



A DIFFERENT SORT OF WAR

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WITH COMPLIMENTS

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FOR A BETTER WORLD

EDITOR'S NOTE

This *AIR* edition focuses on the Israeli response to the extraordinary global coronavirus pandemic – with a view to what other nations, such as Australia, can learn from the Israeli experience.

The cover story is a detailed look, by security journalist Alex Fishman, at how the IDF has been mobilised to play a part in Israel's COVID-19 response – even while preparing to meet external threats as well. In addition, Amotz Asa-El provides both a timeline of Israeli measures to meet the coronavirus crisis, and a look at how Israel's ongoing political standoff has continued despite it. Plus, military reporter Anna Ahronheim looks at the cooperation the emergency has sparked between Israel and the Palestinians.

Also featured this month is a look at another contagion being spread by the coronavirus – dangerous and often destructive international conspiracy theories about it, many of them antisemitic. Oved Lobel and Judy Maynard survey such conspiracies across the world, while academic Ran Porat looks at some specific examples from Australia.

And don't miss Naomi Levin on the rise of far-right groups in Australia, and South African Olga Meshoe Washington on the insult to the victims of Apartheid in her country perpetrated by those who label Israel with that word.

We invite your views on any part of this edition at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

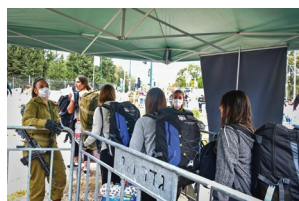
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Israeli Border Police patrol the streets of Jerusalem, 25 March 2020. Israeli authorities have tightened citizens' movement restrictions to prevent the spread of the coronavirus that causes the COVID-19 disease. (Photo: Abir Sultan/AAP)



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FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN

THE WORLD BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

Most countries have understandably and rightly turned their national security focus – as well as their political, economic and social priorities – inward toward attempts to mitigate the havoc caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Necessary as this is, states and governments must not take their eyes off the constellation of geopolitical strategic threats that will continue to simmer during the current crisis, and may well worsen after the pandemic has subsided.

COVID-19 appears to have temporarily lowered the level of friction in some conflict zones. Yet it certainly hasn't had any significant effect on the underlying hostility driving those who seek to destroy Israel or harm the interests of Western countries such as Australia and its allies.

In fact, the pandemic has not only fomented financial and political instability, but potentially created opportunities for rogue actors to exploit the situation and create new realities on the global strategic playing field that will play to their advantage when the current crisis ends.

China, where the coronavirus epidemic originated, claims to be on the cusp of being the first country to contain the spread of the virus and start returning to a fully functioning economy and society. Meanwhile, the US, Europe and Australia are under increasingly tight restrictions and are well into an agonising process of placing large segments of their economies into medically-justified lockdowns.

China's lies, suppression and deception in the early days of the pandemic deserve considerable blame for the extent and gravity of the current crisis. It would be disastrous if the Chinese Communist Party, with its aggressive and threatening foreign policy, were to reap geopolitical benefits from a horrific pandemic it contributed so much to causing.

Meanwhile, despite the shocking toll the coronavirus appears to be taking amongst the Iranian people, the threats posed by the Islamist regime in Teheran and its proxies are anything but receding.

In Iraq, a March 11 attack by Iranian proxies on coalition forces stationed at Camp Taji killed two American and one British soldier. Teheran has persisted with several additional rocket attacks by its proxies on American forces designed to force the US out of Iraq.

Meanwhile, nuclear non-proliferation experts have expressed concern that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), hamstrung by quarantines and the risk of infection in virus-plagued Iran, will be unable to carry out thorough inspections of Iran's nuclear program in the near future. Without proper monitoring, there would be little to prevent Iran from rushing towards a breakout to nuclear weapons.

Like China, the Iranian regime is no mere innocent victim of the pandemic. Rather, its failed policies for controlling the spread of the virus at home, the careless way the virus was imported into the country through Iran's extensive and cavalier dealings with China, and Teheran's repeated denials and cover-ups, have made Iran the most significant proliferator of COVID-19 in the Middle East, and even beyond.

With regard to well-meaning calls to lift sanctions to facilitate aid to coronavirus-stricken ordinary Iranians, there are already ample channels under the sanctions for Iran to import medical goods and humanitarian supplies, but the regime chooses not to take advantage of them. Above all, any sanctions relief should not fund Iran's continued aggression in the region, but only benefit the long-suffering Iranian people.

In Israel – despite fleet-footed and far-reaching efforts to keep the virus from spreading within its borders – experts warn that, like here in Australia, the full force of the viral spread has yet to be felt.

Israel has lacked a fully-functional national government, which it badly needed. It seemed obvious that the current crisis demands a broad government of national unity – as most Israelis want. Instead there has been a relentless power struggle between the two political blocs in the Knesset leading to a constitutional crisis involving the Speaker of the Knesset Yuli Edelstein facing off against Israel's High Court, then resigning.

The latest twist is the likelihood of a national unity government, following opposition leader Benny Gantz's election as Knesset speaker on March 26, and apparent decision to join a national unity government together with Netanyahu, with the latter serving as PM for 18 months.

This has split Gantz's Blue and White party, but Israel needs stable government – both because of the urgent need to address the pandemic, and to prepare for the ongoing regional threats which may well escalate in the future.

Yet despite political conflicts, as a society, Israel has stood up to coronavirus well, and the start-up nation has many potential technological and medical innovations that may assist other nations confronting the current

unprecedented challenges.

Jerusalem made the difficult decision to apply advanced counter-terrorism tracking technologies in the effort to curb the virus's spread – something other democracies may have to consider replicating.

At the same time, Israel is putting its unique military muscle into helping hospitals cope with the epidemic.

For example, one of the IDF's most elite cyber-intelligence and technology laboratories, Unit 81, has been deployed to use its talents to modify consumer-grade home medical ventilators to make

them suitable for use in intensive care units (for more on the IDF's role in fighting COVID-19, see our cover story).

Given Australia's special friendship with Israel, both socially-distanced democracies today stand to benefit from standing figuratively shoulder-to-shoulder and learning from each other in this fight.

Emblematic of this friendship and opportunity was El Al's first-ever direct commercial flight to Australia on March 24. The return flight between Tel Aviv and Perth provided repatriation home for hundreds of stranded Australians and New Zealanders, and allowed hundreds of Israelis to also return home safely.

It was a reminder of the mateship that binds our countries even in the darkest moments.

AIR

WORD FOR WORD

"We could reach a million infected within a month ... There could also be 10,000 dead Israelis."

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu at an Israeli cabinet meeting on March 23, which decided on more tough isolation measures to counter the coronavirus threat (Jerusalem Post, March 25).

"Netanyahu told me, 'You underestimate this in Europe... Wake up and take action.'"

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, claiming in an interview that Netanyahu shocked him into locking down Austria in response to the coronavirus spread (Times of Israel, March 22).

"Several times Americans have offered to help us to fight the pandemic. That is strange because you face shortages in America. Also you are accused of creating this virus. I do not know whether it is true... You could be giving medicines to Iran that spread the virus or cause it to remain permanently... Our number one enemy is America."

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rejecting US aid (Yahoo! News, March 22).

"The continued refusal to allow the Knesset to vote on the elec-

tion of a permanent speaker is undermining the foundations of the democratic process... This is one of those exceptional cases where this court is required to intervene to prevent a violation of our parliamentary system."

Justice Esther Hayut, President of Israel's High Court, issuing a court finding that the acting Knesset speaker must hold a vote to elect a permanent speaker despite his refusal to do so until a new government is sworn in (Times of Israel, March 23).

"I think that any intervention by the court with the judgment of the Knesset speaker on fixing the agenda of the plenum and setting up for vote for his replacement constitutes an unprecedented interference in the parliament's agenda."

Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein, apparently rejecting the High Court's decision (Ynet, March 24).

"Iran's failure to cooperate with the IAEA's requests for clarification and access to two locations, in accordance with its obligations under its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and the Additional Protocol is a matter of serious concern. We urge Iran to address this issue immediately, to comply with its safeguards obligations without delay, and to cooperate fully with the IAEA."

Ambassador Richard Sadleir, Australia's representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), criticising Iranian noncooperation and noncompliance with nuclear inspectors and the JCPOA nuclear deal (Australian Embassy to the United Nations, March 10).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

INCITEMENT AMIDST COOPERATION

By all accounts, cooperation between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Israeli government and military to deal with the coronavirus crisis has been very good. Amos Harel, the veteran military correspondent and defence analyst for Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper recently wrote that "Cooperation with the Palestinians is at its tightest ever."

This is all the more notable because as recently as February, Israeli-Palestinian relations seemed to be unprecedentedly precarious. In the wake of the release of the Trump Administration's peace plan in late January, PA President Mahmoud Abbas promised to withdraw all cooperation with Israel, including the vital security cooperation. While similar threats had been made before, this time Palestinian anger seemed more palpable and serious. Israeli government plans to annex the Jordan valley or other parts of the West Bank, as the peace plan allowed, looked set to deepen the crisis in relations.

Now, that is all gone. No one is talking about the Trump plan or annexations. Coronavirus has swept all such issues aside, as the two sides seek to manage the pandemic which threatens both Israelis and Palestinians who live intermixed with each other. There is even reportedly an Israeli-Palestinian "joint operations room" to oversee the shared response to the pandemic threat.

Amid the pandemic doom and gloom, this at least is good news, right?

Yes. However... why is it that even in this shared medical emergency the PA cannot stop its official media from engaging in ongoing incitement against Israel?

Here are some examples:

- On March 7, the semi-official PA newspaper *Al-Quds* published an article titled "Herds of Wild Boars: The Settlers' New Tool For Seizing Agricultural Lands" which revived an old, absurd form of anti-Israel incitement. This is the claim that Israeli soldiers and Jewish settlers release wild boars in parts of the West Bank to supposedly destroy Palestinian crops and intimidate Palestinian villagers and farmers. A PA official was even quoted in the *Al-Quds* story supporting the "wild boars" claims, and insisting it was "a form of war."
- Palestinian Authority official sources have repeatedly compared Israel or the "occupation" to the coronavirus. For instance, a cartoon in the official PA daily newspaper *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* on March 16 equated Israel with the coronavirus by showing an Israeli tank drawn with bumps to resemble a coronavirus chasing a Palestinian man and baby. In another example, a March 11 editorial

from the same paper stated, "Just as we will overcome the coronavirus, we will certainly overcome the occupation's viruses that are more dangerous than all of nature's viruses."

- The Fatah movement, the ruling party of the PA, was quoted in *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* on March 17 accusing Israel of "assist[ing] the coronavirus in Jerusalem" and "indifference regarding the spread of the virus among the Palestinians" after Israeli forces arrested some young Palestinians on suspicion of illegal activity, including graffiti. Improbably, Fatah claimed the arrested Palestinians were "disinfecting public institutions."
- On March 12, *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* rapturously praised Palestinian terrorist Dalal Mughrabi, leader of the "coastal road massacre" in 1978. In that attack, the deadliest in Israeli history, terrorists hijacked a bus and murdered 37 Israelis, among them 12 children. The paper lionised Mughrabi for her "daring, courage, well-developed national sentiment, and devotion to Palestine and Fatah" and her "martyrdom" in the "operation" in 1978.
- On March 22, *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* featured a front page article publicising the claims of the Jerusalem Waqf [Islamic religious trust] Council Chairman Abdul Azim Salhab. Salhab was complaining that Israeli demands he close



Abdul Azim Salhab

the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem to worshippers because of the coronavirus threat were merely a pretext to close the Mosque. He said, "The goal of these fines and steps is to close the Al-Aqsa Mosque to worshippers... on the pretext of preventing the spread of the coronavirus. Our position in the Waqf is that we oppose closing the mosque..." He also accused Israel of "allowing settlers to break into the Al-Aqsa Mosque each day, but preventing [Muslim] worshippers from entering the mosque... on the pretext of preventing the spread of the coronavirus." (In fact, contrary to Salhab's claims, Jewish visitors are also currently forbidden to enter the Temple Mount compound just like Muslim worshippers – and they were never allowed to enter the Al-Aqsa Mosque itself.)

What is weird about this is well before this was published, the PA Ministry of Religious Affairs had already ordered Palestinians to pray at home and not go to mosques because of the coronavirus threat. So Salhab's claims against Israel were being publicised on the front page of the official PA daily even as he was violating the PA's own instructions to Palestinians.

And it gets weirder still. That very same edition of *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* had an editorial strongly attacking Hamas for not closing the mosques in Gaza (Hamas has subsequently done so). The editorial did not mince

words. It said that, by not closing the mosques, Hamas was engaging in “a criminal act, more severe than the crimes of the terror groups and organisations that kill with weapons, gunfire, and explosions.”

Yet what Salhab was advocating in Jerusalem was no different from, and just as “criminal” as, Hamas’ approach. But when it was Israel being condemned, the paper just could not help promoting his claims on the front page – despite the ostensible Israeli-Palestinian cooperation.

So the cooperation on containing coronavirus is indeed good news. But it is hard to see it having much long term positive effect on relations as long as incitement and demonisation of Israel remain the default settings in PA official media.

AIR



Khaled Abu Toameh

WHO IS HELPING THE PALESTINIANS BATTLE CORONAVIRUS?

While Israel is working overtime with Palestinians to curb and prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the Arab states appear to be doing what they do best when it comes to helping their Palestinian brothers: nothing at all.

In early March, Israeli authorities delivered hundreds of coronavirus testing kits to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank. Israeli and Palestinian professional teams have been working together to prevent the spread of the virus.

The Israeli authorities have also delivered another 200 coronavirus testing kits to the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, despite the thousands of rockets and incendiary and bomb-carrying balloons that the ruling government, Hamas, has launched from there towards Israel.

In addition, Israeli authorities have coordinated the transfer of 20 tons of disinfectant material from Israeli factories to the Palestinian health sector.

It is worth noting that Egypt, which has a shared border with the Gaza Strip, did not send any test kits or disinfectant materials to the Palestinians living there.

Palestinians in Lebanon, meanwhile, are worried that the Lebanese authorities may use the coronavirus as an excuse to intensify restrictions even further on their refugee camps.

Samir Geagea, a Lebanese politician and chairman of the Lebanese Forces, an anti-Palestinian Christian political party, has come under sharp criticism for calling for the immediate closure of the 12 Palestinian refugee camps in his country.

As of January 2019, there were 475,075 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, according to the United Nations Re-

lief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

“Palestinians in Lebanon do not enjoy several important rights,” UNRWA pointed out.

“They cannot work in as many as 39 professions and cannot own property [real estate]. Because they are not formally citizens of another state, Palestinian refugees are unable to claim the same rights as other foreigners living and working in Lebanon.”

Palestinian refugees are barred from numerous professions in Lebanon, including medicine, law and engineering.

“After more than seventy years, Lebanon remains the country where Palestinian refugees suffer the most, where they are deprived of many of their economic and human rights, including working in certain professions, procedural complications in obtaining work permits, and denial of the right to own property,” said Dr. Mohsen Saleh, Director-General of the Zaitouna Centre for Studies in Beirut.

Palestinians are now worried that, in addition to the discriminatory and apartheid measures, Lebanese authorities may confine them to their refugee camps on the pretext of fighting coronavirus.

Tayseer Khaled, a senior member of the PLO’s Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), denounced Geagea’s proposal as “racist and unacceptable.” The idea of imposing a lockdown on the refugee camps, he said, “is in violation of human rights and human values.”

Another PLO faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), said in response to Geagea’s proposal that “racist minds, and not refugee camps, need to be placed in isolation.”

As Palestinians were expressing concern over Lebanon’s discriminatory and apartheid laws, Assad Abu Khalil, a Lebanese-American professor at California State University, Stanislaus, came out with another blood libel against Israel – the only country that is helping the Palestinians in the war on the coronavirus. On March 8, the professor tweeted: “Israel will – I am sure – have different medical procedures for Jews and non-Jews. Non-Jews will be put in mass prisons.”

The Lebanese professor, who claims to be “pro-Palestinian,” does not seem concerned about the severe restrictions imposed on Palestinians by his own country – Lebanon. Nor does he seem bothered that a Lebanese (and not Israeli) official is the one who is actually calling for placing Palestinians in “mass prisons.”

It would be imprudent for the Palestinians to harbour any illusions that Lebanon, Egypt or most of the Arab countries would come to their aid, particularly in light of the outbreak of the coronavirus.

Lebanon has been discriminating against the Palestinians for decades.

Egypt, for its part, long ago abandoned the Palestinians by essentially sealing its border with the Gaza Strip. The



Lebanese, Egyptians and most Arabs perceive the Palestinians as Israel's problem.

When the current virus crisis has passed, it is to be hoped that the Palestinians will remember that one country alone came to their rescue: Israel.

AIR

Khaled Abu Toameh, an award-winning Palestinian Affairs journalist based in Jerusalem, is a Shillman Journalism Fellow at the Gatestone Institute, where this article was originally published. © Khaled Abu Toameh, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

STRESS TEST

As the entire world grapples with the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, the unfolding crisis is laying bare the political and social pathologies of each host country.

Given their proximity to the initial epicentre China, South East Asian nations reside in the first line of vulnerability. In Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea at the forefront, the response has been swift and decisive. For their neighbours in the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, the apparent lack of preparedness portends an unfolding disaster.

Thailand saw cases surge from 117 on March 17 to 322 three days later – although those figures are almost certainly low because of a lack of testing. Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul blamed “dirty” Caucasian tourists, stating on March 12: “Ninety percent of Thais are wearing masks. However, none of the Caucasians are wearing masks. This is the reason our country is being infected... they have all fled the cold and the virus to come into warm Thailand. Many of them are dirty and do not shower.” The tweet was deleted hours after it was widely condemned.

Cases jumped in the Philippines by more than 40 percent in one day in mid-March, prompting the Duterte Administration to institute a lock down on Manila with a curfew and entry restrictions, which has since been extended to much of the country's northern industrial heartland including areas of food production. Most vulnerable are those living in slum areas, including the vast numbers of casual labourers and street vendors, while a lack of testing kits and contradictory statements by officials – from the President down – are contributing to the growing alarm.

Indonesia may well be the worst-prepared country in the region, as *Asia Sentinel* reported on March 12, with Vice-President Ma'ruf Amin and Minister of Health Terawan Agus Putranto, for example, initially saying prayers had kept the virus at bay until it became obvious they hadn't. With confirmed infections at 514 by March 22, the

Johns Hopkins Centre for Health Security has already put Indonesia's COVID-19 mortality rate at more than 8%, the highest in the world, ahead of even Italy, Iran, China, Japan and Spain, while testing has lagged badly.

The message about social distancing has been slow to register. It took several days of public outcry, including the pleas of former vice-president Jusuf Kalla, chairman of the Indonesian Red Cross, before the global Islamic proselytising movement Tablighi Jama'at finally cancelled a gathering of 8,000 Muslim devotees from across Indonesia and countries including Malaysia, Pakistan and India just hours before opening near the South Sulawesi capital of Makassar. Several thousand pilgrims who had already arrived are now under quarantine, with security forces guarding the location to prevent the pilgrims from leaving.

Evidently the lesson was not learned from a similar event in Malaysia.

The annual Tablighi Akbar gathering of Islamic missionaries took place over a long weekend at the end of February, where 16,000 pilgrims – including 1,500 foreigners – gathered at the Jamek Mosque at Seri Petaling, one of the oldest mosques in Kuala Lumpur. For four days, they lived, ate, slept and prayed side by side. At dawn they would pray on rows of prayer mats inside the dome. At night many slept in tents outside.

Within a week, it became clear that the event had spawned a public health disaster. It is now linked to infections in Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand and Brunei, the latter of which alone has confirmed at least 50 cases associated with the pilgrimage event. Nationals from China and South Korea, countries with severe COVID-19 outbreaks, were reportedly among the assembled worshippers.

Cases have surged across Malaysia as an estimated 14,500 event participants have since returned to their home states. The Muslim-majority nation is now the worst hit in South East Asia with 790 cases and two fatalities, both announced just hours before new restrictions on movement took effect at midnight on March 18. Up to 450 cases have been directly linked to the Tablighi Akbar event.

“I was very surprised actually that it went ahead,” one attendee from Thailand told *Reuters*. Indeed, it is hard to believe no-one looked at what happened just weeks earlier when a similar mass gathering had led many members of South Korea's Shincheonji Church of Jesus to become exposed to COVID-19.

The timing of such an event was far from ideal, as Malaysia was distracted by political turmoil, with then-interim Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad the sole official leading the government. His February 24 resignation led to the dissolution of Cabinet, which resulted in the country going without a health minister for two weeks as COVID-19 cases spread globally.

For new Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's government, the widening outbreak is proving to be a baptism

by fire. The new Malay-centric governing coalition has announced measures previously considered unthinkable – a shutdown of all non-essential businesses, schools and universities, and places of worship.

AIR



Douglas Davis

SILVER LINING

For those who have failed to find a silver lining to the dark clouds cast by the coronavirus pandemic, look a little harder. Eventually, your eye may fall on the latest edition of an obscure newsletter entitled *al-Naba*.

Published by the hyperactive ISIS organisation, the newsletter issued its very own travel advisory when it counselled its readers and supporters to stay away from Europe – “the land of the epidemic” – to avoid becoming infected.

For those who find themselves in Europe anyway, *al-Naba* offers a set of “Shia Directives” [*Ed note: Shia means “follower” in this case*] that will ease the discomfort of their sojourn: it instructs followers to cover their mouths when yawning and sneezing, and to wash their hands regularly.

The newsletter does not credit the World Health Organisation or other medical specialists with such guidance, but rather points to recorded quotations by the Prophet Muhammad, known to Muslims as *hadiths*.

It notes that one “plague” is described as a “torment sent by God on whoever He wills”, while another *hadith* notes that “illnesses do not strike by themselves, but by the command and decree of God.”

The advice is featured in a full page containing “Shia Directives for Dealing with Epidemics”, all taken from Islamic texts. The advice highlights, “the obligation of taking up the causes of protection from illnesses and avoiding them.”

Al-Naba warns that “the healthy should not enter the land of the epidemic and the afflicted should not exit from it.”

Where, then, is the silver lining? One unintended consequence of the coronavirus chaos is that plans for a summer of ISIS terror assaults in Europe have, apparently, been put on hold. For the time being, at least.

According to documents discovered on a hard drive in an ISIS redoubt in the Syrian town of Baghuz, the organisation was planning a series of terrorist extravaganzas in Europe that would have rivalled the attack on the Bataclan concert hall in Paris five years ago. A total of 130 spectators were killed in that attack.

Fresh outrages were reported to be aimed at a high-speed train in Germany and a major oil pipeline in Switzerland. The orders for the attack were contained in a letter signed by five ISIS commanders to since deceased ISIS spiritual leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other leading figures

in the ISIS command structure.

The mastermind of the foreign operations, they write, will be an ISIS member, Abu Khabab al-Muhajir, in charge of three cells: one in Russia and two in Germany. Another group would be based in north-eastern Syria under a separate command.

The first aim of the cells would be to steal money: “Killing infidel venture capitalists, hacking banks through bank accounts, bank robberies or robberies of places that are pre-studied,” the letter says.

The cells would also commit attacks, including vehicle rammings. Most importantly, they would plan “special operations” with a “determined goal and outcome that are picked carefully.” The document cites the 2015 Bataclan massacre and the Manhattan truck-ramming attacks as inspiration.

The operations were to be committed not only by ISIS members already in Europe, but also by transnational networks stretching from Germany to Russia and Syria, which would facilitate the flow of fighters and money across borders.

The document spoke of the cost of \$10,000 for an off-the-shelf operation. This would purchase a gun, a motor-bike, and a haul of electronic goods including laptops and flash drives.

In addition, an ISIS commander who identified himself as Abu Taher al-Tajiki, wrote: “We will tell you here in our letter the targets that we will hit, Allah willing, and they are targets that will destroy the economic world in Europe and spread horror in the hearts of the enemies of Allah.”

First up was intended to be the high-speed German express. “It will be targeted, with Allah’s help and strength, with an explosive device made by the brothers in Europe and it is from available and simple materials,” wrote Abu-Taher.

The second operation would target an oil pipeline in a petroleum refinery near the Swiss city of Basel, on the border with France – chosen for the “economic disaster” the militants believe it would inflict on the two countries. A satellite photo of the refinery taken from an online map was attached.

After each attack is executed, “we will provide you with a video of the pledge of allegiance of the brother who carried out this operation, Allah willing,” the letter continues, adding that the authors were, “your loyal soldiers and your sword in Europe.”

The first three months of the year have witnessed an array of plagues: bushfires in Australia, floods in Europe, pestilence across Africa and the Middle East, and now the coronavirus contagion that has engulfed the world. As the current crisis passes, we should be harnessing the energies used to combat these natural disasters to declare all-out war on the ongoing unnatural disaster which we confront: the scourge of ISIS-inspired terrorism.

AIR

9

BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR

The last ten days of February saw a dramatic escalation in rocket fire from Gaza. On Feb. 23-24, more than 110 rockets were fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) forces into Israel, prompting Israeli retaliatory strikes against PIJ positions in both Gaza and Syria. Most of the rockets were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system, although there was some property damage in Israel. The catalyst for the flare-up was allegedly an Israeli bulldozer attempting to recover the body of a PIJ militant shot and killed while trying to place an IED near the fence on Feb. 23.

On March 1 and 6, there were additional unsuccessful attempts to fire a rocket into Israel. In Israel's north, the IDF reported a foiled Hezbollah-Syrian sniper attack on March 2.

Meanwhile, according to the IDF, the coronavirus has forced Iran to scale back the activities of its forces and proxies along Israel's borders.

The virus has also had a dampening effect on terrorism and unrest in the Palestinian territories, with only one shooting attack in the West Bank on March 12, and an attempted stabbing in Jerusalem on March 10.

IAEA: IRAN HAS NEARLY ENOUGH ENRICHED URANIUM FOR A BOMB

On March 3, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued two reports about Iran's nuclear program. The public report recorded Teheran's escalating breaches of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), and noted that Iran has now amassed more than one tonne of low-enriched uranium – almost the amount required to build a nuclear warhead if further enriched to weapons grade.

The second report, confidentially

distributed among IAEA member states, harshly criticised Teheran for denying inspectors access to three sites in Iran where forbidden atomic bomb-related work was allegedly conducted.

The IAEA's new Director-General, Rafael Grossi, explained on March 4 that he considered the matter "serious enough" to call for the unusual step of issuing two reports simultaneously. He urged Iran to cooperate with the agency's work, saying otherwise "we will be walking towards a crisis."

A GRAVE SITUATION FOR IRAN

On Feb. 19, Iran announced its first cases of COVID-19 at the holy Shia city of Qom, 140 km south of Teheran. Two days later, satellite images revealed a mass grave pit being dug outside Qom. By the end of February, two large trenches, totaling over 90 metres in length, were visible at the site.

Despite the clear evidence of the deteriorating situation, the Iranian Government apparently underreported the number of local coronavirus cases and allegedly discouraged individuals and institutions from revealing the extent of the disease's spread in Iran. However, on March 16, *Radio Farda*, a US government-funded radio station, claimed that by collating statements from local officials and anonymous medical data, they were able to identify twice the number of coronavirus infection cases as Iranian Government figures admitted.

Dr. Rick Brennan, a World Health Organisation official who visited Iran in March, warned that the actual

number of cases could be up to five times higher than reported.

IRAN: AN EPICENTRE FOR COVID-19'S SPREAD

Iran is among the countries with the highest rates of infections of COVID-19, and, as of March 23 had the fourth-most deaths, according to World Health Organisation data. It also experienced one of the earliest major escalations of cases outside China, leading it to become a major source of the virus's spread to other countries around the world.

In the early days of March, one of the first cases of COVID-19 in New Zealand came from a family who had recently travelled to Iran. In Canada,



Iranian travelers appear to have spread COVID-19 to several countries

at least three of the first 12 cases were traced back to Iran, as were all initial cases reported in Iraq.

In the United States, the first confirmed COVID-19 case in New York City was a health-care worker who had returned from Iran, and Los Angeles also identified a coronavirus patient from Iran who passed through the local airport.

US CONSOLIDATES IN IRAQ AS IRAN-BACKED MILITIAS STRIKE

Despite COVID-19, Iran-backed

militias continued to attack the US and its allies in Iraq. On March 11, two US and one British soldier were killed and 14 others wounded, when more than 15 rockets hit Camp Taji, an Iraqi army base hosting coalition troops.

The US retaliated the next day, striking five weapon depots belonging to Katai'b Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian militia, amidst reports US President Donald Trump wanted a limited response.

There was also an attack on March 12 on the Imam Ali Iranian military base in Albukamal, Syria, near the Iraq border, which killed 26 Iranian-allied fighters and destroyed a warehouse. The US denied responsibility for this attack.

On March 14, Camp Taji was again hit by a large salvo of more than 25 rockets, injuring five. These were claimed by a "new" Iranian front group, the League of Revolutionaries (*Usbat al-Thairen*). On March 17, another Iraqi base hosting coalition troops was hit by two rockets.

Meanwhile, the US announced its training of Iraqi forces had been essentially halted due to fears of COVID-19 and it would be pulling some troops out of the country and consolidating its remaining forces by withdrawing them from smaller bases and outposts.

WEST BANK SETTLEMENT CONSTRUCTION FALLS

Media reports based on data published by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) showed that the construction of housing in West Bank settlements in 2019 was down by almost a third (32%), and the number of completed homes down by 39%, compared to the previous year. According to the CBS, there were 1,528 settlement housing starts in 2019 and 1,431 dwellings completed, the lowest rate of construction since 2012.

This fall in building occurred despite an increase in construction plan announcements and the publication of tenders for future construction in settlements.

AUSTRALIAN ICC SUBMISSION ON JURISDICTION OVER "PALESTINE"

On March 16, the Australian Government provided a formal submission to the Pre-Trial Chamber (PTC) of the International Criminal Court (ICC), outlining legal "Observations" that suggest the ICC does not have territorial jurisdiction to investigate "The situation in Palestine".

The submission said Australia does not recognise a "State of Palestine", and argued that ICC efforts to assert jurisdiction over this "state" are both legally incorrect and risk jeopardis-

ing hopes of negotiating a two-state Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The matter is before the ICC's PTC following an announcement in December by the Court's Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda that she wanted to launch a formal investigation into the "Situation in Palestine" because there was a "reasonable basis to believe that war crimes were committed" by the Israel Defence Forces, Hamas and other "Palestinian armed groups."

Israel, which is not a party to the ICC, has strongly criticised the decision, arguing the Court does not have jurisdiction to consider the matter, as "Palestine" is not a sovereign state and does not have a defined territory that the ICC can claim jurisdiction over.

Germany, Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Brazil and Uganda also made submissions offering similar arguments to Australia's.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

OPEN DOOR "PRISON"

Critics of Israel often mindlessly parrot the slogan that the Palestinian-ruled Gaza Strip is an "open-air prison". Yet residents of Gaza have, in recent weeks, been urged by their de facto government to avoid overseas travel.

Let's repeat that. It's an "open-air prison" in which you are told to avoid overseas travel.

Fearing a coronavirus outbreak, the Hamas-run Gazan Health Ministry issued a statement on March 7 saying, "We call on citizens to not depart the Gaza Strip – unless totally necessary – in order to preserve their well-being."

The reality is that thousands of permits are issued monthly by Israel to Gazans, mostly for medical reasons, but also for trips abroad, conferences, business, weddings and for work with international aid organisations.

Travel restrictions exist for security reasons – principally, to prevent the movements of terrorists and the transfer

of weapons and the means for making them.

Reports say that, by March 23, almost 1300 people returning to Gaza from overseas had been placed in quarantine. Two men, aged 79 and 63, returning from Pakistan were put into this quarantine on March 17 and became the first Gaza residents to test positive for COVID-19 on March 22.

Hamas has now closed the border with Egypt to travellers going in both directions and the border with Israel has also been closed.

This means that Gaza is now in a similar situation to many territories around the world where borders are closed because of the coronavirus threat – giving lie to the claim it was a "prison" before.

Meanwhile, Israel has sent coronavirus testing kits and medical equipment to Gaza. An official from the Gaza Health Ministry even acknowledged the assistance, saying, "Without help from Israel, Gaza would be in a very difficult situation in the case of an outbreak. We have no help from outside, certainly not from Ramallah or Egypt."

COVER STORY

A DIFFERENT SORT OF WAR

THE IDF AND THE BATTLE AGAINST CORONAVIRUS

by Alex Fishman

The Israeli military is preparing for the worst. Already by the last week of February, the “Summer Cage” program had been pulled out of the filing cabinets by the IDF’s Operations Department. This is a military plan to deal with a “severe national event” – such as a natural disaster like an earthquake, which causes cities to collapse, severe damage to energy infrastructure and of course, tens of thousands of casualties and fatalities.

The coronavirus crisis is a whole other story – something we haven’t seen before. It is not targeted at a particular area and threatens to harm all populations across the country. Therefore, teams have been working around the clock in the planning department of the operations division to adapt “Summer Cage” to an epidemic situation.

The defence forces, and the IDF in particular, have a key role to play in such national crises in Israel. At the present time, the military is mainly focused on assisting the civilian economy, but if the government declares a national emergency, it will become a major factor in addressing and managing the crisis. In the end, the security services are the largest and most organised body in the State of Israel, and there are tasks that only they can do.

Operating a modified “Summer Cage”, with all its implications, would require a government decision to implement emergency regulations that transfer military powers to areas designated as closed military territory.

Incidentally, the legal situation today states that the person in charge of a “civilian emergency”, if declared, is the Minister for Public Security, with the army subject to him. This promises conflict between Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan and Defence Minister Naftali Bennett.



Israeli security forces in Jerusalem as Israel’s coronavirus lockdown takes hold

Yet Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, for his part, appears in no hurry to convene the government to implement the emergency regulations – except for an amendment that allows Israel’s General Security Service (GSS) and the police to monitor civilians.

For the time being, it is doubtful that anyone in the IDF General Staff believes that we will indeed reach full implementation of “Summer Cage”, that is, a situation in which the defence establishment takes responsibility for managing the crisis.

But the first phase of the program has already been activated.

The military’s ability to exert efforts to benefit the economy and civilian infrastructure is contingent on quiet on the borders, as “Summer Cage” requires a concerted effort by all Home Front Command units, including the operation of an IDF logistics envelope.

That includes: airlifting patients, mobilisation of the

transport system (including buses), the establishment of evacuation and medical treatment centres and field hospitals, isolating infected areas, assisting local authorities with management, ensuring essential services to the home front, information and more.

Therefore, since late February, Israel has been sending a clear message to the players and countries in the region: We will not tolerate any provocation at the current time. Don't test this. Any provocation will be answered with a disproportionate response.

At the same time, the Israeli Air Force continues to conduct regular flights over the region's skies to make sure the message is understood. Hostile countries see the planes on their radar and should understand that Israel seriously intends to carry out the threat. The result, for now, is that the message appears to have been fully absorbed.

The Israeli threat may have worked, but the coronavirus crisis in neighbouring countries – notably Iran and Lebanon – is likely to have an effect too. Activities that are defined by Israel as “red lines” that require a counterterrorist response are hardly being seen. Relieving tension at the borders also includes lowering the level of friction in the West Bank. Arrest operations, for example, in the West Bank, are currently carried out mainly in urgent “ticking bomb” situations only.

CORONAVIRUS AND THE REGIONAL SITUATION

The first factor that initially brought the global coronavirus crisis to the consciousness of the IDF General Staff as a problem came out of the Intelligence Division.

Intelligence material coming from Lebanon and Iran showed a worsening crisis in these countries.

In Lebanon, this was demonstrated by the huge concern amongst Hezbollah officials, most notably the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, in the face of the illness of members of the organisation returning from Iran.

In Iran, the epidemic has affected both daily life and the conduct of the Revolutionary Guard.

Thus, in the discussions held by the IDF Operations Division in mid-February, three factors that would influence the assessment of Israel's security situation were flagged:

1. The Israeli elections in early March;
2. The harsh winter weather, potentially limiting the use of air power; and
3. The coronavirus crisis.

At the end of February, the IDF defence attaché was recalled from China, and the true scale of the global epidemic began to seep into the military's plans. The IDF Medical Corps went on alert. IDF medical practitioners – who began holding video conferences regularly with

military medical allies to exchange information – began to understand the implications.

At the end of February, IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi issued a summary of the General Staff status, setting priorities for the military's preparation for the coronavirus crisis:

1. Maintaining operational competence and readiness and especially the IDF's functional continuity in the face of the danger of mass contagion within the military.
2. Reducing the rate of the virus's spread in the IDF.
3. Providing assistance to the civilian population.

The Chief of Staff has tasked his deputy, Major General Eyal Zamir, with coordinating situation assessments within the army in the face of the coronavirus crisis, while the Chief of Operations, Major General Aaron Haliva, was placed in charge of planning and implementing the decisions arising from the new situation.

The Deputy Chief of Staff conducts daily status assessments with several partners; the Chief of Operations; the Planning Division chief, who oversees relations with neighbouring countries and with the world; the Head of the Technology and Logistics Division, who is in charge of the Medical Corps and Logistics Centres; and the Commander of the Home Front, who is tasked with assisting the civilian sector.

The first step taken to curb the spread of the epidemic within the IDF was to cut off military personnel from all parties outside Israel. In late February, two major joint exercises were cancelled: “Juniper Cobra,” an exercise that takes place once every two years with the US Central Command, and an extraordinary exercise in which a US paratroop brigade was to be deployed with the parachute units in the IDF.

Some of the American soldiers were supposed to come through Italy, but Israel required those coming from Italy to enter isolation.

An awkward situation occurred when, due to coronavirus restrictions, a meeting of Chief of Staff Kochavi and senior US officers, including four-star generals, who had come to Israel as part of the preparations for the exercises, could not go ahead.

At that time, there were no restrictions on behaviour in place for curbing the spread of coronavirus in the US. But the Chief of Staff realised by then that in order to maintain operational continuity, the senior officers must guard against risk of contagion.

If trips by military personnel abroad for exhibitions and conferences were initially cancelled, it was only in mid-March that the penny dropped about the severity of the situation, when a sweeping directive was issued prohibiting the departure of Israeli military personnel abroad for any reason, including for operational cooperation with other

“The security services are the largest and most organised body in the State of Israel, and there are tasks that only they can do.”

militaries.

The Chief of Staff himself had to cancel a planned work trip to the United States.

In addition, the routine of the General Staff has been changed in recent weeks. Meetings of generals and other senior officers have been reduced to small gatherings.

In the recent General Staff discussion, for example, some of the generals sat in eight different areas of the “Kirya” military headquarters and participated in the meeting via video conference.

The generals in charge of the Southern and Northern Command remained in their offices in Beer Sheva and Safed respectively.

SEDER NIGHT OPERATION

In order to maintain operational functionality in the army, the General Staff decided to radically alter working practices. Units began to function in shifts, with each shift never meeting or coming into contact with the shift that followed.

So if one of the soldiers on guard at a site comes down with coronavirus and the other soldiers on the same shift are put into isolation, another team can immediately go into operation.

This is true in the headquarters and it is also true for various operational units, including squadrons. Shifts do not meet other shifts.

In the Air Force, for example, reserve air crews, who usually attend one-day training, will be housed for a full two weeks inside the base and not leave except for their flights. This substantially reduces the number of active pilots in the squadron. This also means that if a pilot gets sick and his unit needs to be quarantined, there are enough pilots to replace them without interrupting operations.

In the Navy, some of the ships have been sent for extended stays at sea so that they have no contact with

anyone on land.

To ensure functional continuity in critical areas, the army has built another mechanism known as “capsules.” These are small groups of unique professionals in very critical areas of intelligence, the computer service directorate, the special forces, and the Navy and the Air Force.

These people have been moved to isolated places, completely cut off from the world.

Some of these personnel are capable of operating the systems they are in charge of in isolation, while others

will be alerted when necessary to replace their counterparts who operate systems on a daily basis if they become infected.

For example, a submarine crew will be kept completely isolated from the world and will be alerted if there is a necessity to replace a crew that has become infected with the coronavirus.

The IDF also recently took another major step to reduce contact between the soldiers and the civilian population. All field unit

soldiers, training programs and training units are required to remain at their bases for an indefinite period. Less vital soldiers have been sent home by the thousands.

Training programs have also been adjusted, while major exercises planned for the next six months have been postponed. The army is only fully training at the low tactical levels of brigade and below. All other training, at the battalion level or above, is done by a skeleton staff or as part of the headquarters training at the designated centre.

The army continues to recruit new soldiers, but all pre-military endurance training programs – to prepare for pilot courses, special forces entry, etc. – have been shut down. Soldiers involved in classroom studies will learn in classes of no more than 30 people.

Meanwhile, up to 100 soldiers are allowed to perform operations together in the open air. Junior commanders – platoon commanders and sergeants – lead the training.

In fact, the Chief of Staff declared 2020 as the year of improving the qualifications of junior tactical level commanders, so he can now fulfil that goal courtesy of the coronavirus.

These are just a few examples of the thousands of adjustments the Army has made to operate in the coronavirus era.

Holding such large numbers of soldiers in closed bases over time is a complex logistical challenge. It is difficult to feed tens of thousands of soldiers under the conditions of remoteness and isolation required by the Israeli Ministry of Health.

The annual Passover holiday seder dinner, with its



The IDF is testing and isolating soldiers – preparing for the likelihood that whole units will be taken out of action by the coronavirus

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logistical hardships, is already waiting in the wings, with Passover beginning on April 8. This requires the IDF logistical department to buy three times as much food as it originally planned.

The need to find places to make arrangements for Passover seders that accord with the Ministry of Health's guidelines on large gatherings is also a logistical nightmare.

Not to mention the need to find accommodation solutions for soldiers who have so far had to stay at open-air bases, to provide suitable equipment, to adapt sanitation systems, to disinfect military buses after each use, to disinfect elevators and more.

MOBILISING FOR DISINFECTING

As of mid-March, nine coronavirus patients had been identified in the army. About 4,700 uniform wearers were in isolation. However, no unit in the army was disabled.

There is a single case of a military research centre where 70% of its employees have had to go into isolation, but this has had no operational impact.

However, at the top of the IDF there are no illusions: it is possible that whole battalions or more may be removed from an operational situation.

The Medical Corps received an immediate budget boost of NIS 20 million (A\$9 million) to purchase protective equipment, respiratory systems and medicines to be used by the military, but also to assist the civilian sector if needed.

HOTEL TO HOSPITALS

At present, the IDF's assistance to the civilian economy is a function of requests that reach the Ministry of Defence from the National Security Council (National Security Council head Meir Ben-Shabbat, acting on behalf of the Prime Minister, coordinates all the bodies and offices involved in management of the current crisis). But the Defence Minister is pushing the IDF to assist the civilian population even before it is asked.

From this, for example, was born the idea of turning civilian hotels into inpatient facilities for those infected with coronavirus. This stems from Bennett's view that hospitals have no place to isolate the ill patients and they should be isolated from the other patients in the hospitals so as not to expand the circle of carriers.

The Ministry of Defence and the Home Front Command assumed responsibility for operating these facilities.

The Defence Minister also wants to increase the number of coronavirus test kits to enable testing of several thousand subjects a day. To this end, the Home Front Command and the Medical Corps began to purchase a large amount of test kits and additional equipment.

In addition, the Mossad intelligence agency had procured 100,000 test kits through dealing with an unnamed country with which Israel does not have official relations.



The IDF Medical Corps is moving to play a key role in disinfection efforts

Prior to the outbreak of the crisis, the Ministry of Health held sufficient emergency equipment for only a month. It was only in February that a budget was approved to purchase equipment for three months, but it is estimated that this will not be enough, so the Ministry of Defence entered the picture.

At the same time, the IDF has promoted the establishment of a laboratory using the capabilities of the IDF Medical Corps to supplement the civilian laboratories that can detect coronavirus carriers.

As part of its collaboration with the NSC and the Ministry of Health, the Home Front Command has also deepened its presence in hospitals and is assisting them in establishing emergency systems. For this purpose, blood donation units have been recruited, and the Home Front Command's medical units are getting training in coronavirus patient care.

Also, in discussions with the Ministry of Defence, the Home Front Command has formulated a plan to disinfect extensive areas, using means originally intended for clean up after chemical weapons attacks.

In addition, a focal point has been established in the Home Front Command to assist the information provision sections of the Ministry of Health and Magen David Adom (MDA), Israel's national emergency medical service.

The army has also already mobilised a skeleton staff for its liaison units to assist local authorities. Their mission is to help the local authorities maintain a continuous functioning around the clock of key services such as garbage collection, assistance for the elderly and populations with special needs, distribution of food and medicine, volunteer work, etc. These bodies are already working alongside the municipalities to prepare for a situation where the pandemic will paralyse entire sectors of the economy.

The army is preparing for the battle against the coronavirus as if for a conventional war.

AIR

Alex Fishman is military affairs correspondent at the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot. © Yediot Ahronot (www.ynet.co.il), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved. Translation by Ahron Shapiro.

POLITICS IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

by Amotz Asa-El

The storm is almost perfect. Challenged by the coronavirus pandemic like the rest of the human race, and struck by its financial repercussions like the rest of the developed world, the medical crisis caught Israel at the height of an ongoing political drama as well.

On the medical front, the Israeli Government actually responded earlier, and more pessimistically, than most others. As reports emerged in December about the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic in China, the Israeli Health Ministry instructed people returning from China with flu-like symptoms to hospitalise themselves. On Jan. 30 all flights to and from China were suspended.

Three weeks later, it turned out that several South Korean pilgrims who had visited Israel in mid-February had been diagnosed with COVID-19. The Health Ministry therefore reconstructed that group's itinerary and asked anyone who might have come in contact with its members to self-quarantine.

At the same time, entry to the country of tourists from China, South Korea, Japan and Singapore was banned. Anyone returning to Israel from those countries was requested to self-quarantine.

On Feb. 27, anyone entering Israel from Italy was also requested to self-quarantine, and the Government issued a special order allowing the Health Ministry to forcibly quarantine coronavirus patients.

When these measures were prepared, Israel had yet to detect its first coronavirus patient, and, in fact, the first one emerged only on Feb. 27 – a toy-store manager who had visited Italy was diagnosed, as were his wife, two employees, and a customer.

That was a mere nine days after PM Binyamin Netanyahu had said in a radio interview that “Israel is possibly better prepared than any other country,” which was why “we have so far managed to prevent the virus's entry.”

Yet the virus soon landed in Israel, and within three weeks of that statement, there were more than 300 verified COVID-19 carriers.

The Government therefore began to gradually issue drastic preventive measures of the sort that, over the course of March, became common worldwide, as scores

of governments set out to minimise public gatherings and social contact.

By mid-March, Israel's three airlines had already cancelled almost all flights abroad, while its restaurants, cafés, theatres, wedding halls, shopping malls, schools, and universities were ordered shut, and the public was ordered to avoid gathering in groups of 10 or more people.

The following week, the gatherings ban expanded to synagogues and ritual baths, and the Chief Rabbinate issued a religious ruling that backed the Government's decree.

At the same time, with hospitals absorbing a growing number of suspected coronavirus carriers, the Government set up makeshift hospitals in some major urban hotels, which had anyhow emptied of guests as tourism ground to a halt.

On March 19, with 677 Israelis infected, 244 more than the previous day, Netanyahu effectively declared a state of emergency, saying in a dramatic televised address that the Government was turning the pandemic's civic restrictions into emergency orders. This meant that people leaving their homes for purposes other than work or basic needs, like buying food, would be subject to fines.

One optimistic footnote on the margins of the unfolding medical crisis was the establishment by Israel and the Palestinian Authority of a joint operations room in an unspecified location, where representatives from both sides now coordinate their



PM Netanyahu with Israel's Magen David Adom emergency medical service

separate struggles with the pandemic.

This, then, is what happened in Israel on the pandemic's medical front, accompanied by the quiet, but frantic efforts by Israeli scientists to produce a vaccine, just as their colleagues all over the world are racing to do.

Yet, dramatic though it is, the medical crisis is hardly more daunting than the economic mayhem it has spawned.

The bans on the operation of theatres, restaurants, and cafés immediately endangered thousands of businesses, while the plunge in air traffic debilitated the tourism industry. The national airline El Al, for instance, said it would fire 1,000 workers and cut the pay of the remaining 5,000 by 20%.

Even so, all this was only the beginning of the pressure on the economy, as the Government ordered all employers to keep no more than 30% of their workers in the physical workplace, and have the rest either work from home or not work at all.

Employers obeyed. By March 19, statistics showed that

more than 100,000 people had filed requests for unemployment payments over the previous two weeks – 70% of them reporting they had been placed on leave of absence, and 30% saying they had been fired. By the following week more than 500,000 had applied for unemployment benefits, and the jobless rate, previously barely 4%, was unofficially estimated at 16.5%.

The pessimism that suddenly gripped the global financial marketplace possessed the Jewish State as well. The Tel Aviv Stock Exchange's 125 Index plunged 33% over the month between Feb. 18 and March 18.

As the stock prices slid, the Government announced a NIS 5 billion (A\$2.4 billion) stimulus plan, which included aid packages to small businesses, eased criteria for unemployment stipends, and allowed delays in tax payments.

Curiously, the Treasury's measures were announced by Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, thus placing him at centre stage even after he had effectively retired, having refrained from running in the general election on March 2.

The long political crisis that has seen Israel hold three general elections within less than 12 months was not resolved at the March 2 poll, which left neither Netanyahu's Likud nor his rival Benny Gantz's Blue and White with a parliamentary majority.

Likud and its satellites now control a combined 58 of the Knesset's 120 members. The rest includes both the 15 anti-Zionist lawmakers of the predominantly Arab-supported Joint List and a number of Jewish lawmakers in other parties who refuse to be part of any government dependent on the Joint List's support, making Gantz's theoretical majority of 62 politically unworkable.

Gantz did receive President Reuven Rivlin's mandate to attempt to form a government, but always looked unlikely to be able to do so – even before the pandemic crisis reached a point which made the idea of a narrow government not only politically untenable, but also almost indefensible in the public opinion.

The public wants and expects a broad, national unity government to address the coronavirus crisis.

That popular sentiment was only intensified by the perplexing scene on March 16 of the new Knesset's members entering and leaving the plenary chamber in groups of three assembled by alphabetical order, in order to be sworn in. This was so the swearing in ceremony would not violate public health orders forbidding gatherings of 10 people or more.

Netanyahu said he wanted a broad government, but within Blue and White, many distrust him, alleging he was in fact manoeuvring to call yet another election.

Moreover, with Netanyahu appearing frequently on TV and dominating the governmental response to the crisis, some in Blue and White allege that he is using the crisis in order to serve his own political interests.



Benny Gantz was elected as Knesset Speaker, in a move likely paving the way for the formation of a national unity government

This was also the lens through which some in the opposition saw the postponement of Netanyahu's pending trial on corruption charges, from March 17 until May 24, by the presiding judges in the case. Most court cases have been similarly postponed under the public health guidelines, because they involve gatherings of more than 10 people.

At the same time, with Israel's Shin Bet internal security service asked to assist police in tracking infected citizens through their cell phones, some began wondering loudly whether democratic principles were not being dangerously eroded.

Such concerns were assuaged after the High Court of Justice ruled in response to an appeal that the Shin Bet's



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involvement in such surveillance must be strictly limited in time and supervised by the Knesset.

Meanwhile, back in the political corridors, the effort to establish a unity government was proceeding despite the bad blood between Netanyahu and Gantz.

The latter's retweet of Netanyahu's plea to the public to obey the Health Ministry's instructions, and Gantz's statement in that tweet that "when it comes to human life there is no politics, Israel is above all" – helped restore dialogue between the two. As the medical crisis spiralled, negotiations between the representatives of the two appeared to finally become serious.

The prospective government itself is expected to rotate the premiership between Netanyahu and Gantz, with Netanyahu serving first, because his Likud won more votes than Gantz's Blue and White. Special legislation allowing Netanyahu to serve as a minister, despite his indictment, would also need to be passed, as current Israeli law does not allow anyone under indictment to hold a ministerial portfolio (the prime ministership is the only exception).

Negotiations are therefore ongoing about the length of Netanyahu's first stint, and the distribution of portfolios, with Blue and White demanding the Justice Ministry in light of what it sees as Likud's assault on the legal system in the wake of Netanyahu's indictments.

However, Gantz's number two, former finance minister Yair Lapid, remained opposed to serving under Netanyahu, as does the party's number three, former defence minister Moshe Ya'alon.

Gantz reportedly felt that national unity was more important right now than his party's cohesion, and a series of dramatic events from March 16 through 26 led to a split in the Blue and White party and Gantz's reported decision to join a national unity government with Netanyahu. Lapid, Ya'alon and their followers will go into opposition.

Earlier, Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein adjourned the Knesset for one week between March 16 and March 22, saying this was because of coronavirus fears and to facilitate negotiation of a unity government. This occurred as the Blue and White-led bloc had been seeking a vote to remove Edelstein from the speakership and replace him with their own candidate – allowing the anti-Netanyahu bloc to dominate the legislative agenda in the incoming Knesset. The opposition took the issue to Israel's Supreme Court, which ordered Edelstein to convene the Knesset and hold a vote for speaker.

Edelstein criticised the court ruling and resigned rather than comply. But in a dramatic vote on March 26, rather than Blue and White's expected candidate Meir Cohen, Gantz was temporarily elected Speaker, with the support of the pro-Netanyahu bloc in the Knesset. This paved the way for him to join a unity government with Netanyahu serving as PM first, and Gantz later, splitting

Blue and White.

Incidentally, the medical, economic and political crises have afflicted the Jewish state just as the Jewish people prepares to celebrate Passover. As winter makes way for spring in Israel and they sit in unusually small forums for the festive Seder meal, Israelis of all persuasions will be hoping that an epic journey from a land of pestilence to salvation is once again afoot – both medically and politically.

AIR

A CORONAVIRUS CEASEFIRE?

by Anna Ahronheim

Israel and the Gaza Strip are once again at war. But this time the enemy isn't in the form of rockets or airstrikes but rather an invisible enemy. One that has crept into every country across the world, blind to religion and nationality, killing thousands.

Israel's war against the novel coronavirus – which has claimed the life of one man and has been diagnosed in 1,238 others as of March 23 – began over a month ago. Borders were quickly closed to travellers, and citizens who flew into the country were ordered to self-quarantine for two weeks to prevent the spread of the deadly disease.



Palestinian security forces are also preparing to play a role in the coronavirus crisis

But the numbers kept rising in Israel and in early March the first positive diagnosis was announced in the West Bank city of Bethlehem and the virus quickly spread across the Palestinian territories.

Israel, in coordination with Palestinian Authority forces, imposed a closure on Bethlehem and, more recently, closed all crossings to and from the West Bank save for humanitarian cases.

Yet, there was a sliver of hope with the Hamas-run Gaza Strip where there had been no cases... until March

22, when two men who had just returned from Pakistan via Egypt tested positive.

There were jokes going around in Gaza prior to the first cases that the virus was too afraid to enter the Strip and that the blockaded enclave may be the “safest place in the world.”

Nadia Abushaban, a 25 year-old activist from Gaza City, wrote in early March that “we haven’t died from four wars, chemicals, toxic gases that half of our youth inhaled near the border fence [with Israel], light bombs, or phosphorus. You think we would die of corona with cream? Relax people,” she joked, referring to a chocolate-covered wafer biscuit with a cream filling called Korona that is popular in Gaza.

But weeks later, the jokes have turned to real fear.

The streets of Gaza, one of the most densely populated areas in the world, are eerily quiet. Save for trying to buy food, whole families are staying home.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned that Gaza’s healthcare system would not be able to deal with an outbreak of the deadly disease in the coastal enclave home to nearly 2 million people.

Hamas violently took power in the 40-kilometre Gaza Strip in 2007 and a blockade imposed by Israel has reduced the supplies of fuel, electricity and medical supplies, making it doubtful that the medical infrastructure would be able to contend with such a crisis.

The Strip’s weak healthcare infrastructure, with fewer than 3,000 beds in total, is unable to cope with the responsibility for caring for the sick.

WHO has stated that the organisation supports the establishment of a field hospital at the Rafah crossing with 38 beds, including 6 intensive care unit beds.

Another 50 rooms will be established as a quarantine area for travellers. The Gaza European Hospital will also be designated to absorb and treat additional cases should the field hospital reach full capacity.

But that’s likely not even close to enough should Gaza experience a full-blown outbreak of coronavirus.

And Israel will not be able to avoid assuming responsibility for it.

Eitan Dangot, the former commander of Israel’s Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), said Hamas must put its terrorism aside and focus on protecting and caring for the population.

“Israel cannot be blamed, Israel is suffering already from this virus,” he said.

“It’s time that Hamas takes a look inwards and supports

their own population” he said, adding that if “Hamas takes a few steps towards Israel, such as returning the bodies, such steps can reduce the tensions and can build trust” between the two foes.

Once that step is taken by Hamas, another crossing could be opened with the Gaza Strip to allow for more humanitarian goods into the beleaguered coastal enclave.

According to Dangot, while there is an exchange of information and professional collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian health care workers from the West Bank, “we aren’t doing that in Gaza.”

And while only two people there have so far been confirmed to have the virus, the speed with which the virus spreads “would be a

significant problem in Gaza,” Dangot said, warning that an outbreak of the virus “can also cause an internal explosion which can affect the security situation with Israel.”

A senior official in the Palestinian Ministry of Health told *Israel Hayom* on Sunday that there is major concern that if the virus spreads in Gaza and the already fragile healthcare system collapses, “thousands of Palestinians will try to reach the Israeli border.”

That scenario would be a nightmare for Israeli security forces who are ordered to prevent any Palestinian from infiltrating into Israeli territory. There is no way to spin footage of IDF troops firing towards Palestinians seeking medical care to help them in the worldwide fight against the novel coronavirus.

And if they get in, will they transmit the virus to troops who would be unable to screen every person for the virus? What then? Place all those troops in quarantine? How will the military continue to protect Israel’s borders if hundreds of troops are in self-isolation or sick with the virus?

Israel and Hamas have been working towards a long-term ceasefire arrangement in recent months and since the outbreak of the virus there has been a significant drop in attacks from the Strip, be it incendiary balloons or armed infiltration attempts.

If there is any positive to be found in this worldwide pandemic, it is that two warring parties are both facing the same deadly invisible enemy. The fight against the coronavirus has strengthened the coordination between Israel and the PA in the West Bank and can be a reason to work towards a ceasefire arrangement with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

AIR

Anna Ahronheim is the military affairs reporter for the Jerusalem Post. © Jerusalem Post (www.jpost.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



Disinfection efforts in Gaza City

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The Other Contagion

Conspiracy theories multiply like viruses

by Oved Lobel and Judy Maynard

With great crises come great conspiracy theories, and the novel coronavirus pandemic currently rampaging throughout the world is no exception. During times of great uncertainty and anxiety, as the world is now experiencing, conspiracy theories can provide a comforting framework for divining sense and reason from chaos and seemingly random tragedies.

Some may find the thought of a nefarious mastermind causing immense global destruction more comforting than the idea that nobody has the slightest control over what is happening.

The novelty and scale of the current crisis has also allowed false information to rush in and fill the information gap.

None of this is helpful and some is extremely harmful. Moreover, some are exploiting the coronavirus crisis to spread conspiratorial hatred and antisemitism.

FALSE “CURES”

One form of false information involves spruiking disastrous snake oil cures to the gullible and desperate, whether through ignorance or wilful deception and exploitation.

Ayatollah Abbas Tabrizian, for example, acclaimed by supporters as the father of “Islamic medicine of Iran”, has prescribed a miracle cure for the novel coronavirus: the application of violet oil to the anus. Even other Shi’ite clerics, such as Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi (more about him later) have rejected this, noting that there is no such thing as “Islamic medicine” as such. Thankfully, at least, the cure is harmless.

Other “cures” are far less benign. Dozens of people died in Iran after drinking industrial-strength alcohol based on rumours it cured the virus. A Nigerian talent manager, Bizzle Osikoya, tweeted a fake news chyron claiming cocaine cured the virus. This was retweeted and ‘liked’ thousands of times, forcing an incredulous French Government to officially warn people against using cocaine at all, much less to cure coronavirus.

In the US, backers of QAnon, a far-right conspiracy theory cult, have been advocating drinking bleach to cure the virus. One of its online commentators claimed YouTube had been deleting his videos discussing this “cure” because “Big Pharma wants you ignorant.”

QAnon advocates have also been pushing the bizarre theory that Bill and Melinda Gates created the virus to depopulate the world.

Meanwhile the state of Missouri is suing notorious televangelist Jim Bakker for promoting and selling “Silver Solution” as a cure for the virus. Bakker has spent time in prison for defrauding his viewers of millions of dollars in the past.



In a time of great uncertainty, conspiracy theories can be alluring – but are dangerous nonetheless

PREJUDICE AND BLAME SHIFTING

Conspiracy theories can be cynically employed for a number of other reasons: stirring up existing prejudices, blaming rival governments, diverting attention from one’s own failings. All these have been at play during the current crisis.

Hatred of the US and Israel has led some Arab outlets to accuse them of creating the virus in order to profit by selling vaccines.

For instance, Saudi columnist Sa’ud Al-Shehry wrote for *Al-Watan* in early February that “A ‘wonder’ virus was discovered yesterday in China; tomorrow it will be discovered in Egypt, but it will not be discovered either today, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow in the U.S. or Israel...” Unfortunately, the latter prediction has turned out to be very wide of the mark.

Similarly, one of the key kingmakers of Iraq, militia leader and Shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, tweeted on March 11, “I was taken aback when Trump said: ‘We are doing a great job against the coronavirus, and the situation would have been worse had it not been for our intervention.’ Oh, Trump, you and others like you are suspected of being behind the spread of this disease, especially since most of those suffering from it are opponents of America.”

Egyptian journalist Ahmad Rif’at wrote, “American factories are the first to manufacture every kind of virus and bacteria, from the virulent smallpox virus and the bubonic plague virus to all the viruses we saw in the recent years, such as mad cow disease and swine flu.” Introducing COVID-19 to Wuhan “is not only intended to worry China, trouble it and cause it to spend billions of dollars on emergency measures and medicines – which, by the way, will be manufactured by an Israeli company... The U.S. wants to inform the world, and especially China itself, as part of a propaganda war targeting [China’s] prestige and status, that [China] is still a backward country whose citizens eat bat

soup and which exports diseases and epidemics to the rest of the world!”

BLAME THE JEWS!

And, of course, what would a global pandemic be without variations of blood libels being promoted on state television channels. In Turkey, one commentator said, “Jews, Zionists have organised & engineered #Corona virus as biological weapon just like bird flu & Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever (CCHF). They want to design the world, seize countries, neuter the world’s population.”

That the Jews wish to reduce the world’s population for unclear reasons seems to be a popular trope among anti-semites. Notorious white supremacist David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, also wondered on Twitter, “Are Israel and the Global Zionist elite up to their old tricks?”

Meanwhile, Hollywood actress Rosanna Arquette published a tweet suggesting Israel was behind the outbreak, because it had been “working on a corona virus vaccine for a year already... (so they knew).” She was referring to reports an Israeli institute had developed a vaccine for a different coronavirus afflicting chickens that might also work for COVID-19. She deleted the tweet following a backlash.

Similarly, the Algerian news outlet *Al Masdar* published a conspiracy theory with the headline, “A Zionist organisation is behind the coronavirus and the Zionist entity (Israel) claims to have found the vaccine.”

False accusations that Israeli hospitals are treating Jews and non-Jews differently or that Israel’s Ministry of Health is only publishing health information for staying safe from coronavirus in Hebrew have also been rife. These claims have been coming from some groups and individuals who routinely accuse Israel of Apartheid and state-sponsored racism.

BIOWEAPON BLOVIATION

Conspiracy theories postulating that coronavirus was created for biowarfare have come from a number of sources. In Iran, for example, both state-sponsored outlet *Press TV* and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard have been promoting the theory that the virus is a US manufactured bioweapon.

The Russians have been doing likewise. The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) reports that Russian biologist Igor Nikulin, supposedly a former member of

the UN Commission on Biological and Chemical Weapons, was interviewed in February on *Russia Today*’s Arabic-language channel and claimed that coronavirus’s effects in China, Iran, and Italy were no coincidence, having been carefully selected to affect countries that rival the US. This was, he said, a conspiracy by the “global government,” which consists of 200 families that control over US\$400 trillion, own the media outlets and Hollywood, control human minds, and want to decrease the world’s population by 90%.

Nikulin also told a Russian talk show that Britain had created the virus as a weapon, and that they and the Americans already had a vaccine. He suggested that a UK Ministry of Defence facility was responsible for producing both COVID-19 and the Salisbury chemical weapon attack on Russian defector Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in 2018: “the same facility that I suspect was behind smearing the nerve agent on Skripal’s door handle. Maybe they smeared something in Wuhan, Hubei, too, such as an escalator handrail on the subway – something thousands of people touch daily.”

Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who previously revealed to the world that the Holocaust is a myth and that there are no homosexuals in Iran, tweeted, “It is clear to the world that the mutated coronavirus was produced in lab, manufactured by the warfare stock houses of biological war belonging to world powers, & that it constitutes a threat on humanity more destructive than the other weapons that target humanity.”

China, where COVID-19 originated, has been criticised for its slow and secretive response to the outbreak that has led to a global catastrophe. But it has also been the target of conspiracy theorists, who claim the virus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan. In one version, the virus “escaped” due to lax safety protocols. In another it was created as a bioweapon.

Right-wing US radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh suggested that the virus “got out” and was “probably ... a ChiCom (Chinese Communist) laboratory experiment that is in the process of being weaponised.”

Another US right-wing media personality, Josh Bernstein, argued that coronavirus was “a Democratic Party and a media establishment made-up pandemic. I believe that because Russia didn’t work, and Ukraine didn’t work, and impeachment didn’t work, they are so hell-bent on destroying this country [and] this president to gain back power that they probably worked with the Chinese gov-



Off-beam (from top): David Duke, Igor Nikulin, Josh Bernstein, Hadi al-Modarresi

ernment, and they devised this plan. They allowed their medical deep state to release this virus into the American public, to scare the living daylight out of everybody to shut down the economy, to shut down the markets, and to stop the Trump rallies.”

Recently China has claimed to have reined in the epidemic, and blames new cases on “foreign arrivals.” Moreover, in a transparent attempt to deflect blame, China is now pointing the finger at the US for the outbreak, saying the disease might have been introduced by members of the US military who visited Wuhan in October last year. It offers no evidence to back this up. The consensus amongst scientific experts in infectious diseases is that the virus is new and its origin is in nature.

A DIVINE PLAN?

As is to be expected when catastrophe strikes, religious figures have claimed it to be divine retribution, offering a variety of grounds for the Almighty’s pique.

One anonymous preacher on the Palestinian Authority’s official TV station referred to the virus as “one of Almighty Allah’s soldiers... He is unleashing it on those who attack his believers.” He also referred to it as a test of belief for Muslims, and called its victims “martyrs”, as has Iran.

Meanwhile, Shi’ite Iraqi Islamic scholar Hadi Al-Modarresi insisted, “It is obvious that the spread of this virus is an act of Allah,” and said, “Allah sent a disease upon” the Chinese because of their treatment of the Muslim Uighur minority.

On the other hand, an Israeli ultra-Orthodox rabbi, Meir Mazuz, announced that the virus was divine punishment for gay pride parades, whereas the high casualties in Iran, which doesn’t host gay pride parades, was punishment for its hatred of Israel.

SELF-HARM VIA CONSPIRACY THEORY

To witness the twisted world of conspiracy theories and the hateful environments in which they can flourish, we have only to turn to Iran. Asked by the pragmatic conservative Iranian *Hamdeli* daily whether it would be permissible for Iran to purchase a COVID-19 vaccine from Israel if it succeeded in developing one, Ayatollah Shirazi’s published response was that it was forbidden to do so “if we know for certain that the profit made by the companies [manufacturing it] will go to the Zionists and Israel, unless this is the only medicine [available] and there is no other alternative. In the latter case, it is not forbidden [to buy and use the vaccine].” That same day his office issued a denial of the report, calling it “a complete lie. No question on this matter was submitted [to us] and no answer was issued. We repeat our announcement that rumours of this sort are the work of people with ill intentions.”

Meanwhile, although Iran has been devastated by coronavirus, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has

refused US offers of assistance to combat the disease. Referring to conspiracy theories Iran has helped promulgate claiming that the virus is an American creation, he said, “I do not know how real this accusation is but when it exists, who in their right mind would trust you to bring them medication? Possibly your medicine is a way to spread the virus more.” Making the ludicrous claim that the virus “is specifically built for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians which they have obtained through different means”, he added, “You might send people as doctors and therapists, maybe they would want to come here and see the effect of the poison they have produced in person.”

Such is the tragedy of so losing touch with reality you believe the conspiracy theories you yourself have invented.

AIR

CORONAVIRUS CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN AUSTRALIA

by Ran Porat

The global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has spawned conspiracy theories that play on people’s fears and foster hatred by laying blame for this unprecedented threat on a recognisable “enemy”.

Unfortunately, such conspiracy theories, many with an antisemitic flavour, are currently being fanned by a handful of Arabic-language media outlets publishing in Australia.

Pierre Sema’an: The virus is an evil world government plot

Pierre Sema’an is the senior columnist for *El-Telegraph* newspaper published in Sydney. Edited by Antoine Kazi OAM, the newspaper bills itself as being the “Largest Lebanese and Arabic Daily Newspaper in Australia”.

Sema’an has a long history of spreading conspiracy theories and antisemitic tropes in his columns, as I have

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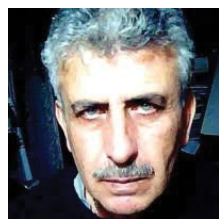
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previously reviewed in the *AIR* (“The Columnist as Conspiracist”, Oct. 2018; “The Bushfire Conspiracy”, March 2020). He has claimed that the US, the West and Israel created and operated Islamic State and that Iran and Israel conspire together to control the Middle East in a plot masterminded by the Rothschild banking family.



Pierre Sema'an

Now Sema'an is trying to persuade readers that the coronavirus epidemic is a US-made biological weapon used in the trade war with China. Furthermore, he alleges that the virus was created by a mysterious and secretive global government, “the Illuminati, a fascist, Nazi-oriented organisation”.

He says this secret government is using COVID-19 to implement its evil Agenda 21 plan to dramatically reduce Earth's human population to only 5% of current numbers.

In reality, Agenda 21 was a 1992 non-binding UN plan to preserve the global environment.

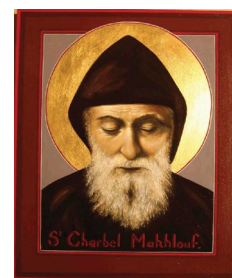
The world government in Sema'an's fantasy is comprised of towering public figures and leaders from different countries, including Australia, united as in the sinister “Club of Rome”, made up of either atheists, or Zionists, and possibly even aliens (he has favourably cited the theories of British conspiracist David Icke, who believes shape-shifting reptilian aliens secretly control the world).

To achieve their goal of reducing the population, ex-

plains Sema'an, policies are initiated such as inciting false wars, promoting sexual promiscuity and narcotics addiction and much more. The coronavirus pandemic, Sema'an is certain, was unleashed by the world government “to achieve this reduction in the world's population in a relatively short period of time.”

Sema'an cites a 2015 quote from Microsoft founder Bill Gates, a supposed member of the “Club of Rome”, about the dangers of viruses to humanity and asks, “Was [Gates] aware that [coronavirus] would inevitably happen due to international conflicts and the intention of reducing the world's population?”

Adding fuel to his bonfire of disinformation, Sema'an also champions traditional Lebanese myths about the alleged healing powers associated with the tomb of Saint Charbel Makhoulf, a 19th century Maronite monk.



St Charbel Makhoulf

There is no need to invest in science to fight the virus, declares Sema'an, because “Providence offered [Lebanon] a free healing remedy from a pinch of earth from the tomb of Saint Charbel... a free vaccine to treat the corona epidemic and all physical and spiritual epidemics.”

Finally, Sema'an dangerously questions the logic of government sanctioned precautionary measures, aimed at reducing contact between people – especially suspending religious gatherings, including prayers in churches and mosques, as well as temporarily avoiding religious customs that require touching other people or objects in public spaces.

In his view, churches are protected from diseases: “I think [these measures] reflect a kind of lack of faith and the primacy of material thought and the spirit of the world over divine power. We know historically that the Church, as long as it was at the centre of crises, faced all dangers, battles and diseases, armed with the power of faith and the words of Christ who said: Do not be afraid, I conquered the world.”

Farah News: Uncle Sam created and profits from the virus

The Sydney-based *Farah News Online* (www.farah.net.au) portal in Arabic and English similarly contributes to spreading virus-related conspiracy theories and fabrications. This website features almost exclusively non-original content previously published in Middle Eastern media. External analytic platforms suggest thousands of people visit the website monthly, while its Facebook page had close to 17,000 followers as of March 2020.

Farah News' editors decided to republish several articles dealing with the coronavirus. Two such articles were by Dr. Mouaffaq Mustafa Alsibai', a Syrian author who previously published a series of antisemitic articles portraying the Jews as evil and the enemies of humanity, which also previ-

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ously featured on *Farah News*.

Addressing the virus crisis, Alsibai' informs readers that it is a punishment from Allah against infidels, the Communist Chinese, the pagan Persians and "Uncle Sam." He blames the US for using its "control" over world media to inflate the threat of the virus in order to profit from it and (like Sema'an) as a means to reduce world population. "Uncle Sam is eager for such an event, he uses his media machine that controls the entire globe, to sow terror, panic, and inflated fear millions of times!!! [...] America aims to reduce the world's population by two thirds [while] making billions."

Alsibai' vehemently rejects the prohibition against attending mosques to reduce exposure to the coronavirus (a restriction also widely imposed in the Muslim-majority Middle East). Instead, he declares that such measures are "an unforgivable crime... to deprive [worshippers] of divine mercy, which is revealed to them during the congregational and Friday prayers, and [the person doing this] will be greatly disgraced in the world, and suffer great punishment in the hereafter [...] Those who prevent the Friday [gatherings at mosques] and congregational prayers are fighting against God, who has made [mosques] his homes."

Another *Farah News* columnist is Lebanon resident and Palestinian-born Moustafa El Liddawi, a former senior member of the terrorist organisation Hamas. Liddawi is an open antisemite, expressing his belief, for example, in the truth of the ancient blood libel that Jews drink non-



Moustafa El Liddawi

Jewish blood as part of annual Passover holiday celebrations.

In his latest article, handpicked by *Farah News* editors, Liddawi alleges that the virus is "an active act and human industry and a human


decision, and I firmly believe that it is a shameful and frank American aggression against China... [The US decided that China] had to be attacked, weakened, occupied and controlled [...] using] this biological battle." In addition, Liddawi states, the US failed to topple the Iranian regime, "so it resorted to declaring a health war on it" using the virus.

The real aim of this supposed biological warfare is to subject all the Middle East "to the American hegemony [...] and] in the service of the Zionist entity."

In a different column, Liddawi claimed that Israel is using the virus threat as a pretext to impose unnecessary abusive and harsh measures on the Palestinians. Of course, in reality, Israel has actually been working together with the Palestinian Authority to help its health system cope with the virus crisis.

Covering Arabic media in Australia over recent years, one can't help but be disappointed at the lack of ongoing monitoring and proper enforcement to control the few extreme voices spreading poisonous views amongst the overwhelming majority of law-abiding, Arabic-speaking Australians.

Now these voices are taking advantage of the current unprecedented public health challenge to attempt to incite hatred of the other and spread fake news. Worse, they are exposing those who follow their advice to serious health risks.

At this moment of crisis, this is a genuine danger that must not continue to go unnoticed and unchallenged. 

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.

SANCTIONS AND CORONAVIRUS IN IRAN

by Jonathan Tobin

The whole world is dealing with the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, but among the countries that have suffered the worst is Iran. And as far as some critics of the Trump Administration are concerned, the blame for the growing toll of the sick and dead in that country belongs to the United States.

Former members of President Barack Obama's foreign-policy team are using the crisis as an excuse to re-litigate President Donald Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the 2015 nuclear deal and to reimpose sanctions on the Islamist regime. According to Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor, the continuing sanctions on Iran are a "moral abomination" that is leading to the deaths of innocent Iranians.

Rhodes is remembered for dubbing the Washington press corps his boss's "media echo chamber" because of the ease with which Obama's team manipulated them into repeating their often-duplicious talking points favouring the nuclear pact. But in this case, he is acting as an echo chamber for the theocratic regime in Teheran, which has also been appealing to the world for sympathy because of the devastating impact of the coronavirus. They, too, are claiming that the economic sanctions that America has reinstated are the reason why so many of their people are dying from the virus.

A spokesperson for Iran's UN mission claimed that Washington's move in mid-March to add to the existing restrictions on Iran by sanctioning five international firms that were assisting Teheran's efforts to sell its oil abroad was "beyond cruel" and demonstrated Trump's lack of "humaneness."

On the surface, these complaints about Trump's policy seem reasonable. At a time when the world ought to be coming together and putting differences aside in order to fight the virus, why would the United States continue its efforts to isolate Iran? The pandemic's impact on Iran has been particularly harsh with it suffering the fifth most reported cases and trailing only China and Italy in the number of reported coronavirus-related deaths, as of March 23.

Seen from that perspective, maintaining US sanctions on Iran at this time – let alone toughening them – does seem harsh or even vindictive.

But the argument in favour of lifting sanctions rests on a false assumption that the sanctions are preventing Iran from getting material that might alleviate the suffering there. Humanitarian aid and medical supplies are exempted by law from the American sanctions that much of the world has been forced – often reluctantly – to observe.

As US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on March 20 at President Trump's press conference about the coronavirus, the humanitarian channel to Iran is "wide open." Indeed, the Administration offered to help Teheran fight the pandemic last month, as its spread there became an issue and weeks before Americans started treating the threat seriously.

The problem in Iran is twofold.

The toll of victims there is so high for the same reason that the virus killed so many people in China. As soon as cases of coronavirus emerged there, the despotic Iranian government sought to cover it up rather than to spread the alarm about the peril.

The Iranian people have good reason to find fault with the ayatollahs who rule them. Instead of devoting its oil wealth to helping its citizens, they have lavished it on foreign terrorist groups that serve as the regime's auxiliaries, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq.

Rather than invest in their own people's welfare, they have engaged in foreign adventures. Their intervention in the Syrian civil war, which helped keep their barbarous client – Bashar al-Assad and his terrorist partners – in power

in Damascus, was a military success but did nothing to help ordinary Iranians. The same is true for all of the oil wealth that they have squandered on a nuclear program that Obama's deal allowed to remain in existence, and thanks to that pact, will allow the regime to acquire nuclear weapons once the agreement expires.



Disinfection in Iran: Sanctions do not need to be lifted for Iran to get the medical supplies it needs

There's also the fact that both the country's "Supreme Leader" – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the regime entity that both runs its foreign terrorist efforts and controls much of Iran's economy, are sitting on vast fortunes that could alleviate much of their nation's suffering. Instead, they continue to use their consid-

erable resources to finance terrorism and keep a tight lid on dissent.

The IRGC murdered hundreds of Iranians who protested against the regime's misrule late last year, not to mention the many women who have been beaten and/or imprisoned for refusing to wear hijabs – a true war on women that most Western liberals have ignored.

While Trump's critics want him to let up on his "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at forcing Iran to start behaving like a normal country and cease its terrorism, as well as give up any hope of a nuclear weapon, Teheran hasn't let up on its misbehaviour. Iranian proxies are still attacking Americans in Iraq, and aiding terrorists in both Lebanon and Gaza, where they continue to push for conflict with Israel, which the regime has vowed to destroy.

While Americans are sympathetic to the suffering of Iranians, the answer to their problems is in efforts to force the regime to change its behaviour. The only way to do that is to continue Trump's pressure campaign.

Iran's leaders are counting on Trump being defeated in November. That's why former Vice President Joe Biden, the likely Democratic nominee, ought to give them no encouragement and declare that the United States won't return to Obama's policy of appeasement.

Reviving a failed nuclear deal that enriched and empowered the regime won't help the Iranian people. It will just mean more grief and suffering for Iranians who were left vulnerable to oppression, as well as disease, by the cruelty of their own leaders and the naïveté of those who supported the nuclear pact.

AIR

Jonathan S. Tobin is editor-in-chief of JNS, the Jewish News Syndicate. © JNS (www.jns.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

FOCUS ON THE AUSTRALIAN FAR-RIGHT

by Naomi Levin

In March, an unemployed 21-year-old Australian man living with his parents in the regional NSW town of Nowra, was charged with terrorism offences. If found guilty, he faces life in prison.

This man came to police attention after allegedly posting extremist material online.



“The Lads Society”: One of Australia’s most prominent far-right groups

Police then allegedly found him stockpiling weapons, with plans to build a home-made explosive device, that could be used to blow up a local electricity sub-station.

Police described his views as antisemitic, anti-indigenous, anti-government and neo-Nazi.

While this arrest was alarming, it was also not unexpected. The threat posed by those holding extreme right-wing views has been growing in Australia. It is now second only to the terrorist threat posed by Sunni Islamists, such as ISIS.

In February this year, Australia’s new Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) Mike Burgess, issued a warning loud and clear.

Burgess called the terror threat posed by far-right extremists “real” and “growing”. He added: “I am particularly concerned that we continue to see vulnerable and impressionable young people at risk from being ensnared in the streams of hate being spread across the internet by extremists of every ideology.”

Racism and identity-based intolerance is what motivates this group of people and their bigoted and xenophobic views are proliferating in the West, Burgess said.

Those on the far-right meet up regularly – both on- and off-line.

According to Burgess, when they get together, they salute Nazi flags, inspect weapons, learn combat skills and collaborate on ways to disseminate their hateful ideology.

The recent arrest indicates that Burgess probably did not go far enough in his comments – in this case the weapons inspections he spoke of had morphed into plans to perpetrate violent crimes using those weapons.

The arrest also came on the first anniversary of the Christchurch mosque massacre, in which 51 Muslim worshippers in New Zealand were killed by Australian far-right extremist Brenton Tarrant. Tarrant was inspired by far-right organisations, but seemingly not an affiliate of any of them.

Nevertheless, Tarrant is now lionised in far-right online forums, as are his fellow perpetrators of recent synagogue shootings and other identity-based crimes.

Social media platforms – from the mainstream, such as Instagram and Twitter, to the more obscure, like Gab – host discussions that push the boundaries of free speech and inspire individuals to the extreme right cause.

The far-right uses online tools, some of them in a highly sophisticated way, some of it very rudimentary.

The most offensive and violent content is saved for private encrypted chats, the dark web and obscure chat sites. But a lot is easily found on YouTube, Instagram, Tik Tok and blogs

In researching this article, the *Australia/Israel Review* did not have to look hard to find anti-immigrant, antisemitic and Islamophobic rhetoric on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Antisemitic comments, which had not been removed by these mainstream platforms despite repeated pledges to do so, ranged from “The Zionists have infiltrated almost every government and set the rules” to “I hate Jews! Straight up! F***ing terrible people, all of them!”

The Lads Society, one of Australia’s most prominent far-right groups, is on ASIO’s radar. Material by the Lads Society is openly published online and its founder, Tom Sewell, is active on Twitter. While Sewell is not particularly prolific on the platform, he does like to point out people’s Jewish identity in a derogatory fashion and refer derisively to “goys” (a Yiddish word meaning “non-Jews” that has been commandeered by those on the far-right).

While the Lads Society does not appear to be openly inciting or perpetrating terrorism, the *Australia/Israel Review* discovered a very disturbing article posted to its website called “Why National Socialism?”

In this article, the Lads Society explains its commitment to National Socialism – the ideology of the Nazis – because it represents “truth” and “natural order”. The



Lads (from left) Tom Sewell, Thomas Hopper and Blair Cottrell

article seeks a white Australia, is anti-government and contains thinly veiled incitement to future violence with statements like: “The only people that have anything to fear from National Socialism, are those who are actively weakening our race. In a world where everything is struggling to dominate and survive, not actively fighting for yourself, is fighting against yourself. If you are White and inactive in the struggle for racial survival, then you are against us.”

The Lads Society is an easily accessed gateway to even more extremist rhetoric and possible violence. But it is far from the most radical of extreme right groups in Australia.

Antipodean Resistance came to public prominence by sticking vile and offensive stickers and posters in prominent locations – from university campuses to the door of the office of a federal Labor MP, Mike Kelly, in 2018.

Antipodean Resistance is loosely affiliated with two extreme-right British groups, National Action and Sonnenkrieg Division. Earlier this year, both these groups were registered as terrorist organisations by British authorities. Australia has not yet listed any far-right groups on its terrorism register.

While the Australian Coalition Government has emphasised its focus on preventing all terrorism – regardless of motivation – Labor has argued more could be done to prevent a local far-right-inspired terrorist incident in the future.

Labor’s Home Affairs Spokesperson Senator Kristina Kenneally asked ASIO’s Burgess why groups similar to National Action and Sonnenkrieg Division are not treated as terrorists in Australia.

He was vague in his response, telling Senator Kenneally: “Obviously, we constantly review proscription of certain groups. When we do that, we’re mindful of the intelligence that we have, the legal threshold for which we can do so, and the purpose that that would allow us to achieve by listing such organisations. Whilst it’s under constant review, I can’t go into full details of those particular matters.”

Senator Kenneally pressed further, asking whether Australian far-right groups are so sophisticated that they have



Antipodean Resistance

worked out loopholes to avoid being banned.

Burgess said he was “paying great attention” to the issue, but he did not think these groups were evading the law.

As outlined above, Senator Kenneally is certainly correct in noting the sophistication of these extreme right groups.

They have developed a parallel vocabulary to allow their offensive discussions to go largely undetected. To the layperson reading their comments, they are virtually indecipherable. But organisations, such as the US-based Anti-Defamation League, have put together a glossary of some of their most-used – and vilest – terms.

This vocabulary, which takes seemingly innocuous graphics, numbers and words and gives them alternate meanings, allows a lot of their comments to avoid being caught by automated filters looking for profane and offensive language. They also commandeer popular phrases and graphics and give them coded meanings, which allows them to easily identify themselves to fellow supporters.

Once understood, it is clear the movement is highly violent, glorifies murder and incites other to act in illegal ways.

Senator Kenneally’s parliamentary colleague Tim Watts has also weighed in on the discussion, suggesting a more community-based approach similar to that being used to combat Islamist terrorism. In a speech to Parliament late in 2019, he called on the Morrison Government to consider providing funding for countering violent extremism programs that target “vulnerable and marginalised individuals in our community who may be beguiled by the messages of these white nationalists.”

This appears on point in light of the fact that the 21-year-old arrested in March was unemployed and came from Nowra, an area of regional NSW where the unemployment rate is double that of the rest of Australia.

As the case with the individual arrested in March wends its way through the legal system, we will no doubt find out more about his personal circumstances. However, it is clear that the terrorist threat from the far-right is not abating in Australia and unflagging vigilance is required.

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The Year the Sky Fell

Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East
by **Kim Ghattas**, Henry Holt and Co., 2020, 400 pp., A\$49.95

by Michael Totten

In the greater Middle East, the year 1979 felt like the end of the world. Westerners know it as the ominous date of the Iranian Revolution, the hostage crisis, and the rise of the grim-faced, murderous Ayatollah Khomeini.

But those weren't the only pivotal events that unfolded back then. The scarcely known siege of Mecca occurred at the same time, and it was equally dreadful – and fateful. In an effort to appease an armed insurrection, the Saudi government sharply reversed what precious little social progress had been made and, in a revolution from above, transformed the country into an even more regressive and repressive place than it already was.

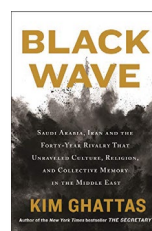
The Saudi and Iranian governments, once grudging allies, became sworn, bitter enemies determined to export their own revolutions to the whole Muslim world, across the Middle East and beyond.

Nearly all the worst disasters that have swept across the Muslim world in the past four decades can be traced, at least in part, back to that year. That's the thesis of the masterful book *Black Wave*, by Beirut-born,

Emmy Award-winning journalist Kim Ghattas. She travelled from Egypt and Iraq to Iran and Pakistan, and no matter where she went, the people with whom she spoke let loose a tsunami of emotion when she asked how that year had devastated them and their countries: "Everyone had a story about how 1979 had wrecked their lives, their marriage, their education, including those born after that year."

Even close observers of the region can be forgiven for not quite realising that things are *much* worse now than they used to be.

The Middle East in the mid-20th century was hardly a utopia. Authoritarianism was the norm, with rule by Turkish and European empires only recently shrugged off. But aside from the Arab-Israeli conflict, the wars were less endless, the culture more open, and sectarian mass murder a thing out of the history books. Beirut, Cairo, and even Kabul, enjoyed semi-liberal golden ages before sliding into decline. Iran under the leadership of the authoritarian yet progressive Shah



"Even close observers of the region can be forgiven for not quite realising that things are much worse now than they used to be."

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was pro-Western, had friendly relations with Israel, and seemed to have a shining future ahead of it.

Ghattas treads familiar ground describing the Iranian Revolution and its cruel aftermath, but the Saudi half of the story is less well-known to her Western audience. While the Ayatollah railed against the Shah and his Western allies in Teheran, 300 totalitarian-minded Saudi insurgents from the spectacularly backward Najd desert captured the Grand Mosque in Mecca, took thousands of hostages, and engaged in a deadly standoff with the government. The Saudi royal family couldn't break the siege on its own, so it resorted to summoning French paratroopers – to a city where non-Muslims are otherwise banned forever from entering – to lay waste to the rebels. What could have, and arguably should have, been an isolated event, instead marked a turning point.

The insurrectionists had a list of demands for Saudi Arabia: Sever ties with the West, stop exporting oil to the imperialists, banish all foreigners,

and purge impure clerics. As Ghattas points out, these demands weren't terribly different from former Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's years later, and they created a terrible crisis for the House of Saud. Its

custodianship of Mecca and Medina is the foundation of its leadership of the Islamic world, and if it can't handle the job, perhaps it should be given to somebody else.

The hopelessly reactionary blind cleric Abdul Aziz bin Baz stepped forward and effectively forced the royal family to go all-in on the exquisitely bigoted Wahhabi subset of Sunni Islam, and the royals felt obliged to do so lest the insurgency gather strength and remove them from power.

Women weren't allowed to anchor the news anymore. Their faces were



scrubbed from newspaper photos, and they were fired from their jobs and sent home. Beach resorts were closed. Whip-wielding authorities forced citizens to pray five times a day.

Simultaneously in Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini banned dancing and alcohol. Children were told they'd have molten metal poured into their ears on Judgement Day if they listened to music. Khomeini's revolutionaries burned down movie theatres and other supposedly decadent businesses.



The Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 marked a major turning point in the entire Middle East.

The Shah's regime was brutal, but he wouldn't even qualify as a water boy in the league Khomeini played in. The new Islamic government, "in a paroxysm of depravity," executed 75 times as many people as the Shah's notorious secret police, SAVAK.

There were two Islamist revolutions in 1979, not just the more infamous Iranian one. As if they didn't constitute enough hell to be unleashed at once, Soviet tanks rolled across the border from Uzbekistan into Afghanistan to prop up a local Communist government. The United States jumped in and backed a movement of Islamic fighters, hoping to give Moscow its own black eye after the humiliating Vietnam War. The Saudis waded in, too, not just to punch back at the Eurasian heathens, but to keep the Russians out of Pakistan, bolster their own bonafides as the Muslim world's leaders after being challenged in Mecca, and provide a pressure-release valve for their own fanatics.

But the Saudis had too many extremists to export; their narrow-

minded religious and education establishment kept creating more of them as if it were running an assembly line. The 9/11 hijackers, almost all of whom were Saudi, "did not stand out in their country; they were unremarkable, representing the average Saudi man of that generation, the generation of 1979, the fateful year around which most of them were born."

Over the next several decades and going all the way up through to the present, Iran armed and trained sectarian Shi'ite militias—Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Mahdi Army in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and so on—to wage civil wars inside their own countries and wars against "imperialist" non-Muslims such as Americans and Israelis. The Saudis, meanwhile, spent untold billions of petrodollars exporting their harsh and alien Wahhabi doctrines to distant countries with no such tradition. And they backed their own totalitarian proxies when they found it useful, from Saddam Hussein in Iraq to the Taliban in Afghanistan. The region-wide export of these twin revolutions is the "Black Wave" of Ghattas' title, "the torrent that flattens everything in its path" and that has "changed who we are and hijacked our collective memory."

The Iranians have even chosen to back non-Shi'ite militias and terrorist organisations in the Palestinian territories, not because the ayatollahs have any warm feelings for the drinkers and womanisers in the Palestine Liberation Organisation or the Sunni fundamentalists of Hamas. Instead, the Iranians, as Shi'ites and Persians, hoped to win support as the hegemons of a Sunni-Arab-majority region by hitching a ride on the anti-Zionist train, a move that was particularly effective after Egypt had "betrayed" that cause by signing a peace treaty with Israel.

Hatred between the Saudis and the Iranians is more than political; it's personal and visceral. Khomeini once blasted the Saudis as "the camel

grazers of Riyadh and the barbarians of Najd, the most infamous and the wildest members of the human family." The Saudis, for their part, fear and loathe the Iranians as Persians and heretical Shi'ites who might one day sponsor an anti-royal insurgency in the heavily Shi'ite Eastern Province, which just happens to be where most of the oil is.

Beyond the oppressed and murdered victims in their own countries, the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has so far killed millions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Afghanistan. The "black wave" has even washed over countries where the Saudis and the Iranians haven't faced off directly or through their proxies. Egypt has seen a dramatic decline, partly because so many from its poorer classes have spent time as temporary workers in Saudi Arabia and come home transformed into ultra-conservative quasi-Wahhabis, and also because the Egyptian middle class has since rejected the West and turned to the Saudis for inspiration and fashion.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry for supremacy in the Middle East is as central to, and defining of, that region's modern history as the American-Soviet rivalry was to Europe's between 1945 and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Those who choose to blame the Arab-Israeli conflict or American foreign policy blunders for most of the Middle East's ills are drastically wide of the mark. Syria's civil war, which scarcely involves Americans or Israelis and emphatically involves the Saudis and the Iranians (and the Russians), exposes the "blame America" and "blame Israel" crowds as the blinkered fools that they are. Ghattas barely touches on this in her book, but she doesn't have to. It's obvious.

AIR

Michael J. Totten is the author of nine books, including Where the West Ends and The Road to Fatima Gate. © Commentary magazine (www.commentarymagazine.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



The Apartheid Lie

The appropriation of South Africa's history

by Olga Meshoe Washington

Imagine having your food served to you on a tin plate and not a normal ceramic one, because of the colour of your skin. Imagine having to use the designated, concealed back entrance of a public hospital to be checked by a doctor in a designated room, out of sight of other patients of a different race. Those are two of the many experiences my parents and millions of other black South Africans experienced during apartheid South Africa.

THE APARTHEID LIE

In recent years, the term “apartheid” has become so synonymous with the State of Israel that it has almost lost its original meaning: the policy of the South African regime from 1948 to 1994 that segregated and discriminated black South African citizens from white South African citizens. This regime was regulated and institutionalised by a system of over 150 codified laws. By law, black people were dispossessed of their land, homes, and livelihoods, and forcibly relocated to designated, under-developed areas. By law, we black South Africans were prohibited from using the same transportation system, attending the same public schools or enjoying the same public facilities as white South Africans. By law, we could not move freely within our own country

and were not allowed to participate formally in the main economy of the country. We were denied the right to vote. We were forbidden from marrying the person we loved if he or she were of a different race group.

In addition, black people of different tribes were separated and grouped into mini-homelands to further strip us of our identity as black South Africans. Growing up in apartheid South Africa, I was told by white society that as a black person, I could dream only certain dreams; all others were reserved for white people.

The above descriptions of apart-

heid South African life are the antithesis of contemporary Israeli life.

In Israel, by law, Israeli Arabs have the same rights as Israeli Jews. They study in the same school system and are treated as equals to all other Israelis in the same hospitals. Israeli Arabs vote, are elected to the Knesset, and have become Supreme Court justices. Although not required to join the army, some Arab Christian and Muslim citizens of Israel choose to serve in the Israel Defence Forces. Israeli Arabs enjoy the same privilege as other Israelis to study for academic degrees at Israeli universities of their choice.

Palestinians who live in east Jerusalem also enjoy this privilege, despite not being Israeli citizens. Buses and trains are open to all; they do not have signs saying “Jews only” or “Arabs only” to separate commuters, as was the case in South Africa.

Some argue that Israel's Nation-State law (formally titled *Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People*) adopted by the Israeli Knesset on July 18, 2018, which legally enshrines Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, confirms Israel's “apartheid” character.

However, it does not impact or detract from the existing rights to equality and dignity of all Israeli



Those who experienced the reality of South African apartheid know they are the antithesis of contemporary Israeli life.



citizens which remain enshrined and protected in *Israel's Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty*. The Nation-State law merely reaffirms Israel's Jewish majority character and underlying Zionist founding principles, the very reason for its modern creation as the democratic nation state of the Jewish people.

Israel's Jewish character was recognised and validated by the League of Nations in 1922, its successor organisation the United Nations in 1945, and again upon Israel's acceptance as a formal member of the United Nations in 1949.

Just as Japan is the homeland of Japanese people and France is the homeland of French people, Israel is the homeland of Jewish people. The existence of these sovereign countries as homes for their respective peoples is not discriminatory in nature. Of all these nations, and so many others in the 193 member states of the United Nations, Israel is the only nation accused of being an apartheid state. This malevolent double standard constitutes antisemitism according to the internationally accepted 2016 International Holocaust Remembrance Association working definition of antisemitism.

Despite being a Jewish State, Israel's population is comprised of approximately one-quarter Muslims and it is the only state in the Middle East in which other religions, such as Christianity, not only coexist with Judaism but are thriving.

Israeli Jews themselves are of more than one colour; more than half of the Israeli Jewish population are descendants of immigrants from North African and Middle Eastern lands. Jews from India, China, and South America also call Israel home. Said differently, the majority of Israel's population is non-white.

THE PEDDLING OF AN ANTISEMITIC LIE

Anti-Zionists often refer to the late former president of my country,

Nelson Mandela, as an authoritative validator of the apartheid lie. One of the most used quotes from Nelson Mandela for this purpose is, "We know too well that our [South Africa's] freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians," from his speech given on the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People in 1997.



Nelson Mandela in Israel in 1999

What is not told is that Mandela visited Israel in 1999, something those who perpetuate the apartheid narrative do not want the world to know. On this visit, Mandela said, "I cannot conceive of Israel withdrawing [from territory] if Arab states do not recognise Israel within secure borders." This is a Zionist statement. While Nelson Mandela was pro-Palestinian, he was not anti-Israel.

In addition to dishonestly misrepresenting the positions of authoritative and respected individuals such as Mandela to underpin their deceptive narrative, information sites aimed at journalists are often guilty of furthering the apartheid narrative.

For instance, the Institute for Middle East Understanding (IMEU) is a self-described resource hub for journalists seeking information on the socio-economic, political, and cultural aspects of Israel (which it calls "Palestine") and Palestinians, for purposes of educating the general public. Despite touting itself as an independent non-profit organisation, IMEU describes Israel as an "occupier" that engages in "ethnic cleansing" in Jerusalem. It also nefariously ascribes Israel's administration of the West Bank, the result of a bi-lateral diplomatic agreement with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and which

was internationally witnessed and guaranteed by the Oslo Interim Accords in 1995, as the basis for Israel being an apartheid state.

The Oslo Interim Accords divided the West Bank into three zones. Depending on the zone, Israel or the Palestinian leadership was assigned all, some, or no civil and security jurisdiction of the zone in question. Not only is it factually incorrect and dishonest to describe Israel's civil and/or security administration of the zones, per the Oslo Accords, as "apartheid", it is a deliberate omission and distortion of history.

It is true that racism exists in Israel. Racism also exists in mature democracies such as the United States and Great Britain. It also exists in today's democratic South Africa. If the United States, Great Britain, or South Africa are not described as an apartheid state, it begs the question why Israel is singled out as being an apartheid state because racism can be found within it.

A COLONIAL-SETTLER STATE?

What of the argument that Israel is a colonial-settler state? That question may be answered by another: can a native become a settler?

From as far back as the second millennium BCE, there has always been a significant Jewish presence in the land, which comprises the modern state of Israel, Gaza, and Judea and Samaria – the disputed territories of the West Bank. Historical data and archaeological artifacts testify to the existence of Jewish culture, politics, and an economy for the past 3,000 years. These demonstrate that Jews are the indigenous people of the land. The immigration of Jews from across the world to the State of Israel does not equate to the increasing occupation of dispossessed land by the dispossessors, but the return of the indigenous people to their homeland. This homeland includes east Jerusalem and west Jerusalem.

Indigenous people cannot be settlers. The Jews are not settlers. Israel is not a coloniser.

Calling Israel a colonial-settler state is an insult to every African nation that was a victim of colonialism. It also dismisses the fact that the economic and political instability that characterises much of Africa today owes most of its existence to Europe's egregious colonisation of all but two African nations.

THE TRUE COST OF THE ISRAEL APARTHEID NARRATIVE

Lies empower evil. Lies about blacks empowered apartheid in South Africa. Lies about Jews made the Holocaust possible.

With all its imperfections, Israel is not an apartheid state. This false claim masks the true antisemitic intentions of those who call Israel an apartheid state. It has misled many well-intentioned people around the world into opposing the only true democracy in the Middle East.

This apartheid lie continues to embolden antisemitic acts on innocent Jews in the privacy of their homes, during their times of worship, and on university campuses. It odiously characterises non-Jewish Zionists and supporters of Israel as accomplices of Israel's fictitious crimes against humanity. More importantly, it compromises the chances of peace in the Middle East.

Equally important but oftentimes forgotten, the apartheid label assigned to Israel redirects focus away from holding the Palestinian Authority and Hamas accountable for their ill-treatment and abuse of the Palestinian people.

DISHONOURING SOUTH AFRICA AND SOUTH AFRICANS

Calling Israel an apartheid state trivialises the humiliation and

injustices endured by black South Africans who lived through apartheid and who still, together with their children and grandchildren, bear the scars of its legacy. If black South Af-

“Calling Israel an apartheid state trivialises the humiliation and injustices endured by black South Africans who lived through apartheid and who still, together with their children and grandchildren, bear the scars of its legacy.”


ricans enjoyed the rights enjoyed by Israeli Arabs, there would have been no need for South Africa's liberation movement. There would not have been a Nelson Mandela, as the world knows him, or other freedom fighters who spent much of their lives incarcerated, and whose families sacrificed much for the democracy South Africa enjoys today.

It is thus morally repugnant for any person, any organisation, or any government to incorrectly appropriate South Africa's apartheid history to apply to Israel. It is also repulsive to rally people across the world on the painful, collective, real experiences of black South Africans for a cause premised on falsehood.

Black South Africans must declare

that their moral authority on what apartheid is and what it is not cannot be bought; that their history cannot be manipulated to perpetuate a narrative that erases the boundary between legitimate criticism of policies of the Israeli government and antisemitism.

It is incumbent upon all persons who genuinely desire to see peace in the Middle East and who have

a sincere interest in the liberation of the Palestinian people from their oppressive leaders, to seek the truth and speak the truth against a narrative that is the core of an agenda to delegitimise, demonise, and ultimately destroy the State of Israel and Jewish life in the diaspora. 

Olga Meshoe Washington, Adv., is an attorney, corporate consultant, and CEO of DEISI, Defend Embrace Invest Support Israel. This essay was initially published as a chapter in the book Israelophobia and the West: The Hijacking of Civil Discourse on Israel and How to Rescue It, edited by Dan Diker and published by the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs (JCPA). © JCPA (www.jcpa.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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Through bi-annual programmes, SCCI seeks to elevate the conversation around fashion and architecture to prominence alongside other forms of cultural expression. Our programmes explore intersections with these disciplines and the cultural, social, aesthetic and economic life of contemporary Asia Pacific.

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THE MONTH IN MEDIA

VIRAL CLAIMS

Age/Sydney Morning Herald reporter Sherryn Groch's online article (March 18) on global efforts to slow the coronavirus's spread stated that "China, Iran and Israel are deploying their notoriously invasive surveillance networks, including tracking phones, to keep tabs on people under isolation and close in on suspected cases."

Including Israel with China and Iran is unfair.

The threat from Islamist and far right groups using technologies to communicate, radicalise, recruit and develop terror plots has seen most Western countries – Israel included – adopt the capacity to monitor its citizens' phones.

This is how Israel applies the technology. In contrast, China and Iran use surveillance as a means of internal repression toward dissent against their dictatorial regimes.

Furthermore, Israel's surveillance capacity is subject to parliamentary oversight, as well as judicial review and appeal.

In the *Mercury* (March 23), commentator Greg Barns criticised Australia and Israel for wanting to use surveillance methods to enforce social isolation and slow the spread of coronavirus. Barns suggested such moves would erode human rights. Strangely, however, he expressed no concern at China's total lack of scruples in how it has combatted the spread of the coronavirus.

The *Guardian Australia* (March 19) contrasted the Australian Government's reluctance to charter flights to repatriate Australians overseas with that of "the governments of several countries – including Mexico and Israel – [which] have chartered flights to repatriate their citizens".

RIVETING VISIT

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin's much anticipated visit to Australia did not go unnoticed.

ABC TV "7pm News" Victoria (Feb. 26) reported Rivlin's promise to raise the issue of Malka Leifer, who has fought an extradition request by Australia to face 74 charges of child sex abuse from when she was principal of the ultra-Orthodox Adass Israel School up until 2008. *SBS TV* "World News" (Feb. 26) also reported on Rivlin's commitment, as did many newspapers.

On *ABC TV* "The World" (Feb. 26), veteran Israeli journalist and recent AIJAC guest Ehud Yaari explained that President Rivlin's position in Israel was akin to Australia's Governor-General.

THE RIGHT KIND OF LEADERSHIP

The quality of Rivlin's leadership also came in for close examination.

Australian Strategic Policy Institute senior fellow Anthony Bergin noted Rivlin comes from the Israeli right but has an "unflinching support for democratic principles, respect for human rights, opposition to any form or expression of racism and support for the rule of law." Bergin also noted Rivlin's decision, when elected speaker of the Knesset, to make "his first official visit... to a pro-Palestinian Arab town. He also refused calls to disqualify an Arab member of parliament who participated in the flotilla to Gaza."

Bergin said Rivlin's visit was an opportunity for Australia and Israel to "thicken" ties in areas "ranging from defence, cyber security and the start-up world," *Australian* (Feb. 20).

Australian foreign editor Greg Sher-

idan's (Feb. 21) commentary on the visit touched on a range of contemporary topics, including Rivlin's support for US President Donald Trump's peace plan. Sheridan quoted Rivlin's insights into Israeli society, which he said consists of "four tribes: religious Jews, ultra-Orthodox Jews, Arabs and secular citizens," and explained Jerusalem's current confrontation with Iran's regional and global threat using "Hezbollah, and the Shia militias in Syria" and support for " Hamas and Islamic Jihad across the Middle East."

Elsewhere, AIJAC's Naomi Levin elaborated on Rivlin's unifying role, writing, "Since becoming president, Rivlin has established an NGO called Israeli Hope... to promote diversity and inclusion of all of Israel's demographic groups in academia, education and sport," *Daily Telegraph* (Feb. 21).

PREMATURE VICTORY LAP?

The *Australian* (March 4) editorialised on Israel's March 2 election, casting a sceptical eye on PM Binyamin Netanyahu's claim that he had won a "gigantic victory".

The paper said, "Given Israel's existential challenges, especially Iranian aggression, Mr Netanyahu should build a broad coalition beyond his alliance with religious parties. After the inconclusive election in September last year, he proposed a national unity government with Mr Gantz, with the two leaders alternating as prime minister in the way Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir did so well in 1984. Despite keen support from President Reuven Rivlin, Mr Gantz climbed on to his high horse and refused to work with a prime minister under indictment for corruption."

BIBITALK

A 28-minute profile of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on *ABC Radio National* “Rear Vision” (March 15) was mostly fair and informative.

Professor Neil Lockery – author of *The Irresistible Rise of Benjamin Netanyahu* – said the Netanyahu family belonged to Zionism’s Revisionist stream which “believed that [Jews] would never be accepted by the local Arab population and... Israel needed to create an iron wall around it to protect it from attacks from the local Arab population.”

The program noted that Netanyahu’s late father, Benzion, paid a price

for supporting the Revisionists against the Labor Zionist establishment, and was forced to seek employment in the United States, where Netanyahu acquired his proficiency in English. Also canvassed was the impact on Bibi of the tragic loss of his older brother Yoni, killed in 1976 leading Israel’s daring mission to rescue passengers from a plane hijacked by Palestinian terrorists and diverted to Entebbe in Uganda.

Israeli journalist and Netanyahu biographer Anshel Pfeffer said Netanyahu’s defeat of incumbent Israeli PM Shimon Peres in May 1996 was because “a very large part of the Israeli public, a majority... were against the Oslo Accords.”

In fact, Peres held a double-digit lead over Netanyahu through most of the election campaign. Voters shifted their support to Netanyahu after five devastating suicide bombing attacks during the campaign killed 72 Israelis.

Academic Robert Freedman highlighted how Netanyahu’s electoral success has been, in part, an outcome of Palestinian and Arab terrorism.

Freedman said, “In 2000, Ehud Barak, when he was prime minister, withdrew from southern Lebanon, withdrew Israeli troops from southern Lebanon. The idea at the time was this would finally bring peace. The UN recognised the border, but instead of bringing peace, it brought rocket fire



IN PARLIAMENT

Tony Zappia (ALP, Makin) – March 5 – “Today I raise two human rights matters. The first relates to the ongoing persecution of people of the Baha’i faith in Iran... The second matter relates to over a century of persecution, suppression, discrimination and brutality of Palestinian people. The Palestinian people have battled unfairness since 1917 when the British imposed the one-sided Balfour Declaration upon them... The Palestinian people have suffered enough. They have no country of their own, no independence, no control over their future, no freedoms, no rights and a shrinking land area with no light at the end of the tunnel, whilst most of the rest of the world looks the other way.”

Senator **Larissa Waters** (Greens, QLD) – March 5 – Asking a question during Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee Estimates hearings: “I have a few questions about the detailed proposal regarding Israel and Palestine that was released by President Trump in late January. It appears that major world players are seeing this plan as a radical departure from the rule of law.”

Libby Coker (ALP, Corangamite) – March 4 – “...The ICC prosecutor has spent five years in a preliminary investigation looking at allegations, including that Israeli authorities have settled Israeli civilians into Palestinian territories, a clear breach of the Geneva Conventions; that Palestinian Security Services in the West Bank have committed torture against civilians under their control; and that there has been criminal behaviour by both the Israeli military and Palestinian armed groups. The prosecutor wants to prosecute these alleged crimes... The Australian government, along with only five other governments, has indicated it does not think that the court has jurisdiction—not because there are no crimes to answer but because we do not recognise Palestine as a state. I ask: why did Australia feel it

necessary to make this observation and risk the capacity for the ICC to consider these possible crimes? Why should Australia not leave the umpire to do its job?”

Senator **Eric Abetz** (Lib., TAS) – March 3 – Asking a question during Senate Environment and Communications Legislation Committee Estimates hearings: “I encourage the ABC to learn about this definition [the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism] and ascertain whether they might seek to apply it. I especially ask whether this definition was used to inform the publication of Salman Abu Sitta’s article [on the ABC website] on 15 January 2020, which in part claimed the state of Israel is a racist endeavour... That sort of language is, according to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism, actual anti-Semitism. It’s pretty ugly.”

Tim Wilson (Lib., Goldstein) – March 2 – “I move that this House:

(1) notes that: (a) the Jewish Australian Internet Radio (J-AIR) is an outstanding broadcasting service that brings together Jewish culture, news, analysis, music, comedy, personalities and performers for audiences in Melbourne and through the internet;... (c) as demonstrated by the 2019 Executive Council of Australian Jewry report, the character of anti-Semitism has worsened in Australia and services like J-AIR play a crucial security role;... (d) J-AIR has begun working closely with the Community Security Group (CSG) to combat the rise of anti-Semitism and ensure the safety and security of the Jewish community in Victoria; and...

(2) calls on the Australian Communications and Media Authority to consider the new relationship with the CSG and allocate J-AIR a community broadcasting licence in the Melbourne Radio Licence Area.”

Bert Van Manen (Lib.-Nat., Forde) seconded the motion, and **Josh Burns** (ALP, Macnamara), **Katie Allen** (Lib., Higgins) and **Mike Kelly** (ALP, Eden-Monaro) spoke in support, but the motion was not put to a vote.

and ultimately a war in 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah. Then... Ariel Sharon as prime minister withdrew from Gaza. That was supposed to bring peace, but it didn't. It brought rocket fire into Israel, which continues to this day from Gaza. So this... plus the second intifada, where Hamas would put bombs in pizza parlours and in restaurants and coffee shops to make Israeli lives miserable. All this shifted the Israeli polity to the right and Netanyahu was able to exploit this."

It is important to also understand that ten years elapsed between Netanyahu's 1999 election loss and his return to the prime ministership in 2009. During that decade, Israelis became disillusioned by a peace process wherein generous offers to create an independent Palestinian state in 2000, 2001 and 2008 were rejected and met with unprecedented terrorism.

TOO RIGHT

ABC journalist Iskandar Razak reported on the Victorian Government's commitment to make Holocaust education mandatory for year 9 and 10 classes, as well as launching a parliamentary inquiry to consider banning Nazi symbols.

Razak noted both initiatives are a response to "growing antisemitism" and "the rise of the far-right in many countries", as well as Victorian Education Minister James Merlino's concern that many "high school students" don't know about the Holocaust.

The Jewish Holocaust Centre's Director Jayne Josem said Holocaust education would help in combatting racism in general.

In the *Age* (March 10), AIJAC's Sharyn Mittelman said antisemitism is not confined solely to the far-right, explaining "while separate ideologies of hatred, both Nazism and violent Islamist extremism share similarities — they are hostile to democracy, human rights, the intrinsic value of life, and promote the hatred of certain ethnic groups — especially Jews."

BOYCOTT BLUES

The *Australian* (Feb. 18) slammed the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) decision to issue a blacklist of 112 companies that operate in Israeli settlements on the West Bank as "anti-Semitic."

The paper noted that "the companies — from Airbnb, Booking.com and Expedia to Motorola — employ hundreds of Palestinian workers, allowing them opportunities they otherwise would not have, it beggars credulity and common sense that the UN should see them as 'aiding the commission of war crimes.' No wonder Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council executive director Colin Rubenstein described publication of the blacklist as 'the ultimate sign of hypocrisy and bias by the UNHRC' and 'a witch-hunt that reminds us of Nazi-era boycotts of the Jewish people.' There is no precedent for any UN body taking similar action over a disputed territory, and no basis in international law for it to do so."

On March 12, the paper attacked the International Criminal Court's decision to launch an investigation into alleged US war crimes in Afghanistan, writing that the Court "followed the well-worn path of UN linked bodies and prioritised claims against Israel over alleged war crimes."

In the *Canberra Times* (Feb. 24), Zionist Federation of Australia President Jeremy Leibler said, "The worst thing is not what the Human Rights Council can inflict on Israel (which isn't actually much), but its weakening as a legitimate body for calling out human rights abuses... The loser in all of this is not Israel but the victims of human rights abusers around the world."

'FARSICAL' ELECTIONS

There was widespread coverage of the farcical Iranian parliamentary election results. Most reports noted that only hardliners were entitled to run,

a reality reflected in the low voter turnout, which dropped from 62% in 2016 to 42% on official figures — which may themselves be inflated.

The *Australian* (Feb. 25) said, "Yet the regime remains defiant. It has refused Mr Trump's repeated offers of dialogue about a revised nuclear deal that could lead to sanctions relief. Instead, it has continued its brazen terrorist activities across the Middle East aimed at the ultimate destruction of Israel. Protesters' demands that the regime use billions of dollars Barack Obama made available to Tehran when the nuclear deal was signed (Mr Trump claims it was \$US150bn) to help the economy have been ignored. To the fury of the embattled protesters, it has gone into Iranian military involvement in Syria and Yemen and supporting terrorist groups such as Hezbollah."

Subsequently, AIJAC's Naomi Levin noted the absurdity of Australia not banning the entire Lebanese Shi'ite terror group Hezbollah, despite it largely sharing the same Islamist ideology and terrorist inclinations as Islamic State, which is proscribed. This means that "Australians are not allowed to fly Islamic State flags, not allowed to raise money for Islamic State and cannot recruit supporters of Islamic State," but can do so for Hezbollah, *Daily Telegraph* (March 5).

BUILDING BOGEY MAN

An *AFP* story reported Israeli PM Netanyahu's announcement of plans to build "3500 new homes in the E1 corridor" of the West Bank.

It said E1 was "a highly sensitive part of the West Bank" and "the international community has warned that Jewish settlement construction in the E1 corridor, which passes from Jerusalem to Jericho, would slice the West Bank in two and compromise the contiguity of any future Palestinian state."

As *AIR* has previously noted, E1 does not slice the West Bank in half. It

does not come anywhere near Jericho, nor would it prevent a Palestinian state being contiguous.

In 2012, the *New York Times* issued a correction and apology for making an almost identical false claim, *Australian* (Feb. 29).

HELLYER RAISER

The ABC “Religion & Ethics” website ran British Muslim writer H. A Hellyer’s one-sided opinion piece from his trip to visit the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. In that piece, he essentially denied 3,000 years of Jewish history associated with Judaism’s holiest site.

Hellyer described himself as a “Briton of mixed race”. Travelling to Jerusalem from Jordan, he claimed he “received a certain type of treatment. Not as welcoming, I suspect, as a purely white Anglo-Saxon Briton might have expected, but definitely not what those of Palestinian origin would have endured. The Israeli security officers asked a couple of questions about a trip I’d taken to Lebanon... but after a couple of hours of waiting, I was at last in a car *en route* to Jerusalem.”

Plenty of Anglo-Saxon looking Jews and non-Jews are subject to Israel’s probing customs protocols and from the sounds of it, Hellyer didn’t actually face any impediments.

Hellyer said according to “*status quo* agreements” the “Haram al-Sharif is managed by a *Waqf* (a trust) that the Jordanian monarchy administers, as they did from 1948 to 1967, following which the territory was invaded and occupied.”

Of course, the only reason why Jordan administers the Temple Mount is due to its illegal occupation of east Jerusalem after the British Mandate ended.

Hellyer disparaged a tour guide he overheard telling visitors that “we can’t go to the Temple Mount – the Israeli soldiers keep us out, as Muslims don’t allow non-Muslims on there.”

Hellyer said, “it wasn’t as though

non-Muslims couldn’t enter — I know many non-Muslims who have gone onto the *Haram*... The *Haram* is supposed to be partially restricted, nevertheless, and that would seem to be down to the many provocations that extremist Zionist settlers have carried out over the years.”

He also complained about the presence of Israeli soldiers on the Temple Mount, and said “periodically, Israeli citizens violate the *status quo* with the cooperation of the Israeli military, leading to regular complaints to the United Nations.”

Hellyer is peddling misinformation. Since the Second Intifada in 2000, the Waqf lets non-Muslims walk around the Temple Mount plaza during very limited visiting hours, but denies them entry to the Dome of the Rock and the nearby Al-Aqsa Mosque.

His claim of “provocations” and violations of the status quo by Jews is nonsense. Jews, not “extremist Zionist settlers,” visit and as per a decision by Israeli governments since 1967, they are forbidden from even the merest hint of religious practice. Even praying with lip movements but no vocalisation is prohibited, and soldiers enforce this.

It is the Palestinian side which has been running an ongoing campaign insisting that any entry to the Temple Mount by people in Jewish religious dress is a “provocation” and even an “invasion” by “settlers” — despite a *status quo* understanding which says all non-Muslims are free to visit during visiting hours.

DIPLOMATICALLY CANDID

Former Australian Ambassador to Israel and current federal Liberal MP Dave Sharma said the ABC’s Middle East coverage gives its audience a “one-dimensional picture of what’s going on in that part of the world,” particularly regarding Israel.

According to Sharma, “[The ABC] tend to focus on a particular story and a particular narrative at the expense

of others... The art of news coverage should be to give your viewership and your readership a whole lot of different perspectives and let them decide the truth and decide their one point of view, whereas the ABC, particularly in its coverage there, tends to ram one narrative down the throats of the people who watch it or listen to it.”

As a taxpayer-funded body, the ABC “has a higher degree of responsibility,” he said, but “sometimes the way the ABC conducts itself suggests they think they are beyond reproach, beyond criticism, and I don’t think it’s healthy in a democracy with competing ideas.”

He also said the Palestinian leadership’s failure to respond positively to US President Donald Trump’s peace plan was a missed opportunity, *Wentworth Courier* (March 18).

WORLD VISION CORRECTION

Reports about alleged corruption at NGO World Vision’s Melbourne office and staff underpayments also included mention of the organisation’s former manager in Gaza, Mohammed el-Halabi, who is on trial in Israel on charges of diverting millions of Australian dollars in aid to Hamas.

The *Age* (March 12) cited the Halabi case, saying, “for a charity with a high national profile that relies on public donations and bequests for more than 70 per cent of its income, even the suggestion that resources are being misused can be damaging.”

The *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* reported (March 14) that World Vision had forced former Australian head Tim Costello to change his memoirs out of a “concern” that references “to the Halabi case could be construed as criticism of the Israeli prosecutors and may compromise the legal process in Israel.”

Suggesting that a few critical comments about Israeli prosecutors by Costello in a book published in Australia would have any material effect on a trial in Israel would seem far-fetched.

MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

KNOW WAY

The publication of journalist Sophie McNeill's memoir *We Can't Say We Didn't Know*, focusing on her time as the ABC's Jerusalem-based Middle East correspondent, saw her in the media spotlight but seldom having to answer challenging questions.

In the *Age/Sydney Morning Herald* (March 21) McNeill said, "I still think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a litmus test for journos... I was so glad that I had been covering it since 2006, so I knew the facts and the terminology, I knew why it was important to call it the occupied West Bank... When [then Labor MP] Michael Danby accused me of selective reporting [on Israel], people could see for themselves that I was reporting from other places. So that blew up in his face."

McNeill's claim to have also reported from other conflicts is immaterial. It was her story selection – ignoring Palestinian politics and focusing on alleged Palestinian victimhood at Israel's hands – that attracted controversy. Danby accused McNeill of excessively reporting on the alleged suffering of Palestinians while ignoring Israeli Jews who were victims of terror.

McNeill said that during the "stabbing intifada," she found it "infuriating" to be attacked by critics "sitting in Australia." Is McNeill absurdly implying that she put her life on the line for the ABC's audience and her work should therefore be beyond criticism?

She also lamented that "Right now the ABC is the only media outlet in the country that has Middle East correspondents. That's shocking."

SBS produces in-house reports on the Middle East from Australia. Moreover, its Middle East coverage generally provides a greater breadth and depth than the ABC, with its two Middle East based correspondents.

An excerpt from McNeill's book in the same edition's "Good Weekend" magazine claimed, "more than 1400 civilians [were] killed... including 551 children" in the 2014 Gaza war.

This figure is from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which sources its figures from the Hamas-run Gaza Ministry of Health. Israeli sources claim a much lower figure of 963 civilians.

Whilst all these deaths are undoubtedly tragic, McNeill has repeatedly failed to acknowledge Hamas' responsibility for this – starting a war by deliberately firing rockets at

Israel from the midst of civilian populations, which maximises Palestinian casualties. This is a war crime.

Recalling the "distraught children in Gaza whose parents had died after they were prevented from receiving cancer treatment outside the strip because Israeli authorities wouldn't give them permission to cross the border," McNeill neglected to mention that Gaza shares a border with Egypt through which Palestinians can also enter and exit for medical treatment – or that Israel is under no legal obligation to grant entry to foreign nationals from a hostile territory. Yet every month Israel issues permits

to thousands of sick Palestinians to do just that.

On *ABC Radio National* "Breakfast" (March 9), McNeill absurdly suggested Australia cannot protest China's incarceration of one million Muslim Uighurs "on the basis of religion" because last October Prime Minister Scott Morrison gave a speech "undermining the UN system" and thus the "rules don't apply" anymore. This is a gross misrepresentation of Morrison's speech, which merely argued against Australia uncritically accepting the diktats of international organisations run by unelected officials.

Talking to *ABC Radio National* "Late Night Live" host Phillip Adams (March 9), McNeill similarly said, "if you want to lead you have to lead by example, so if you don't speak out against what is happening in Gaza or what's happening by the Saudis in Yemen, then when you do want to criticise [Syrian dictator] Assad or... the Iranians or... Xi Jinping, then you've lost your high moral ground."

This implies that all parties in conflicts are equally guilty and all conflict is equally immoral, which most people rightly do not accept. Moreover, suggesting that Australia cannot criticise the Assad regime for the hundreds of thousands murdered, tortured, and subjected to chemical weapons attack and ethnic cleansing because of more muted criticism in other conflicts is just a ridiculous argument to make.

On *Radio 2SER* (March 11), McNeill included Gaza in a list of conflicts that receive media coverage but the world is "indifferent to this slaughter" – which is nonsense, given all the UN resolutions and media coverage focused on Gaza, particularly during war.

McNeill also appeared on *ABC Radio 774 Melbourne* "Mornings" (March 11), *ABC Triple J*'s "Breakfast" (March 11), community radio's "The Wire" (March 24) and *Network Ten*'s "The Project" (March 8).

"The publication of journalist Sophie McNeill's memoir *We Can't Say We Didn't Know* saw her in the media spotlight but seldom having to answer challenging questions"

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THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

NOT THE RIGHT WAY

Some history, and a comment on society today:

Some years ago, a leader of the Jewish community in Australia received a call from a distressed young man named Jeremy Jones.

This individual was not Jewish but had been receiving death threats and had been subjected to acts of vandalism, by people calling him a range of things all beginning with the adjective “Jewish”.

It was a time when my activities against the Australian far-right racist fringe were becoming known to the far-right racist fringe, who misdirected their rage at another Jeremy Jones.

Not long after this incident, I was driving in leafy north shore Sydney on a Sunday afternoon when my brakes failed and I cruised through a (fortunately) empty intersection. I used my handbrake to slowly edge into a nearby service station where I was informed, the next day, that my car had been vandalised and I was fortunate that I had escaped serious harm.

This was in a period when far-right thugs had sought to intimidate Asian Australians, women’s groups, Jews and others, mainly on university campuses but also in the suburbs of Sydney and other Australian cities.

A variety of extremist neo-Nazi or otherwise racist groups held meetings, published newsletters and planned actions against varying lists of enemies, which were not uniform or consistent but nevertheless always included Jews.

After one of these newsletters declared me as “Kike of the Month”, the house of a different J. Jones was vandalised with Holocaust denial and other antisemitic slogans.

Yet another person opened an envelope bearing my name and was told that the author of the enclosed note knew how to find me and that I would suffer consequences for my work against racists.

Over the years, I have taken telephone calls at work phone numbers from people threatening me if I didn’t stop talking negatively about racists and seen countless social media

posts by anonymous individuals on the same theme.

After the Director General of ASIO Mike Burgess warned in February of the dangers to Australians of far-right extremists, a number of commentators posited that our intelligence, security and law enforcement agencies have had a sad history of ignoring this threat. They are wrong.

For over 30 years, I have personally been acquainted with Federal and State agencies taking far-right extremism very seriously, and not only because a number of the racist thugs saw law enforcement as agents of the enemy they were fighting.

Some of the racist fringe purport to be acting to defend

Christianity or Christendom, but the religious element is generally less important to them than it is to the far more ideologically sophisticated, and larger, Australian Islamist terrorist subculture.

But that does not mean they lack Manichean world views or messiah complexes, or that they are not dangerous.

Due to a combination of incompetence, unreality and the good instincts of most of the people they claim to champion, the far-right has not been able to garner much of a support base. To the contrary, they are correctly understood to be intellectually contemptible and morally repulsive.

Which brings us to the atmosphere in many societies today.

The spread of COVID-19 has brought major changes to all of our lives. Loss of loved ones, personal experience of illness, unemployment, massive financial loss and fears for the future are afflicting people in many places. This is a time of high stress, pressure and tension.

For some, the reaction is to find scapegoats and targets for frustration and anger. Antisemites and other racist elements have tried, and will continue to try, to whip up hatred against Jews, Chinese and probably others.

Experience suggests that strong moral leadership from all levels of government against racism is necessary, but not sufficient.

We should be grateful that our federal and state agencies are both aware of the reality of far-right extremism, and willing and able to defend our community from it.



Racist thugs target a shifting list of “enemies” – but Jews are always included



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