have been defended in court, and received a degree of clemency, because such behaviour was deemed to be self-evidently insane.

A key problem with these analyses is that they allow an individual who has committed an act of racism to relinquish any personal responsibility – defending actions with the defence that their behaviour is due to an illness rather than being the results of judgements which involve objective free will.

As Professor Gilman notes, it also can lead to a conclusion that the way to “cure” racism is to give populations psychiatric drugs, perhaps added to the water supply together with fluoride!

It is a moral judgement, sometimes with a political overlay, to describe racism as wrong, ridiculous, and damaging to society, and a value judgement to call it illogical, inane or counterproductive. It is generally extremely questionable science to suggest it is a form of insanity.

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