



## ISRAEL HAS A GOVERNMENT AT LAST

But can the complex Netanyahu-Gantz  
“national emergency” government  
deal hold?

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This *AIR* edition analyses the breakthrough in Israeli politics, whereby, after more than a year of deadlock, incumbent PM Binyamin Netanyahu and Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz have signed an agreement to form a "national emergency" government, leading to a unity government in six months.

Amotz Asa-el looks at the convoluted arrangements that Netanyahu and Gantz have agreed on, and their prospects for success, while Jonathan Tobin argues that, contrary to the claims of his critics, Netanyahu will be pleased to lead a centrist government. In addition, David Makovsky and Stephen Daisley offer contrasting analyses of a controversial provision in the Gantz-Netanyahu agreement for Israel to annex parts of the West Bank, as per the Trump Administration's peace plan.

Also featured this month is a detailed report from Ahron Shapiro and Naomi Levin on how Israeli high-tech is ramping up to confront the coronavirus crisis, while famous American legal academic Alan Dershowitz dissects the intersection between anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

And don't miss academic Zachary Abuza on the political implications of Indonesia's COVID-19 emergency, Oved Lobel on the continuing conspiracy theory epidemic accompanying the medical pandemic, and top analyst Jonathan Spyer on how the Islamic State's "ghost caliphate" is gearing up to exploit the current global coronavirus crisis.

We would welcome any feedback you have at [editorial@aijac.org.au](mailto:editorial@aijac.org.au).

Tzvi Fleischer

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Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz at a memorial ceremony marking 24 years since the assassination of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in the Knesset on November 10, 2019. (Photo: Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)



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

**SYDNEY OFFICE**

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

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# FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN

## AT LAST, A POLITICAL BREAKTHROUGH

**A**fter three elections, Israel finally has a government. Following weeks of tense negotiations between Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Blue and White's Benny Gantz, they finally agreed to form a national emergency and unity government to address Israel's immense challenges – especially the coronavirus crisis and its crushing impact on the economy.

In the first six months, “the government will act as an emergency government” focussed on “dealing with the coronavirus crisis in all its aspects.” It will then transition to a longer-lived national unity government, which will give it time to seriously address Israel's other strategic challenges, including especially threats from Iran and its proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Gaza.

While Gantz had long promised during the election campaign that he would not sit in government alongside Netanyahu while the latter remains under criminal indictment, the challenges confronting Israel at the current time led him to compromise rather than send Israelis to a fourth election amid a pandemic. As Gantz argued, “these are not normal times and they call for unusual decisions.”

Certainly, the pragmatism and patriotism of both Netanyahu and Gantz demonstrated that the spirit of democratic compromise and service to the national interest is still alive and well in Israel. Israel desperately needs the stable government they seem likely to provide after the unfortunate political impasse the country has experienced over the last year, with no duly-elected government in Israel since December 2018, and no ability to pass a national budget to fund the range of services required – especially crippling amid the current medical crisis.

The 14-page Gantz-Netanyahu deal is unquestionably complex. Netanyahu will serve as PM for the first 18 months while Gantz serves as PM for the subsequent 18 months. While Netanyahu is PM, Gantz will serve as Defence Minister and “Alternate Prime Minister”, a new position to be created by legislation. Netanyahu will be “Alternate Prime Minister” when Gantz becomes PM.

The agreement would also split a record 36 ministers evenly between blocs led by Likud and Blue and White respectively, with both parties being criticised for creating such a bloated and expensive cabinet at a time of national austerity. Yet most Israelis would doubtless agree that, despite this expense, it is best to avoid a fourth election campaign amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Blue and White and Likud will be joined in government by several smaller parties, making a robust governing coalition of at least 72 members of the Knesset out of 120. The dual structure that Netanyahu and Gantz have created, whereby agreement between the two main blocs is needed for most important decisions, is potentially unwieldy and will need goodwill and political creativity to function effectively.

Controversial Health Minister Yaakov Litzman, head of the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party, has reportedly asked to be moved from the health to the housing portfolio. Litzman has been criticised by many for his handling of the coronavirus crisis and especially for allegedly pushing to allow ultra-orthodox religious institutions to keep functioning even as health experts were saying they needed to be temporarily shut down – and indeed a concentration of COVID-19 cases in ultra-Orthodox neighbourhoods of Israel has eventuated. Moreover, there are allegations that Litzman broke

his own ministry's guidelines to attend an indoor prayer service.

Litzman's reappointment would also be a very bitter pill for the Australian Jewish community, including AI-JAC, and Australians in general, given that Israeli police have recommended he be indicted because of his alleged interference in the extradition of accused child sex offender Malka Leifer. Leifer is wanted in Australia to face 74 charges of sexual assault from the time she was the principal of the Adass Israel school in Melbourne. The retention of Litzman in health would be a bad look for the new government, while a move to housing may be a somewhat less problematic but still highly unsatisfactory outcome, as Litzman should be sidelined from the ministry until police investigations are completed.

One controversial aspect of the agreement to form the Gantz-Netanyahu emergency government is a clause which allows Netanyahu to introduce legislation after July 1 to apply Israeli sovereignty to areas of the West Bank, as outlined in the US Trump Administration's peace plan released in January. This is subject to some fairly ambiguous pre-conditions about prior international consultations.

As David Makovksy notes in this edition (p. 16), there are serious diplomatic risks to Israel in doing this. However, as Stephen Daisley points out (p. 18), there is also a case to be made that there is currently a unique and short-lived opportunity to begin implementing the Trump peace

plan in a way that will draw reasonably definitive borders between Israel and the ongoing option of a viable future Palestinian state. This is something which simply cannot be achieved through negotiations for the foreseeable future because of the continued Palestinian refusal to even negotiate.

**"The pragmatism and patriotism of both Netanyahu and Gantz demonstrated that the spirit of democratic compromise and service to the national interest is still alive and well in Israel"**

This difficult issue will certainly tax the creativity and cohesiveness of the new unity government.

Gantz has said this is not the kind of government he would have wanted, but desperate

times call for desperate measures. The Government he and Netanyahu have forged is certainly unique, and in some ways, unprecedented.

But Gantz and Netanyahu do have a history of working together successfully: when Gantz was IDF Chief of Staff and Netanyahu was PM from 2011 to 2015. And both appear to have few good alternatives to trying to make the current arrangement work. They also bring to the table a broad coalition encompassing most of the centrist members of the Knesset, potentially affording the Government the capability and flexibility to make those important decisions needed to ensure the nation's health, economic viability and security.

While the challenges are profound, there are good reasons to believe, and every reason to anticipate, that the new unity Government can fulfil many of these expectations.

AIR

## WORD FOR WORD

"We prevented a fourth election. We will preserve democracy. We will fight the coronavirus and take care of all of Israel's citizens."

**Blue and White leader Benny Gantz announces the formation of the National Emergency Government in Israel (Twitter, April 21).**

"The coronavirus has changed priorities around the world, and it may also change priorities in the Middle East. I am hopeful that we will strengthen even more our ties with Arab and moderate Muslim countries."

**Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (Twitter, April 21).**

"A government coalition based on a commitment to annex more occupied Palestinian territory is a threat to a rules-based world order in general... Annexation means the end of any possibility for a negotiated solution."

**Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat on the annexation provision in the new Israeli emergency government agreement (New York Times, April 22).**

"We're glad that there is a now fully formed government in Israel. As for the annexation in the West Bank, the Israelis will ultimately make those decisions... we will work closely with them to share with them our views of this in a private setting."

**US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (US State Department, April 22).**

"The world is dealing with a crisis that does not distinguish between people or where they live. The cooperation between us is vital to ensure the health of both Israelis and Palestinians...our ability to work together in times of crisis is also testament to our ability to work together in the future for the good of us all."

**Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in a phone call with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (Times of Israel, March 30).**

"The Israeli and Palestinian authorities are continuing to coordinate their responses closely and constructively, which is a major factor in the level of disease containment achieved so far."

**UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov (Algemeiner, March 30).**

"I have instructed the United States Navy to shoot down and destroy any and all Iranian gunboats if they harass our ships at sea."

**US President Donald Trump (Twitter, April 22).**





# SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

## ARAB ISRAELIS SAY “I FEEL LIKE A REAL ISRAELI”

This column has frequently highlighted trends and polls indicating that, despite some ongoing problems and discrimination, members of Israel’s Arab minority are increasingly integrating into the Israeli mainstream and finding themselves at home there.

There have been numerous stories, both in Israel and internationally, that suggest the COVID-19 crisis may be helping to encourage this trend – especially given the important and often selfless roles Arab medical workers in Israel are taking in helping victims of the virus.

Arabs make up around 17% of Israel’s doctors, 24% of the nurses, and 48% of the pharmacists. Many important medical departments at Israel’s major hospitals are headed by Arab doctors. In the Israeli medical system, Arab and Jewish patients are treated side by side, under the care of both Arab and Jewish doctors and nurses who generally work together seamlessly.

And there are some amazing stories coming out in the Israeli media of Arab health care workers going above and beyond, acting with compassion, skill and selflessness, and even making extra efforts to help Jewish patients with their religious needs.



Dr. Abed Zahalka bringing a Torah scroll into the coronavirus unit at Mayanei Hayeshua Medical Centre in Bnei Brak

To give but one example, *Haaretz* published a photo of Dr. Abed Zahalka, dressed in full protective gear, carrying a Torah scroll wrapped in a Jewish prayer shawl into the COVID-19 ward at the hospital he works at

in Bnei Brak. Bnei Brak is an ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood which has been a major hotspot for coronavirus cases in Israel. Dr. Zahalka, a Muslim, said facilitating Jewish patients carrying out their daily religious rituals would help them recover, but also said, “I felt like... I was a part of the place, of the people, of the tradition.”

All of this is very positive, especially after a period when Israeli politics has featured some divisive rhetoric about Israel’s Arab minority and their sometimes controversial representatives in the Knesset. But the truth is there is evidence things were going well in terms of Arab feelings of integration even before the pandemic.

Of particular interest is a poll conducted by Tel Aviv University’s Camille Fuchs for the Jewish Public Policy Institute (JPPI) on Israeli Arab identity.

A similar poll from August 2017, which I noted in this column in November of that year, found that, when asked “which term best describes you”, 54% of Israeli Arabs said something that was a variation of “Israeli” – “Israeli Arab,” “Arab citizen of Israel,” “Israeli,” or “Israeli Muslim.” Only 24% chose some variant of “Palestinian” – most commonly simply “Palestinian”.

That 2017 poll in itself showed major change from a poll conducted five years earlier, which showed only 32.5% of Israeli Arabs chose a variation of “Israeli” when asked about their identity.

But the new JPPI survey suggests an even greater transformation since 2017. Today, a full 74% of Israeli Arabs self-identify as either an “Israeli Arab” (51%) or simply an “Israeli” (23%). Only around 7% said their identity was as a “Palestinian.”

The trend toward identifying simply as “Israeli” with no modifier was particularly striking. A similar survey last year found only 5% of Israeli Arabs chose to call themselves simply “Israeli” at that time.

Another survey question provided additional evidence that many Israeli Arabs are identifying with a sense of ‘Israeliness’. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the statement “I feel like a real Israeli.” Almost all said they either agree completely (65%) or somewhat agree (33%) with that statement.

The selfless and often heroic efforts of Israeli Arab medical workers can only help accelerate this trend. Yet the evidence from the expressed views of Arabs themselves is that the important work of improving the integration of Israel’s Arab minority is already making excellent progress.

## AN IRANIAN PRESENT FOR YOM HASHOAH

Many people seemed to think that, with the departure of the openly antisemitic and Holocaust denying Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2013, the Iranian regime had largely stopped its rampant Jew-baiting. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The real power in the regime, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has himself engaged in Holocaust denial, including in a speech in 2014 and in a video he posted in 2016. He has also promoted antisemitic conspiracy theories, including regarding the coronavirus. In late March, Khamenei’s own office offered this explanation for a claim made by Khamenei that *djinn*s (demons) and humans could be conspiring together against Iran in the coronavirus crisis – there is “no doubt that the Jews and especially the Zionists previously have a long history of supernatural affairs and matters such as a relationship with the devil and genies.”

Meanwhile, this year the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which has come to increasingly dominate

the politics and economy of Iran under Khamenei's patronage, had its own little present for this year's Holocaust Memorial Day (called *Yom HaShoah* amongst Jews), which fell on April 21.

The IRGC saw fit to post on its official twitter account the following tweet in Persian (translation courtesy of Google Translate):

"Big Lie: Today Israel commemorates the greatest lie of the century, the Holocaust, in which the Jews created fictitious documents to influence leaders in the world, [about the] killing of six million Jews in World War II and the Nazi invasion of Poland in incinerators and gas chambers."

Ahmadinejad may be long gone, but the most powerful elements in the Iranian regime seem determined to continue to make it the most antisemitic in the world.

AIR



**Ricki Hollander**

## THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE UN'S WHO EXPOSED

The World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations agency responsible for international health under the helm of Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has been increasingly criticised for playing politics by allowing China to downplay and conceal information about the novel coronavirus outbreak in that country; for refusing to declare COVID-19 a global emergency from the get-go; and for opposing travel bans from China.

An April 15 *Wall Street Journal* editorial points out that the coronavirus epidemic "has exposed the [WHO's] process for declaring emergencies as prone to politicisation..." But this was not the first time that the WHO director-general has been criticised for allowing political considerations to influence him to cover up epidemics and human rights abuses.

Much the same can be said of the WHO's politicisation of healthcare in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israel is one of the WHO's 194 member states and belongs to the European region. The West Bank and Gaza belong to the Eastern Mediterranean region, made up of largely Arab and Muslim countries. The only non-state included in the Eastern Mediterranean region is the West Bank and Gaza Strip, referred to by the WHO as "Palestine".

WHO's Eastern Mediterranean division is overtly partisan: its literature consistently refers to the disputed land of the West Bank and Gaza as "Occupied Palestinian Territories" and, along with its reports, include incendiary propaganda claims, with the WHO imprimatur.

The WHO's political and sectarian approach to healthcare in the West Bank and Gaza is made clear in its "Country Cooperation Strategy for WHO and the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2017–2020" (CCS) – the document that sets out its strategic vision in establishing health policies, strategies and plans for Palestinian healthcare development efforts.

Shortcomings in healthcare delivery to Palestinians are blamed on Israel, with no acknowledgement of the role of the Palestinian leadership – neither Hamas nor the Palestinian Authority (PA) – in the conflict itself, or in the decisions it makes that compromise healthcare delivery.

Similarly, the WHO's most recent report on Palestinian health care, "Right to Health", published at the end of 2017, was crafted to blame Israel for limitations in Palestinian access to healthcare.

According to the executive summary, the report, "focuses on two major issues: access restrictions for patients, companions and health staff – specifically due to Israel's permit regime – and health attacks affecting patients, companions, health workers and health facilities."

While noting that the PA and Hamas have responsibilities for providing appropriate healthcare to their people, the WHO report lays the blame for Palestinian healthcare problems squarely on Israel:

"Israel as occupying power has the primary responsibility for ensuring the right to the highest attainable standard of health for the Palestinian population..."

What is missing from both the CCS and report on Palestinian healthcare is the context of Israel's complete withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and its takeover by Hamas.

There is no discussion about the effect of Palestinian terrorism that impacts the delivery of healthcare, nor of the decisions by the leadership – the Palestinian Authority (PA) that runs the West Bank, and Hamas, the terrorist group that runs Gaza – that have an impact on the delivery of healthcare. There is, for example, nothing about the subverting of medical ambulances by terrorists, Hamas' rejection of essential medical supplies from Israel, or the diversion of resources by Hamas to benefit its terrorist infrastructure; and nothing about the reduction of essential services and halting of medical shipments by the PA to Gaza resulting from the internecine fighting between the PA and Hamas.

Like its reliance on the Chinese Communist Government as a source of information on the coronavirus outbreak, the WHO relies on Gaza's Health Ministry officials as a source of information. These officials are employees of Hamas, a terrorist regime sworn to Israel's destruction.

Were the WHO really interested in improving Palestinian healthcare, it would examine all the factors involved in regulating healthcare.

It has taken a global pandemic to shed light on the fact that the United Nations World Health Organisation is not



the politically neutral organisation it was meant to be – not in China nor in the Middle East.

AIR

*Ricki Hollander is a senior media analyst at CAMERA, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis. © CAMERA (www.camera.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

## ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

### IN THE BALANCE

The coronavirus pandemic is adding an extra layer of hardship to impoverished southern Thailand, already struggling to contain the disproportionate growth of infections, yet the lockdown has brought about a rare cessation of hostilities in the insurgency-stricken region.

Ripple effects from the viral outbreak have hit the region's fishing and rubber farming industries, and the closure of the Thai-Malaysia border trapped nearly 100,000 Thai workers on the wrong side. The border provinces are already among the country's most impoverished, with an average household income of 15,000 to 20,000 baht (A\$720 to A\$965) per month, compared with 45,500 baht (A\$2,170) in Bangkok.

Confirmed infections in the southernmost provinces account for 11% of cases recorded nationwide since January, although the mostly Muslim, Malay-speaking region comprises just 3.5% of Thailand's total population.

Meanwhile, the office that oversees Muslim affairs has ordered mosques closed nationwide and banned activities associated with Ramadan, which began in late April, including food bazaars, invitations to break the daily fast with friends and colleagues, and large groupings for evening prayers.

Thai authorities already have to walk a fine line, enforcing public health measures while avoiding offending religious sensibilities, but appear to have been blindsided by the disastrous timing of the massive Islamic revivalist gatherings held by Tablighi Jamaat.

As mentioned in last month's column, hundreds of followers of the India-based missionary group tested positive for the coronavirus after attending gatherings in Malaysia, India and Pakistan, despite warnings from medical personnel and fellow Muslims to observe social distancing. Other followers who travelled to Sulawesi in Indonesia to attend another gathering, which was eventually cancelled, also caught the virus.

Around 340 Thai Tablighi Jamaat followers who attended the Malaysian event or had travelled for the Indonesian gathering have tested positive for COVID-19 since returning home. This cluster included 170 residents of the

Thai deep south. Most of those infected did not display any symptoms upon their return, but steadily streamed into hospitals in the weeks that followed.

On March 17, only four cases had been detected in the southern border region, but that number had jumped to more than 280 by mid-April.

Containing the virus in the Muslim-majority, Malay-speaking far south is a task complicated by the ongoing separatist insurgency that has claimed more than 7,000 lives over the past 16 years. Yet, the insidious spread of COVID-19 through the region has achieved what many years of counter-insurgency operations could not – a ceasefire.

On April 3, the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (National Revolutionary Front, or BRN) which has spearheaded the separatist revolt, announced it was willing, at least temporarily, to put down its arms on humanitarian grounds and facilitate the response to a threat it described as the "principal enemy of the human race", so long as the Thai military refrained from attacking its forces.

The declaration by BRN came two months after its military wing and the Thai government announced that they had opened direct talks facilitated by Malaysia, but the path since then has hardly been smooth.

Thai security forces have continued targeted raids on insurgent safe houses, leading to clashes, bombings and arrests. BRN leaders have complained that these operations – reportedly based on improved operational intelligence – are at odds with Bangkok's stated goal of advancing peace.

Larger sweeps through mountains and jungles where BRN fighters hide out have also taken a toll. In February, a running battle in the mountains of Narathiwat saw six fighters surrounded and killed in the largest single loss to BRN's military wing since 2013.

One of the largest operations to date unfolded in mid-March when security forces closed in on a group of rebel fighters camped in marshland close to Yala city. After dragging on for nine days, the operation left four rebels dead along with one Thai soldier killed and six others wounded.

The BRN struck back with a massive car-bomb attack on March 17 on the headquarters of the Southern Border Provinces Administration Centre (SBPAC) in Yala city which injured some 25 people but miraculously caused no fatalities. The ceasefire announcement followed soon afterwards.

The Thai Government has not yet given an official response to the announcement, although a spokesman for the military's southern regional command indicated that security forces would carry on with enforcing laws "to keep internal peace, regardless of [a] ceasefire."

Mutual suspicion between the two camps remains high. Hopes that the pandemic pause could create an opening for a lasting peace appear slim.

AIR





Miriam Bell

## MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Closed borders and deserted streets, crazed behaviour at supermarkets, the global economy in free fall... This is life in the time of COVID-19. It seems longer, but in a mere few weeks, the world has become a very different place.

After confirming its first case of COVID-19 on Feb. 28, New Zealand closed its borders to non-residents on March 19 and went into lockdown on March 25.

New Zealand, like Australia, currently seems to be winning its battle on the public health front at least, but it's not possible to avoid seeing reports of the devastation wrought by COVID-19 in countries like Italy, Spain, the UK and the USA.

Yet while we might be in the midst of a global crisis, that's not enough to stop some people peddling their brand of anti-Israel propaganda.

Indeed, the lockdown means that a vast number of people are living their lives online – and at least some old hands have realised that equates to a captive audience. In particular, veteran Kiwi pro-Palestinian activists Roger Fowler (the force behind the group “Kia Ora Gaza”) and John Minto have been doing their best to mobilise their troops during lockdown.

Largely using the Kia Ora Gaza website and *The Daily Blog*, they have been ensuring a constant stream of misinformation appears about Israel's actions towards Gaza during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given Israeli and Palestinian authorities have, in fact, been co-ordinating efforts to battle COVID-19 pretty well, the claims of Minto and his cohorts are easily disproven. But that has not stopped them upping the level of activity on their websites and social media channels in order to push their agenda.

Over the course of the lockdown, they organised a letter, signed by New Zealand “notables”, to the Prime Minister and New Zealand's “first online protest”, and held an online film screening (“Gaza fights for freedom”). Minto even featured in the *Sunday Star Times* magazine's “At home with...” section. He was sporting a Justice for Palestine-type t-shirt and predictably expressed his strong views on the situation between Israel and the Palestinians.

However, the current reality of life under COVID-19 means that little notice has been taken of their efforts. Despite their plea to Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, her attention has clearly been focused elsewhere, as has that of the media.

The problem is that in other, more settled times, this same small group of “activists” can garner a disproportion-

ate amount of media attention in New Zealand.

A prime example of this is a situation which occurred in Wellington in February, just before the COVID-19 crisis took hold.

The Wellington Jewish Council had requested that Wellington Council adopt the widely-used International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. The city's new mayor, Andy Foster, was keen to do so.

Then just a day before the Wellington Council meeting where the proposal was to be debated, two members of Temple Sinai – Wellington's Progressive synagogue – published an opinion piece in the city's newspaper voicing their strong opposition.

Fred Albert and Marilyn Garson claimed that the IHRA definition includes a set of examples which conflate antisemitism with anti-Zionism and that the definition is a political instrument which fails as an anti-racism tool.

Albert and Garson, who have a history of publishing such views and falsely implying they represent the wider Jewish community, also complained there had been no opportunity for public input on the motion.

Subsequently, the Wellington Jewish Council requested that the motion be withdrawn because of the controversy it was causing, but also expressed hopes that it can be returned to the agenda at some point.

But the Albert/Garson column caused significant consternation among the Jewish community.

Temple Sinai's Board of Management Chair Matthew Smith explicitly repudiated the column.

Smith said the fact that Albert and Garson self-described themselves as “members and service leaders” at the Wellington Progressive Jewish Congregation without offering any further disclaimer implied their views could be ascribed to Temple Sinai and its members.

“This effective misrepresentation is damaging to the Wellington Progressive Jewish Congregation and is disregarding of its members... Their views are in no way representative of those of the Board or the congregation, they are rather the views of a vocal fringe.”

The words of Smith and New Zealand Jewish Council spokesperson Juliet Moses, who reinforced Smith's statement, were reported by media. The problem is they did not receive nearly the degree of coverage that the words of Albert and Garson had.

All too often, that is the problem in New Zealand. The views of a very small, vocal minority of anti-Israel protesters are presented as authoritative. Further, the tiny number of Jewish people among these groups tend to be presented as representative of the wider Jewish community.

And this is not only wrong, it is contributing to a profound lack of knowledge about Israel and the Palestinians, as well as a growing misunderstanding of what constitutes antisemitism.



# BEHIND THE NEWS

## ROCKETS AND TERROR REPORT

Israel's Shin Bet security agency recently announced it had arrested three Hamas operatives who had attempted a number of attacks in Israel and the West Bank, including planning an attack at the Teddy Stadium soccer venue in Jerusalem.

Only a single rocket was fired from Gaza into Israel in recent weeks, on March 27, as Hamas and other Palestinian groups focussed efforts on containing the spread of COVID-19. While the March of Return riots have been cancelled for now, three Palestinians armed with a knife and fire accelerants snuck through the fence from Gaza into Israel on April 14. The death of a Palestinian prisoner on April 21 led to explosive balloons again being launched into Israel from Gaza after a month of quiet.

On April 22, a Palestinian armed with a pipe bomb rammed his van into a border police officer in the West Bank and then tried to stab him before being shot and killed.

An Israeli citizen and leading Palestinian activist, Ayman Haj Yahya, was indicted for spying for Iran on April 19.

On 22 April, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) announced that it had found a hand grenade and military vest hidden in one of its now vacant schools in Gaza.

## ISRAEL TRAINS GAZA MEDICS

Israeli medical staff have trained a team of Palestinian doctors and nurses from Gaza to treat coronavirus patients. A team from the Sheba Medical Centre in Ramat Gan conducted the training sessions at the Erez Border Crossing.

Israel's Defence Ministry's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories has, since the start of the medical emergency, transferred hundreds of tonnes of medical equipment, as well as food, agricultural products and building materials to Gaza, and provided information on preventing coronavirus in Arabic to the Palestinian public via a digital platform. Israel has also been regularly processing coronavirus tests from Gaza in an IDF lab and removed restrictions on previously banned dual-use items entering Gaza if these are needed to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

## MOSSAD HELPS WITH MEDICAL EFFORT

As part of the battle against coronavirus, Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu reportedly ordered the Mossad, Israel's spy agency, to focus on sourcing medical supplies for Israel via its overseas contacts.

Between mid-March and mid-April, the Mossad obtained at least 100,000 coronavirus detection kits; millions of protective gear items such as surgical masks, overalls and glasses; 50,000 doses of potential coronavirus medicines and hundreds of crucially needed ventilators.

## US BREAKS PALESTINIAN AID FREEZE DUE TO PANDEMIC

On April 6, US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman announced that the US would give US\$5 million to Palestinian hospitals in the West Bank to help fight coronavirus. The decision came despite the US cutting most of its aid funding to the Palestinians in recent years.

Relations between the US and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have

been increasingly strained since the PA cut communications with the US following President Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

The Trump Administration later clarified that the funding was part of a wider US effort to support coronavirus responses in the Middle East, and did not reverse existing policy on aid to the Palestinians.

## ZOOM WITH ISRAELIS, GET ARRESTED

On April 6, Palestinian activists in Gaza took part in a two-hour discussion with Israeli peace activists via Zoom, conversing about topics including the current COVID-19 crisis. In the days following, Hamas-run security forces arrested several of the Palestinians involved.

"Holding any activity or contact



Palestinian activists in Gaza: "Illegal" contact with Israelis

with the Israeli occupation under any cover is a crime punishable by law and a betrayal of the people and their sacrifices," a Hamas statement read.

Meanwhile, in early April, Hamas' leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, stated he was interested in resuming negotiations with Israel for a long-discussed prisoner swap deal. The proposed deal is to trade the bodies of two Israeli soldiers, and two living Israeli civilians who had entered Gaza voluntarily, for Hamas prisoners in two stages, according to Arab media reports.

## ASSAD REGIME ASSISTING HEZBOLLAH IN GOLAN

On April 10, the IDF released footage of the Syrian military helping the Hezbollah terror group establish a permanent military presence on the Syrian section of the Golan Heights.

The footage showed the commander of the Syrian Army's 1st Division and other Syrian army officers walking with the head of Hezbollah's southern command. According to an Israeli agreement with Russia, the regime is supposed to keep Hezbollah forces away from the Golan border.

On April 20, Israel struck Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Syria, reportedly killing nine fighters. Israel also struck Syria's Shayrat Airbase on April 1.

## IRAN NUCLEAR BREAKOUT TIME: "3-5 MONTHS"

The US-based Institute for Science and International Security concluded on April 21 that Iran would require only three to five months to amass 25kg of weapons-grade enriched uranium, enough for one atomic warhead, if it were to decide to do so.

This significantly shorter breakout time is based on Iran's nuclear stockpiles as of late February. Since then, Teheran has escalated breaches of its nuclear commitments and is currently in possession of at least one ton of low-enriched uranium.

Furthermore, on April 8, an Institute for Science and International Security report exposed the Shahid Mahallati Uranium Metals Workshop near Teheran as a previously undisclosed plant for manufacturing nuclear weapon cores that was in operation between 2002 and 2003.

On April 22, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps launched a military satellite into orbit. In response, US Special Representative for Iran, Brian Hook, emphasised that "Iran's space program is clearly a cover for its inter-continental ballistic missile aspirations."

## IRAN UPS THE ANTE IN PERSIAN GULF

Iran continues to harass both military and civilian vessels in the strategic Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf.

On March 27, ships approached a US-flagged tanker with raised ladders, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) approached another vessel on April 2. On April 15, the IRGC seized a Hong Kong-flagged tanker, but released it upon realising it was Chinese. Also on April 15, 11 IRGCN fast boats harassed a US naval exercise in international waters, racing back and forth across the bows and sterns of ships at high speed and at extremely close range. In response, on April 22 US President Donald Trump announced orders to fire upon any Iranian gunboat that hassles US ships.

Reports also indicate Iran has deployed Fajr-5 missile batteries on beaches along the strategically and

economically vital Strait of Hormuz.

## MAHAN AIR'S COVID-19 ROLE

Until overtaken in late April by Turkey, Iran had been the epicentre of COVID-19 in the Middle East. Newly revealed aviation data shows that a prime cause may be the continuation of flights between Iran and China, including Wuhan, by Mahan Air, for several weeks after the pandemic began. Mahan Air is a privately-owned Iranian airline linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and has allegedly frequently been used by the IRGC for ferrying weapons and fighters into Syria and elsewhere. Although the Iranian Government declared the suspension of the flights on Jan. 31, and Mahan Air insists it stopped flying to China on Feb. 5, flight data assembled by outside researchers appears to reveal flights continuing until early March.



## STRANGER THAN FICTION

### COVID-19 DEVICE BOMBS OUT

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads across the world, it is universally agreed that one crucial weapon in fighting the virus would be widespread testing with a swift turnaround.

While the world's scientists have been labouring to achieve this result, it seems they no longer need bother – Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has apparently taken a break from spreading terrorism and conflict throughout the Middle East to achieve a dramatic breakthrough in such testing.

At an April 15 grand ceremony, IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami unveiled a device, called a *Mosta'an*, that he claimed could detect the presence of coronavirus in a person or on a surface from 100 metres away in only five seconds.

The dubious technology was said to be based on "creating a magnetic field and

using a bipolar virus inside the device," but no further information was provided about the detection device except that it was trialled in 10 Iranian hospitals for 10 days and showed a success rate of up to 90%!

The device, unsurprisingly, was not well received by either the Iranian people, with media reporting it was widely mocked, or by foreign observers. However an IRGC official responded by saying negative reactions were "a result of [the West's] feelings of weakness, inferiority, and desperation in the face of the Iranians' might and will in resolving what has embroiled not only the Iranian nation, but also other nations and societies."

The UK's *Independent* newspaper noted that the *Mosta'an* appeared to be very similar to a fake bomb-detecting device previously peddled by a British fraudster named James McCormick to various countries including Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Thailand.

The claims about the *Mosta'an* are about as believable as the Iranian regime's claim that it has never pursued nuclear weapons.



## COVER STORY

A GOVERNMENT  
AT LAST

## NETANYAHU AND GANTZ MAKE A DEAL

by Amotz Asa-El

It's over. No, the coronavirus pandemic is not over, and its economic impact and social challenges may hardly have begun.

However, the 12-month political deadlock in Israel, during which these major medical/economic crises occurred, has finally ended after Israel's two largest parties – Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White – signed a coalition agreement, following three inconclusive election campaigns and seven weeks of unedifying talks.

According to the deal, Netanyahu will serve as prime minister for 18 months, and Gantz will then succeed him for 18 months, after which the next general election will be held in early 2023, unless Netanyahu and Gantz decide jointly to schedule it closer to its legal deadline of early 2024.

After creating, through new legislation, the entirely novel political position of “Alternate Prime Minister”, the pair will serve as each other's defence minister (assuming Netanyahu's legal travails allow him to), and become the other's automatic, and only, replacement. Both sides will have an equal number of cabinet ministers which they are free to allocate to their satellite parties.

Calling itself an Emergency Government, this coalition will focus on combating coronavirus, an effort which Gantz and Netanyahu will lead personally and jointly.

Blue and White's Gabi Ashkenazi – Gantz's predecessor as IDF chief of staff – will be foreign minister, while



After weeks of negotiations, Binyamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz sign a 14-page coalition deal on April 20

Likud's Yisrael Katz, the current foreign minister, will become finance minister. In addition, Blue and White will get the justice portfolio, which has become pivotal in the wake of Netanyahu's legal entanglements, and Likud will get the Knesset speakership.

The deadlock this deal ends began at the April 9 2019 general election, in which each major party won

35 of the Knesset's 120 seats. Netanyahu's decade-old right-wing coalition unravelled at that time, after former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman and his secularist Israel Beitenu party abandoned it, citing Netanyahu's retreat from a bill that would have expanded the conscription of ultra-Orthodox men into the IDF.

Israel consequently went to a new election the following September, in which the centrist Blue and White won one seat more than Likud, but still could not form the centre-left coalition which its leaders hoped would end the Netanyahu era.

There was another possibility at that time: a broad government, based on the precedent of 1984's inconclusive election, after which the two major parties of the day – Likud and Labor – agreed to share power, rotating the premiership between their leaders.

Netanyahu, who at that point had yet to be formally indicted on the corruption charges that were pending against him, offered Blue and White a rotation government. Under this scenario, he would have relinquished the premiership

once indicted, but Blue and White's four leaders turned that offer down, saying they would not serve in a government headed by a suspected felon.

It was a decision Netanyahu's opponents would soon regret, because in the next election they forced, on March 9 this year – the third within 11 months – Likud emerged with three more seats than Blue and White, though once again neither of the two parties could form government without the other.

Worse, from Blue and White's viewpoint, Likud grew its vote in that election, increasing its representation from 32 to 36 Knesset seats. This came despite Netanyahu's formal indictment between the second and third elections.

This circumstance alone caused some in Blue and White to conclude they must compromise and enter a broad government, in order to put an end to what Gantz and his colleagues portrayed as a Likud-led assault on the judicial system.

A confederation of three parties established only last year, the Blue and White coalition's debate on this dilemma had hardly begun when the coronavirus crisis upended the world and undid their union.

On the rational side, the split was over political strategy.

Former finance minister Yair Lapid and former defence minister Moshe Ya'alon wanted to first conquer the legislature by appointing a Knesset speaker from Blue and White with the support of the Joint List, a party whose mostly Arab members oppose the idea of a Jewish state. Lapid and Ya'alon's plan was to proceed from there to the establishment of a minority government and then seek its expansion.

However, Gantz and Ashkenazi argued that the pandemic changed everything, and demanded a unity government. Polls indicated that this was also the will of most voters, including Blue and White's. This was on top of the reluctance of Gantz and Ashkenazi to rely, even momentarily, on the support of the Joint List.

Beyond these dilemmas, there appears to have been some personal circumstances that led to a gap in emotional intensity between members of Blue and White's estranged leaders. Lapid and Ya'alon were both personally humiliated by Netanyahu, the former in 2014, when he was fired as finance minister, and the latter in 2016, when he was removed as defence minister. Gantz and Ashkenazi, who worked under Netanyahu as IDF commanders, carried no such baggage.

Emotion aside, when faced with his colleagues' refusal to enter into an emergency government under Netanyahu,

Gantz decided to part with them. The faction therefore split down the middle: Gantz was supported by 17 of his faction's 33 lawmakers, and the rest followed Lapid, who will now be Leader of the Opposition, leading the Yesh Atid ("There is a Future") faction.

Gantz also brings into the coalition two of Labor's three lawmakers, headed by Amir Peretz, who served as defence minister in Ehud Olmert's government, and before that as head of the Histadrut labour federation.

The 68-year-old Peretz will serve as economics minister, and his colleague Itzik Shmuli, 40, will be minister of welfare. More significantly, Peretz and Gantz announced they had plans to merge their factions, a move which may presage a deeper consolidation. Gantz also intends to appoint an Arab-Israeli citizen, yet to be named, as minister for minority affairs.

**T**here has been considerable commotion on the emerging coalition's opposite side as well.

First, lawyer and social activist Orly Levy-Abecassis, who ran with her Gesher Party on the same ticket as Labor and the far-left Meretz, has veered right, returning to where she was born and raised, as the daughter of former Likud leader and foreign minister David Levy. She will now become a minister representing Likud.

Second, and much more dramatically, Netanyahu seems

prepared – as of this writing – to leave incumbent Defence Minister Naftali Bennett and his right-wing Yamina faction out of the new coalition.

The reason for such a move, if it materialises, would be two-fold: first, the outspoken Bennett has been a thorn in Netanyahu's side – recently criticising the government in which he was a senior member for its handling of the coronavirus crisis, as he similarly did back in 2014 when he spoke out against the then-

government's management of that summer's fighting in Gaza while it was still raging.

Secondly, Yamina currently holds three important portfolios – defence, education, and transport – even though it only has six elected lawmakers. Vacating those ministries would allow Netanyahu to give Likud members more booty out of what little has been left for them after Netanyahu gave Gantz 16 ministries to allocate.

Still, even without Yamina, the Netanyahu-Gantz coalition will include a solid 72 lawmakers, and thus provide the stability Israeli politics has craved since late 2018, and even more so since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.



Split down the middle: (From left) Blue and White's Ashkenazi and Gantz join the government, while Lapid and Ya'alon refused

The new coalition's agenda will obviously be dominated by the pandemic, which is also what brought the deadlock to its end.

The pandemic caused Gantz to retreat from his demand that the indicted Netanyahu clear the scene until the charges against him were resolved, and the pandemic made Netanyahu seek a partner with whom to share responsibility for the tough decisions it demands.

Until he made his move, some pundits thought Netanyahu was actually seeking yet another election. This impression was underscored by polls that indicated the public was largely satisfied with Netanyahu's handling of the coronavirus crisis, and that support for Likud was consequently rising.

Netanyahu had indeed responded to the crisis faster than most other world leaders. Israel stopped flights from China and neighbouring countries earlier than others, and was also quicker to impose social distancing, all of which resulted in comparably lower rates of contagion in Israel, compared with most of Europe and the US.

Even so, with the Israeli jobless rate suddenly exceeding 24%; with school closure increasingly unsettling parents; and with small business owners vocally demanding they be allowed to reopen their stores, Netanyahu likely knew that the current positive polls might well prove meaningless by the time an early election rolled around in August.

Now he will be handling the crisis together with Gantz, and if public impatience and dissatisfaction grow, as they likely will, he will not be held solely accountable.

The pair will be joined in this effort by Katz, the designated finance minister, who incidentally grew up with Gantz in the same small farming community south of Tel Aviv, Kfar Ahim, which means, perhaps proverbially, "village of brothers".

An efficient administrator and powerful party boss, the 64-year-old Katz will be tasked with making deep budgetary cuts, including possibly slashing public-sector salaries, in order to finance compensation for the unemployed and for the private sector's losses in the wake of the pandemic.

**"The new coalition's agenda will obviously be dominated by the pandemic, which is also what brought the deadlock to its end"**

The three will nominally manage the crisis, together with the Health Minister. Yaakov Litzman, one of Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox loyalists, currently holds that position, but if he keeps the job, the others will likely effectively sideline him. Litzman has been criticised for being ineffective as an administrator, focusing largely on sectarian issues like delaying social distancing in synagogues, and is alleged to have flouted his own ministry's social distancing guide-

lines. Litzman also faces allegations of interference in the case to extradite former Australian Jewish school principal and accused child sex offender Malka Leifer to Melbourne. However, Litzman has reportedly requested to move to housing.

**B**eyond the coronavirus crisis, the new coalition will be tested on two more fronts: the politicisation of the judicial system and the Trump Administration's peace plan released in late January.

Regarding the judiciary, Netanyahu will stand trial while Blue and White runs the Ministry of Justice, which oversees the court system.

This means that Gantz's designated justice minister, Avi Nissenkorn, a 53-year-old lawyer and former chairman of the Histadrut labour federation, will be tasked with undoing the legacy of Likud's Amir Ohana. It has been alleged Ohana tried to use the pandemic to delay Netanyahu's trial, and before that, broke precedent by trying to install his own candidate as State Attorney, while rejecting the candidate of the non-political Attorney-General.

According to the details of the Netanyahu-Gantz deal, all senior civil service appointments, except for certain Ambassadorships, will be made by consensus.

This provision will first be applied to Nissenkorn's appointment of a new State Attorney. Other positions, such as a new Inspector General for Israel's Police and an Ambassador to Washington, will test the new coalition's harmony soon after it is sworn in sometime in early May.

Concerning the Trump peace plan, Netanyahu insisted on applying its recommendation that Israel extend its sovereignty to the Jordan Valley and certain other parts of the West Bank, by passing a law to this effect. Gantz agreed, but only if the legislation was approved in advance by Washington.

Whatever transpires on this front, particularly if it is Palestinian violence and strong diplomatic protests from Jordan, might also test the new coalition's effectiveness and durability.

Yet more than anything else, Israel's 35th government seems set to be remembered for signalling the beginning of the end of the Netanyahu era, which began with his return to the premiership in late 2009.

For better or for worse, Netanyahu's current premier-

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ship now appears to have a formal expiration date, September 2021 – more than a dozen years after he returned to Israel's top job.

If the deal holds up until then, Gantz can say that, in the short year since he entered politics, he has left an imprint on Israeli political history deeper than most other Israeli politicians made even after decades in Jerusalem's corridors of power.

AIR

## NETANYAHU AND ISRAEL'S CENTRIST NEW GOVERNMENT

by Jonathan Tobin

Israel's year-long political standoff is finally over, and the only real winner is Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Although there were moments when it seemed as if there was no way he could hold onto office for long, Netanyahu again proved that it's a mistake to underestimate his political acumen or survival instincts.

But there is something else about this outcome that Netanyahu's international detractors need to understand. The agreement does reaffirm the conventional wisdom that views Netanyahu as a ruthless, skilled and self-interested partisan dedicated to holding onto power at virtually any cost.

But contrary to most mainstream media coverage of Israel, the deal with Blue and White coalition leader Benny Gantz also debunks the notion that Netanyahu is an extremist who is wrecking Israel by dragging it to the right, as well as sabotaging hopes of peace with the Palestinians. Israel's new government is instead proof that Netanyahu is, at heart, a consensus politician most happy when leading from the centre and with his right-wing allies cut out of the decision-making process.

The deal he signed on April 20 with Gantz will likely enable the incumbent Prime Minister to remain in office for the next 18 months and call a new election, which he might win, even if the Israeli Supreme Court rules that he is ineligible to stand as prime minister because of his upcoming corruption trial.

Netanyahu's enemies are lamenting what they see as Gantz's weakness, as well as the way the coronavirus pandemic strengthened the Prime Minister's hand. Still, as many in the Likud and in its erstwhile right-wing partner Yamina Party are pointing out, while Netanyahu got what he wanted out of the agreement, the interests of the national camp that he has led for a generation did not fare as well.

That's not just because the recent deal left both Yamina and leading Likud figures without their share of power. The unity deal also ensures that outside of guaranteeing a vote on the annexation of some West Bank settlements in the coming year, the new Government is not committed to the platform Netanyahu ran on.

On judicial reform, economics and, yes, even settlement growth, the Government will be split rather than united. That ensures that stalemate, rather than right-wing governance, will largely characterise the next three years – assuming, that is, that the judges' rulings in the fraud, corruption and breach of trust allegations against Netanyahu don't cut the scheme short by seeking to do what the voters and his political opponents could not, and depose him.

The assumption in some quarters is that this is frustrating for Netanyahu. That isn't the case. While he is the undoubted idol of Israel's right-wing voters, he is perfectly pleased not to be leading a narrow right-wing government largely dominated by ideologues. To the contrary, his preference has always been for assembling the most broad-based government possible.

That was true in 2009, when he assembled a government that included the Labor Party, then led by Ehud Barak, even though he could have assembled a majority that was solely composed of right-wing and religious parties.

After the next election in 2013, the same thing happened as Netanyahu invited both Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid Party and Tzipi Livni's Hatnua Party into his government, disappointing those on the right who wanted him to govern with the narrow majority that he had won.

It's true that those who join in coalitions with Netanyahu generally find the experience extremely unpleasant. Barak, Lapid and Livni all emerged from their time at Netanyahu's cabinet table determined never to do it again. That's one of the reasons why Netanyahu wound up leading a narrow right-wing/religious coalition after the 2015 election.

The defection of Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu Party, which leans strongly to the right on security issues though is avowedly secular, from Netanyahu's bloc at the end of 2018 led to the long stalemate that has just ended.

That dispute, along with others that led to other right-wing figures such as Telem Party chief and former defence minister Moshe Ya'alon and other former members of Gantz's Blue and White coalition to take sides against the Prime Minister, was rooted more in personal animosity than ideology.

Netanyahu is probably quite glad to see his Yamina allies decide to go into opposition, as opposed to joining his new government. Yamina wants to prod Netanyahu to push the envelope on establishing Israeli sovereignty over land in the West Bank, when he is content merely to discuss

the possibility, while still resisting – as he has throughout his career – pressure on Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians.

While Netanyahu's flacks attacked Gantz as a leftist during the three election campaigns of 2019-20, the Prime Minister and Gantz, the new Defence Minister/future prime minister, are largely in agreement on most security issues. When they clash, it will be about Netanyahu's efforts to gain immunity from prosecution or when he pursues efforts to reform what he sees as an out-of-control Israeli judiciary.

And if that leads to stasis rather than pushing ahead the agenda of the settlement movement or others in his core constituency, Netanyahu won't shed a tear so long as his grip on high office remains secure.

The easy way that Netanyahu and Gantz, who ran to the right in the elections to appear as close to the Prime Minister on the peace process as possible, will be able to cooperate on security issues demonstrates another element of Israeli politics that many still struggle to understand. They represent a broad consensus that believes that in the absence of a credible peace partner, the best Israel can do is to manage the conflict and secure those areas – like the Jordan Valley and the settlement blocs – that the Jewish state will never surrender, even if peace were possible.

Say what you like about Netanyahu, whose ultimate fate will likely be settled in court, but calling him an extremist is simply untrue.

AIR

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## THE COMPLEXITIES OF 'APPLYING SOVEREIGNTY' IN THE WEST BANK

by David Makovsky

On April 20, after the longest electoral deadlock in Israel's history, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and rival Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz signed an agreement to form a unity government with a rotating premiership. Netanyahu will lead the Government for the first 18 months, even as he battles three corruption indictments; Gantz will take the second rotation.

Although officials have committed to parity between the new Government's right-wing and centre blocs, seri-

ous questions persist about whether this principle will be sustained given their wide disparity in parliamentary seats held. An early test for the new Government will come in the next two months, as Israel decides whether to "apply sovereignty" in parts of the West Bank, which many observers view as de facto annexation. According to the April 20 agreement, Netanyahu will be allowed to bring this issue before cabinet or even a parliamentary vote from July 1, provided he fulfils two stipulations in advance: obtaining "full agreement" from the United States, and conducting "consultations" internationally.



Netanyahu sees expanding sovereignty to areas of the West Bank as a key part of his legacy

### WHY DOES NETANYAHU WANT SOVEREIGNTY, AND WHY NOW?

The idea of applying sovereignty has its origins in former Israeli Likud PM Menachem Begin's December 1981 decision to unilaterally apply Israeli "law, jurisdiction, and administration" to the Golan Heights. In his public remarks at the time, Begin – always a stickler for legal distinctions – chose this formulation rather than "annexation" and pledged that it would not prohibit Israel from engaging in peace talks with Syria. In other words, applying sovereignty was reversible, while annexation was irreversible. To most observers inside and outside Israel, however, this sounds like a distinction without a difference.

Granted, the Golan decision did not stop Israel from negotiating over the territory's future between 1992 and 2010 (including under governments led by Netanyahu). Yet Israel seems to have closed the issue indefinitely amid the Syrian regime's brutal, decade-long war, Iran's military entrenchment close to the Golan, and US President Donald Trump's March 2019 announcement that the United States would henceforth recognise Israeli "annexation" of that territory.

Shortly after Trump's announcement, Netanyahu declared that he would also support applying Israeli sovereignty to all West Bank settlements, hoping that this proposal would likewise gain public approval from Washington. Yet a May 2019 blog post by Joel Singer – former legal advisor to the Israeli Foreign Ministry and a top negotiator during the Oslo Accords – called this step a "poison pill" that would make it extremely difficult to reach a two-state solution.

He also laid out some of the political and legal hurdles that would need to be cleared in order to pass such a measure. According to him, the matter falls under the jurisdiction of the Referendum Law of 2014, meaning it would require approval from a super-majority of the Knesset (80 out of 120 members) or 50% of Israeli voters in a referendum.

In Netanyahu's view, however, the Trump Administration peace plan presented on Jan. 28 has given him an historic opportunity to fulfil long-term territorial goals. He respected the Administration's wishes to wait until a new government was formed before attempting to annex the 30% of the West Bank allocated to Israel in the peace plan. Yet he now sees application of sovereignty as a key component of his legacy.

The window for securing that component may be quite narrow, though. The coronavirus pandemic has added to the uncertainty over whether President Trump will be re-elected in November, so Netanyahu is adamant about acting on annexation before then. He also seems to believe that Trump is willing to run interference with key Arab states so long as Israel makes the move before the most intense portion of the presidential election campaign (i.e., around September, if history is any indicator).

Netanyahu's timetable also appears driven by concerns that Trump's opponent Joe Biden could build a significant electoral lead before November. All of these factors help explain why Netanyahu rejected Gantz's offer to delay annexation discussions for six months, instead insisting on a July deadline.

## ISRAEL'S PLANS, TRUMP'S TERMS?

One key unknown is where exactly the application of sovereignty would occur:

- In all 128 Israeli settlements (which would make a two-state solution impossible).
- In the Jordan Valley frontier (a key security zone that holds major sensitivities for Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians).
- In the 51 settlements that lie inside the West Bank security barrier, house most of the settlers, and take up around 8% of the land (a move that could be consistent with a two-state solution if conducted via negotiations and territorial swaps with the Palestinians, though any such talks seem unfeasible at present).
- In a limited number of less controversial settlements adjacent to Israeli urban areas (e.g., Gush Etzion, which has been included as part of Israel in leaked Palestinian maps related to past two-state discussions).

Some believe that Netanyahu's top priority right now is the Jordan Valley.

As for the US view, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that "the Israelis ultimately make those decisions," suggesting the Administration will be a partner rather than an

obstacle in this regard and will not block Israeli application of sovereignty.

The remaining question is conditionality. If Israel decides to apply sovereignty, will the US ask the Knesset to commit to the measure called for in the Trump peace plan, namely, yielding the remainder of the West Bank to the Palestinians?

## INTERNATIONAL CHALLENGES

Jordan's Prime Minister Omar Razzaz has stated that West Bank annexations under any name would put Israel's peace treaty with his country in a deep freeze, though speculation suggests that bilateral security cooperation would continue.

Unconfirmed reports also indicate the Palestinian Authority might suspend security coordination after such a move, though that inclination could be tempered by continued economic downturns and dependency on Israel during the pandemic. Europe has substantial objections as well – in February, 21 EU countries came out against the Trump plan and annexation.

The potential reaction among Gulf Arab states is uncertain. Israel has prioritised quiet ties with them amid strategic convergence on Iran and a shared focus on technological development. Yet, even if these states are tired of the Palestinian issue, they do not like being publicly embarrassed, and they remain risk-averse. As such, they are unlikely to see the upside of publicly aligning with unilateral Israeli annexations that are seen to impinge on



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Jordan's security and Palestinian rights – especially in the context of a pandemic that has rendered regional governments all the more vulnerable to public unrest.

Another challenge lies in Washington, where Democrats may depict Netanyahu's annexation push as not only a deadly blow to peace efforts, but also as a ploy to help Trump win re-election. Leading pro-Israel Democrats in Congress have publicly rejected such proposals for at least a year now. The full diplomatic damage of pressing ahead with annexation might not be felt immediately, but congressional sources indicate they would not be surprised if legislators call for restricting military assistance to Israel in the future.

## A TEST FOR GANTZ AND ASHKENAZI

During the new Government's first rotation, Gantz will serve as defence minister while his Blue and White colleague Gabi Ashkenazi will serve as foreign minister. It will be interesting to see how both men act leading up to the July 1 deadline. They are already being accused domestically of lending their imprimatur to annexation and not using their leverage to delay or reshape the issue at this key moment. In response, they privately argue that Netanyahu could win the requisite support for applying sovereignty by wooing just a handful of dissident parliamentarians.

Yet given their military record as former IDF chiefs

of staff, Gantz and Ashkenazi are well aware how important it is for Israel to maintain good ties with the United States, Europe, and Arab governments. For example, given Amman's frosty relationship with Netanyahu, it would not be surprising to see Jordanian officials meet with the two former generals in the coming weeks to explain how annexation might affect the kingdom's internal stability. Both men will likely meet with European officials and US Democrats as well.

## CONCLUSION

In theory, a broader Government should enable Israel to make favourable progress on several fronts: extricating itself from its reliance on pro-settler factions, which have held the balance of political power since 2015; reaching wider constituencies in key foreign countries; and restoring bipartisan cooperation with Washington. Yet the looming July 1 annexation deadline puts all of these potential gains in peril very early in the new government's tenure. AIR

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and coauthor with Dennis Ross of the book Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny. © Washington Institute, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

## DOES COALITION DEAL PUT THE TRUMP PEACE PLAN BACK ON TRACK?

By Stephen Daisley

**A**fter three stalemate elections in a year, Israel finally has a government. The most immediate concerns for Israelis are how the new administration will handle the coronavirus outbreak, but for the rest of the world, what matters most is paragraph 29 of Netanyahu and Gantz's coalition agreement.

Paragraph 29 says Netanyahu can bring forward a bill to apply sovereignty to Israeli settlements in the West Bank as early as July 1. Although Gantz personally opposes this approach, he will not stand in the way. Provided Netanyahu can find the votes, we could be just weeks away from Israel formally asserting itself as the *de jure* sovereign over the West Bank settlements.

This will of course be met with resistance. Yousef al-Hasaneh has already accused Netanyahu and Gantz of "extremism" and undermining the peace process. Yousef al-Hasaneh is the spokesman for Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Alongside PIJ, expect cold fury from the likes of the UN, the EU, CNN and the BBC. Terms like "annexation", "colonisation" and "bantustans" will almost certainly be thrown around.

But a sovereignty bill, if it passes into law, will simply begin the process of implementing US President Donald Trump's peace plan, announced in January. That plan assigns 30% of the West Bank/Judea and Samaria to Israel, and the other 70% to a demilitarised Palestinian state. The United States intends to rec-

ognise this Israeli sovereignty provided Jerusalem agrees to map out a Palestinian state with its opposite numbers in Ramallah.

It now falls to the Palestinians to decide whether this is where the Israeli settlement enterprise ends or whether it continues advocating for complete sovereignty.

The Palestinians and their forerunner representatives have refused every offer of statehood made to them. If they refuse this one, they may not get another.

One of the reasons for Palestinian rejectionism is that such behaviour is rewarded by the international community. Israel makes concessions, the Palestinians spurn the concessions, the world demands Israel make more, Israel makes more, the Palestinians again rebuff them, and the world shakes its collective head at those hard-line Israelis who just refuse to give any ground. Encouraging Palestinian intransigence keeps them stateless and their national fate in the hands of others. Indulging their rejectionism, their payments to terrorists who kill Israelis, and their kindergarten plays where children dress up as suicide bombers, makes it all the harder to achieve a Palestinian state.

The sovereignty bill Netanyahu is likely to bring forward will leave the Palestinians with the vast majority of Judea and Samaria on which to found their state. Any country that considers itself a friend to the Palestinians should beg them to take the deal and end the conflict. AIR

*Stephen Daisley is a Scottish journalist, political commentator and film critic. Reprinted from The Spectator. © The Spectator, all rights reserved, reprinted by permission.*

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# Israeli tech versus COVID-19

“Start-Up Nation” innovation in the fight against the virus

by Ahron Shapiro and Naomi Levin

The worldwide mobilisation to address the coronavirus pandemic has been compared to a war, and nowhere has this been more true than in Israel, where government, defence and academia have pulled together as in wartime to provide innovative solutions to the crisis both domestically and as part of the global community.

Israel, the world's leader in start-up companies per capita, has directed that innovative mindset towards some trendsetting efforts to harness technologies and resources to mitigate the coronavirus crisis on four fronts: improving testing methods for determining if people have contracted the virus; creating better treatments to lower mortality rates for those already infected; developing a vaccine to protect those who haven't been stricken; and improving patient care to deliver the best outcomes for coronavirus patients while minimising risk to the people caring for them.

## TESTING IMPROVEMENTS

Testing for coronavirus has been a highly fraught aspect of the current outbreak given the global shortage of testing kits, and the slow pace and labour intensiveness of traditional lab testing methods.

Israeli researchers have been taking a multi-faceted approach to improving testing methods through technology.

At least three different Israeli companies are developing coronavirus screening and monitoring platforms, based on artificial intelligence, that analyse the sound of a patient's voice and breathing, observing patterns in order to detect the illness, as well as allowing doctors to evaluate the severity of the symptoms among those infected.

Cordio Medical has modified its HearO app, which had previously been used to remotely monitor fluid accumulation in the lungs of outpatients suffering from heart failure. HearO, already in use in 10 Israeli hospitals and medical institutions, is now undergoing clinical trials for coronavirus cases.

Tel Aviv start-up Vocalis Health, working under the guidance of Israel's Defence Ministry, is developing a

similar product, while Herzliya-based Voca – whose core business focuses on automated call centre technology – has partnered with Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, USA, to develop what it calls the Corona Voice Detect app.

Coronavirus can also potentially be detected not only through sound but through smell. Israel's Ministry of Defence is teaching dogs from the IDF canine unit to help identify coronavirus patients by smelling saliva samples – a technique that is also being explored in other parts of the world.

On the patient side, Israeli health funds working together with civilian and military partners have unveiled innovative walk-up kiosks in two Israeli cities offering contactless testing for coronavirus. Health care workers conduct the tests from inside pressurised booths using rubber gloves that extend outwards from the enclosure. Between patients, the gloves are carefully washed with disinfectant, providing a secure environment for patient and clinician alike.

A further 30 booths are slated to be deployed in the coming days.

“We would be happy to share the design plans with any health organisation worldwide in order to support our shared mission of fighting the COVID-19 virus,” Maccabi health fund CEO Ran Sa'ar told the UK's *Daily Mail*.



Israel has invented a contactless coronavirus testing booth, the plans for which it is now offering to other countries

Meanwhile, on the laboratory side, researchers at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology, collaborating with experts at Rambam Medical Centre in Haifa, have come up with a new method of processing test results that could vastly speed up the rate at which tests for the virus can be completed.

The technique, known as “pooling”, involves protocols which make it possible for a lab to test samples from up to 64 people at the same time, rather than one at a time, as is the usual practice.

Also, the British-Israeli company “diagnostics.ai”, whose R&D centre is based in Herzliya, is using artificial intelligence to vastly shorten the time it takes for labs in the US and UK to process coronavirus test results, effectively doubling the rate of testing without the need for more technicians.

Tel Aviv University (TAU) has opened a dedicated coronavirus research lab, which will also be able to perform 1,000 tests for coronavirus a day, adding to Israel's ability to slow the spread of the virus.

Israel has also recruited more than 600 doctoral students from across the country's top universities and medical centres to help with testing.

“The level of collaboration between faculty, physicians, health professionals and medical and graduate students





Israel has recruited its university labs and doctoral students to assist with testing

at the universities, hospitals, health maintenance organisations, Magen David Adom, and Ministry of Health, is unprecedented in Israel,” Professor Karen Avraham, Vice Dean of TAU’s Sackler Faculty of Medicine, reflected.

## BETTER CORONAVIRUS TREATMENTS

While the public’s focus may be on vaccine development, inoculations are useless to the millions of people worldwide who have already contracted the virus, or those who are expected to in coming months.

For those people, the medical community is more focused on finding off-the-shelf treatments that might weaken the virus’ fatal grip on so many patients, especially the elderly and those with pre-existing health issues.

To that end, scientists at Israel’s Weizmann Institute of Science, together with Diamond Light Source laboratory in the UK, are “pioneering a revolutionary method of scientific research that could see a candidate for an anti-coronavirus drug emerge ‘within weeks’” the UK’s *Jewish Chronicle* reported.

According to Dr. Nir London, who heads the team at Weizmann, the technique involves using the “crowd-sourcing of global intelligence” to quickly generate an “unprecedented amount of preliminary data” and then using tests conducted on all proposed molecules in parallel, rather than linearly, enabling scientists to follow up on “500 to a 1,000 compounds” in the same period it would normally take to test a “few tens of compounds.”

Potential treatments go beyond pharmaceuticals. Haifa-based Pluristem has used its PLX placenta-based stem cell-therapy product to treat seven ventilated, critically ill coronavirus patients, including one in a US hospital. All of them survived, giving hope for its potential as a treatment in improving coronavirus survival rates.

Like other countries, Israeli hospitals are also experimenting with treating patients with antibodies from people who have recovered from the virus. Results, while encouraging, are still inconclusive.

Coronavirus kills most of its victims by affecting the

lungs – typically, in such cases, double pneumonia sets in and the organ loses its ability to oxygenate blood, until the point that the weakened body can no longer breathe on its own and the patient dies.

At that crucial point for so many, the only thing standing in the way of death is a ventilator, which breathes for the patient until the immune system can beat back the virus and healing begins.

The fear in Israel, as in Australia and elsewhere, has been that the number of critical patients in need of ventilation will exceed the number of ventilators available. It has been said that in the war against the coronavirus, ventilators are the tanks on the battlefield, personal protective equipment (PPE) are the bullets.

Perhaps it’s not surprising, then, that Israel’s Ministry of Defence, defence contractors and entire units of the Israel Defence Forces itself have been redeployed as ventilator builders and PPE makers virtually overnight.

The IDF tasked its famous Unit 81, the military intelligence technology unit, with upgrading simple and inexpensive household breathing regulators, commonly known as CPAP machines, into “smart” ICU-grade ventilators. The first prototype reportedly took a month to perfect. Israel’s Health Ministry ordered 1,000 – the first hundred were delivered on April 19.

Meanwhile, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, Israel’s Defence Ministry, in collaboration with medical company Inovytec and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), launched a production line for Ventway Sparrow ventilators on the grounds of a classified IAI missile production site.

Additionally, Unit 108 of the Israeli Air Force has teamed up with Microsoft Israel Research and Development, Ichilov Medical Centre, Magen David Adom (MDA) and others to develop a simple respirator that could be mass-produced in labs at low cost. It is being developed as “open source” so that countries around the world can ramp up manufacturing locally, affordably and in a short period of time.

The IDF has also retooled assembly lines previously used to build seats for tanks in order to produce protective goggles for health care workers.

## THE RACE FOR A VACCINE

Early reports that Israel was ready to export a coronavirus vaccine to the world were premature: In reality, even vaccines that appear to work on lab animals need additional testing before they can be considered safe and effective in humans. All such candidates would require extensive clinical trials that take at least a year. However, there are at least four Israeli institutions closing in on such a vaccine.

Israel’s state-run Institute for Biological Research (IIBR) was tasked with the job of creating a vaccine early

on by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Fifty top scientists at the Institute are working on the vaccine, in three separate teams, alongside a global biotech company with complementary expertise. As of the end of March, according to reports, IIBR had begun testing a COVID-19 vaccine prototype on rodents.

In addition, Migal Galilee Research Institute, located in Kiryat Shmona in Israel's far-north, has spent four years working on a vaccine for a coronavirus disease in poultry that has many similarities to the current novel coronavirus which is causing the current pandemic among humans.

David Zigdon, the CEO of Migal Galilee Research Institute, said his lab was working hard to accelerate the vaccine's development, and is expecting to be able to go to clinical trials "within a few months".

"The experiments we have carried out so far show that because the vaccine does not include the virus itself, it will be safe to use in immune-suppressed recipients, and has fewer chances of side effects," Zigdon said in an April 22 statement announcing a new infusion of venture capital funding in the vaccine's development.

Meanwhile, Professor Jonathan Gershoni of the School of Molecular Cell Biology and Biotechnology at TAU, announced on April 19 that his lab was "two-thirds of the way to a vaccine" that would tackle not only COVID-19, but the entire family of coronaviruses – past, present and future.

Gershoni was recently granted a US patent for his vaccine model, which would target the coronavirus' Receptor Binding Motif (RBM) – what he believes is a vulnerable keystone in the virus' mechanism for invading a cell. According to Gershoni, who has studied the coronavirus family since 2004, a vaccine that would target the virus at this stage would likely be effective against any mutation.

"The idea is to recreate, to reconstitute, to construct an RBM of COVID-19 virus and use it as the vaccine," he told the *Jerusalem Post*. "That is to say, you would inject a small 50 amino-acid sequence and it would allow our immune

system to focus on it and create antibodies that would directly target the virus at its weak spot."

Finally, at Haifa's Technion, Dr. Avi Schroeder, head of the Laboratory for Targeted Drug Delivery and Personalised Medicine Technologies, is aiming to rework an immunity-boosting treatment he has previously developed to fight a virus affecting shrimp into a coronavirus vaccine.

"Viruses infect us by multiplying inside our cells," Schroeder told *Forbes*. "To do this the virus produces proteins. [When] we stop the production of these proteins inside the body, this is called RNA interference. The shrimp [treatment] triggers RNA interference, breaking down the messenger RNA that carries the virus that infects the body", and Schroeder believes he can interfere with coronavirus RNA in the same way.



A quarantine Telemed robot and control centre at the Sheba Medical Centre

## REFINING PATIENT CARE

Winning the war against coronavirus requires a holistic approach that maximises efficiency in caring for patients, while at the same time minimising exposure to the virus, not only for doctors and nurses, but other patients and staff in the hospital. Israeli tech companies are providing innovative solutions in all aspects of patient care.

For example, CLEW Medical, based in the coastal city of Netanya, has developed an artificial intelligence platform for use in intensive care units (ICU) designed to identify a pattern of respiratory deterioration in patients in real-time and issue pre-emptive warnings to ICU doctors accordingly. While already in use in some Israeli hospitals and not aimed at coronavirus per se, the technology is expected to be especially valuable in coronavirus cases, given the disease's notoriously fast-moving nature.

The Israeli defence contractor Elbit Systems has developed an automated radar-based system to measure a patient's heartbeat, respiration rate and body temperature from a distance, without any need for physical contact by a medical worker. It is currently undergoing medical trials at Rabin Medical Centre.

Tel Aviv-based Kryon Systems has developed an automation system to help Israel's health insurance companies quickly process the mountains of data coming in from the

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country's growing number of coronavirus patients – as well as those who have tested negative. Kryon is now offering its automation technology free of charge to assist in the global effort to combat the virus.

In Israel, even secondary school students have made a meaningful technological contribution to the national effort, with students at the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa answering the call of Rambam Hospital for a remote-controlled robot to handle some of the tasks required in coronavirus wards, reducing the exposure of staff to the virus.

Israel has proven itself to be at the cutting edge in helping solve this dangerous pandemic. Time remains of the essence, but Israel's entrepreneurs, academics, engineers and innovators appear to not be wasting any of it. AIR

## COVID-19 AND THE FATE OF INDONESIAN DEMOCRACY

by Zachary Abuza

**A**t the time of writing, Indonesia had 7,775 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the second highest in Southeast Asia. The rate of infection was doubling every 13 days.

But commentators really do not have a handle on the scope of the problem, as Indonesia has the lowest rate of testing in the region. As of April 23, Indonesia had conducted fewer than 50,000 tests, or 0.17 tests per 1,000 people. Even the Philippines had conducted three times that amount.

Six hundred and forty-seven deaths from COVID-19 have been reported (51% of the total reported COVID-19 deaths in Southeast Asia). But anecdotal reports suggest that this is a gross undercounting, with funerals in some provinces 40% higher than normal times. The Indonesian Doctors' Association estimates more than a thousand dead, with many untested but having had COVID-19 symptoms.

The case fatality rate in Indonesia is the highest in Southeast Asia, currently over 9%. By comparison, Malaysia, which until mid-April had a similar number of confirmed cases, had a case fatality rate of just 1.7%. In part

that is a factor of the dearth of testing in Indonesia. But it also speaks to Indonesia's chronic underinvestment in its public health.

Indonesia's public health spending is 3.1% of government spending, well below the ASEAN average of 4%, far below its neighbours: Malaysia (3.8%), Thailand (3.7%), Philippines (4.4%), and Vietnam (5.7%). The figures for physicians per 1,000 population show the same thing: Indonesia has 0.38 doctors per 1,000 people; the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) average is 1.04. Indonesia pales in comparison with its neighbours: Malaysia (1.51), Thailand (0.81), Philippines (1.28), Vietnam (0.82). The Global Health Index makes clear that in terms of most of their six categories (detection, risk, norms, prevention, response, and health), Indonesia lags behind its peers.

And yet, Indonesia is no stranger to viral epidemics: It has weathered SARS, H1N1, avian influenza, swine flu and MERS. Yet it did not make significant investments in preparedness, monitoring, or its health care systems.

The deaths of over 42 doctors and nurses put additional strains on the health care system.

And lest we forget, Indonesia's already under-resourced health care system was further hobbled by the 2009 Law on Health that prioritised a creeping Islamist agenda. Its priority was assuring that all Muslims have the right to a Muslim doctor.



The low level of testing, and funeral statistics, suggest Indonesia's COVID-19 problem is far worse than official figures imply

At the current rate of growth, Indonesia is likely to see well over 100,000 deaths from COVID-19 by the end of 2020, the earliest we may see a vaccine come on-line. However, this estimate may change in the wake of the new restrictions announced on April 23.

### PRESIDENT WIDODO'S RESPONSE

While no government should be blamed for a pandemic, how they respond to it is fair game. And what we have seen from the Indonesian Government's initial response, up to April 22, has been inept, poorly communicated, indecisive, lacking transparency, and based on short-term economic calculations, not science.

The pandemic erupted in the second term of President Joko Widodo (widely known by the nickname "Jokowi"). He knew the levers of government. Yet the response was bungled from the start. The Government was in complete denial, downplaying the crisis, apparently fearing negative economic repercussions.



While other governments began lockdowns, President Jokowi was courting tourists. The Government pushed back against social distancing, only imposing stricter measures in mid-April, already too late. The Government flip-flopped on whether to allow people to return to their provinces for the Eid al-Fitr holiday, following Ramadan, before announcing last minute extensive travel bans on April 23. Rapid transmission beyond the capital, where health care is even more under-resourced, will prolong the pandemic and increase the death toll.

While President Jokowi has accepted more testing kits from South Korea, and pledged to step up the rate of testing, the base line is so low that it really won't stem the rate of transmissions soon.

The belated announcement at the start of Ramadan on April 23 of a ban on "sea, air, land and railway transportation" across all of Indonesia, lasting until June, may possibly have more of an effect.

Indonesia has a very rudimentary social safety net. While the Government allocated IDR 405 trillion (AUD\$40 billion) for urgent injection into the health infrastructure, including purchases of personal protection equipment (PPE) from China, it also had to earmark some social welfare for up to 10 million households. It has pledged electricity and food subsidies.

Indonesia is already the largest food importer in South-east Asia and maintaining low prices for food and staples is critical for the Government. While the Government claims that it has 3.5 million tons of rice stockpiled, its national logistics agency BULOG is riddled with corruption and inefficiency.

Moreover, Indonesia had already acknowledged needing to import one million tons of rice in 2020, up from 600,000 tons in 2019. And due to droughts in Thailand and Vietnam in 2019, largely caused by China's damming of the Mekong, rice prices are 7% higher. And with the pandemic, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia (the second, third, and eighth largest exporters, respectively) have all temporarily halted rice exports because of fears of hoarding and price spikes at home. Should the price of food staples go up dramatically, there is a high potential for unrest.

The pandemic's economic implications will be enormous, larger than the 2007-08 Asian Economic Crisis, which resulted in 40 million Indonesians unemployed or underemployed, and saw a major economic contraction. Indonesia's currency is already approaching the exchange rate at the height of the 1998 crisis, US\$1 being equal to IDR 15,795. In Jakarta alone, 300,000 workers are already

eligible for unemployment benefits.

Commodity exports will fall with economic contractions and declining manufacturing in the region.

Indonesia is also likely to take another hit: regional countries that rely on migrant workers are going to be very reluctant to take any as long as the pandemic rages in Indonesia. That will lead to a significant drop in remittances, impacting domestic consumption.

## THE POLITICAL AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS

While President Jokowi is in his last term and not permitted to run again, he still has well over five years to serve. And yet his timid response, mixed messages, and lack of a vision for moving forward have damaged his legitimacy and public trust in his Administration. While not a lame duck, he will emerge weaker politically, and with diminished public confidence.

That has an important implication for civil-military relations. Since the start of his Administration in 2014, the Indonesian

military has been pushing to reassert itself in public life and civil administration. Though this push, known as *Bela Negara*, meaning "Defending the Nation," was largely the pet project of the former minister of defence, Ryamiz-Ryadudu, the current incumbent, Prabowo Subianto, has similar interests. President Widodo has already toyed with the passage of an emergency decree (as we've seen in Thailand, the Philippines and Cambodia), and he's looked to the military to backstop his fumbling response.

It has not helped that his Minister of Health, Terawan Putranto, is a lieutenant general in the army. Terawan has been anti-science and an indecisive leader during the pandemic. While a handful of defence industries are quickly trying to produce ventilators, giving the Indonesian National Armed Forces (known by their Indonesian acronym TNI) greater powers over civilian life and public policy is a setback for Indonesia's fragile democracy.

In terms of domestic security, we have not seen how the pandemic will play out. Islamist parties and organisations quickly scapegoated ethnic Chinese for COVID-19's spread, always their default stance.

Indonesian officials were very slow to shut down a mass gathering of the Tabligh Islamic evangelical movement in Sulawesi, for fear of angering Islamists, even though a similar Tabligh gathering a few weeks earlier outside of Kuala Lumpur had led to outbreaks of COVID-19 in Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and Thailand. While the Government ultimately banned the gathering, it was only after thou-



Indonesia's healthcare system compares poorly with most of its neighbours, with far fewer doctors per capita

sands of people had already converged.

President Jokowi has been reluctant to ban religious gatherings for fear of angering Islamists, defaulting to letting individual imams make their own decisions.

*Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD)*, Indonesia's Islamic State affiliate, has been largely quiet on the issue. While there was a shootout between police and members of the pro-Islamic State *Mujahideen Indonesia Timur*, leading to the deaths of two militants, it's not clear how planned out the initial attack was.

The older *Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)* Islamist group is actually in a much stronger position than the JAD to take advantage of the situation as it has a very well developed network of charities and social welfare organisations. JI has been given ample space to regroup, which it has done effectively while letting the JAD be the focus of Indonesia's counter-terrorism efforts.

AIR

*Dr. Zachary Abuza is a professor at the National War College, Washington, DC and an adjunct at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program. The views expressed are his personal opinions and do not reflect the opinions of the National War College or the US Department of Defence.*

## COVID-19 AND THE GHOST CALIPHATE

by Jonathan Spyer

The coronavirus is generally held to represent a common threat to all nations and communities. It does not differentiate according to religion, ethnicity or national origin. The pandemic has even produced examples of enemies working together against the new invisible foe. Medical personnel from Hamas-controlled Gaza, for example, have travelled to Israeli hospitals to learn techniques for treating those infected.

But the virus, and more specifically the general focus on it, also offers an opportunity to any organisation seeking to exploit the short-term distraction of its enemies.

Islamic State, commonly known as ISIS, lacks administrative control of any territory. But across a broad swath of Iraq and Syria, ISIS retains networks of support and lines of communication and supply. Somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000 members of the group remain active in this area. There is no shortage of either money or weaponry.

From Syria's Badia desert in the west, eastward to the Euphrates River valley and Deir al-Zor province, and then deep into Sunni-majority central Iraq, the vanquished ISIS caliphate retains a kind of half-life. Beneath the nominal

authority of three administrations – the Assad regime, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and the government of Iraq – the structures and networks of ISIS are alive.

And with all three of these administrations preoccupied with the current pandemic, Islamic State is raising its head. A sharp uptick in ISIS activity has taken place across this space over the last few weeks.

On April 9, ISIS gunmen attacked and seized the town of al-Sukhna in the desert of central Syria's Homs province. Russian aircraft were scrambled in response, launching a series of air raids against the positions of the jihadis. Extended clashes followed between the ISIS men and Assad regime forces. The death count after the ISIS fighters disappeared back into the desert was 18 on the regime side, and 11 ISIS men, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

In eastern Deir al-Zor province, ISIS fighters killed two members of the National Defence Forces, an Iran-established regime auxiliary force, on April 7. In the same period in this area, Sunni jihadis on April 6 executed a woman they claimed was working with the regime, and on April 7, detonated a land mine in the Shola area in southern Deir al-Zor, killing four pro-regime militia members. ISIS also attacked regime positions in the towns of al-Jala, al-Siyal and al-Abbas in the same area on April 6.

According to the Observatory, the latest attacks bring the death toll among regime and allied forces west of the Euphrates at the hands of ISIS for the period from March 24 to mid-April to 377.

The Kurdish/US-controlled area east of the Euphrates has also been hit by the uptick in ISIS activity. On April 3, an SDC forces unit killed an ISIS would-be suicide bomber in the town of Manbij as he prepared to carry out his attack.

The situation in the mainly Sunni Arab middle Euphrates River valley is tense. There are unresolved issues of authority and governance between the Sunni Arab tribal population in the area and the SDC forces. ISIS seeks to gain from this situation, and attacks have been on the in-



A member of the Kurdish-led Asayish security organisation stands near a man in a wheelchair along an empty street, as coronavirus restrictions are imposed in Qamishli, Syria

crease since February.

This issue is compounded by the uncertainty in the area. US President Donald Trump's announcement in October 2019 of the imminent withdrawal of remaining US forces from northeast Syria has reduced the willingness of some elements in the population to cooperate with the SDC.

A central concern for both the SDC and its US partners is the roughly 11-12,000 ISIS prisoners held in a number of facilities east of the Euphrates. Already, ISIS prisoners have staged one attempted breakout.

**T**he public health situation in the SDC-controlled area is fragile. Water supplies are subject to intermittent interruptions, because of Turkish control of the Allouk water station since late 2019. There is also an acute shortage of medical equipment, including testing kits and ventilators.

There is concern that if COVID-19 strikes in the area, facilities holding ISIS prisoners could become unmanageable.

Iraq, too, has witnessed renewed ISIS violence in recent days. A recent report on the Kurdish *Rudaw* website noted the death of an Iraqi federal police officer at a checkpoint in Hawija in western Kirkuk on Sunday, April 12. Hawija is a focal point of support and activity for ISIS. The report noted that this was the third killing of security forces personnel by the organisation since the beginning of the month.

The Iraqi security forces are currently focused on the pandemic. The attacks come also in the wake of US redeployment of forces within Iraq in recent weeks, and the continued paralysis of the political system there.

So the increase in ISIS activity is taking place across a broad but contiguous majority-Sunni Arab area of territory. The pattern of events confirms the continued existence of ISIS's networks of supply and support, through which the movement's members can safely pass. This is the "ghost caliphate" in the territory that the movement once administered.

The ongoing, slow-burning ISIS insurgency in this area

is proof that the "victories" in the wars in Syria and Iraq have resolved little.

Neither the Assad regime's crushing of the Sunni Arab uprising against it, nor the US-led coalition's destruction of the ISIS caliphate has settled the underlying issue that led to the emergence of both. This is the fact that both Baghdad and Damascus are dominated by non-Sunni ruling authorities with little interest in, or ability to integrate, the large Sunni Arab populations living under their rule.

The coronavirus offers a window for ISIS to increase the tempo of its activities. But with or without the pandemic, the "ghost caliphate" is here to stay.

AIR

*Dr. Jonathan Spyer is Director of the Middle East Centre for Reporting and Analysis, and a research fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Security and Strategy. He is the author of Days of the Fall: A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars (Routledge, December 2017). © Jerusalem Post (jpost.com), reprinted by permission, all rights served.*

## THE CONSPIRACY DISEASE CONTINUES TO SPREAD

by Oved Lobel

**R**egrettably, even after in-depth coverage of conspiracy theories arising from the coronavirus pandemic in the April edition of the *Australia-Israel Review*, there is still more than enough new material to compile another article for this month's edition, particularly focussed on Jews and Israel.

On April 17, Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, released a statement noting that he was "extremely concerned to see that certain religious leaders and politicians continue to exploit the challenging times during this pandemic to spread hatred against Jews and other minorities," in particular the conspiracy theory that Jews or Israel had unleashed the virus to reduce the world's gentile population.

A recent report by Israeli Students Combatting Anti-semitism (ISCA) has been tracking hundreds of antisemitic posts across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram in multiple languages that blame the spread of the virus on Jews and Israel, although the problem is obviously far more widespread than these specific posts.

Looking beyond the antisemitic conspiracy theories, among the most bizarre ones circulating is that all the virus symptoms are in fact caused by electromagnetic radiation emanating from 5G radio antennae, which has led to

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Mobile phone towers – an unlikely target for conspiracy theories and even vandalism

dozens of attacks on telecommunication masts and engineers around the world, threatening lives and livelihoods. A surprising proponent of the 5G conspiracy is the former Grand Mufti of Egypt Sheikh Ali Gomaa. He explained the “science” behind the 5G-virus link:

“In 1918, the [Spanish Flu] pandemic was caused by a disruption in the Earth’s electromagnetism, due to the prevalence of electricity... When electricity was first introduced, it caused something in the atmosphere, which prepared it for the splitting of these materials, thus creating that virus. When we apply the same theory to the coronavirus, we see that the fifth generation of communications might be the cause... All our phones are 4G now. For the sake of 4G technology, 20,000 satellites were launched into orbit. In order to introduce 5G technology, which they say will change social relations, they had to launch 100,000 satellites into orbit. This caused additional disruptions in the electromagnetic field, which have made the atmosphere hospitable for the spread of these viruses.”

Celebrities have taken the bait too. Among those spreading the 5G nonsense are Hollywood actors Woody Harrelson and John Cusack and singers MIA and Keri Hilson.

The British organisation HOPE Not Hate has been investigating anti-5G social media groups and has found extensive links to the far-right for over a month. Multiple Facebook groups with tens of thousands of followers actively plot attacks on 5G infrastructure.

Unfortunately, any large collection of conspiracy theorists, regardless of the particular theory under discussion, seemingly always end up at antisemitism. According to HOPE Not Hate researcher Gregory Davis, “People seeking out information on the 5G controversy in Facebook groups will soon find themselves exposed to any number of alternative conspiracy theories, many only tangentially related to 5G. Many of these theories are implicitly or explicitly anti-Semitic, with the rollout of 5G and many other alleged crimes being laid at the feet of prominent Jewish individuals or organisations.”

Meanwhile, Palestinian conspiratorialism and incitement about Israel purposely spreading the virus among Palestinians have reached fever pitch, such that the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) Maj.-Gen. Kamil Abu Rukun (himself an Arabic-speaking Israeli Druze) called on the Palestinian leadership to retract its absurd accusations.

Rukun warned Palestinian leaders falsely blaming Israel for spreading the virus “that there could be repercussions in various spheres... Such shameful remarks, baseless and indefensible, completely contradict the plain fact that Israel has prepared and engaged itself to give all possible assistance in the regional effort to halt the spread of the epidemic, both in Israel and in the Palestinian territories. We see those remarks and accusations as crossing a red line.”

No less a figure than Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh has been spreading lies about IDF soldiers deliberately spitting on car door handles to spread the virus.

The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting and Analysis (CAMERA) has documented several other instances of senior PA and Fatah officials – as well as international supporters of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement – championing these conspiracies. For instance, leading Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat was quoted by the PA daily *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* on March 30th saying “... The settler gangs go wild, the latest example of which is... the spitting on Palestinian cars and property in order to transfer the corona disease to them... all of these are expressions of the spirit of hate taking root, the spread of the incitement to racism, and the wild desire to get rid of the Palestinian people in any way...”

Official PA spokesperson Ibrahim Melhem went even further: “It is not strange that the settlers and occupation soldiers are doing acts such as these [trying to infect Palestinian property], as they are striving for the epidemic’s spread in Palestine. In addition, they are attempting to approach our labourers and mingle with them in order to transfer the disease to them.”

This lie about Israel deliberately infecting Palestinian workers is particularly ironic given that, as CAMERA points out, it was PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh himself who insisted that Palestinian workers return to Palestinian Authority-controlled territories, whereas Israel allowed them to stay in Israel to see out the quarantine period, and even mandated their employers provide them accommodation temporarily. This did not stop Fatah declaring on its official Facebook page that Israel “is opening all of the gates and fences throughout the two districts of Qalqilya and Tulkarem in order to ease the smuggling of Palestinian labourers who were infected inside Israel into their villages without passing through the [PA’s] emergency committees, medical inspections, and quarantine... [Israel] is now launching a biological war against us.”


The PA has also been using the spread of coronavirus to pressure Israel into releasing Palestinian prisoners, with one op-ed in the official PA daily newspaper claiming that Israel had “not taken the necessary steps to prevent the spread of the virus, and added insult to injury when they withheld disinfectant and cleaning materials from the prisoners – as if we are on the brink of a holocaust against the Palestinian prisoners... The colonialist and settlement occupation system in the era of Benjamin Netanyahu is proving for the millionth time that it is the most dangerous ‘human virus’ known to man.”

A slew of cartoons comparing Israel to the virus continue to appear in official and unofficial Palestinian media, and the lies have been coming from all levels of the leadership on TV and in print.

Hamas seems to actually have been less vocal than the PA when it comes to these conspiracy theories, but its statements also reflect a parallel reality.

Nickolay Mladenov, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, recently publicly praised Israel for allowing “the entry of critical supplies and equipment into Gaza: examples of critical supplies include swabs for collection of samples and other laboratory supplies required for COVID-19 testing, and Personal Protective Equipment to protect health workers,” as well as facilitating the movement of UN and other personnel moving in and out of Gaza and the West Bank. Israel has even been training Gaza medics, and is reportedly processing coronavirus test results from Gaza.

Naturally, senior Hamas official Khalil al-Hayya’s response to this was to threaten Israel with “other measures” to force it to do what it is already doing. This is even as other Hamas leaders, including Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar, expressed optimism about reaching an agreement with Israel on a prisoner exchange.

Still, at least the Palestinians are not promoting “Islamic medicine”, and can thus avoid the fate of Iranians who have been advised by certain of their clerics to drink fresh camel urine or apply violet oil to the anus to cure the virus. 

## A SHEIKH’S TRAVELS

by Ran Porat

**S**heikh Taj el-Din al-Hilaly, a senior Australian Sunni cleric and a former Mufti of Australia, recently travelled to Lebanon and met with two leaders of political movements with ties to terror organisations. His encounters in Lebanon – unnoticed by the Australian public until now – provide fresh evidence of the continued questionable behaviour and ties of this senior Australian Muslim preacher.

## WHO IS SHEIKH TAJ EL-DIN AL-HILALY?

Sheikh Hilaly has a chequered past, spending time in prison and appearing to openly incite racism in Australia.

Egyptian-born Hilaly arrived in Australia from Lebanon in 1982 on a tourist visa. He narrowly escaped deportation in 1988 when the then-immigration minister alleged he failed to uphold “Australian values”, but was granted residency in 1990 following strong lobbying by elements of the Australian Muslim community. In 1999 Hilaly was jailed in Egypt for smuggling, and in 2003 fined for exhibiting offensive behaviour towards NSW police officers and resisting arrest.

Hilaly has a long history of alleged antisemitism. In 1988, he told a Sydney audience that Jews have “enmity towards the human race as a whole”, and are trying to achieve world domination using “secret movements” such as communism, libertarianism and Freemasonry, as well as through sex, “espionage, treason, and economic hoarding.”

In a sermon in Lebanon in 2004, Hilaly called for Muslim youth to become martyrs by fighting Israel and praised the 2001 September 11 terror attacks against the United States as “God’s work against oppressors”, stating that “The media all over the world are controlled by Zionist fingers.”

Hilaly was removed from an Australian government consultation group in 2006 after calling the Holocaust a “Zionist lie” and labelling Israel a “cancer”.

He has also been notorious for his extreme views against homosexuals, anti-Western comments (“the biggest liars and oppressors”), and for suggesting that women in revealing clothes are like “uncovered meat” and thus bear the blame if they are raped. In 2013, he labelled Australia a “dictatorship”.

Despite being Sunni, Hilaly is an open supporter of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi’ite terrorist organisation which is Iran’s most important international client and proxy. He met Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, in Lebanon in February 2004 and later said that he had praised Hezbollah and “its sacrifice” as a model for all “Mujahideen” (Islamic fighters) around the world.

In 2007 he was cleared of allegations that he had transferred charitable donations to Hezbollah.

## A VISIT TO LEBANON

In mid-February this year, Hilaly paid a visit to Lebanon.

On Feb. 19 in the Lebanese city of Tripoli, Hilaly met with senior members of the Islamic Unification Movement (IUM, Arabic: *Harakat al-Tawhid al-Islami*), including the Secretary General Sheikh Bilal Saeed Sha’aban, and the head of the Military Command Council (Arabic: *Majliss al-Kiyadi al-Harb*) Sheikh Hashem Minqara. On that occasion, Hilaly was awarded a special plaque honouring his “efforts on the road of Da’wah” (preaching the word of Islam).



(From top) Hilaly with Shiekh Sha'aban; Hilaly (in the middle) holding the plaque he received from the IUM

Formed in 1982 in Tripoli, the Sunni IUM was once a heavily armed militia of a thousand or more fighters, with extremely anti-Western views following the Khomeinist ideology of the Shi'ite Iranian regime.

Tony Badran, a Lebanon expert at the US-based think-tank the Foundation for Defence of Democracies (FDD), described the IUM as “an Iranian asset” backed by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, and noted that “its leader was a regular guest in Tehran.” The IUM is part of the Islamic Action Front (*Jabhat al-‘Amal al-Islami*), which is a “Hezbollah- and Iran-aligned consortium of groups representing Tehran’s network in northern Lebanon” and provides a “veneer of cross-sectarian unity around Iran’s regional designs,” according to Badran.

The IUM is suspected of responsibility for at least three terror attacks in Lebanon – one in 1985 and two in 2013 – in which 68 people lost their lives and almost 500 were injured. It is listed as a terrorist organisation in the *Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. It was heavily involved in the Lebanese civil war and in fighting against the Israeli army’s presence in Lebanon between 1988 and 2000. In 2014, the Lebanese army largely crushed the IUM militia while fighting al-Qaeda affiliated terror groups in Tripoli.

Current IUM leader Sha’aban is an enthusiastic supporter of Hezbollah and Iran. Last September, he praised two Lebanese terrorists who were trained in Iran and killed by Israeli forces in Syria while preparing to launch armed drone attacks against Israel. Sha’aban congratulated them for “the heroic operation carried out by the group of martyrs [...] giving the Umma [Islamic nation] the dose of glory it needed.”

Interviewed for this story, Lebanon expert Pierre Akel,

founder and Editor in Chief of the website *Middle East Transparent*, confirmed that Sheikh Minqara is “linked to Syrian security services.” Minqara was jailed in Syria for 15 years until he was released at the behest of Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati. According to Akel, Mikati personally brought Minqara from Damascus in his car, possibly in exchange for working with Syrian intelligence services.

In 2013, a Lebanese court charged Minqara, along with two Syrians – one of whom was a Syrian intelligence officer – with responsibility for car bomb explosions outside two Sunni mosques, killing at least 47 people and injuring more than 500.

Akel also alleged that Minqara bore responsibility for the 1987 killing of dozens of Communist supporters in the Mina district conducted by IUM fighters.


Meanwhile, in the Lebanese town of Minya north of Tripoli, Hilaly visited Shi’ite Sheikh Mustafa Malas, the head of the National Solidarity Council. Malas is also a member of the Council of Ulama (Koranic scholars), a pro-Iran group made up of Lebanese Sunni and Shi’ite scholars.

Like Sha’aban and Minqara, Malas is strongly affiliated with Hezbollah and Iran, and an extreme supporter of violent struggle against Israel. “What is happening in Palestine,” Malas said in response to the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem in December 2017, “once again confirms that the Intifada is the only solution to the Palestinian cause, and that the resistance is the first choice of the Palestinian people.”

Malas survived a car bomb attack in October 2010 following his support of a visit to Lebanon by then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Malas also visited Teheran at least once – in February 2018.

In November 2019, Malas met with a delegation from Islamic Jihad in Lebanon (not to be confused with the Gaza-based Palestinian Islamic Jihad), a Shi’ite terror organisation responsible for several attacks, assassinations and kidnappings. Islamic Jihad in Lebanon is strongly affiliated with Hezbollah, specifically with the External Security Organisation (ESO) within Hezbollah, which is listed in Australia as a terrorist entity.

Australians meeting terrorist supporters on foreign soil are not exempt from responsibility for their actions. Taj El-Din al-Hilaly’s visit to Lebanon is yet another red flag in his notoriously controversial personal history and should not go unnoticed by the relevant authorities. 

*Dr. Ran Porat is a 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, Herzliya Israel, and a research associate at the Future Directions International Research Institute, Western Australia.*





## THE BIBLIO FILE

# Muslims and Jews: The 'original grudge' theory

**Un certain "vivre ensemble": Musulmans et juifs dans le monde arabe**

**Daniel Sibony, Odile Jacob, 2016, 190 pp.**

by Lyn Julius



In 2013, Princeton University Press published *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*, the first encyclopaedia on the history of relations between Jews and Muslims from the birth of Islam to the present day. Edited by Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora, the encyclopaedia is a glossy coffee-table book featuring more than 150 articles by an international team of leading experts. Its stated objective was "greater historical understanding and a more informed dialogue between Jews and Muslims."

One man, however, was not impressed. Daniel Sibony is a French psychoanalyst and philosopher, and the author of no fewer than 26 books, most, unfortunately, not available in English. Sibony believed that "greater understanding" and "informed dialogue" meant idealising the true nature of Jewish-Muslim relations during 13 centuries of "coexistence". He set out his response to Meddeb and Stora in a book called *Un certain "vivre-ensemble": musulmans et juifs dans le monde arabe* ("A certain 'co-existence': Muslims and Jews in the Arab world").

The book's message may be summed up as follows: "Tell me who you despise, and I'll tell you who you are."

Sibony argues that the Muslim

bears the non-Muslim 'other' an "original grudge," which has coloured Muslim relations with the Jews living among them since the Koran was written in the seventh century.

Going back to Mohammed's encounter with the Jewish tribes of Arabia, the grudge, says Sibony, consists of resentment of the Jews for "betraying" Mohammed by refusing to follow his new religion. And, he adds, there is the lingering resentment that the Jews were first out with their Holy Book.

In the Muslim mind, argues Sibony, the Jew is cursed by his primordial failure to convert. In fact, the very term "Jew" – with its apparent associations of uncleanness and femininity – was an insult in Morocco, he notes.

The Jew is condemned to inferior, or dhimmi, status, a system of humiliating handicaps and strictures. He is banned from reading the Koran, in case he should criticise it. To argue that the colonial era in Arab lands marked a divorce between Jews and Arabs assumes that there was a marriage in the first place.

Non-Muslims kept the Islamic world afloat through payment of the *jizya* tax. The ruler levied this tax in order to "protect" the Jews. But protect from whom? A hostile populace which had assimilated the lessons of the Koran and the "original grudge".

Living in the Marrakech medina in Morocco until he left for France at age 13, Sibony knew the power of the mob. Riots would erupt around the time of Jewish festivals, to the extent that one Jewish mother preparing her daughter's wedding sought reassurance from a neighbour that his co-religionists were not planning to disrupt the festivities.

The ruler could turn the screw on his Jews when he needed them to pay heavier taxes, while threatening to unleash popular violence on them. Today's jihadists, too, Sibony argues, are essentially mobsters.

There are plenty of Jews from Morocco willing to testify to the good relations there between Jews and Muslims. One reason was that the mob never penetrated the richer quarters; protected by the police – their Jewish residents were insulated from trouble.

Sibony claims that Jews did not want to dwell on the negative, they were too busy living life to the full – a life filled with music, poetry, ritual and faith. There were times when Muslims, too, forgot their "grudge" – but it was always there in the background, like a radio whose volume knob had been turned down. The ultimate proof that all was not well between the two communities is the massive exodus of Jews from Arab lands.

Sibony's thesis may be criticised for putting too much emphasis on a *dhimmi* status abrogated by the colonial era, and for ignoring the influence of European and Nazi antisemitism in the Arab world. But in Morocco the colonial period was shorter than most, and Sibony still remembers seeing Jews wearing the discriminatory black *djellaba* in his native Marrakesh. He should be commended for boldly swimming against a tide of denial and distortion.

AIR

Lyn Julius is the author of *Uprooted: How 3,000 years of Jewish Civilisation in the Arab World Vanished Overnight* (Vallentine Mitchell, 2018). © JNS.org, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



## The Case for Moral Clarity

### Anti-Zionism, Antisemitism and legitimate criticism of Israel

by Alan Dershowitz

**M**uch of what today purports to be criticism of Israel or the claim of ideological opposition to Zionism is merely disguised antisemitism, perpetrated by singling out the nation-state of the Jewish people for condemnation and demonisation.

The United Nations, for example, devotes more time to condemning Israel than all the other countries in the world combined, and the only explanation for this is that they are motivated by a hatred of the Jewish people and a hatred of their Jewish state.

When, on university campuses, there are demonstrations against buildings going up in the West Bank (something I might personally be opposed to), while ignoring the misdeeds of Syria, Yemen, Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, there is no other explanation but a hatred of the Jewish people.

The world did not care when the Palestinians were being oppressed and occupied by Egypt or Jordan. The world only became concerned when occupation accusations shifted to the nation-state of the Jewish people. Israel is the “Jew among the nations,” and to single out only Israel for delegitimisation, condemnation, and demonisation is perverse and the

current form of antisemitism.

To put this brief on antisemitism in historical context, “legitimate” anti-Zionism can be traced to German Jews who considered Judaism merely a religion and not a nationality. However, this is not the subject at hand, nor is it the mindset of today’s antisemitic “anti-Zionists.” The current debate does not centre around the philosophy of Zionism, but on the

**“If you want to find apartheid situations in the Middle East, look to Saudi Arabia for apartheid based on religion and gender, or talk about Iranian apartheid based on sexual orientation. But don’t pick Israel”**

demonisation of Israel not because of what it does, but because of what it is, and that is, a sovereign state of the Jews. There is no name for this other than antisemitism.

First, to understand the new antisemitic movement, its core values and outlook must be understood. The so-called “progressives” are largely *regressive*, in that they repress free speech and deny due process. These new McCarthyites are not truly liberals because they do not allow for freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, and freedom of speech.

They show a fundamental disrespect for others who think differently from them.

I consider myself a liberal.

Anti-Israel rhetoric does not stem from liberals for the most part, but from radical leftists. The radical Left has been antisemitic since Voltaire and Marx. The radical Left and the radical Right both have shared elements of antisemitism. A problem we now face is that this outlook is slowly creeping into the minds of liberals. American Jewish writer Peter Beinart deserves some of the blame for this phenomenon, because he presents himself as a liberal, not a radical leftist, and he has begun to use tropes, that at least others interpret and use to make broader arguments against the Jewish people, such as the influence of Jewish money. These can be heard from other Jews, too.

For example, Eric Yoffie, a former head of the Reform movement in the US, attacked me in an article in Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz*, for defending Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu against his current indictment, saying I must be doing it for the money. He said that it was a matter of American businessman Sheldon Adelson’s money.

I have never received a penny for defending Netanyahu. How is Yoffie different from US House of Representatives Congresswoman Ilhan Omar tweeting, “It’s all about the Benjamins, baby”? The trope that Jews do everything for money and that Jews use money to do everything is pervasive, and even Jews are guilty of this when attacking other Jews.

When Yoffie attacked me, he resorted to antisemitic tropes; that I must be doing what I do for the money, even though I have never spoken to Adelson about this subject and would never take orders from anybody, even a client, as to what to say on a given subject, as a matter of principle. The use of antisemitic tropes is finding its way into our everyday



The situation in the West Bank bears no relationship to apartheid, nor is it “occupation” as that term is used in international law

speech, writing, and rhetoric, and it is a dangerous development.

Not only are classical antisemitic terms being used in rhetoric against Israel, but other loaded catchphrases are being blatantly misused to smear Israel.

One such term is calling Israel “an apartheid state.”

Historically, we should recall that the campaign that misnamed Israel as an apartheid country was initiated by none other than an antisemite named Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. Bishop Tutu, though highly respected, has proven himself a bigot, constantly speaking of the Jewish people’s influence and money. He once said that Israel and the Jews are very un-Christian. I was banned from speaking at a university in Cape Town because of my criticism of Bishop Tutu.

The apartheid claim generally comes from antisemites, and it is based on ignorance. Anybody who fought the war against South African apartheid as I did, along with Bishop Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and Canadian Supreme Court Justice and jurist Irwin Cotler, knows what apartheid is. Apartheid is denying “people of colour” the right to vote, among other

basic rights. In Israel, of course, the Declaration of Independence assures the Arab citizens of Israel full, complete, and equal rights, and obviously, the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament, has Arab members. Apartheid is a fake argument, but it is one that resonates with ignorant people who do not understand history and cannot distinguish true apartheid from the country in the Middle East that has the most equality.

If you want to find apartheid situations in the Middle East, look to Saudi Arabia for apartheid based on religion and gender, or talk about Iranian apartheid based on sexual orientation. But don’t pick Israel, which has the best record of equality on all these grounds of any country in the Middle East, and one of the best records of any country in the world.

### THE MYTH OF “ILLEGAL OCCUPATION”

Another false claim is that of “occupation.” This term has crept into the popular parlance by way of the media adopting this inaccuracy from sources of propaganda and anti-Israel rhetoric, with politicians following along, lacking basic understanding about

the terms and their legal meaning.

One culprit is a man I voted for twice and campaigned for twice, former President Barack Obama. President Obama, who, in a vengeful last act, a month before he left his presidency, actually pushed through, and did not just refuse to veto, a resolution saying that the *Kotel* – the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Judaism’s holiest place of prayer – was illegally occupied, and that the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem’s historic Old City, which has been populated by Jews for 3,000 years, is “illegally occupied.”

First, the term “illegal occupation” is a misnomer. The term “occupation” is a term of art in international law. It applies to “belligerent occupation” of sovereign territories by an external sovereign, whether it was Nazi Germany’s occupation of European states such as France, Belgium, and Holland or whether it was the Allied post-war occupation of Germany or imperial Japan.

The specific situation in the West Bank areas of Judea and Samaria after the 1967 war is not occupation, since the Palestinians never had a state there. It would be accurate to say that the lands are under dispute and subject to negotiation in line with the Oslo Accords of the 1990s.

Yet, China’s occupation of Tibet, or Russia’s occupation of Chechnya, or Turkey’s occupation of Northern Cyprus are overlooked, as are other parts of the world today where there is genuine occupation.

There can be no “occupation” when on numerous occasions, in line with Oslo and subsequent peace initiatives, Israel offered to concede disputed land in exchange for peace and recognition.

I know this because I sat across the



table from Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and asked him if he would be willing to say that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people. He replied, “No,” he would not.

You cannot honestly call the situation between the Israelis and the Palestinians “apartheid” when former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered the Palestinians an end to the so-called “occupation” in 2008, or when former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered to end the “occupation” in 2000.

That is not “apartheid;” that is not even an “occupation.” That is just disputed territory over which the Israelis are prepared to compromise. This only requires that the Palestinians sit down with Israelis, which the Palestinian leadership has refused to do for over a decade, feigning various reasons, the latest of which has been the 2019 American Embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which is a simple recognition of the Jewish right to its actual historical capital and does not negate the right to a Palestinian capital jointly located there at a later phase.

Even the situation of Arabs living on the West Bank bears no relationship to apartheid. The leadership has repeatedly rejected offers of statehood. Moreover, Arabs living in Ramallah, Jericho, and other West Bank cities have more freedom and control over their lives than most Arabs living in Muslim countries.

**F**alse claims and legal inaccuracies hurled at Israel freely by the left beg the question, “Can Israel do anything about the new antisemitic bias in the form of anti-Zionism or anti-Israeli sentiments?” The answer is, unfortunately, nothing.

In my new book, *Defending Israel: My Lifelong Relationship with My Most Challenging Client*, I document how every time Israel did something positive, every time it gave away some of its territories, every time it sat down and negotiated, every time it offered a two-state solution, every time it

offered the Palestinians the West Bank, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and other attacks on Israel grew.

There is an inverse relationship between conciliatory Israeli actions and the criticisms and attacks on Israel. The BDS movement is not a protest against Israeli decisions or actions; it is a crusade against Israel itself.

Just ask the founder of the movement, Omar Barghouti, who says that he believes in Palestine “from the river to the sea,” which means Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Ashdod. This makes the idea that Israel can counter this kind of belief system historically untenable since it is an attack on the very existence of Israel.


According to the anti-Zionists, the only thing Israel can do to stop the criticism is pack up and leave, give up and commit politicide, which no country in the history of the world has ever done, and which Israel will not do.

Concessions drive radical attacks on Israel, and these attacks are not based on the “occupation,” the separation fence, the response to Gaza, the moving of the embassy, or the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The attacks on Israel are not based on what Israel does, rather, they happen because of what Israel is, and that is the nation-state of the Jewish people.

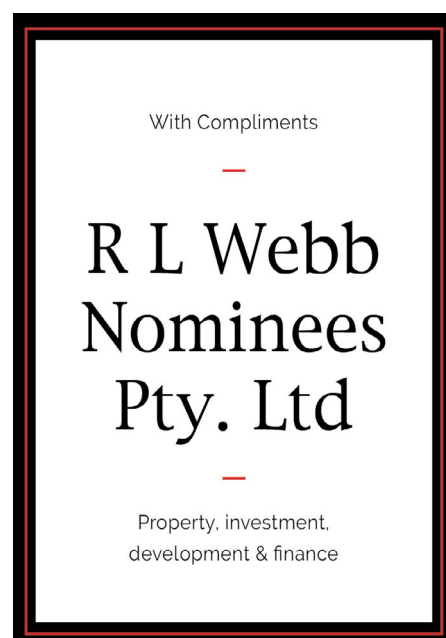
Peter Beinart wrote an article justifying arguments that Israel should not be the nation-state of the Jewish people, saying that it is perfectly legitimate to criticise and attack the entire Zionist enterprise, and that it is not antisemitic to say that Israel should not exist, any more than it is anti-Kurdish to say that there should not be a Kurdish country. But it is anti-Kurdish to say that there shouldn’t be a Kurdish country. There should be a Kurdish country. And it is certainly antisemitic to say that there should not be a nation-state for the Jewish people.

This brings us to the question of what is truly legitimate criticism of

Israel. Legitimate criticism should focus on issues and actions, not on what Israel is. Criticism must be equivalent to both sides. It must be criticism which passes what I call “the shoe on the other foot” test. If you criticise Israel for something, and the Palestinians do it too and do it worse, you must criticise them equally. If you criticise Israel, and other countries in the world are as bad or worse, you must put it in the context of those other countries.

That is the key to legitimate criticism; *equality, symmetry of criticism, no double standards*, no singling out Israel because it is the nation-state of the Jewish people. Much of the current condemnation of Israel does not meet that definition of legitimacy. 

*Professor Alan Dershowitz is the Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law Emeritus, Harvard University Law School, and the author of numerous books including 2019’s Defending Israel: The Story of My Relationship with My Most Challenging Client. 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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# NOTED AND QUOTED

## THE MONTH IN MEDIA

### PLANETRUTH

The *Australian Financial Review's* Andrew Tillett (April 14) reported that two El Al flights chartered by Israel to repatriate 500 of its nationals in Australia during the coronavirus pandemic represented "two accomplishments".

Tillett explained, "A flight to Perth on March 24 was the first direct service between Israel and Australia, while the airline set the record for its longest non-stop flight, between Tel Aviv and Melbourne, on April 2."

The report said it was a logistical challenge involving liaising with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Border Force and state authorities, as well as Kiwi officials given that some of the Israeli passengers were coming back from New Zealand – plus meeting the stringent security arrangements El Al enforces because of its history of being a terrorism target.

Israeli Ambassador to Australia Mark Sofer was quoted saying, "The Australians were absolutely wonderful. I can't stress enough the co-operation we've got."

### FULLY SICK

Tillett's story wasn't an outlier, with Israel making many small but noteworthy appearances in a plethora of coronavirus reports.

In an April 21 report by *AFR* correspondent Tom Burton on the merits of forcing Australians to download a tracking app to combat the spread of communal infections, IT consultancy firm Kearney was quoted saying, "Singapore and Israel – nations that were early users of government sponsored voluntary-adoption apps – show us that not only is a strong early push necessary to build momentum, both achieving [about] 20 per cent commu-

nity adoption in the first 10 days, but that governments need to redouble efforts to push past this adoption 'ceiling' in weeks ahead."

On April 3, the paper ran a *Washington Post* column by Henry Olsen noting, "Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is as hated by his political opponents as Trump is by his, but 60 per cent of Israelis gave Netanyahu a good grade or better on his handling of the crisis in a recent poll. His Likud party is also gaining in recent polls."

### SECRET VIRUS BUSINESS

A report in News Corp papers (April 17) said, "the secretive Israel Institute for Biological Research, which normally works on developing defences against chemical and biological threats, has been re-tasked to researching COVID-19."

The "secretive" Israel Institute for Biological Research (IIBR), an Israeli government research institution, is no different to any other scientific organisation that carries out research into potentially lethal substances and threats and which supplies products and solutions to both government and civilian clients.

In fact, it has a mission statement to commercialise its research. Researchers from the IIBR have helped develop a polio vaccine, kits to identify explosives and a drug to treat Sjogren's syndrome.

On April 22, *ABC TV* "7pm News (Victoria)" listed Israel as one of 20 countries trialling a COVID-19 vaccine.

### EVERYTHING OLD IS JEW AGAIN

The *AFR* (April 17) ran British

historian Simon Schama's look at past plagues and the shameful record of European countries in scapegoating Jews when they occurred.

He said, "If scapegoating was always going to be a predictable response of plague-beleaguered powers, the inevitable target of blame was the Jews. At the time of the Black Death, they were accused in some places of poisoning wells; in others it was said that they had introduced the disease out of sheer malevolence towards Christians. The consequences, even by the standards of persecution endemic in the medieval Christian world, were horrific. From Spain to the Rhineland, in Switzerland and Bavaria, Jews were the victims of massacre and, very often, burnings alive. In Strasbourg, 2000 were slaughtered; in Basel, 130 children were separated from their parents before 600 adults were burnt. In the single village of Tarrega in Catalonia, virtually the entire community of 300 Jews were killed by assault or burning... The pious and the powerful often, but not invariably, held up their hands in horror. Pope Clement VI forbade attacks on Jews and insisted that since they had suffered at least equally if not more seriously than Christians from the plague, why would they be responsible for their own suffering?"

### CREDIBILITY GAP

On the ABC's website (April 14), Executive Council of Australian Jewry co-CEO Peter Wertheim tackled the very contemporary issue of when criticising Israel and calling for boycotts against it becomes antisemitism.

Wertheim said the internationally recognised working definition of antisemitism from the International



Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), adopted by many countries and official institutions, emphatically rejects the “belief that criticisms of Israel and antisemitism are mutually exclusive.”

Wertheim, quoting the definition’s principles, argued that when criticism of Israel “is couched in terms which employ or appeal to negative stereotypes of Jewish people generally; or denies the Jewish people their right to self-determination; or applies double standards by requiring of Israel standards of behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation; or holds Jews collectively responsible for actions of the State of Israel,” then “the line has been crossed. It’s antisemitism.”

He cited the examples of when

“law-abiding Australian Jews who support Israel are accused of being more loyal to Israel than Australia... When classical stereotypes are deployed about Jews as a people having inordinate control over the media, economy, government or other societal institutions as a means of supporting Israel... When BDS supporters denigrate us as ‘the Jewish lobby,’ ‘the Zionist lobby’ or ‘the pro-Israel lobby,’ a sinister influence rather than Australians legitimately exercising the right of all citizens to promote our views, that’s antisemitism.

“According to the IHRA definition, claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavour — for example, by smearing Israel as an ‘apartheid State’ — is a way of denying the legitimacy of a Jewish State

and thus denying Jewish people their right to national self-determination. Israel’s detractors wouldn’t deny that right to any other people, least of all the Palestinians. It’s a double standard, and therefore antisemitism.”

All Israeli citizens, including Jews, Arabs and others, have equal voting, civil and religious rights, he noted, and BDS activists’ “skewed concept of apartheid could be applied to almost every country in the world, including Australia. Yet they only seek to boycott Israel.”

In the *Spectator Australia* (April 11), Australian Jewish Association Executive Director Ted Lapkin also explored the strands of legitimate and illegitimate criticism of Israel in the context of historic antisemitism.



## OUT OF IN PARLIAMENT

Prime Minister **Scott Morrison** (Lib., Cook) during a press conference, when asked what his message is to people carrying out racist attacks during the coronavirus pandemic—April 21 — “Stop it. That’s my message... and I think that is the message of every Australian. Now is a time to support each other and I would remind everyone that it was Chinese Australians in particular that provided one of the greatest defences we had in those early weeks. They were the ones who first went into self-isolation, they were the ones who were returning from family visits up into China and they were coming home, and it was through their care, it was through their commitment, their patience that actually Australia was protected in their first wave. I mean within a week of our first case, we’d shut off travel from those from China except for Australians returning home. And so absolutely I deplore that sort of behaviour against any Australian regardless of their ethnicity or their religion or whatever it happens to be. And I think that is the view of all Australians. So we have to call that sort of thing out. It’s not on.”

Federal Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs **Andrew Giles** (ALP, Scullin) in an opinion piece in the *Canberra Times* — April 21 — “At this time of great disruption and anxiety we need facts, not fear. We need to build solidarity, and reject hate and division. We can do so with the confidence of knowing the majority of Australians value our multiculturalism and abhor racism. But the challenge of fighting, and defeating racism isn’t just a matter for individuals, it’s a responsibility of our leaders.”

NSW Shadow Treasurer **Walt Secord** (ALP, Legislative Council) in *J-Wire* — April 19 — “Put simply, I believe flying a Nazi

flag should be banned in NSW, but I would like to go through the proper process — with a referral to the NSW Law Reform Commission.

“The Nazi flag is deeply offensive to veterans who fought against fascism and was an affront to survivors of the Holocaust and their descendants. The Nazi flag is an emblem of genocide and racism.

“Physical attacks on a person on the way to prayer, painted swastikas at Bondi Beach and a Nazi flag flying in Wagga Wagga and Newtown are all symbols of a despicable shift in our community. The decision to fly a Nazi flag is a simple expression of hatred.”

NSW Attorney-General **Mark Speakman** (Lib., Cronulla) speaking to the *Australian Jewish News* about proposals to ban the flying of the Nazi swastika — April 23 — “I have requested advice from the Department of Communities and Justice about this matter. These symbols of hatred and antisemitism are unacceptable anywhere in our community. They are deeply offensive and capable of traumatising survivors of genocide and their loved ones.

“The small but disgraceful minority who display these images insult the memory of the millions of victims of the Holocaust and those who died defending the world from this hatred.”

Victorian Shadow Minister for Police, Community Safety and Corrections **David Southwick** (Lib., Caulfield) speaking to the *Australian Jewish News* about the public display of the Nazi swastika — April 16 — “The use of this imagery, [which] incites fear and division throughout the community, at a time such as this is appalling and such behaviour must never be tolerated.

“Whether it’s in Kyabram, Beulah or Caulfield, the Nazi swastika remains an extreme symbol of hate and has no place in our community.”

## FUNNY BUSINESS

The announcement in Israel of a new national emergency government on April 20, after 17 months of deadlock and three elections, made little more than a whimper in the local media, given the overwhelming contemporary focus on the coronavirus crisis.

ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek's major offering was a monologue on *ABC Radio National's* "Correspondents Report" (April 19) with his observations including saying Blue and White leader Benny Gantz's decision to "throw in the towel to join an emergency government" had "allowed" Benjamin Netanyahu "to become the first Israeli prime minister in history to serve while also a defendant in a criminal case."

Of course, Netanyahu argues he is an innocent man and has availed himself of the rights under Israel's Basic Law passed in 1992 that lets a sitting PM under indictment remain in office until he has been convicted and exhausted all appeals.

On *ABC TV* "The World" (April 21) veteran Israeli commentator and AIJAC fellow Ehud Yaari described the governing arrangement as "a political structure never seen before. We will have now a prime minister and an alternate prime minister. They will have both prime ministerial residences at the same time".

He said, "this arrangement is puzzling to Israelis. I'm sure it's, it's quite funny to watch from abroad."

Asked what happens if Israel's Supreme Court rules that Binyamin Netanyahu – who is under indictment on corruption charges – cannot lead the government, Yaari said, "they have both committed to one another in writing that if Netanyahu is not allowed to form the government, then they" will go to a "fourth round of elections."

## TOO BRIEF

On April 21, the *SBS TV* "World News" report on the new Israeli Government was relegated to the show's 38-minute mark, when newsreader Janice Peterson noted that both Binyamin Netanyahu and Blue and White leader Benny Gantz support US President Donald Trump's peace plan which "involves the annexation of parts of the West Bank". What she didn't say was that it also gives Palestinians a chance to establish a Palestinian state.

The news item was also a convenient segue to promote an episode of *SBS TV's* "Dateline" later that night looking at a grassroots peacemaking effort involving fringe but well-meaning Israeli activists who support a two-state formula for peace and honest Palestinians who talked about a preferred one-state option.

SBS reporter Ben Lewis' story was reasonable, if lacking in context and background, but did make the faux pas of implying that Israel was only established in 1948 in response to the Holocaust, after which Jews were able to settle there. In fact, Israel was virtually a *fait accompli* before World War II, with a large Jewish population and proto-state already in place.

## SOCIALLY DISTANCED FROM THE CONTEXT

A *Courier Mail* report (April 21) on the visually arresting site of 2,000 Israelis practising social distancing at a rally in Tel Aviv, said protesters were "against what they said was a threat to democracy from ongoing coalition talks between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former rival Benny Gantz" and "followed a call launched on Facebook by the 'Black Flag' movement which condemns Netanyahu's continuing rule."

A few more lines, such as were included in the *Adelaide Advertiser's* report, would have informed readers of the important context that the group are opposed to Netanyahu

because he is refusing to step down as PM whilst under indictment.

## A GAZA TRUTH BLOCKADE

The capacity for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to cope with COVID-19 was the focus of an *ABC TV* "The World" (April 6) interview with Oxfam's Gaza-based food security manager Najla Shawa that included anti-Israel propaganda.

Host Bev O'Connor's introduction appropriately noted that Gaza is under a "crippling blockade by both Israel and Egypt."

Shawa said coping with COVID-19 was particularly challenging for Gazans because the territory has been suffering a "humanitarian crisis" for years due to the blockade, which has caused 47% unemployment and "close to 70%" of Gazans not "know[ing] where their next meal is going to come from."

It is not the blockade that has created the humanitarian crisis or caused "the health system in Gaza [to be] extremely weak" but the legacy of Hamas' decision to invest in terror tunnels and rocket production instead of civilian infrastructure over the past 13 years, as well as neglect of medical investment by the Palestinian Authority, nominally responsible for purchasing medical supplies and equipment for Gaza.

Shawa said responding to cases of coronavirus was difficult because "in, general, there is a lot of restriction of movement even within the Gaza Strip itself."

Apart from a narrow buffer zone along the shared border with Gaza to deter would-be terrorists from entering Israel, any internal restrictions on movement are on the orders of Hamas – and this should have been made clear. But the word "Hamas" was somehow never mentioned in the interview.

Asked if there had been an easing of the blockade, Shawa acknowl-

edged there was “some collaboration between the authorities” but claimed “there is strong restriction on medical equipment, on the devices, on even humanitarian assistance.”

This is simply untrue.

Israel’s blockade never restricted either humanitarian assistance, medical supplies, or almost any medical equipment. Certain very limited types of medical equipment, such as x-ray machines, are considered “dual-use” (x-ray machines contain radioactive material which can be used to build a “dirty bomb”) and are subject to extra restrictions, but they can still be imported with proper arrangements. What’s more, Israel has lifted almost all “dual-use” restrictions on anything considered of medical relevance since the coronavirus crisis began.

Meanwhile, Gazans needing medical treatment can still enter Israel.

The NGO Gisha, which monitors Gaza restrictions and is generally highly critical of Israel, said on April 20, “since March 8, travel to and from Gaza via Erez Crossing has been limited almost exclusively to medical patients seeking treatment unrelated to COVID-19, and their companions” and “Kerem Shalom Crossing, between Israel and Gaza, is operating as usual. Salah a-Din Gate for entrance of goods from Egypt to Gaza is also working regularly on three days per week.”

## THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY ALL IN ONE

On April 4, ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek’s report on Gaza and COVID-19 for “7pm News” offered greater context than Oxfam’s propaganda but wasn’t without its problems.

Tlozek noted Gaza’s capacity to cope has been affected by wars fought with Israel and infighting between Palestinian factions i.e. Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

But Tlozek absurdly said “two-thirds” of Gaza’s two million residents

are refugees, which only makes sense if you know that the vast majority inherited their refugee status from ancestors displaced during the 1948 war – which is a unique right that only Palestinians enjoy.

Whilst Tlozek did note Israel has been working to ensure Gaza’s medical needs are met, he said Israeli Defence Minister Naftali Bennett has suggested “some assistance for Gaza” could be conditional on Hamas returning the bodies of two Israeli soldiers killed there in the 2014 war. While Bennett did threaten something along these lines, there is no evidence Israeli agencies have ever sought to implement this threat.

## HAMAS MISSING IN ACTION

Elsewhere, the *Australian* (March 31) expressed an entirely justified concern over the ability of developing nations to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, and said that “in the Gaza Strip, two million Palestinians are crammed together cheek by jowl, their only real hope Israel’s willingness to help contain the pandemic.” Although it did not blame the blockade, unfortunately there was also obviously not enough space to acknowledge Hamas’ negligence as the key reason for the Strip’s limited capacity to cope with the pandemic.

## QUIET AS A GRAVE

*ABC Radio National* “Religion and Ethics” (April 8) reported that COVID-19 has forced the historic closure during Easter of Jerusalem’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre, where Christians believe Jesus was buried. The story focused on Palestinian Muslim Wajeeh Nusseibeh, whose family has minded the key to the holy site for generations.

Free of the politics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the interview gave listeners a glimpse of the Jerusalem’s Old City not frequently heard on the ABC.

Nusseibeh said, “Everybody is sad to see all the shops, the souvenir, the restaurants, the streets is empty. And this time is the time for people to live in the city, to making money. No money, no work. People stay home and no people to come to pray.”

When host Andrew West asked why a Muslim family has the key, Nusseibeh said it is because Muslims believe “Jesus is one of the... holiest prophets in the world.”

West gave listeners the wider context – centuries of bickering between various Christian churches attempting to share access and control over the holy site eventually resulted in a Muslim family being entrusted with the key.

## NO FOOLING

*ABC Radio National* “Religion and Ethics” episode on April Fools’ Day included a story by Australian-born Israeli reporter Iris Makler on Israel’s ultra-Orthodox Jews – known as “Haredi”, meaning “trembling” before God – who make up only 10% of the population but were 50% of those hospitalised with COVID-19.

Makler noted that Israeli cities with large Haredi populations tend to be densely populated, making it “hard to implement” social distancing rules.

The report quoted Israel Democracy Institute’s ultra-Orthodox expert Dr. Gilad Malach, arguing, “the state has been slow to communicate with the ultra-Orthodox rabbis” about social distancing, and conceded that this is strange given Israel’s then-Health Minister Yaakov Litzman is himself Haredi and leads a Haredi political party.

The day after the episode, News Corp websites reported that Litzman and his wife had contracted COVID-19.

On March 26 and April 9, the *Age* reported on the flouting of social distancing rules by small groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Melbourne.



# MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

## BETWEEN ALPHA AND OMEGA

The coronavirus pandemic may have been the alpha and omega of the media's news focus, but there was still plenty of Middle East coverage, too.

On the cusp of the pandemic (March 14), *Canberra Times* columnist Crispin Hull decried successive US administrations, saying if they "had not sent massive amounts of arms to Israel since the 1960s and troops and weapons to Saudi Arabia – seen as an enemy of Shiite Muslims – since the 1950s and troops and weapons to other regimes in the Middle East or endlessly meddled on Israel's side in the Palestinian conflict, anti-US sentiment would not have built up. It would not have built up to the extent that terrorist groups would make the US a prime target."

Hull of course downplayed the former Soviet Union's role in fomenting regional tensions, including spreading false intelligence that helped spark the 1967 war, as well as massive arms transfers in the 1950s and again between 1970 and 1973. Moreover, prior to 1967, Israel relied upon French, not US, military aid to counter Moscow's interventions.

Renewed Iranian-American hostilities in April saw *Australian* commentator Graham Richardson (April 24) write that US President Donald Trump's order "to 'shoot down' Iranian gunboats harassing US shipping" was "terrifying" and "dangerous", adding, "being the one to fire the first shot is never a good look and may give some legitimacy to these mad mullahs who control Iran. Those ignorant, hate-filled theocrats should never be presented as being only as bad as the world's superpower. The Israelis have been right all along. As long as the mullahs run the show, there can never be peace in the Middle East."

A UK *Channel 4* report on *SBS TV* "World News" (April 13) highlighted the Iranian regime's cover up and repression of the pandemic's full effects, including in the holy city of Qom, both an epicentre of the virus and a central plank in the regime's support base.

In the *Australian* (April 16), Lowy Institute analyst Rodger Shanahan called for the Trump Administration to lift "punitive" sanctions imposed on Iran after the US withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018, predicting this would "ease tensions in the region and... gain favour among the Iranian population."

A response to Shanahan by American Enterprise In-

stitute scholar Michael Rubin in the *Australian* (April 27) provided evidence that the regime only shifts position when faced with "maximum pressure".

Iran responded to Germany's 1992 "critical dialogue" proposal, Rubin wrote, with "assassinations in Berlin just weeks later, a truck bombing of the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires in 1994, and another targeting an

American barracks in Saudi Arabia two years after that."

Sanctions relief, Rubin said, would mostly benefit Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which dominates "manufacturing, trade,

and all major industries, and control[s] perhaps 40 per cent of Iran's economy" and would "deny hope to those who suffer the most."

An online analysis (April 11) by ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek and ABC fixer Fouad Abu Ghosh explored COVID-19's potential effects on Middle Eastern governments, including Iran and Syria. But no consideration was given to future repercussions for the Hezbollah-Iran relationship, which some blame for expediting COVID-19's entry into Lebanon.

A welcome reality check, however, came courtesy of Dutch Lebanese writer Kim Ghattas who discussed her new book "Black Wave" (reviewed in the *AIR*, April 2020) on *ABC Radio National* "Religion and Ethics Report" (April 22).

During the lengthy interview, the corrosive effect of the partnership between Palestinian leaders and post-revolutionary Iran was raised.

According to Ghattas, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat wooed Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 because Palestinians felt "repeatedly betrayed by the Arabs or let down by the Arabs because either they could not win wars against the Israeli occupation or they signed peace with the Israeli occupier... Arafat thought, well, who's going to help us now reclaim the land that we lost in this partition plan of 1948, which we rejected."

Khomeini, she said, "early on identified the Palestinian cause as one that could give him appeal beyond the Shi'a community... into the Arab world... Arafat was very supportive, helping to train the vanguards of the Iranian revolution in Lebanon, Islamists and leftists... And he was the first foreign dignitary to visit Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in February 1979, just about a week after Khomeini returned."

# THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

## VIRAL THEORIES

As I write, the coronavirus pandemic has brought about changes to virtually every aspect of our ways of life.

Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives or experienced devastating illness, while countless millions have lost livelihoods, opportunities and aspirations.

Country after country, state after state, community after community are experiencing restrictions on movement, and various levels of government authority have exercised their power to legislate and enforce numerous changes to our daily lives.

Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, reactions have included acceptance of conspiracy theories – by which I do not mean healthy scepticism and critical thinking – particularly on the origin and early spread of the virus.

The central villains in the malevolent conspiracy theories vary from culture to culture and subculture to subculture, but those open to the conspiracies universally share a failure to consider that the human beings making decisions could be speaking and acting honestly and with responsibility.

With the virus dominating the media in the United Kingdom, evidence of this conspiratorial mindset came to light in the context of a leaked report on antisemitism in



Former UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn continues to spark controversies over antisemitism

the British Labour Party – which essentially dismissed the problem as a beat-up by opponents of former leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The 860-page in-house assessment of the way antisemitism was dealt with by the Party addressed allegations made against people promoting anti-Jewish bigotry and hatred within the Labour movement since Corbyn's ascension to the leadership in 2015.

Its dismissive attitude revealed not just that the party has a problem with antisemitism but also that it is peopled by factional warriors who have complete contempt for anyone who is not the correct shade of leftness.

The report's authors failed to address the corrupt ideologies driving so many who had gravitated to the Labour

Party or appreciate why it was that so many previously rusted-on Labour voters simply, well, rusted off.

The authors of the document displayed an astonishing lack of self-awareness by treating victims of racist anti-Jewish bullying as the perpetrators of an offence against progressive thinking.

My own experiences with far-left groups while a student exposed me to their complete contempt not only for people who draw different conclusions about what is best for the population, but also for values such as truth or honesty.

I had first-hand experiences of well-to-do activists cynically campaigning to stop economic programmes which would help disadvantaged and needy people because they thought that the suffering of the destitute was the best way to have the “working class” see the political light.

Having been present in discussions as to how to manipulate political processes to exact influence well beyond that justified by popular support, nothing done or said by far-left activists surprises me.

But not being surprised doesn't mean not being concerned – or even alarmed.

For, as scholar and author of *Contemporary Left Antisemitism* David Hirsh has observed, the underlying thesis of the Labour Party report was the idea that the success of the Corbyn project was derailed by conspirators, enemy agents and deplorable double-dealers.

Hirsh noted, “It is a classic ‘stab in the back’ myth.” The Labour Party “blames the issue of antisemitism for its defeat. It focusses the blame onto political opponents. And the Jewish communities which were loudest and clearest in their opposition to antisemitism ... are the unmentioned, unseen villain.”

Dave Rich, author of *The Left's Jewish Problem*, wrote that, “the repeated message from the top of the Labour Party and their outriders and supporters was that allegations of antisemitism were exaggerated or invented to prevent socialism and defend Israel.”

Another expert observer, Dr Alan Johnson, noted that the report confirms the Labour Party was institutionally antisemitic, and provided a comfortable home for those who are antisemitic.

To return to this issue of the coronavirus, conspiracy theories have the potential to lead to misdirected anger and destructive behaviour.

The conspiracy theory which has infected the British Labour Party has the power to harm Britain for a generation or more.



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