

A photograph of Ayatollah Khamenei, leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, shaking hands on a red carpet. Khamenei is wearing a white turban and a black robe, while Xi is in a dark suit. The background is a blue wall with a large, faint, circular emblem.

AXIS OF AGGRESSION?

The implications of the mooted
Iran-China alliance

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Sherman Centre for Culture and Ideas

The Sherman Centre for Culture and Ideas (SCCI) is a Hub series fashioned as the newest evolution of the re-named Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation (SCAF, 2008-2017). SCCI launched in April 2018 with its inaugural Fashion and Architecture Hubs. SCCI returns in 2019 with new programming for the Fashion Hub (April) and Architecture Hub (October).

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Dr Gene Sherman AM, Founder and Executive Director.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This *AIR* edition's cover story analyses the potential consequences of a mooted deal establishing a long-term economic and strategic alliance between Iran and China.

Amotz Asa-El looks at the terms of the deal and what both Iran and China may be seeking to achieve, while Lahav Harkov of the *Jerusalem Post* explores the worrying consequences of such a deal for both Israel and the wider world. Meanwhile, in the editorial, Colin Rubenstein suggests that this "axis of aggression" that seems to be developing will require some major policy rethinking in Canberra, Jerusalem and other capitals.

In addition, Australian academic Ran Porat reveals the increasing takeover of Iranian politics by former and current members of the radically ideological Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Also featured this month are leading Israeli columnist Haviv Rettig Gur on the Israeli Government's recent stumbles in dealing with the coronavirus crisis, and leading academic demographer Sergio DellaPergola's look at West Bank population data in the context of the Trump Administration peace plan.

And don't miss Naomi Levin on the mythmaking of Israel critics who say they are being silenced, Jeremy Jones on recent revelations about antisemitism in Australian public schools and Allon Lee's review of a Palestinian director's charming movie, with a sting in the tail.

As always, we invite your feedback on this edition at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

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Iran's President Hassan Rouhani with Chinese President Xi Jinping at a summit in Shanghai, May 21, 2014. (Photo: Mark Ralston/Reuters)



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FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN

THE IRAN-CHINA AXIS

Reports from mid-July indicate that Iran and China are on the verge of entering into a 25-year strategic, security and economic partnership that would vastly expand China's presence in Iranian banking, telecommunications, ports, and railways – as well as foster military cooperation. This is a development that should deeply trouble the Morrison Government and all Australians, as well as cause a serious rethink in Israel.

The deal should come as no surprise, given the propensity for the world's revolutionary actors to seek alliances to help each other withstand diplomatic and economic pressure aimed at changing their problematic behaviours.

China's interference in Australian affairs, its mishandling of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, its ongoing South China Sea aggression, and now its indefensible changes to the status quo in Hong Kong, in violation of treaty obligations and other commitments, are just the latest chapters in Beijing's increasingly menacing foreign policy and grave human rights record.

At the same time, China, together with Russia, poses the biggest obstacle to restraining Iran's nuclear enrichment program through the UN Security Council. This ongoing permissiveness effectively enables Teheran's growing violations of the woefully inadequate and ephemeral 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, as well as its recently exposed violations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

For Israel, the prospects of an Iran-China deal that could potentially see Beijing invest up to US\$400 billion in Iran over the next 25 years should be a sobering wake-up call.

Like many other countries, Israel's Government has long tried to balance its relationship with China. Yet Jerusalem has nonetheless too strongly highlighted the benefit side of the cost-benefit equation, all the while confident it could contain the potentially deep risks extensive Chinese involvement might have for the nation's security.

Israel even awarded some major infrastructure projects to Chinese Government-linked firms, including, especially egregiously, the automation and management of Haifa Port over the next quarter-century, beginning in 2021.

At least there is little chance a similar contract would be awarded today.

As Yossi Melman, an expert on Israeli-Chinese relations, wrote last year, "The Israeli Government ignored China's behaviour for too long, but lately it has begun to pay attention."

Last October, Israel's security cabinet established an advisory committee to examine national security issues as part of the approval process for foreign investments.

In May, Israel chose an Israeli company over Chinese firm Hutchison to construct the world's largest desalination plant.

In June, Israel's Communications Ministry declined to include bids from Chinese firms in tenders for the construction of the country's 5G infrastructure.

To be sure, Israel's newfound wariness towards China has been spurred on by its biggest ally, the US. "We don't want the Chinese Communist Party to have access to Israeli infrastructure, Israeli communication networks," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Israelis in a televised interview in May. They're "the kind of things that endanger the Israeli people and the ability of the US to cooperate with Israel," he warned.

There is finally a growing awareness that Israel, while keeping the door open to trade opportunities in principle, must go much further in safeguarding national security vis-à-vis its business dealings with China, especially in regard to dual-use technology transfers.

China is now offering the Iranian regime, which is openly bent on destroying Israel,

numerous benefits that will effectively assist Teheran in its bid to achieve that goal. These potentially include making Iran more powerful militarily by supplying weapons; giving Iran the financial wherewithal to increase its support for terrorist proxies attacking Israel; and even indirectly helping Iran develop nuclear weapons by removing much of the pressure Iran is currently confronting to negotiate a new nuclear deal as a result of the effectiveness of new US sanctions.

As *Jerusalem Post* editor Yaakov Katz recently wrote, “One could say that while Israel is reportedly waging a covert battle against Iran’s nuclear program with one hand... with the other hand it is giving China billions of dollars that could then make their way to Iran.”

The mooted China-Iran deal should persuade any remaining Israelis still starry-eyed about the economic opportunities Beijing supposedly offers that these must now be significantly reassessed.

Meanwhile, the draft agreement between China and Iran should be recognised as a potentially grave development with the capacity to reframe foreign relations in ways that affect not only Jerusalem, but Canberra, Washington, London, Riyadh, New Delhi and beyond.

China is moving to project its power westward while Iran is seeking to insulate itself from American sanctions, enhance its own regional influence, and bolster its claim to lead a coalition of “resistance” states against the international order.

“China is now offering the Iranian regime, which is openly bent on destroying Israel, numerous benefits that will effectively assist Teheran in its bid to achieve that goal”

Iran’s partners in this alliance include not only Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis, but Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea, as well as China. In other words, this is a deal to help empower an international gallery of violent and destructive rogue actors.

With the JCPOA mandating the lifting of the long-standing arms embargo on Iran in October, the world could soon face the prospect of modern Chinese arms and military technology flowing into Iran, shifting the regional balance of power with potentially devastating, destabilising consequences.

This gives yet another strong reason for Australia to lend its diplomatic support to the US-led efforts to cancel the obviously foolhardy lifting of the arms embargo on Iran.

Meanwhile, Iran, which is reeling from a series of mysterious explosions that have reportedly damaged key strategic facilities around the country, could turn to China for a lifeline for its nuclear weapons program as well, given China’s long history of nuclear weapons technology transfer to Pakistan going back to the 1980s.

As Beijing and Teheran huddle closer together, Australia, Israel and their natural allies must review their respective basic national interests, draw the necessary conclusions and adjust their policies to develop and implement effective counter-strategies towards both countries accordingly.

AIR

“WORD FOR WORD”

“Responding to cyber-attacks is part of the country’s defence might. If it is proven that our country has been targeted by a cyber attack, we will respond.”

Iranian civil defence chief Gholamreza Jalali on the unexplained explosion at a centrifuge production facility at its Natanz enrichment plant (Reuters, July 3).

“Everyone can be suspicious of us all the time. But not every event that happens in Iran is connected to us. A nuclear Iran is a threat to the world and the region, as well as a threat to Israel. And we will do everything to prevent that from happening... but I do not refer to any individual event.”

Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz on recent explosions in Iran, some of which have been alleged to be due to Israeli sabotage (Times of Israel, July 5).

“I’m proud that there’s not been any administration that has

supported Israel in the way that President Trump and our Administration has done... We moved our embassy to Jerusalem. We said that the Golan Heights is a part of Israel. We’ve now unveiled a vision for peace that recognises reality on the ground... And we’ve said that anti-Zionism is indeed anti-Semitism. Period.”

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (US State Department website, July 17).

“The resurrection of Hagia Sophia was the harbinger of the liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and the footsteps of Muslims’ will to leave hard days behind.”

Remarks of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan after reestablishing the Hagia Sophia as a mosque (Times of Israel, July 14).

“It’s so disheartening to see people from groups that have been violently marginalised do the same thing to others without realising that perpetuating this kind of bad logic is what perpetuates racism.”

American basketball legend Kareem Abdul Jabbar on the frightening rise of antisemitic claims being spread by celebrities, particularly among the African-American community (Hollywood Reporter, July 14).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

A “SEA” CHANGE?

Once upon a time, it was not unusual for Middle Easterners who rejected Israel’s right to exist to express openly genocidal intentions – such as calls to “throw the Jews into the sea.”

According to Dr. Fadhil Jamali, Iraq’s Representative to the United Nations, speaking to the Arab League on February 6, 1955 about how Arab League leaders during the 1948 war were overconfident, “The highest official in the League said that with 300 soldiers or North African volunteers we could throw the Jews into the sea.” And there is indeed evidence some key Palestinian and Arab leaders did use the phrase “throw the Jews into the sea” during the 1948 Independence war – for example, Fawzi el Kaukji, the field commander of the Arab Liberation Army (ALA), is documented to have said this.

There are also numerous examples of Arab leaders and state-owned media during the lead-up to the Six-Day War in 1967 talking about the “annihilation” or “eradication” or “death” of Israel, wiping “Israel off the map” or “blotting out” its existence. While some may argue this could mean politicide without genocide, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) head in 1967, Ahmed Shukairi, was pretty explicit about what would happen to Israelis once Israel was “annihilated” in a sermon on June 1, 1967: “We shall destroy Israel and its inhabitants and as for the survivors – if there are any – the boats are ready to deport them.”

Since then, most advocates of Israel’s destruction have learnt to use more palatable language, talking about Israel’s replacement with a “democratic” state. Indeed, in 1969, one small Palestinian terrorist faction, the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP) published a circular saying the phrase “throw the Jews into the sea” had done the Arab cause great damage and that the demand should instead be that Israel be replaced by a “democratic Palestinian state” in which Arabs and Jews would live in peace.

Since then, advocates of Israel’s destruction have largely adopted variations of the phrase in the PLO Charter about replacing Israel with a “secular democratic state in all of Palestine.” However, most such claims have a sting in their tail – for instance the PLO Charter also said the “secular democratic” state could not contain “Zionists”, which was interpreted to mean almost all Israelis Jews would have to leave.

Even Islamists such as Hamas have mostly learned to get on board, insisting to Western interlocutors that Israel’s Jews could live there happily once the area becomes an Islamic state, just like the Jews of the Middle East did under Muslim rule since the seventh century (never mind that this historical claim is largely a fantasy.)

Yet, even today, 51 years after the PDFLP missive, some have not got the message about how to properly sell the radical and inherently ultra-violent idea of Israel’s destruction.

Ahmad Nofal, a Jordanian professor affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, gave us a good example on his weekly show on a Jordanian TV channel on July 17. Talking about Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s decision to turn the ancient Hagia Sophia church in Istanbul from a museum into a mosque, Nofal not only thought this was a wonderful development, but added this in justification of it:



Ahmad Nofal

“If we liberate Palestine tomorrow, will we leave the Jewish synagogues intact? No! We will uproot them, along with their people, and throw them into the sea. Allah willing, it will be soon.” (Quote translation by the Middle East Media Research Institute – MEMRI).

Incidentally, Nofal also insisted that Kamal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey who turned the Hagia Sophia into a museum in 1935, was really a Greek Jew.


He’s not the only one who hasn’t learnt the “diplomatic” way to demand Israel’s destruction.

The head of Hamas’ women’s movement in Gaza, Rajaa Al-Halabi, said the following at a rally that aired on July 9 on *Al-Aqsa TV*:

“These are the Israelites. These are the Jews. They are the ones who slayed the prophets... This enemy, who came from all corners of the world, has no place here, but this is what Allah wanted for them... This is our fate, my beloved sisters – to be Allah’s hand on Earth, the hand that will finish off the Israelites, this Zionist enemy, Allah willing. Allah brought them here in droves, so that Palestine becomes their graveyard, Allah willing.” (Quote translation by MEMRI).

These examples call to mind how, frankly, too many ostensibly well-meaning people have become willing to buy ridiculous claims that a democratic “one-state solution” encompassing both Israelis and Palestinians, could work. Anyone who thinks this way is buying the spin being used to sell an inherently violent idea, and not listening to what Palestinian leaders, and indeed the Palestinian population at large, are saying, either overtly or more subtly, about the Jewish presence in what they regard as “Palestine”.

Even those Palestinian leaders who do not say the Jews should be “thrown into the sea” or “finished off”, like Nofal and Al-Halabi, are almost all pretty clear that they view the Jewish presence in the land as completely illegitimate.

Even putting aside those who openly insist or surreptitiously believe that the Jews must be killed or expelled – and evidence suggests their number is not insignificant – that attitude alone would make a process of peaceful, shared national co-existence, with all the compromises this would require, inherently impossible. 

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

David Horovitz

AN ABBAS-HAMAS REALIGNMENT?

At a joint press conference on July 2, two Palestinian leaders from different factions, Fatah's Jibril Rajoub and Hamas' Saleh al-Arouri, vowed to work together to resist unilateral Israeli moves to extend sovereignty to parts of the West Bank and "topple" the Trump Administration's Israeli-Palestinian peace proposal. "We will put in place all necessary measures to ensure national unity," proclaimed Rajoub in Ramallah, as al-Arouri looked on, via video link, from Beirut.

Their coordination would open "a new phase that will be a strategic service to our people," chimed in al-Arouri, adding ominously that Hamas would "use all forms of struggle and resistance against the annexation project."

Had the bombshell event been organised by an internal opponent to Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas' rule, it would have represented an outrageous act of defiance against him.

Here, after all, was one of Abbas' most senior colleagues, a former PA preventive security chief and potential successor who once worked in close coordination with Israeli security forces, grandly declaring that Fatah was henceforth partnering with Hamas, readying to work in "100 percent harmony" with an Islamist terror organisation avowedly committed to the destruction of Israel. An Islamist terror organisation, moreover, that 13 years ago brutally forced Abbas' Fatah out of the Gaza Strip, and would have long since finished him off in the West Bank too were he not protected by Israel's ongoing overall security presence there.

But Rajoub's "unity" presentation with al-Arouri – the exiled chief of Hamas' West Bank terrorist infrastructure, and the man who orchestrated the kidnapping and killings of three Israeli teenagers in the Etzion Bloc south of Jerusalem in 2014 – was not a calculated act of defiance against Abbas.

It was, rather, a stinging blow to the lingering hopes of those on the Zionist left who, in the face of years of contrary evidence, still insistently regard Abbas as a potential peace partner with whom Israel might be able to reach a dependable peace agreement.

The Fatah-Hamas pledge of partnership declared by Rajoub and al-Arouri – who has a US\$5 million American bounty on his head – was approved in advance by the PA President. The joint event was applauded on the day itself by the PA Prime Minister and shown on both PA and Hamas TV.

The message Abbas was sending – to a watching world but most especially to his own people – was unmistakable: Israel, and any possibility of reconciliation, out; Hamas, and terrorism, in.

There was never any remote chance that Abbas, who chose to walk away from then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's 2008 offer of almost everything the Palestinians purportedly seek – including land equivalent to 100% of the West Bank with one-for-one land swaps, and a shared capital in Jerusalem – was going to engage with the Trump Administration's "Peace to Prosperity" proposal, with its far less generous, highly conditional framework for a Palestinian state.

Abbas, who warmly hosted President Donald Trump in Bethlehem in May 2017, made his strategy plain when he broke off all contacts with the Administration seven months later, after Trump formally recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital – even though the presidential recognition left open the possibility of Palestinian sovereignty there too.

The PA chief has since underlined his rejectionism in all manner of ways, many of them directly self-defeating for his people – routinely inciting against Israel and denying Jewish history in the Holy Land in order to persuade Palestinians that Jews have no legitimacy there; diverting foreign assistance to help fund salaries and payments to terrorists and their families; and refusing in recent months to accept the tax payments collected by Israel on the PA's behalf – monies essential to pay the Palestinian workforce.

Thus when various interlocutors, reportedly including Jordan's King Abdullah, have urged Abbas in recent weeks to thwart Netanyahu's unilateral annexation gambit by informing the Americans he was prepared to re-engage, Abbas refused to do so, instead suspending security cooperation and intensifying the PA's anti-Israel diplomacy.

He also submitted a "counter-proposal" to the Middle East Quartet – a forum comprising the US, EU, UN and Russia under whose aegis Israel has always refused to negotiate – for a demilitarised Palestinian state. But any credibility in this counter-proposal, whose full details have not been publicised, has now been superseded by his new alliance with Hamas.

Plainly, the Trump Administration can put aside any thought of the Palestinian leadership engaging with its Peace to Prosperity vision, notwithstanding US officials' intermittent assurances that the proposal's terms are not final, and that the goal is for the Palestinians to come back to the table, where they could propose changes.

And we wait to see how much freedom of operation Abbas intends to give to al-Arouri and his murderous aco-



lytes, or rather how much they will now seize – whether, that is, Israel now faces a new wave of terrorism in and from the West Bank.

AIR

David Horovitz is the founding editor of the Times of Israel. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

THE MAIN AGENDA

With its first parliamentary challenge now behind it, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's Perikatan Nasional governing coalition looks set to double down on the well-trodden road of Malay chauvinism to ensure its survival via a razor-thin majority.

Meeting on July 13 for its first full session since his government took power five months ago, the Parliament rid PM Muhyiddin of his first obstacle – voting to remove the house speaker who had approved a potential no-confidence vote against him pushed by the opposition.

Muhyiddin's Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, which has only 13 members of parliament, is in a shaky coalition that gives him 113 seats, a bare two above the minimum to stay in power. He depends upon the support of the deeply corrupt United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and the rural Islamist Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS).

Last September, UMNO and PAS formalised what had been an unofficial marriage of convenience since before the 2018 election, a dedication to Ketuanan Melayu, or Malay nationalism and the religious primacy of Islam.

That such policies were ever deemed necessary owes to the fact that Malaysia was once a tolerant multi-ethnic nation of Malays, Chinese, Indians and small indigenous groups, headed by a patriarchal Malay elite embodied by the royal families and the long-established political families that still dominate today.

But in the wake of race riots in May 1969 that resulted in hundreds of deaths, the New Economic Policy which followed instituted privileges for Malays in a creeping monoculturalism that has entrenched rent-seeking patronage networks and performative identity politics over competence and fresh ideas. In 1957, Chinese Malaysians comprised about 40 percent of the population – a figure that has since shrunk to about 23 percent.

Generations of Malays have now been educated through a system that has rewritten history to justify their special privileges, while Islam has been reframed to become a tool of exclusion, rather than a doctrine of universal values.

Language and greetings have been Arabised, which has

further separated Malays from other ethnic groups.

As Malay birth rates have far exceeded those of other racial groups, the Malays are the dominant grouping in the country. The first-past-the-post electoral system and single-member constituencies ensure that candidates need only appeal to the sectional interests of the dominant group.

Deeply embedded within the “Malay agenda” is an inferiority complex which sees threats both from within – the largely prosperous and outward-looking Chinese community – and far beyond national borders. One of the prime foreign bogeymen has long been Jews, and Israel in particular. Conspicuous antipathy to Israel, and support for the Palestinians, serves as a signifier of Malay-Muslim identity and in-group solidarity.

The prospect of Israel extending its sovereignty into the West Bank gave PM Muhyiddin another opportunity to demonstrate support for the Palestinian cause. In a Facebook post on July 2, he said, “I would like to stress that Malaysia will continue giving its support to the struggle of the Palestinians. I also call on the international community, especially the UN, to immediately find the best solution to the peace plan in the region.”

Accompanying the post were pictures of Muhyiddin receiving a courtesy call from a MyAQSA Foundation delegation. The Putrajaya-based organisation has the declared mission of linking government and NGOs to be a “unifier of the ummah in achieving the liberation of Al-Aqsa.”

He spoke approvingly of MyAQSA's international activities, especially in the case of alleged “Israeli war crimes against Palestine” in the International Criminal Court (ICC). “It is my hope, as much as MyAQSA's, to see Malaysia play a bigger role in strengthening the unification of the Palestinians,” he added.

While denial of Israel's legitimacy is implied rather than openly stated in such comments, there was no ambiguity in Muhyiddin's deposed predecessor Mahathir Mohammed.

In an English-language interview on Lebanon's *Al-Mayadeen TV* aired on June 29, Mahathir said that Muslim in-fighting was helping Israel and her allies. “I know there are big powers that would like to see instability in Muslim countries,” he said. “We are doing things – almost like helping Israel. Because we fight each other, the Israelis don't have to kill Muslims. Muslims are doing it for them.”

Mahathir warned that carrying out terrorist attacks against Western states will only erode support for the Palestinians, insisting that the true enemy was Israel. “[If] you want to do anything, do it to the Israelis, like some of the Palestinians in Jerusalem who individually attack Israeli soldiers. That is the enemy,” he said.

These and similar statements alleging “Jews control the media in the West” are nothing new from Mahathir and cause barely a ripple within Malaysia. Some within the opposition ranks still see him as the best leadership candidate if an early election is called.

AIR

Douglas Davis

THE NEW NORMAL?

Is the European Union, well-known for its ongoing hostility to Israel, about to make a seismic shift? A clutch of leading European states – though not including Germany – has called for the toughest possible response if Israel declares sovereignty over parts of the West Bank under the Trump Administration peace plan.

There are many reasons for such displays of hostility, not least Europe's longstanding perception that its real interests lie not with Israel, but with the Arab world in general and the Palestinian cause in particular. Add to that Europe's antipathy to faith, flag and family – prized values in Israel – its enduring antisemitism, and its inability to deal with the Holocaust and you go some way to understanding Europe's hostility towards the Jewish state.

Whatever punishment Europe might impose if Israel goes ahead with so-called annexation is a matter of conjecture, ranging from symbolic diplomatic rhetoric to hard-knuckle sanctions regimes. Times change. These days it would be hard for the EU to inflict damage on Israel without hurting itself.

There are several factors which are tending to temper the traditional European antagonism towards Israel: firstly, Europe is finding itself deeply engaged in Israeli commercial opportunities; secondly, it is hungry for the military high-tech that is pouring out of Israeli start-ups and; thirdly, it is grateful for Israel's valuable intelligence contributions to European security.

What has radically complicated the picture for Europe is that some of the most important Arab states on the European check-list, like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, are increasingly irritated by the Palestinians and increasingly open about their relations with Israel. France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium and Luxembourg – the advocates of tough anti-Israel action – may have to look elsewhere for a bone on which they can collectively gnaw with a degree of general satisfaction.

They may be encouraged to rethink their sterile old alliances in the Middle East by four former communist states – the Visegrád Four – which joined the European Union in 2004. The Visegrád Four – Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia – are well disposed towards Israel.

The Visegrád Four are not, to be sure, free of anti-semitism or Holocaust guilt, but they are drawn to Israel because, after decades of communist domination, they are determined to follow Israel's example. They are deter-

mined to assert their national uniqueness and express their long-suppressed identity, even when this is opposed by the older EU states, which believe national identities should be diluted by regional organisations like the EU or, better still, international organisations like the UN.

Meanwhile, there are ample signs of a rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf states, which cannot have gone unnoticed in Europe. In June, for example, the first commercial aircraft from the United Arab Emirates landed at Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport carrying COVID-19 supplies for the Palestinian Authority. The PA rejected the precious aid cargo because it wanted to avoid the impression of normalisation between Israel and the UAE.

In fact, contacts between Israel and the Gulf states have been booming over the past five years. There have been top-level exchanges – political, security, economic and social – with Oman, Dubai, Bahrain and, of course, Saudi Arabia.

Trade between Israel and the Gulf states is now estimated at about US\$1 billion a year.

One Israeli-owned company, AGT International, has reportedly concluded an \$800 million deal with the UAE for border surveillance equipment. And much more is reportedly happening out of sight in the intelligence and security spheres.

For all that, the Gulf states are not on the brink of full normalisation with Israel. The Arab world is unable to decouple itself from the fraying Palestinian cause without risking the ire of the street; nor is it able to free its population from its own frequently antisemitic views towards Israel.

But something has changed.

The most important is the rise of the Shi'ite states, led by nuclear-hungry Iran and supported by a cast that includes Iraq, Syria, the Houthi in Yemen and the Hezbollah elements in Lebanon. The Shi'ite arc poses an existential threat not only to Israel, but also to the Arab Sunni world, led by Egypt and the Gulf states.

This coincidence of threats and interests has thrown together some key Gulf Arab states – along with Egypt and Jordan – and Israel into a security alliance. And the alliance appears set to endure.

From Israel's perspective, it is important beyond the obvious strategic advantages. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's openness to the Arab world is part of his broader campaign to project Israel's political profile achieved through historic visits into Latin America, Asia, South Asia and Africa. Israel now has more diplomatic recognition in the international community than at any time since it achieved independence.

Can the European Union afford to cling to its clapped-out rhetoric and ignore the changed diplomatic map of the Middle East, led by Israel's manifest vitality and success?

BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

Two rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel on June 26 and three more on July 5. The rockets caused no damage or injuries and prompted Israeli retaliatory strikes. On June 30, terror organisations in Gaza test-fired 20 missiles into the sea, presumably to send a message to Israel.

On June 24, a Border Police officer was injured at a checkpoint in a vehicular attack. The Palestinian attacker – a nephew of senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat – was shot dead by security forces.

PFLP AID LINKS UNCOVERED

On July 21, Israel's Shin Bet security service announced it had uncovered a terror cell on the West Bank that was posing as an aid group, and arrested its members. A detained member of the cell, aligned with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), revealed that the cell had been funded by Iran and Hezbollah, and members were to receive weapons training in Lebanon.

Also on July 21, the Dutch Government admitted in Parliament that the Netherlands had paid salaries to two PFLP terrorists responsible for the murder of 17-year-old Israeli Rina Shnerb in an August 2019 bomb attack in the West Bank. The terrorists were employees of the Palestinian Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), which was receiving Dutch funding and allegedly has long-standing ties to the PFLP.

SENIOR HAMAS COMMANDER DEFECTS

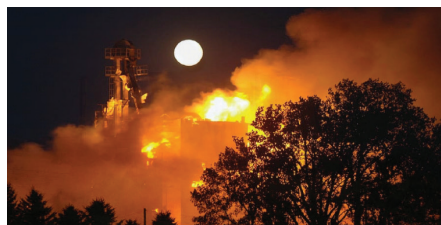
A senior commander in Hamas' Gaza naval commando force report-

edly defected to Israel on July 12. According to the Arabic press, the defector had been part of a spy network working for Israel since 2009.

The defector, who left Gaza for Israel by boat, reportedly carried with him sensitive information about planned attacks, weapons depots, military training grounds, and the addresses of senior members of the terrorist organisation.

In response to the defection, it was reported that several Hamas military wing members were arrested in Gaza, officers at Hamas' internal security apparatus were removed from duty, and senior leaders were required to relocate and change mobile devices.

MYSTERIOUS EXPLOSIONS IN IRAN



A fire at Natanz, Iran on July 2

From late June, Iran has been struck with a series of more than 10 fires and explosions across the country, some of which occurred at sites related to Iran's nuclear project and ballistic missile program. An explosion in or near the Parchin military base on June 26, for example, was reportedly in the Khojir missile production complex, while a major fire or explosion destroyed a factory for constructing advanced centrifuges for enriching uranium at the Natanz nuclear facility on July 2.

Some analysts suggested many of these occurrences were malfunctions in old and rickety infrastructure in Iran, although the regime in Teheran reportedly suspects sabotage or

cyber-attack by foreign elements. Intelligence sources told the *New York Times* that Israel was responsible for the explosion at the Natanz facility.

RARE ONLINE PROTEST IN IRAN AGAINST EXECUTIONS

In a rare online campaign, Iranians from all walks of life joined together to deliver a message to their government to stop executing dissidents. The online campaign followed a judicial decision to uphold death sentences against three young men for joining anti-government protests in November 2019, against worsening economic conditions and rising gas prices.

It is estimated that Iranian security forces killed more than 500 protesters and arrested another 7,000 during those protests. According to Amnesty International, the Iranian government put 251 people to death in 2019, second only to China.

By July 14, the hashtag #Don'tExecute, written in Persian, was published in more than 4.5 million tweets by Iranians around the world, including famous bloggers, actors, pop stars, filmmakers, and former politicians and members of parliament.

On July 19, the Iranian judiciary announced the three men at the centre of the campaign would receive a re-trial.

ERDOGAN PROMISES TO LIBERATE AL-AQSA

In a July 10 decree widely condemned around the world, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reversed a 1935 law that had turned Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, the ancient cathedral of Constantinople, from a mosque into a museum. His speech in

Turkish about the conversion of the site back into a mosque conveyed a message of tolerance, but a tweet in Arabic on the President's personal Twitter account linked this decision to the future "liberation" of the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

This coded incitement against Israel, which controls Jerusalem's Old City where the Al-Aqsa mosque is located, is consistent with Erdogan's frequent invocations of a glorious Ottoman and Muslim past to justify Ankara's ambitious religious and nationalist agenda in the region.

Meanwhile, non-government organisation UN Watch noted that "Turkey's decision to turn UNESCO-listed Hagia Sophia into a mosque violates the World Heritage Convention," even as Turkey serves as president of the UNESCO General Conference.

ISRAEL'S NEW SURVEILLANCE SATELLITE

On July 6, Israel launched the Ofek 16, an electro-optical reconnaissance satellite with advanced imaging capabilities. This is the newest in a series of military satellites launched by Israel since 1988.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said the new satellite strengthened Israel's defences against opponents. Iran recently launched its first spy satellite.

IRAQI PM TAKES ON IRANIAN CONTROL

Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, elected in early May, has taken his first major action against the pro-Iranian Iraqi militia responsible for rocket attacks against US troops and targets in Iraq. On June 25, an Iraqi counterterrorism unit raided a South Baghdad compound belonging to the pro-Iranian militia, Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), arresting 14 members.

Reports said that inside the compound were Iranian rocket experts and workshop facilities for producing

Katyusha rockets.

However, following threats against al-Kadhimi by a militia aligned to KH, and a judicial finding that there was no evidence to justify their arrest, the KH men were released days later.

Subsequently, on July 6, Iraqi security commentator Hisham al-Hashimi, a critic of the militias and informal advisor to al-Kadhimi, was assassinated.

Earlier, PM Kadhimi had begun requiring that Iranian General Esmail Ghaani, head of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, obtain a visa before entering Iraq. He also removed several pro-Iranian senior Iraqi government officials from their posts.

ISRAELI, PA, COVID-19 SPIKES

While both Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank were initially successful in suppressing the spread of coronavirus, both have

recently suffered sharp spikes, which experts have attributed, in large part, to one common factor – wedding season.

By the end of May, there had been only 400 active cases in the PA, but by July 21, the West Bank had 7,232 active cases, was averaging more than 300 new cases a day, and had suffered a total of 64 deaths.

PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh told a July 6 cabinet meeting that 82% of cases at that time were linked to weddings and funerals.

Similarly, on July 6, an Israeli health official blamed the 2,092 weddings between June 15 and 25 for much of the spike in Israel. Israel, which had 30,874 cases on July 21, was averaging more than 1,500 new cases a day, and had by then suffered 425 deaths.

Both Israel and the PA have announced a raft of new restrictions to combat the virus, including cracking down on large weddings and other gatherings.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

A CYBER OWN GOAL

Iran has repeatedly denied that it is involved in state-sponsored cyber espionage, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary. These denials are now much more difficult to sustain after it has been caught red-handed thanks to Iranian-backed hackers who recorded their own actions and uploaded the videos to an unprotected server on the internet.

According to a report in *Wired* on July 16, "Researchers at IBM's X-Force security team revealed today that they've obtained roughly five hours of video footage that appears to have been recorded directly from the screens of hackers working for a group IBM calls ITG18, and which other security firms refer to as APT 35 or Charming Kitten. It's one of the most active state-sponsored espionage teams linked to the government of Iran."

The article also noted that the videos were found alongside data that the hackers appear to have stolen from accounts belonging to US and Greek military personnel. The hackers may have also targeted US State Department staff and an Iranian-American philanthropist.

The videos appear to be training demonstrations to teach junior hackers how to steal data from Gmail and Yahoo Mail accounts, and obtain other Google-hosted data.

Senior analyst at IBM X-Force Alison Wikoff, whose team discovered the videos, noted the novelty of the findings. She said, "Very rarely do we actually see the adversary on their own desktop. It's a whole other level of 'hands-on-keyboard' observation."

Hopefully much can be learnt about how to prevent Iranian cyber-espionage from these videos. And perhaps the next time Iran wishes to deny its involvement in state sponsored cyber espionage, it should make its hackers turn their cameras off when they are at work.

COVER STORY

A TEHERAN-BEIJING AXIS?

MAPPING THE POTENTIAL GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

by Amotz Asa-El

“Contacts are underway to establish normal ties with Afghanistan, as well as Israel,” reported Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai to China’s National Assembly in mid-1954.

The Korean War had ended the previous year, and the Chinese communist government was looking for ways to reach out to the West. Jerusalem, after some deliberations, decided to accommodate Beijing despite Washington’s dismay, and in early 1955, an Israeli diplomatic delegation was hosted in Beijing. However, China soon changed its mind, and the two nations remained estranged.

By 1964, estrangement had turned into hostility. That’s when the same Zhou Enlai emerged from talks in Cairo and declared “we are ready to help the Arab nations reconquer Palestine” promising Israel’s enemies “anything you ask: weapons and volunteers.”

The volunteers never came and the weaponry of Arab armies remained mostly Soviet-made, but the Chinese attitude remained a thorn in Israel’s side. It was the inversion of what was happening at the other end of the historic Silk Road, in Iran, whose relations with Israel were flourishing at that time.

In 1979, by sheer coincidence, China and Iran both made historic U-turns. The former abandoned major elements of its anti-Western communism while the latter shifted to anti-Western Islamism. Now the two ancient nations are both reportedly at the cusp of yet another change of course, potentially at Israel’s expense.

With Beijing facing what it sees as an economically belligerent White House, and with Teheran straining under American-led sanctions, Chinese and Iranian representa-

tives have held talks in recent months over an ambitious long-term deal that would focus ostensibly on trade, but create serious potential geopolitical consequences.

According to a draft agreement obtained by the *New York Times*, the plan involves nearly 100 civilian projects including airports, seaports, metro systems, fast trains, and telecommunications infrastructure. Spanning 25 years, Chinese investments would average US\$16 billion (A\$22.9 billion) annually, in return for which Iran would ship oil to

China at discounted prices for the deal’s duration.

Militarily, the document did not include transfers of hardware, but it did mention intelligence exchanges, joint exercises, and joint arms develop-

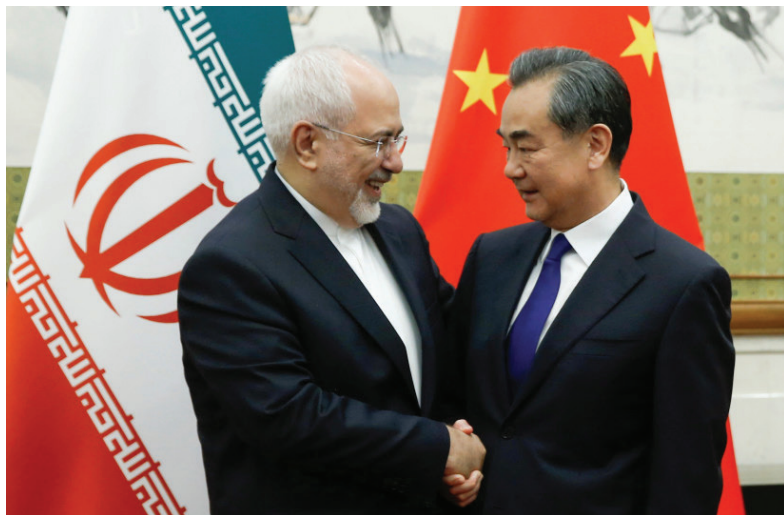
ment. At this writing, there is no firm indication of when the deal might be signed, though some reports suggested it could be scheduled for next March.

In recent years, there have been other strategic deals between the two countries, most notably one signed in 2016 for joint exercises and cooperation in what they called “fighting terrorism.” However, in terms of its scope, duration and cost, this new agreement would be on an entirely different scale. The question therefore is what in it might materialise, and what it means for the West generally, and for Israel in particular.

Strategically, there is logic in the reported blueprint.

Iran’s needs are obvious: the Islamic Republic is beset by international sanctions, inflation, unemployment, and industrial stagnation. A long-term partnership with China offers Iran a priceless alternative to European and American investment. As a bonus, it can also potentially create a counterweight to America’s naval dominance between the

“Strategically, there is logic in the reported blueprint. Iran’s needs are obvious: the Islamic Republic is beset by international sanctions, inflation, unemployment, and industrial stagnation.”



A deal discussed: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Beijing in 2018

Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.

Such hopes were asserted publicly by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in a speech delivered on July 7, where he called on Lebanon to forego a much-needed International Monetary Fund loan, and seek credit from China instead. The Iranian-backed Nasrallah added that China is eager to restore Lebanon's defunct coastal railway.

From China's viewpoint, a strategic partnership with Iran would offer its vast industrial sector, the world's leading oil importer, a smooth and long-term supply of petroleum. Meanwhile, the public works projects would fit well into the Belt and Road Initiative, through which China is building infrastructure projects across Asia and the Pacific, through the Indian sub-continent and into the Middle East – a program which aims to expand Chinese international influence, as well as provide contracts for state-linked Chinese firms.

Then again, in some respects, the prospective deal makes less sense.

First, Iran's oil is hardly crucial for China, which has a surplus of solid suppliers, from Russia and Malaysia to Saudi Arabia. Moreover, China is investing billions in fracking, and its shale deposits are believed to be vast, possibly larger than America's.

Second, with oil prices already at historic lows – due both to America's intense fracking and the coronavirus effect – selling crude to China, at even lower prices, might prove economically unworkable for Iran.

Thirdly, some in Iran are concerned that China's projects might compromise Iran's national interest, and possibly also its sovereignty.

Rumours that the prospective deal includes ceding Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf to China were denied in early July by Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Abbas Mousavi, after former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said in a speech that the proposed deal with China was "suspicious".

Such concerns about Chinese designs are not unique to Iranian nationalists, and indeed are shared in Western capitals, where Beijing's rapidly expanding involvement in global infrastructure projects is seen as risky economic hyperactivity at best, and a geopolitical power grab at worst.

In Iran, there are concerns that a deal will involve a Chinese naval presence within, and military presence alongside, the Strait of Hormuz, which would govern that passage from the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf. Whatever such a presence might mean for China and Iran, the US would not be at all happy to see a Chinese base located in a key geopolitical chokepoint through which most of the Middle East's oil passes to the outside world.

Just what China is out to achieve in Iran, and what it is prepared to pay for that, remains unclear.

In all likelihood, one component of Beijing's thinking is not about Teheran, but about Washington. Feeling pressured by US President Donald Trump, China might be pretending to cook up an Iranian deal only to convince Trump to change his course on China – for instance by ceasing to confront the aggressive Chinese expansion in the South China Sea.

Whether or not this is part of an arm-wrestle with the US, China is out to establish a presence along what it calls the maritime Silk Road. That is why it stationed a military unit in Djibouti, at the Horn of Africa, in 2015, and why Beijing has signed long-term leases for ports from Malaysia through Sri Lanka to the Maldives.

Then again, the days when superpowers were prepared to pay fortunes to maintain Middle Eastern alliances, the way the USSR did with Egypt in the 1950s and with Syria in the 1970s, are almost certainly over. China wants cash for anything it offers. This is the likely reason the Iranian-Chinese deal apparently does not include arms supplies. Iran can't currently afford the jets, tanks and battleships which its military craves and which China can deliver, the sanctions notwithstanding.

As China did during the Iran-Iraq War, when it sold arms to both sides, it is prepared to sell almost anything to almost anyone, but being the good capitalist it has become, it will only do so for hard currency. Iran does not currently have any to spare.

Does this mean Israel should not be alarmed by the Chinese-Iranian trade talks and purported deal? Sadly, it does not.

It is true that since establishing diplomatic ties in 1992, China and Israel have become close commercial partners – so much so that over the half-decade from 2014 to 2019 their bilateral trade nearly doubled, from A\$12.6 billion to A\$21.75 billion.

Moreover, Chinese companies were involved in build-

ing major Israeli infrastructure projects, including the Tel Aviv subway and a new seaport in Haifa, while Israel's leading universities have built five academic centres in major Chinese universities.

These civic and economic partnerships will not be directly affected by whatever China does to help Iran economically. However, should China set out to replace the Iranian army's ageing aircraft, armour, and boats, Israel will have to treat such an effort the way America treats China's commercial conduct: as a strategic threat.

AIR

WHY THE CHINA-IRAN DEAL IS CONCERNING

by Lahav Harkov

With Iran and China working on a multibillion-dollar 25-year economic and security deal, there are many reasons to be concerned.

The proposed agreement, leaked to the *New York Times* which reported on it on July 11, would lead to a closer military relationship between Teheran and Beijing, including joint military exercises, research and weapons development and intelligence sharing. It would also increase Chinese investments in Iranian banking, telecommunications and transportation, such as airports and railways. China would reportedly get a discounted supply of Iranian oil in return.

The document describes the countries as "two ancient Asian countries... with a similar outlook" that "will con-

sider one another strategic partners."

Neither side has publicly confirmed that the document is genuine. When asked about a deal with Iran a few weeks ago, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said: "China and Iran enjoy traditional friendship, and the two sides have been in communication on the development of bilateral relations. We stand ready to work with Iran to steadily advance practical cooperation."

Meanwhile, there is public debate in Iran about whether the agreement could be a debt trap, with former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaking out against it. The agreement has been in the works for a long time – Chinese leader Xi Jinping first proposed it on a visit to Teheran in 2016 – and the timing for the recent progress likely has to do with Iran being especially economically weak these days.

According to Carice Witte, executive director of SIGNAL, a think tank focused on China-Israel relations: "This is indicative of the Chinese approach, [to] identify where there is a vulnerability and then patiently look for ways to capitalise on it."

China has much to gain from the deal besides a discount on gas when energy prices are plummeting anyway. The

agreement fits into China's Belt and Road Initiative to build infrastructure across the world, while bringing Iran into its orbit of influence. It also would bolster China's new digital currency e-RMB as a way to bypass American systems and reduce the power of the dollar.

Plus, China would gain power and influence in Iran, a diplomatic card it can play with respect to the US and garner greater leverage in the Gulf.

For Israel, the potential for damage from such an agreement is clear.

As Witte said, "Any dollar going into the Iranian system is one that can likely be spent against Israel." This is especially clear when it comes to the bolstering of Iran's military through cooperation with China. Any of the new resources directed to the Islamic Republic's army can potentially – and likely will – be turned on Israel.

Another part of the deal may be a massive sale of weapons to Iran. A recent Pentagon report said China seeks to sell Iran attack helicopters, fighter jets, tanks and more once the UN arms embargo expires in October.

While Israelis and Israel supporters may find it hard to believe, the Chinese Government truly does not think Iran is a danger to Israel, Witte said. "China's perception is that Iran doesn't mean what it says about destroying Israel," she added.



Will China be getting access to an Iranian port or other energy infrastructure?



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Israel and the US have been pushing UN Security Council members to extend the arms embargo on Iran that began under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and world powers. Israel and the US have cited Teheran's violations of that deal and continued attempts to build up its nuclear program, for which the International Atomic Energy Agency has repeatedly rapped Iran in recent weeks, as well as its sponsorship of terrorism and warfare through proxies around the Middle East.

But Chinese Ambassador to the UN Zhang Jun said in mid-July his country opposes US attempts to activate the JCPOA's "snapback sanctions" mechanism.

The return of US sanctions in 2018 has led to a major economic crisis in Iran and subsequent political instability. This empowered hardliners to say Iran never should have made a deal involving the US in the first place. They won a decisive majority of Iran's parliament in an election this year.

But it also has led to protesters taking to the streets this year, protesting a government that uses its money to pay for wars in other countries instead of helping its own people. Experts say the regime is as unpopular as it has ever been since the Islamic Revolution.

The US "maximum pressure" campaign has clearly had a major impact on Iran, but a massive influx of Chinese investments will go a long way toward undoing it, effectively relieving the pressure.

Another concern is regarding Chinese companies' involvement in infrastructure projects in Israel and Iran. This is already taking place, but the 25-year agreement would deepen those ties.

A *Jerusalem Post* investigation last month found that three of the six international groups bidding on the tender to build two lines of the Tel Aviv light rail include Chinese-owned companies that also worked on railway projects in Iran.

A report by the RAND research institute this year warned that due to China's close ties with Iran, the Chinese Government could have companies share insights on Israel with Teheran to gain favour and influence. In addition, China could use the companies operating in Israel and Iran for political leverage on Israel, such as in 2013, when it conditioned a Beijing visit by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on his stopping defence officials from testifying in a New York federal lawsuit against the Bank of China for laundering Iranian money for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The US is waiting to see what actual agreement emerges, and it will continue to take action against any Chinese company breaking sanctions, a State Department source said.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's office declined to

comment on this matter, but it is likely eyeing the China-Iran agreement with concern.

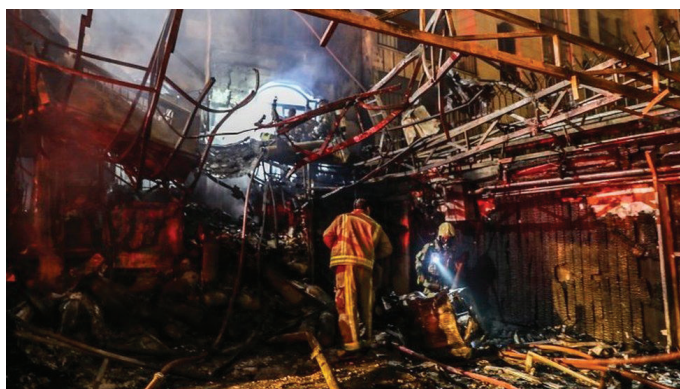
AIR

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IRAN BLASTS EXPOSE REGIME'S SHAKY FOUNDATIONS

by Raz Zimmt

The series of unusual incidents in Iran over the past few weeks has proven again the weakness of the regime in Teheran in the face of serious challenges at home and abroad, chief among them the uncompromising diplomatic pressure of the US, its economic crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, which has so far claimed the lives of more than 11,000 Iranians.



Not every disaster in Iran is the result of foreign subterfuge, especially given the very poor state of Iranian infrastructure

Even though it is tempting to attribute these events to foreign sabotage, we must practice caution before grouping all these incidents into one category.

An explosion at the nuclear plant in Natanz on July 2 is not in the same category as a blast at an x-ray lab in the heart of Teheran on July 1, just as an incident at a rocket research facility in Khojir on June 25 is not the same as a wiring fault at a power station in Ahvaz on July 4.

Not every explosion or fire in Teheran is the result of foreign subterfuge; the critical condition of Iran's infrastructure is widely known. Add to that lacklustre maintenance, negligent management and human error.

The head of Teheran's city council lately admitted that out of 33,000 buildings categorised as unsafe following the collapse of the Plasco skyscraper during a 2017 fire that killed dozens of fire fighters, only 3,000 have been sufficiently repaired to meet safety protocols.



And yet, even if all these incidents are unconnected, this unusual series of events only emphasises the lack of safety within the Islamic Republic.

There has been severe criticism on Iranian social media in recent days over the regime's failures and its inability to guarantee the safety of buildings and infrastructure in the face of cyber or direct sabotage.

Iran's leaders are surely very troubled by this spate of accidents, especially the ones in sensitive facilities.

External threats have forced the Islamic Republic in recent years to consolidate its fight to stamp out domestic dissent. It is fair to assume that these incidents will lead to a further ramping up of oppression against the regime's enemies, both real and fictional.

In June, the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency adopted a resolution, the first of its kind since 2012, criticising Iran for not letting its inspectors into sites suspected of having been part of the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

At the same time, the US is attempting to convince the UN Security Council to extend the arms embargo against Iran, which is set to expire in October, and has threatened to activate the clause within the nuclear agreement allowing any one of the deal's participants to automatically reimpose all sanctions lifted as part of the deal.

Iran for its part made it clear that such a move will be answered with an "appropriate response."

Radical wings within Iran have also pressured the Government to take more proactive steps in retaliation, starting with axing cooperation with the IAEA or even withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Even if the latest incidents cannot be connected, and even if most are not the result of sabotage, the heightened sense of alert within Iran could lead to increasingly severe actions, despite its leaders' reluctance to do anything rash in the four months leading up to the US elections in November.

AIR

Dr. Raz Zimmt is a research fellow specialising in Iran at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University. © Yediot Ahronot (ynetnews.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

THE IRGC IS TAKING OVER IRAN

by Ran Porat

Following Iranian parliamentary elections in February, analysts noted a power shift inside the regime. The so-called hardliner camp gained a decisive victory, winning more than 200 of the 290 seats in Iran's parliament, the Majlis. The historically low voter turnout of 42% (in Teheran only 25% of the eligible population voted) was clear evidence of the apathy of the Iranians in light of the rigged elections. After all, the ultra-conservative hard-line Council of Guardians had disqualified almost all reformist candidates from running. The result was a takeover of the legislative body by a conservative-hardliner coalition championed by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, leaving the supposedly reformist President Hassan Rouhani isolated and powerless.

Khamenei had reportedly been worried that protests against the oppressive ruling regime would resume given the widespread impact of the coronavirus – Iran was recording more than 200 deaths per day in early July – and the rapidly deteriorating economy, crumbling under the biting US-led international sanctions designed to punish the regime for its nuclear and terror activities. By taking over the Majlis, the hardliners managed to suppress any final remnants of opposition, which were in any case very limited, that still existed there.

The change in the make-up of the Majlis is the latest step in Khamenei's "Second Phase of the Islamic Revolution" grand strategy (presented in a speech in February 2019). The aim of this strategy is to ensure that the leadership of Iran "is entrusted to young, revolutionary, wise and competent young people." Supposedly meant to preserve the revolutionary spirit in the style of the founder of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, this program is in fact an ideological umbrella for a campaign to promote "securocrats" – senior officials affiliated with Iran's radical Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – into leadership positions across all branches of the Government.

QALIBAF: POWERFUL, AGGRESSIVE AND CORRUPT

Leading the IRGC "securocrats" in the Majlis is the new speaker, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf. A trained pilot, he retired as an IRGC brigadier general after serving as the commander of the Khatami al-Anbia Construction Headquarters and of the IRGC's Air Force (1994-2000). Qalibaf later served as national chief of police from 2000 to 2005, and as the first IRGC-affiliated mayor of Teheran from

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The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on parade (top); New IRGC affiliated parliamentary Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf (bottom)

2005 to 2017. He ran unsuccessfully for the presidency three times – in 2005, 2013 and 2017.

Qalibaf has been embroiled in several corruption scandals. In 2005 he was accused of assisting drug and fuel smugglers to obtain their release from prison in exchange for monetary donations to his presidential campaign. The investigations into this case were allegedly hushed up by the media and the judiciary.

In another case, Qalibaf and his entourage were suspected of distributing more than US\$500 million worth of properties to friends in Teheran's wealthy northern area. The reporter who published the accusations was arrested. Qalibaf also escaped investigation into his possible role in financial corruption concerning two banks operating under the aegis of the Teheran Municipality, as well as for supposedly awarding 600 billion rials (A\$20.5 million) to his wife's charity (the Imam Reza Charity Institute), while his son was also mentioned in relation to another corruption matter.

His reputation as an oppressor of dissidents is just as notorious. In 1994 he founded the intelligence body of the Basij, the IRGC's civil volunteer organisation in charge of crushing domestic opposition to the regime. He was personally involved in suppressing anti-government protests on numerous occasions.

His power emanates from his close ties to a network of the most influential people in the regime, most impor-

tantly the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Another of Qalibaf's allies is Ebrahim Raisi, the extreme hardliner infamous for his central role in the mass executions of thousands in the late 1980s. In line with the 'Second Phase' strategy, Raisi was appointed by Khamenei as Iran's Chief Justice in March 2019. Raisi has close ties with the IRGC from his time as chairman of the wealthy and influential Astan Quds Razavi fund.

Qalibaf has promoted close allies to key positions, including the second vice-speaker, Ali Nikzad, formerly the manager of Raisi's presidential campaign. Currently, former IRGC or Basij members constitute a majority (seven out of 12 members) among the Parliament's presidium (a committee in charge of running the Parliament, membership in the presidium is for one year), while at least 16 prominent Majlis members who are in charge of committees or in other positions of power in the Parliament are also IRGC-linked.

Qalibaf's newly appointed advisor on strategic affairs, Mahdi Mohammadi, also fits in with the "securocrats" despite not being an IRGC representative, given his background as the most radical member of Iran's negotiating team for the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA), and his staunch anti-Western views.

Similarly, the Supreme Economic Coordination Council, and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), each contain a number of former and current senior IRGC commanders, including Qalibaf and Raisi. These councils have the power to circumvent and nullify parliamentary decisions (and have done so in the past). Signalling more limitations on the Majlis, the 93-year-old Secretary of the Council of Guardians, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, told the Parliament on July 21 that he wants the council to have the authority to remove MPs and to oversee law drafting from earlier stages.

THE NEXT TARGET – THE PRESIDENCY

First on the agenda of the IRGC "securocrats" is limiting the power of Qalibaf's archnemesis President Rouhani and his allies, who are wrongly labelled "moderates".

A letter issued in late June by the heads of nine Majlis committees, together with the spokesperson of the Parliament's presidium Ahmad Amirabadi Farahani, another IRGC veteran, called on Rouhani to change his economic policies, reminding him that the Majlis is "revolutionary in nature" and warning him that they "will not remain silent when people's rights are compromised." A few weeks later, 130 MPs tabled a motion to impeach Rouhani due to his failures to manage the economy, the pandemic and foreign policy.

In a rare appearance in the Parliament via videolink on July 12, Ayatollah Khamenei made it clear he would not allow the impeachment of Rouhani. After all, he needs the transition of the presidency to his "securocrats" to appear legitimate. In any case, presidential elections, scheduled

for mid-2021, are looming and Rouhani will not be eligible to run again after two terms. His position is therefore up for grabs by an IRGC “securocrat” very soon.

It is unclear if Qalibaf will run again, after failing three times. Raisi lost in 2017 and is now tipped to be one of the leading candidates to replace the Supreme Leader in due course. The hardline former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a Basij graduate, is testing the waters to see if he could run again, but he has fallen from grace in the eyes of Khamenei.

Into the fray of possible candidates enters another IRGC “securocrat”, Parviz Fattah, although the hardline ideologue and experienced politician has denied in the past that he is considering running for president. An order from Khamenei to contest the presidency will change everything. Considered popular among the radical elements inside the already extremist IRGC, he is the current head of the Bonyad e-Mostazafan Foundation – an organisation directly involved in the acquisition of materials and equipment for Iran’s nuclear and missile weapons programs. Fattah is on both the US and European Union sanctions lists due to his role in illegal nuclear-related smuggling efforts.

RADICALISING FOREIGN POLICY

The IRGC “securocrats” are also working to protect their flagship projects – the nuclear weapons program and the long-range missiles project to carry the atomic warheads to their destination. They see the JCPOA, negotiated by Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, as an evil mechanism slowing down advancement in both projects and reject any compromise with the US, which withdrew from the deal in May 2018.

Addressing the Parliament on June 21, Qalibaf starkly warned that negotiating with the US “is strictly forbidden and detrimental” and concluded that the West, including the European partners of the JCPOA, have “once again proved their untrustworthy and hostile nature to the Iranian nation.”

Qalibaf’s speech was the first of several rounds of loud personal attacks against Rouhani and his people, including a motion tabled in July by 200 MPs questioning his foreign policy, specifically with regards to the JCPOA. Fending off such an attack in early July, Foreign Minister Zarif resorted to claiming that his foreign policy moves and the JCPOA negotiations were coordinated with Khamenei and with arch-terrorist Qassem Soleimani, the Commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force killed by the US in January. “The US does not recognise liberals, reformists, conservatives, revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries. We are sitting in this boat all together,” Zarif said.

Facing increased criticism from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for its failure to comply with the nuclear watchdog and allow access for inspectors, the Iranian Parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission on June 23 called on the Government to limit

the IAEA’s capacity to monitor Iran’s nuclear activities by stopping the implementation of Additional Protocol (which grants the IAEA extended monitoring capabilities in Iran) and, somewhat unclearly, “change inspections into offline.”

If taken, such a step would constitute a very serious breach of Teheran’s international obligations and likely substantially undermine the IAEA’s ability to effectively monitor Iran’s nuclear activities.

IRGC TAX-FREE MONEY CHANNELS

One crucial issue on the agenda of the IRGC “securocrats” is safeguarding the flow of funding to the IRGC. The IRGC’s share of Iran’s 2020-2021 budget, unveiled in June, reached record highs. Despite the dwindling coffers in Teheran because of sanctions, coronavirus and years of corruption and mismanagement, the IRGC was awarded US\$6.96 billion (A\$9.78 billion), 34% of the entire defence budget. The Artesh, Iran’s larger conventional military (with more than 420,000 personnel as opposed to 190,000 in the IRGC), only received US\$2.73 billion (A\$3.78 billion).

The IRGC also has revenue raising ventures outside the formal national budget. Nader Uskowi, an Iran expert at the Atlantic Council’s Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, has estimated that the various mega-sized foundations, funds and companies controlled by the IRGC and the Supreme Leader combined constitute about half of Iran’s economy. The IRGC-related financial network extends into almost every aspect of supply, production and services in the country. This includes agriculture and food, banking and investments, infrastructure, mining and construction, media and telecommunications, transportation, education and more.

The huge business enterprises controlled by the IRGC funds and foundations are tax free and are not recorded in Iran’s official government budgets. Hence they are not subject to oversight by either the Parliament or the public. The IRGC benefits from having its “securocrats” and veterans control the Government and the Parliament to ensure no scrutiny is applied to their vast economic empire. With so much money in the IRGC system largely without oversight or transparency, it is no wonder there is extensive corruption, especially given Iran’s ailing economy more generally.

In 2021, the IRGC “securocrats” are poised to complete their takeover of all branches of Iran’s Government, increase their control over the economy, and continue relentlessly funding and driving their weapons of mass destruction programs and terror proxies across the Middle East.

AIR

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Pandemic Pitfalls

Netanyahu's COVID-19 stumbles

by Haviv Rettig Gur

The coronavirus pandemic arrived in Israel in mid-February. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu seemed up to the task.

He led regular televised briefings announcing each new stage of social-distancing restrictions. At his side, each time, were top officials of the state bureaucracy, especially the directors general of the Health and Finance ministries, Moshe Bar Siman-Tov and Shai Babad respectively.

Cabinet ministers, on the other hand, were nowhere to be found during the most dire crisis Israelis could remember. Then-finance minister Moshe Kahlon and then-health minister Yaakov Litzman (now the housing minister) openly admitted they were uninvolved.

“Barsi” (Bar Siman-Tov’s nickname) and Babad would become household names over the course of March and April – and would lead polls alongside Netanyahu on whom Israelis most trusted to handle the coronavirus emergency.

Netanyahu has spent the better part of the past decade consolidating power in the Prime Minister’s Office and dealing directly with the rest of the bureaucracy, usually over the heads of cabinet ministers. It is an impulse that has seen the expansion of the National Security Council and Mossad – both directly answerable to the premier – and the commensurate gutting of the Foreign Ministry and other policy-making bodies.

Netanyahu prefers to work directly with the bureaucrats and, his supporters say, that fact has streamlined policymaking and removed some of the populist pressure that once led Israeli governments to irresponsible spending and bad policies.

Witness the first wave of infections. Israel’s powerful, assertive and competent bureaucracy worked directly with and for Netanyahu – and delivered one of the fastest and most decisive responses to the pandemic of any government on earth. Israel closed its skies to flights from Beijing and Rome before most nations, even drawing rebukes from those governments. While America, Italy, Spain, Iran and many others became cautionary tales of a pandemic spiral-

ling out of control, Israel was an exemplar of what fast and smart policy decisions could accomplish in an emergency. Then it wasn’t.

THE PM LOSES FOCUS

Where the Government should have spent those hard-won weeks of a “flattened curve” building out an epidemiological “tweezers” capability — the ability to mass-test the population, pluck infected individuals out of the general population and into isolation, and allow the general economy to remain open without repeated waves of shutdowns – Netanyahu instead was focused elsewhere. After a decade of consolidating bureaucratic power until he was nearly the lone master of the political domain, his distraction meant little could move forward.

A “historic” West Bank annexation proposal drove the political agenda for the better part of June. A full day of debate in the Knesset Finance Committee late in the month was taken up with the question of granting

Netanyahu, a wealthy man, retroactive tax breaks on state funding for his Caesarea villa.

Netanyahu would later apologise for the “timing” of that debate. But by early July, as the second wave threatened to impoverish new constituencies and send hundreds of thousands more Israelis out of work, it became increasingly clear that Netanyahu’s distractions were more than a public relations problem.

TURNOVER

There was another difference between the first and second waves of infection: by June, Netanyahu no longer controlled the key bureaucrats.

Health Ministry Director Bar Siman-Tov – part of the fiscally cautious “Treasury youth” subculture in Israel’s government that Netanyahu has always supported and advanced – had worked directly with Netanyahu while

Minister Litzman stayed out of the way. But after the May 17 swearing-in of the new unity government, a new Health Minister had arrived. Yuli Edelstein is a powerful figure in Likud, able to demand a real role in the decision-making.

“Barsi” was out, replaced with a new Health Ministry Director General, physician and hospital administrator Chezy Levy. Levy doesn’t have the Prime Minister’s ear



After taking charge of Israel’s coronavirus response and getting good results, Netanyahu seemed to lose focus



Former Health Ministry Director-General Moshe Bar Siman-Tov

and has no intention of bypassing his minister to obtain it. Where Bar Siman-Tov's role was more often than not to be the fiscally conservative government's representative bearing bad news to the health care system, Levy prefers to serve as the voice of the hospitals and medical associations to what they consider an out-of-touch and stingy government.

It's a similar story in the Finance Ministry. Finance Minister Israel Katz, like his colleague Edelstein, is a popular figure in the Likud rank and file. And the new director general of his ministry, Keren Turner Eyal, is a close confidante of the Minister.

The first wave of the virus met an Israeli state led by a centralising chieftain in de facto control of all the relevant state bodies. Israel responded swiftly and effectively.

The second wave required a different sort of response. Many agencies of government, led by competing politicians, had to band together to forge a complex pandemic response that no one agency could piece together alone. That's when Netanyahu's personality and governing methods failed him.

BLAME GAME

His approval ratings dropped precipitously as Israelis watched their livelihoods evaporate and came to believe the fault lay not with the virus alone, but with the government's mismanagement.

Two journalists, Ben Caspit and Yinon Magal – the former a vociferous critic of Netanyahu, the latter a passionate defender – have been interviewing ordinary Israelis about how they are coping with the pandemic.



Angry restaurant owner, and previously staunch Netanyahu supporter, Meir Mincha

In one memorable exchange, they sat down last week with Meir Micha, the famed owner of the iconic Pinati hummus restaurant in downtown Jerusalem, a symbol of Jerusalem's Mizrahi ("of Middle East descent") working class and a life-

long Likud supporter.

Asked if he was critical of Netanyahu, Micha had this to say: "Why do we have to reach this point, after 40 years, where I can't pay my suppliers? Why? He's dealing with his pool, with the water in his pool [one of the elements of Netanyahu's villa maintenance for which he sought tax breaks]. What are you even talking about? He used to be a god to us, Bibi."

No longer.

Regular protests against Netanyahu have been held for months, but saw mostly older political activists in attendance. By mid-July, they were suddenly joined by new cohorts of out-of-work 20- and 30-somethings.

It was a worrying sight for the Prime Minister, those young people outside his official residence in Jerusalem. With hundreds of thousands now unemployed, such protests had the potential to swell quickly and reshape the political reality.

BIG SPENDER

Netanyahu leaped into action, on July 16 suddenly announcing a NIS 6 billion (A\$2.5 billion) plan to hand one-time grants of between NIS 750 (A\$313) and NIS 3,000 (A\$1,252) to all Israelis. The plan was mocked and derided, with politicians and bureaucrats alike complaining that the payouts made no distinction between those who needed the money and those who didn't, and that a government facing a historic deficit could ill afford such populism.

But more significant was the way the decision was made. Ministers were left out of the loop. So were the bureaucrats, the very heart of the state apparatus with which Netanyahu once so closely identified.

No staff work was done, said the Finance Ministry officials charged with disbursing the funds. No one was consulted. Finance Ministry Director General Keren Turner Eyal heard about it the day before it was announced publicly. Bank of Israel Governor Amir Yaron heard about it on the radio.

Budgets chief Shaul Meridor told ministers he was struggling to piece together a state budget that kept changing based on such whims.

Meridor's criticism became public. It drew sharp and angry rebukes from Netanyahu and his political aides.

Likud MK Shlomo Karhi, one of a handful of backbenchers who have taken on the role of delivering the kind of strident rhetoric Netanyahu wants the public to hear but doesn't want to say himself, tweeted, "The Budgets Department head, Shaul Meridor, is torpedoing every decision by Netanyahu to send money and aid to the self-employed and unemployed, and is briefing [journalists] against the government."

Netanyahu's son Yair, sometimes seen as a bellwether of the pro-Netanyahu activist base, chimed in. "The truth



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is that the treasury clerks are ‘sabotaging’ and refusing to transfer the funds to the self-employed and unemployed in order to incite the people. The clerks are mobilised against Netanyahu’s policies,” he claimed.

(The Hebrew word Yair Netanyahu used for “sabotaging” was *mehablim*, which also refers to terrorists, and he put it in quotation marks so no-one would fail to notice.)

Once the ground had been prepared, Netanyahu waded in himself, retweeting Karhi and adding, “It’s inconceivable that clerks are briefing [reporters] against decisions made by the government and trying to disrupt them. We won’t accept that.”

The very Treasury officials Netanyahu had always viewed as his army of responsible managers, his mechanism for sidestepping competing politicians, were now the enemy working feverishly “to incite the people.”

THE TREASURY FIGHTS BACK

Meridor, no stranger to blustering politicians, has held firm.

“We won’t stop voicing our view, even if they” – the politicians – “don’t like to hear it,” he said on July 18. He warned that Netanyahu’s six-billion-shekel stopgap won’t meaningfully help Israelis, while convincing many that the government’s economic relief was a politicised process. It would make it harder to demand more sacrifices from the public down the road.



Finance Ministry Director-General Keren Turner Eyal

“Trust is something that takes a long time to build, and is destroyed pretty quickly,” he warned.

In a sign of the new reality of competing powerbases outside the Prime Minister’s Office, Meridor had a defender: his Director General

Keren Turner Eyal, who issued a statement that voiced the surprise and frustration felt by Treasury officials at the assault from their long-time patron Netanyahu.

“It’s very hard for me to stay quiet in the face of the unprecedented criticism of ministry staff, specifically the head of budgets Shaul Meridor, and generally of the violent discourse that has developed on social media,” she said.

“The professional echelon in the Treasury and management, and Shaul Meridor specifically,” she added, “are all working around the clock to offer a professional and ethical voice that considers the well-being of the public today and in the future, together with the implementation, to the letter, of all the decisions of the elected echelon.”

And less delicately: “The successful handling of the

economic crisis and of this time, which is unlike anything we’ve ever known, demands of us first and foremost honesty and integrity.”

DESPERATE MEASURES

It is hard to think of a time when Netanyahu was more vulnerable. His corruption trial is moving forward. The

distractions that characterised much of May and June have sparked a backlash and a steep drop in public trust. Even junior lawmakers no longer fear his wrath.

And most troubling of all for Netanyahu, he is forced to resort to the sort of expensive populism that he has spent a career trying to uproot from the public service,

and now finds himself in a full-blown fight with his closest policy allies in the state apparatus.

It must be said: There are valid reasons to question the Treasury’s culture of fiscal conservatism at a time of economic collapse. Netanyahu has argued that his six-billion-shekel grant was essentially a stimulus program, and sending everyone a cheque was faster than establishing complex criteria for recipients that could tie up the money in bureaucracy.

But that substantive debate was not held when he decided on the plan. Alternatives were not sought from the very agencies he had once viewed as his policymaking home turf. The plan amounts to a stopgap developed overnight in the closed confines of the Prime Minister’s office.

Netanyahu never worked well with fellow politicians, preferring to lean on the bureaucrats to manage the state responsibly and effectively. Now disconnected from the clerks, while the second wave of the pandemic gathers steam and the economic emergency deepens, it is no longer clear how he intends to right the ship and steady the economy.

In mid-July, at the height of the panic that sparked the new spending binge, Netanyahu issued an order to all ministers to develop “an exit plan for safely leaving the coronavirus restrictions” for whatever part of the economy or society that was under their ministry’s purview – and to have the plan ready to present to the Government by July 23.

Netanyahu knows he dropped the ball, and now hopes that setting aside all other distractions and getting the Government back to work will win the public’s forgiveness.

Desperate times call for desperate measures: He’s even asked cabinet ministers to start making some of the decisions.

AIR

Haviv Rettig Gur is the Times of Israel’s senior analyst. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

“A COUNTRY IN PROTEST?”

by Herb Keinon

“A country in protest,” is the logo Israel’s Channel 12 ran at the bottom of its reports on July 15, the night demonstrations took place in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

A country in protest – and that, truly, is what it feels like. Movie theatres might be closed, concert halls may be silenced, synagogues might not be permitted to fill their pews to capacity, restaurants may be limited to a bare minimum of diners – but night after night dozens, hundreds, and sometimes thousands of people gather around the country in protest.

On July 15 in Jerusalem, some 2,000 people demonstrated against Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in front of his official residence on Balfour Street, protesting against a situation where a serving prime minister is managing a crisis of unprecedented proportions while simultaneously on trial facing corruption charges.

In Tel Aviv, a few hundred people held a demonstration marking nine years since the last large wave of protests in the country, known as the social justice protests of the summer of 2011.

And in Beitar Illit in the West Bank, hundreds of haredim (ultra-orthodox) protested the lockdown of their community, demonstrating against what they believe to be a heavy-handed government policy against haredi communities struck hard by the coronavirus.

And that was just one night.

On July 13, haredi protests in Jerusalem against the Government’s policies turned violent, and on July 11, some 10,000 people turned out in Tel Aviv to voice pain and frustration at the dire financial straits they, and hundreds of thousands of others, are in. There was violence after that demonstration as well.

There is a tendency to look at 2020’s summer of discontent and compare it with the social justice protests of the summer of 2011. A more apt comparison, however, would be the reservists’ protests that followed the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Following that war, and the colossal mistakes that led up to it, the country was gripped by a sense that something was off-kilter, not working as it should. A similar sense exists now, as the second wave of coronavirus is battering Israel’s shores. Now, as then, there is a sense that tragedy could have been prevented had the leaders properly done their jobs.



Protests in Israel have vastly expanded, with the usual Netanyahu critics now joined by many affected by the country’s dire financial situation

In February of 1974, Motti Ashkenazi, was a recently released reservist captain who had served at an outpost on the Suez Canal, witnessed the colossal lack of preparation and had seen his warnings to his superiors ignored. He began a one-man protest in front of the prime minister’s office calling for the ouster of then Defence Minister Moshe Dayan for his responsibility for the Yom Kippur War fiasco.

Ashkenazi’s one-man protest spread, and soon other reservists who served during the war, as well as ordinary citizens fed up with the government’s handling of the crisis, joined the protests. The fall of Golda Meir’s govern-

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ment in April 1974, just five months after a war-postponed election in December of 1973, has been attributed in part to this movement and the public atmosphere it created.

One thing that characterised that protest movement was that it drew from the mainstream. Protests in Israel in the late 1960s and early 1970s were generally identified with marginal groups outside of the mainstream, trying to change the ingrained status quo. But this protest movement was different. Nobody could argue that it was representing just “angry outsiders”.

And that is also something characteristic of the current wave of protests: the demonstrators cannot be pigeon-holed. Jerusalem Police Chief Doron Yedid tried to do just that, dismissing the protests in front of the Prime Minister’s residence as a left-wing demonstration, but he was missing the bigger picture.

True, those shouting in front of Netanyahu’s house for him to resign may be affiliated with left-wing groups and parties who have shouted for his ouster for years, but they are not the only ones whose anger these days is being voiced on the street.

Among those taking to the streets now to protest Netanyahu are not just the “usual suspects” who despise him, think he is a threat to democracy and have been protesting against him for years. No, now you have people out of work who might even have voted for Netanyahu, but feel compelled to vent their anger at the current financial situation.

These people are not protesting Netanyahu the man, as are those in front of his house holding up signs reading “Crime Minister.” Rather, they are protesting the policies of the Government that he leads, which they fear is leading them to financial ruin.

If the anger on the streets today was only coming from the left and the opposition, that would be one thing and Netanyahu could dismiss it. But it’s not. It’s also coming from people in the middle and the right, seculars as well as haredim.

The organisers of the rally in Tel Aviv on July 11 were

wise in not inviting politicians; they wanted to keep their protest apolitical to attract as wide a base as possible.

Ashkenazi’s protest movement 47 years ago succeeded because it united people who felt that the government failed the country in a time of crisis. The current protestors are trying to do the same thing. Netanyahu would dismiss this at his own peril.

AIR

Herb Keinon is the diplomatic correspondent at the Jerusalem Post. © Jerusalem Post (www.jpost.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

LEBANON’S NEW ‘GREAT SATAN’

by Khaled Abu Toameh

Dominated by the heavily-armed terrorist group Hezbollah – “The Party of God” – Lebanon is currently facing the worst economic crisis in its history. The crisis is seen as the biggest threat to its stability since the 1975-90 civil war in Lebanon. The World Bank warned last November that if conditions worsened, the proportion of Lebanese living in poverty could rise to 50%. Since then, the economy has been further hit by the restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, so the crisis has only deepened.

As the country’s currency collapsed to an all-time low against the US dollar, thousands of Lebanese have been protesting by blocking roads with burning tyres and setting fire to banks.

This mess, which has resulted in an increase in the crime rate, was caused by a corrosive confluence of government malpractice, economic instability and external interference. In the first four months of 2020, murders in Lebanon doubled compared to the same period last year. Burglaries increased by 20% and car thefts by nearly 50%.

Many Lebanese hold Hezbollah responsible for the crisis, mainly because of its wars with Israel and its support for Iran in conflicts with Sunni-led Gulf states.

Until recently, Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah referred to the US as the “Great Satan.” Earlier this year, Nasrallah’s Iranian-backed terrorist group sent a warning to the US:

“We warn the Great Satan, the bloodthirsty and arrogant regime of the US, that any new wicked act of further aggression (against Iran) will bring about more painful and crushing responses.”

In another statement, in January, Nasrallah said:

“America, the Great Satan, is responsible for Israel and all its

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crimes against the Palestinian people. America built ISIS (Islamic State terrorist group) to destroy our countries, our culture, history, and our future. We must never forget this, that America is our true enemy."

The "Great Satan" has been an integral part of Nasrallah's fiery anti-Israel and anti-American speeches for several years.

On July 7, however, Nasrallah, who regularly encouraged his followers to chant "Death to America, death to Israel," surprised many Arabs and Muslims when he seemed to adopt a conciliatory tone toward the US.

"Although it is our enemy, we won't stop America from helping Lebanon solve its economic crisis," Nasrallah said in a speech.



Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah: Now happy to accept funding from the "Great Satan"

"I would like to make some corrections; with regards to turning eastward, I was clear in my last speech that this did not mean turning our back on the West. We can take help from all countries, except Israel. Even the US, which is an enemy, can help us. Any country on earth, with the exception of the usurper entity [Israel], which can help us in any way – we are completely open to this... We must open and explore all possible routes now for staving off Lebanon's collapse."

Nasrallah went on to urge the Lebanese people to engage in an "agricultural, manufacturing jihad resistance."

"Today, we are in the battle of agriculture and manufacturing, and we will commit ourselves to this wholeheartedly. We must all become farmers and manufacturers. Wherever we have potential arable land, even a front yard, even balconies and rooftops, we are going to plant."

Nasrallah's talk about his country's readiness to accept aid from the US has raised eyebrows in Lebanon and other Arab and Islamic states, where cynics wondered why the terrorist leader was suddenly prepared to deal with the "Great Satan."

Lebanese journalist Jerry Maher scoffed at Nasrallah's statement:

"To Hassan Nasrallah, whatever you say and do, nothing

will change in Lebanon before surrendering your weapons and bringing leaders of your group to trial."

Fahim al-Hamid, a Saudi writer, said that Nasrallah's statement "reflects the severe financial crisis that the terrorist Hezbollah is experiencing," particularly regarding paying the terrorists it sends to Syria to protect Bashar Assad's "bloody regime."

Al-Hamid pointed out that Hezbollah's financial crisis is the result of US sanctions on its patrons in Iran, which had been supporting the terrorist group annually with about US\$700 million from oil revenues, as well as the US war on the money laundering and drug trafficking operated by Hezbollah's international networks.

"According to reliable sources, Nasrallah ordered a 60% reduction of the salaries of his fighters," he revealed. "Hezbollah also stopped recruiting new members as a result of the financial crisis. Now he is humiliating himself by begging for help from the US, which he used to consider the 'Great Satan.'"

For several weeks now, a hashtag titled "Nasrallah has ruined the country" has been trending on Twitter, with many Lebanese and Iraqis accusing the Hezbollah leader of destroying their countries. The Iraqis are accusing Hezbollah of meddling in their internal affairs by establishing Iranian-backed terrorist cells in Iraq. The Lebanese, meanwhile, are accusing Nasrallah of ruining their country by dragging it into wars with Israel, destroying Lebanon's economy and smuggling flour and fuel to neighbouring Syria.

Some Lebanese mocked Nasrallah's call for waging "agricultural and manufacturing resistance" and noted that the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture has been under the control of Hezbollah for the past 15 years.

Others pointed out that Hezbollah controls Beirut Airport and the Port of Beirut, occupies private and public land illegally, constantly threatens the Lebanese population; runs a global smuggling ring and counterfeit money operation; manufactures [illicit] drugs of all sorts; has rockets in civilian areas; pays no taxes; gets free electricity while others pay; controls gangs that loot and steal; provides protection for corrupt Lebanese politicians; is killing civilians in Syria and Iraq; and brainwashes children from the age of six.

Several Lebanese politicians have blamed Hezbollah for the country's severe financial crisis.

Member of Parliament Sami Gemayel said that Lebanon was paying the price for Hezbollah's policy. "No one has the right to drag us into the place they want, and no one has the right to impose on us a lifestyle that we do not want," he said. "We do not want to live in isolation and be cut off from the West, Arabs and the entire world."

"Some Lebanese mocked Nasrallah's call for waging 'agricultural and manufacturing resistance' and noted that the Lebanese Ministry of Agriculture has been under the control of Hezbollah for the past 15 years"

Addressing Nasrallah, another Lebanese politician, Fares Soueid, said: “You give us nothing but sedition and backwardness.”

Now that he is having trouble paying salaries to his terrorists, Nasrallah is hoping that the US will step in and rescue Lebanon (and Hezbollah) from collapse. Arabs and Muslims are perfectly aware of Nasrallah’s desperate attempt to drag the US into propping up his country and organisation. Accordingly, they are now mocking his damning of the US as the “Great Satan” by describing the Party of God as the “Party of Satan.”

AIR

Khaled Abu Toameh, an award-winning journalist based in Jerusalem, is a veteran Palestinian Affairs reporter and a Shillman Journalism Fellow at the Gatestone Institute. © Khaled Abu Toameh, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

THE WORLD’S LOUDEST SILENCE?

by Naomi Levin

There is a refrain that is becoming increasingly common in some circles; namely, that Israel’s critics are being silenced in mainstream debates. However, a brief look at recent public debate indicates there is not much substance to this complaint.

There are plenty of prominent critics of Israeli Government policy featuring in Australia’s mainstream press, on social media and in the world’s most read publications.

A timely case study that can be used to examine whether Israel’s critics are being silenced is the recent debate on Israel’s so-far unfulfilled proposal to extend sovereignty to areas of the West Bank.

In the lead up to the supposed deadline for a decision on this – July 1 – the traditional media and social media were ablaze with commentary, much of it critical of Israel’s proposal. Indeed, after the very salient news and debates

around the actions of the Chinese Communist Party, this was probably the second most discussed foreign policy issue in Australia and much of the world.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was published on the front cover of an Israeli newspaper – in Hebrew – calling the proposal “a violation of international law” and flagging that the UK would not recognise any such moves. Australia’s Foreign Minister Marise Payne released a statement raising her “concern” over “possible moves towards the unilateral annexation or change in status of territory on the West Bank”. Her Opposition counterpart Senator Penny Wong declared the Australian Labor Party “opposed” the move and explained the reasons why, including that, in the party’s view, it would “undermine the prospect of a two-state solution [and] violate international law”. Australian Greens leader Adam Bandt also spoke out against the plan.

All of this was covered in the Australian media, as was the call by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd for the Australian Government to pressure Israel against extending sovereignty, on June 29.

Also reported in Australia were other international criticisms of the plans, such as German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas’ visit to Israel in early June, to warn against extending sovereignty.

Internationally, hundreds of media reports publicised a letter signed by 1,000 European members of parliament opposing the plan.

On the matter of international law, on June 25, the *Sydney Morning Herald* provided prominent space for Professor Ben Saul from the University of Sydney, a scholar sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, to present his views on the legal aspects of Israel’s proposals. The next day, the same newspaper offered the same space to Professor Gregory Rose from the University of Wollongong to present an alternative case.

ABC Online’s Religion and Ethics page ran a lengthy piece from Palestinian policy adviser Dr. Samah Sabawi on the same topic on July 6. On the radio show and podcast of the same name, presenter Andrew West interviewed the University of Sydney’s Dr. Eyal Mayroz on June 10, who strongly called on the Australian Government to condemn the plan.

ABC TV’s “The World” host Bev O’Connor interviewed New Israel Fund executive director Liam Getreu (June 24) who criticised the plan, telling the program he believed the Israeli proposal undermines a future two-state solution

“The notion that Israel’s critics are being silenced with respect to their condemnation of Israeli plans to extend sovereignty in the West Bank is unsustainable, as the recent record shows”



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“at almost every level”.

Other ABC interviews with critics of Israeli plans to extend sovereignty ran on June 13, June 29 and July 1. Mainstream newspaper opinion articles condemning the plan also ran in the *Age* on May 23, the *Canberra Times* on June 11, the *Hobart Mercury* on June 22, and the *Canberra Times* on July 6.

This is on top of the regular print and electronic news stories published across virtually all media platforms in Australia on an almost daily basis, most of which gave space to the views of critics of the plan.

Moreover, all this occurred without Israel ever actually releasing any concrete plans to change the legal situation in the West Bank, a move that now looks less likely than ever.

Yet the idea that Israel’s critics were silenced in this debate was actively promoted by Australian-Palestinian writer Randa Abdel-Fattah, who wrote in the literary journal *Meanjin* that the failure of her efforts to find a mainstream Australian media outlet to print a statement she had helped pen was “deliberate erasure” and a “concerted strategy of disappearing and silencing Palestine in public discourse.”



Palestinian-Australian writer and activist Randa Abdel-Fattah

Never mind that the statement Abdel-Fattah was trying to get published was quite extreme. It did not simply condemn and oppose any Israeli plans to extend sovereignty to any part of the West Bank, it accused Israel of “ethnic cleansing” and of apartheid and creating “115 bantustans”. It compared Jerusalem to Minneapolis – where George Floyd was recently killed in an act of police violence – as places of “state-sanctioned violence” and presented the current situation between the Israelis and Palestinians as one of colonialism.

Perhaps the reason why the statement was not taken up by editors was because it fell so far outside mainstream opinion – including even that of most of Israel’s persistent mainstream critics.

In the end, Abdel-Fattah and her supporters bought an advertisement in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* on July 18 and an abridged, significantly toned-down version of the original was printed.

The version advertised in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*, merely condemning any extension of sovereignty and calling for the Australian Government to also do so, was quite different to the very extreme statement which the supposed 900 signatories had actually put their name to.

Of the signatories, many were well-known pro-Palestinian activists, but a significant number of those signatories nominated themselves as academics or PhD candidates.

While there is no problem with academics or post-graduate students expressing their opinions by supporting a public statement, recently published research in the United States has found a direct correlation between academic boycotts of Israel and harassment of Jewish university students.

The research, by the AMCHA Initiative, a US NGO which studies and documents antisemitism on university campuses, reported increasing numbers of Jewish university students being impeded from participating in Israel programs, publicly shamed or vilified for any perceived association with Israel, shut-down when trying to express support for Israel and being unfairly treated or excluded due to their perceived association with Israel.

It would be concerning if something similar were to happen on Australian campuses.

This particular statement did not mention boycotts, but Abdel-Fattah is an active and vocal supporter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS), as are many of the other signatories. Many consider the global BDS movement to be effectively antisemitic, because its leaders seek to discriminate against and ultimately eliminate the world’s only Jewish state, and deny the Jewish people the universal right of self-determination. As a resolution of the German Bundestag passed in May noted, “The pattern of argument and methods of the BDS movement are antisemitic.”

The notion that Israel’s critics are being silenced with respect to their condemnation of Israeli plans to extend sovereignty in the West Bank is unsustainable, as the recent record shows. The Israeli Government’s proposals have been roundly criticised by Australian leaders, international leaders, members of parliament, academics and advocates, and critics have been featured in virtually all major media outlets.

Let’s hope that those who support Israel, especially on university campuses, continue to enjoy the same right and privilege to have their voices heard in debates about Israeli policies and how best to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace. One gets the impression that, by claiming to be silenced, many supporters of BDS may not be seeking access for their own views, but a privileged position which permits them to exclude or marginalise those who disagree with them.

PANDEMIC, *PANCASILA* AND RELIGION IN INDONESIA

by Giora Eliraz

Though mostly populated by Muslims, Indonesia was founded in 1945 based on a secular-oriented ideology, *Pancasila*, that remains today as an ideological pillar of the nation. It embraces a neutral position about Indonesian citizens' faith and declines to endow a single majority religion, namely Islam, with a formal dominant status. But while Indonesian politics formally embraces a model of separation of religion and state, it actually places common religious/spiritual values at the centre of nationhood, as epitomised by the first principle of *Pancasila*: "Belief in the One and Only God." Indeed, Indonesian society, including the public sphere, is marked by a high degree of religiosity that is particularly salient within the Muslim majority and minority Christian congregations.

Indonesia's transition to democracy in the late 1990s triggered the creep of Islam into politics, in various manifestations that were previously suppressed by authoritarian regimes. Examples include the emergence of Islamic political parties that have joined the Parliament; implementation of Shari'a (Islamic law) bylaws at a regional level; and instrumental use by hardliners of the democratic public sphere for street politics that provokes intolerance toward religious minorities and has promoted identity politics that have not left certain mainstream politicians untouched. So perhaps it is no wonder that Indonesian authorities have seemed to be very careful in their domestic policies, lest they provoke an emotional Islamic backlash.

During the last few years, Islam has also appeared to have had more impact on Indonesia's foreign policy, including seeking to employ the distinctively moderate characters of Indonesian Islam in a form of "soft power" diplomacy. Hence, it is worth examining how Islamic life in Indonesia has been affected by the current coronavirus pandemic.

In February, while neighbouring countries were already reporting confirmed cases and experts were sceptical of claims that Indonesia was free of confirmed infections, the Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto, a devout Christian and former military physician, stressed the importance of prayer, even calling on Muslim clerics to encourage it. He attributed the alleged zero coronavirus cases in Indonesia at that time to prayer, saying that as long as Indonesians uphold

Pancasila, which espouses the idea of belief in God, praying is of utmost importance. At the same time, he argued that his country was taking the necessary medical measures.

And then, on March 2, the first two coronavirus cases were confirmed. Criticism of the Government's mishandling of the pandemic increased and was mainly directed at Health Minister Putranto for his supposedly arrogant, anti-scientific attitude, including allegedly dismissing significant scientific reports suggesting that Indonesia must have unreported cases. Soon after that, a significant increase in infection rates was detected, with Jakarta as the epicentre. Later on, the province of East Java would come to record the highest daily number of cases.

Consequently, Indonesia moved to more substantial measures, including a large-scale policy of social distancing that has inevitably affected the normally vigorous religious life among the Muslim majority. It included appeals by the Government and leading Islamic organisations to avoid religious gatherings – including suspension of the significant communal Friday prayers – and directives to pray at home instead. It appears that there was not complete obedience to these directives – mosques in urban areas, generally speaking, obeyed, whereas many mosques in rural areas continued to maintain congregational prayer.

The effects of the pandemic on Islamic life were particularly significant during Ramadan (April 23-May 23), which usually involves many communal events and mass worship. It made for a holy fasting month unlike any seen before, as was the case across the Muslim world. For example, the *tarawih* prayer, a nightly prayer normally undertaken in mosques, was performed at home.

Yet notably, in parts of Aceh province, located in northern Sumatra and known for its particularly strong Islamic identity, congregational prayers in mosques were held during Ramadan.

In addition, it was officially advised that the *iftar* meal, which breaks the fast after sunset and is normally of a communal nature, and the *sahur* meal, taken just before sunrise, should be eaten individually or with only immediate family at home.

A particular issue for the turbulent period was manifested by a significant cultural marker of Ramadan in Indonesia, the *mudik*. This is the local tradition of return by tens of millions of migrants from the cities to their places of origin ahead of *Eid al-Fitr* – known in Indonesia as *Lebaran* – the festival that marks the end of Ramadan. So on April 21, two days ahead of Ramadan, when it was learned that millions still planned to travel to see their families for *Lebaran*, the largest number of them from the Greater Jakarta area, the then-epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak, the



Indonesian worshippers have their temperatures checked before entering a mosque

President announced a ban on the *mudik*. It was a shift from a previous policy of merely advising not to participate in the *mudik*, and was criticised at home for being too slow, half-hearted, and lacking in enforcement.

The case of the *Hajj*, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, this year set to begin in late July, is also notable. The pilgrimage to Mecca has played a significant role in shaping Islam in Indonesia, enhancing religious commitment and creating feelings of unity with the *umma*, the global community of Muslims. It became clear in late February that there would be uncertainty regarding the Hajj when Saudi Arabia suspended arrivals by foreigners for the *umrah*, the lesser pilgrimage to Mecca. In late March, the kingdom asked Muslims worldwide to put their plans to perform the Hajj on hold, until the situation could be clarified.

Since then, many Muslims in Indonesia who had been planning to take part have been in limbo, awaiting a Saudi decision. As the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia has been given the highest quota of visitors for the Hajj. In the second half of June, Saudi Arabia announced it would hold the Hajj only for the very limited number of Muslims of different nationalities who are already currently residing in the kingdom. Indonesia's Government said it appreciated the Saudi decision for prioritising the safety of pilgrims, and described it as a step that follows Islamic precepts.

Since June, Indonesia has started to gradually move to what is called the “new normal” – attempted to revive the economy by easing protective measures, in particular in areas that are considered as COVID-19 free “green” zones, the lowest risk areas and the “yellow” zone areas of low to moderate risk. There has also been a limited reopening of places of worship.

In fact, however, the daily increase in the number of new cases has not slowed. With more than 86,000 confirmed cases and more than 4,100 dead (as of July 19) Indonesia is now the worst-hit country in Southeast Asia. Experts are concerned that any further easing of restrictions could see the situation become even worse. Criticism of the professional performance of the Health Minister has also not diminished.

As the current situation is fluid and uncertain, conclusions about the Indonesian situation must be tentative. Nevertheless certain observations can be suggested about Islam and religion in Indonesia during this turbulent period.

Both Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, huge Islamic organisations which are strong, influential partners of the government, have given tremendous support to it by adopting a very responsible stance and fair-minded approach. They have been guided by public health interests and scientific expertise, enabling the government to manage the struggle against the pandemic through restrictive policies that could potentially have impacted some strong

religious and social-cultural sensitivities in society. This is especially true given Islam's strong presence in the national life of Indonesia and the Muslim majority having experienced an increasing trend toward conservatism in recent decades. Both organisations have played an important role in preventing religious gatherings, including communal prayers, by deploying their great credibility on religious matters among the Muslim majority. They both have also seemed to display careful, fair-minded attitudes about reopening places of worship.

The second observation relates to the episode that saw a Christian Health Minister implicitly connect with the Muslim majority through shared religious spirit, by stressing the importance of prayer in the context of the national ethos of *Pancasila*. This highlights the distinctive ideological context of Indonesia. Indonesians often cite a statement by the late Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), NU's former charismatic leader and the first democratically elected president of Indonesia, that the country is a *negara bukan-bukan* (neither-this-nor-that state), that is, neither religious nor secular. It seems that this stormy period has revalidated this statement in a distinctive way, despite the rise of extremist Muslim forces in the public sphere in recent years. AIR

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THE CINE FILE

Not quite Heaven

It Must Be Heaven

Director / Writer: Elia Suleiman

by Allon Lee



Writer/director/actor Elia Suleiman, who was born in Nazareth in 1960 and is of Greek Orthodox background, is one of the seven percent of the Arab citizens of Israel who identifies solely as Palestinian, and not some variation of Arab or Palestinian-Israeli.

The distinction is relevant when trying to analyse and understand Suleiman's fourth feature film, *It Must Be Heaven*, in which he plays a fictionalised version of himself called "ES" who travels from Nazareth to Paris and New York and then back home.

The arthouse movie garnered largely positive reviews upon its recent Australian release. Most reviewers have focused on the film's undeniable charm. Whimsical and droll, the highly visual world that Suleiman has created and populated with eccentric characters and absurdist set pieces offers a wry and smartly packaged commentary on the quirks of contemporary societies.

But the film can also be read as a commentary on identity and place – what it means to be Palestinian, how others see Palestinians and what might the fate of "Palestine" be – something which has attracted less analysis.

Suleiman doesn't provide clear cut answers and many scenes dealing with "Palestine" are dreamlike, oblique and fantastical.

Israel's presence in the film is

muted and absent, with Suleiman wiping it off the map metaphorically and literally too.

Early on, viewers see street art in Nazareth showing a map of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza coloured as a Palestinian flag with the symbolic key of return alongside it.

More than once, Nazareth – a town which has been part of northern Israel since 1948 – is described as being in Palestine.

Visiting New York, a taxi driver asks him, "What country do you come from?" and viewers hear the only four words ES speaks in the whole movie, which are, "Nazareth. Nazareth". The driver responds, "Nazareth, is that a country?" To which ES adds, "I'm Palestinian."

This deliberate ambiguity again crops up in the only scene where the name "Israel" is explicitly mentioned in the movie.

Real life actor Gael Garcia Bernal – who plays himself – tells someone on the phone, "I'm here with my friend Elia, Elia Suleiman. He's a Palestinian from...No, he's not a Palestinian from Israel. He's a Palestinian from Palestine. Yes, a Palestinian from Palestine. Yes, Palestine."

Meanwhile, a comical scene set in Central Park shows a woman who is wearing a pair of wings remove her top to reveal a Palestinian flag painted across her bare chest with the words

"Free Palestine", before leading a group of New York's finest on a merry dance as they try to cover her up.

When they eventually do, she literally disappears, leaving only the wings behind.

Later on, during what appears to be a Halloween street party, we see her or someone similar, minus Palestinian symbols, riding a bike, watched by a Grim Reaper figure, who then exchanges glances with ES.

Whilst in New York, a fortune teller tells ES, "there will be Palestine. Absolutely. It's gonna happen... But... It ain't gonna happen in your lifetime, or mine."

These themes of rebirth – including the references to "Palestine" – are scattered across the length and breadth of the film.

Symbolically the movie begins at night during Easter in Nazareth as a Greek Orthodox priest leads his congregation in a street procession and recites prayers whose lines state that "Christ has risen from the dead" and is "bestowing life" on the dead. It should be noted that Suleiman has said this scene is not connected to the rest of the movie.

This beginning is bookended by a final scene set in a darkened nightclub filled with carefree young people dancing to a traditional-sounding song titled "I am an Arab" that has been given a techno arrangement. Then, as it fades to black, the words "To Palestine" appear onscreen.

Another allegory for Palestine is a mysterious woman in an olive grove wearing a traditional Arab dress called a *thobe*. ES watches her labour to transport two pots of water.

When ES returns to the grove after his trip abroad, one of the water cisterns she carries is empty and she removes her head scarf to literally let her hair down.

Given this precedes the nightclub scene, it appears to signal an attempt to reframe Western expectations of a Palestinian.

The few times Israelis appear in

the film, they do so in a security capacity and have difficulty seeing what is in front of them.

In Nazareth, Israeli police steal binoculars from a passing street vendor to monitor a man who stands only metres away urinating in the street and then, possibly, arrest him off camera.

When ES is driving, a car with

two soldiers who are recklessly exchanging sunglasses overtakes him. In the backseat is a doppelganger for the Palestinian teen activist Ahed Tamimi, whose trial and conviction for slapping a soldier in 2018 became a *cause célèbre*

for Palestinian activists. The Tamimi look-alike is blindfolded but turns her face to look at ES and the audience.

This general tone towards Israelis conforms with comments Suleiman made in a 2010 interview on *Electronic Intifada*, in which he said that “really they are so obnoxious, the Israelis – the Israeli institution and the government.”

Of course, this is not a movie, *per se*, about Israel, but about Palestinians and Suleiman wants to send the message that Palestinians are being objectified as a hot button social issue and not necessarily treated as flesh and blood people.

The aforementioned taxi driver treats ES as a novelty when he learns he is Palestinian. He tells him “Goodness gracious! Let me look at you, I’ve never seen a Palestinian!” and phones his wife to share this rare sighting.

Likewise, whilst in New York, ES participates in the 10th Annual Arab American Forum for Palestine and sits on a crowded dais of po-faced experts. The audience are all starry-eyed, enthusiastic, “yes” men and women.

In Paris, a movie producer’s sympathy with the Palestinian cause

extends only so far, as he rejects “ES’s” request for funding, telling him the script is not “Palestinian enough...”

We were under the impression that it would take place in Palestine...but it might as well be anywhere. It could even take place here.”

Pro-Israel viewers frustrated by the mass media’s propensity to depict Palestinians purely as noble victims

will appreciate some of these moments. Even if Suleiman’s rationale for including them is entirely different, they do speak to a larger truth and add nuance to the movie.

Whilst the film does include subtle jabs at his fellow resi-

dents of Nazareth, Suleiman’s satirical lens is never turned against the Palestinian national movement, preferring instead the all too familiar paradigm of mocking the West and Israel for their obsession with security.

The sections in France and New York include comical scenes of elaborate interplay between overly officious security personnel and citizens who themselves are heavily and comically armed.

As Suleiman explained in a quote that appeared in the *Australian*, “If my previous films tried to present Palestine as a microcosm of the world, my new film... tries to show the world as

if it were a microcosm of Palestine.”

In this there is a faint echo of the old Palestinian political line that there will be no peace anywhere until the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is solved.

In the 2010 interview, Suleiman certainly suggested he believes this, saying, “The Arab-Israeli conflict is the world’s conflict and vice-versa, so I don’t know what is a microcosm of what anymore, because globally, Palestine has multiplied and generated into so many Palestines. Because I feel if you go to Peru, you will find Palestine in a grave state there too... My films do not talk about Palestine necessarily. They are Palestine because I am from that place – I reflect my experience, but in identification with all the Palestines that exist. The word ‘Arab-Israeli conflict’ is alien to me in terms of the poetics of the word.”

In the same interview Suleiman said Israel had stolen falafel and hummus as national symbols – a common Palestinian nationalist claim – and added “they’re absolutely pathetic.”

It is not necessary to be aware of any of these textual and political threads to see this movie, of course, but it can assist in a greater understanding of what is going on below the surface.

Yet, despite these undercurrents, it is still entirely possible to enjoy this film whilst disagreeing with many of Suleiman’s contentious but subtle political points.

AIR



Elia Suleiman: Satirical treatment does not include the Palestinian national movement

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I N V E S T M E N T S



ESSAY

“As is, Where is”

Demographics and the Trump Peace Plan

by Sergio DellaPergola

More than 40 years ago, during a sabbatical in Rhode Island, I purchased a used car. The seller wrote on a piece of paper: “As is, where is,” and the price. He said: “Note the little dent on the left back door.” I paid cash, got in the car, took the wheel, and left.

“Peace to Prosperity,” the 180-page paper circulated by the White House last January, outlines a similar scenario: Two sides, a written transaction framework – just a little more elaborate – with the addition of an honest broker who asks nothing for himself. But in this case one side, Israel – represented by Binyamin Netanyahu – says: I’ll take the car and drive away. No mention of the price or intention to pay. The other side, the Palestinians, does not even bother to be present.

And so, not unexpectedly, the date announced for this momentous transaction, July 1, passed while the primary actors were otherwise busy: The Israelis with the second wave of COVID-19 and the ensuing dramatic economic recession; the Palestinians with self-inflicted scourging; and the Trump Administration with a stumbling presidential campaign.

At the same time, just by raising the possibility of a unilateral application of Israeli sovereignty to the Jordan Valley and the circumscribed municipal territory of the 127 Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Israel has sparked a spirited debate about the concrete terms and likely conse-

quences of changing the map.

A review of the demographic realities prevailing in the territories in question can help to illuminate the likely effects of the possibilities raised by the Trump plan.

What and where is the Jordan Valley? *Biq’at Hayarden* (in Hebrew) has been referred to as Israel’s eastern security border – provided Israeli troops continue patrolling along the river. Shortly after the Six-Day War in 1967, the Jordan Valley was included in the Allon Plan – which remains the most detailed and internally coherent Israeli attempt to envisage a postwar redrawing of the Middle Eastern map; the plan was later endorsed by former Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995.

The Allon and Trump maps are very similar, although it is not clear which territory exactly would now be up for annexation – whether only a narrow flat band between the Beit She’an Valley south of the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea’s northern shore, or also the western slope of the West Bank plateau (as in Allon’s plan). The possible annexation of the Jordan Valley by Israel that is specified in “Peace to Prosperity” also suggests that Israel should cede to the Palestinians an approximately equivalent amount of ter-

ritory next to its border with Egypt.

The Israeli Administration has divided the valley’s settled areas into two regional councils encompassing a total of 6,900 people. These numbers do not include the 20,900 Palestinians living in the city of Jericho, at the valley’s southern edge, and several more thousands scattered in villages farther north. While Jericho is not a candidate for annexation, the incorporation of these villages would significantly alter the demographic composition of the – admittedly very small – population that might be annexed to the Israeli state.

The demographic/territorial equation is far more complex when looking at the other territory targeted by a majority of Israel’s Government for immediate annexation, namely the municipal boundaries of the settlements built since 1968 beyond the pre-Six-Day War Green Line (the 1949 armistice line). Complications begin from the very naming of the

“The demographic transformation of the West Bank since the 1967 war has been quite extraordinary. In November 1967, Israel carried out a census of the West Bank and found a Palestinian population of 586,000”

region, underlying the different narratives of the parties involved. *West Bank* is the more neutral as it refers to the morphology of a river, the Jordan. In Jewish practice, the same area is called Judea (south of Jerusalem) and Samaria (to the north).

The demographic transformation of the West Bank since the

1967 war has been quite extraordinary. In November 1967, Israel carried out a census of the West Bank and found a Palestinian population of 586,000 (plus 69,000 in east Jerusalem). This was after some 150,000 Palestinians had fled to the east bank of the river in June 1967. At the end of 2019, the total number of West Bank Palestinians had grown to 2,642,000 – 4.5 times larger than 52 years earlier, plus 358,000 in East Jerusalem – 5.2 times larger.

The post-1967 Jewish population of the area, which started from a few

individuals in 1968, passed the 10,000 mark in 1977. It has since grown rapidly to 175,000 in 1997, and to 443,000 in 2019, plus 230,000 in the Jerusalem areas incorporated in 1967. The total West Bank population excluding Jerusalem thus reached 3,085,000 in 2019, of which Jews constituted 14%.

Israeli localities of the West Bank are quite heterogeneous. According to the latest detailed data for the end of 2018, 15 towns with a population of 5,000 and over contribute a total population of 279,000. The largest were Modi'in Illit (73,100) and Beitar Illit (56,700) – both Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) cities. In the March 2020 elections, the Likud party won all non-Haredi towns – including Ma'ale Adumim (38,200), Ariel (20,500), Giv'at Ze'ev (17,900), Oranit (8,800), Alfei Menashe (7,900), and Kiryat Arba (7,300) – with the exception of Efrat (10,100), Karnei Shomron (7,700), and Beit El (6,000), where the national religious party Yamina prevailed.

Another 26 urban localities with 2,000-5,000 inhabitants each totalled 80,500 Israeli inhabitants. Finally, 86 rural localities of fewer than 2,000 inhabitants total 68,300 residents.

If ideology was the main factor driving the settling of Judea and Samaria, Jewish population growth was also strongly incentivised by lower housing costs and other subsidies. Today, the main engine of Jewish demographic growth in the area is the high natural increase of a young and traditional population.

Netanyahu's relatively limited annexation goals are viewed as too little, too late by those who, in the spirit of the *Eretz Israel Hashlema* ("complete land of Israel") movement, would like to annex all of Judea and Samaria.

Israeli national poet and leading in-



tellectual Nathan Alterman was the first who identified the central theme that would animate political cleavage for the next half-century. In an article published on June 16, 1967 he wrote: "The interest of victory rests in that it practically deleted the difference between the State of Israel and the Land of Israel... From now, State and Land are one."

Alterman's identification of the borders of the Jewish state with the biblical Land of Israel was far from the political consensus at the time, as shown by the recently released protocols of the national union government led by Levi Eshkol. Those protocols clearly indicate that in the days immediately following the Six-Day War, Israel had no plan for annexation of the territories that had just fallen under Israeli control. Among the reasons mentioned was the demographic challenge that such annexation would pose to Israel as a Jewish state.

At the end of 2019, Israel's Jewish population of 7.2 million (including the more than 400,000 non-Jewish

relatives of Jewish families) constituted 79% of the country's total – including east Jerusalem, the West Bank's Jewish population, and the Golan Heights. That was a reasonable majority for a sovereign polity claiming to be the Jewish state.

But when factoring in the 2.6 million West Bank Palestinians (without Jerusalem), the emerging conglomerate population of Israel including the entire West Bank would amount to 11.8 million, of which 61% would be Jewish. Such a state would still possess a substantial Jewish majority, but not one necessarily large enough to guarantee a peaceful consensus around the scope, thrust, and symbols of the country.

There are, in fact, no successful examples of liveable societies with similarly heterogeneous compositions – not the former Yugoslavia in Europe, nor Guyana in South America, Ireland, South Sudan, nor for that matter, Belgium.

The recurring suggestion of one state for two people, Israelis and Palestinians, is therefore no more than annoying background noise. Its probability matches the scenario of one state for two people involving the fusion of the United States and Mexico, or maybe France and Germany.

What we are left with is the principle that there are no shortcuts in serious policy transactions. "Peace to Prosperity" dutifully considers population among other variables and can provide effective advice if political leaders capture the demography of the region as is, where is.

Sergio DellaPergola is Professor Emeritus of demography at the A. Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This article is reprinted from Tablet Magazine, at tabletmag.com, the online magazine of Jewish news, ideas, and culture. © Tablet Magazine, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

MUSEUM PIECE

Former Victorian Labor minister Theo Theophanous condemned Turkish President Recep Erdogan's order to rededicate the Hagia Sophia, once Constantinople's main cathedral and a museum since 1935, as a functioning mosque, and said Australia "should immediately withdraw its invitation for Erdogan to visit Australia in protest."

Writing in the *Herald Sun* (July 16), Theophanous said, "Imagine for a moment that Israel decided to convert the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem into a Jewish Synagogue. And justified such action on the basis that the mosque sits on the holiest of places for Jews, the Temple Mount and that the area is subject to Jewish sovereignty."

"The outcry of such an action from the woke Left and the Greens in concert with the Islamic world, Hamas, Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, would be deafening, and probably very violent. Australia and other nations across the world would condemn Israel in the harshest terms."

Theophanous said Erdogan had justified the decision on the basis that Turkey has the sovereign right to decide the building's fate, but wondered "if he would extend that right to other nations if they were to convert mosques on their sovereign soil to Christian places of worship?"

TALKING TURKEY

Meanwhile, in the *Australian* (July 21), American academic and foreign policy columnist Walter Russell Mead argued that Turkey's increasing involvement in the Libyan civil war, in addition to Russian and Iranian hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East, were pushing Sunni Arab states closer to Israel.

Mead said, "the war also underlines the weakness of the Sunni Arab world and its need for a strong relationship with Israel. That the emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia can't control political developments in nearby Libya illustrates the depth of the Arab crisis. These states also failed to steer the course of the Syrian war or prevent Lebanon's collapse. They need allies to balance Turkey and Iran, and, as the US withdraws, Israel is the only real option they have."

Turkey had provoked the US by purchasing the Russian S-400 missile system and, "by turning Hagia Sophia (one of the holiest sites in Eastern Orthodoxy) back into a mosque, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has picked a quarrel with Russia," Mead said.

It has also "crossed" the EU "by exploring for gas in waters claimed by Cyprus" and "its support for Hamas angers Israel."

But "Erdogan clearly thinks he sees a Mediterranean power vacuum and he's seizing the chance to fill it," Mead suggested.

Elsewhere in the same edition of the *Australian*, US academic Firas Maksad argued for greater US support for Sunni Arab regimes, noting China's increasing trade links in the region. He wrote, "these Arab states are authoritarian, as are Iran and Turkey, but they share US concerns about Iran and Europe's suspicions of Turkey. The strategic assets they control, and their degree of coordination, carries potential that deserves greater Western support. Even Israel, America's leading regional ally and a traditional adversary of the Arabs, is now eager to build bridges to this Arab coalition."

CUTTING REMARKS

The *Australian's* "Cut and Paste" column (July 14) warned that Erdogan's Turkey is not a welcoming place for Jews or Christians, quoting an article from 2019 that claimed "the percentage of Christians in Turkey declined from nearly 25 per cent in 1914 to less than 0.5 per cent today." It also quoted from a 2018 article reporting that Erdogan told a rally "don't be like Jews," claimed that "Israel murders innocent people in cold blood", and approved of a wish for Muslims to reconquer Jerusalem.

Also receiving a mention was US commentator and recent AIJAC guest Michael Rubin's advice in March 2019 that Jews are not safe in Turkey, including as tourists, because "as Turkey's economy falters and with so many Turks already in prison, Erdogan is looking for scapegoats."

THE EYES HAVE IT

Writing in the *Australian* (July 9), Israeli counterterrorism expert Professor Boaz Ganor called for Israel to join the ranks of the Five Eyes intelligence alliance – currently consisting of Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Canada and the US.

Ganor argued that, "Without up-to-date and accurate intelligence you cannot thwart terror attacks or deter state actors from carrying out military operations," adding that "Israel has proved itself as a major intelligence player in the Middle East and elsewhere. Its intelligence services have thwarted countless potential terror attacks and hostile military operations, and in recent years shared high-quality intelligence with many countries' security services, the Five Eyes included. That intelligence has helped thwart terror attacks and subversive

activities in those countries.”

Discussing potential stumbling blocks, he said, “doubts may rise out of the bilateral relationships some of the alliance’s members have with Iran or the lack of a visible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which may deter some alliance members from accepting Israel,” and “some of Israel’s security agencies possibly seeing potential risk in exposing their intelligence sources and methodologies.”

A possible solution, he said, was to grant Israel, and other countries, observer status to create “a second ring

of nations that are not full-fledged members but can contribute and benefit from an intelligence co-operation on matters of common interest.”

EXPLOSIVE CLAIMS

Israel was not the sole suspect in media reports after a wave of mysterious fires and explosions in Iranian civilian and military facilities, including a military base and a nuclear enrichment facility.

UK *Times* reporter Richard Spencer’s story in the *Australian* (July 6) on

an explosion at the Natanz uranium enrichment facility on July 2 said it “was accompanied by a warning sent to the BBC’s Persian language service before news of the blast became public. A group of dissidents in the military, the Homeland Cheetahs, claimed responsibility.” However, analysts noted that this is the first time anyone has heard about this group.

An explosion in an electricity transformer in Ahvaz “hints at another culprit: Saudi Arabia. Ahvaz and the surrounding Khuzestan province are home to an ethnic Arab and Sunni



OUT OF PARLIAMENT

Foreign Minister Senator **Marise Payne** (Lib., NSW) Statement – July 1 – “The Australian Government is a longstanding supporter of a two-state solution, in which Israel and a future Palestinian state coexist, in peace and security, within internationally recognised borders. We urge all parties to refrain from actions that diminish the prospects for a negotiated two-state solution, including: acts of violence and terrorism including rocket attacks on civilians, and land appropriations, demolitions, and settlement activity.

“In this context, we are following with concern possible moves towards the unilateral annexation or change in status of territory on the West Bank. The focus needs to be on a return to direct and genuine negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians for a durable and resilient peace arrangement, as soon as possible. Australia has raised our concerns with Israel in relation to indications of annexations, and I have done so directly with my Israeli counterpart.”

Shadow Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) Statement – June 30 – “Labor opposes the annexation of land in the West Bank by the Israeli Government.

“Annexation of any part of the West Bank will weaken the viability of any future Palestinian state, undermine the prospect of a two-state solution, violate international law and risk destabilising Israel’s neighbours, which the world cannot afford.

“We expect the Australian Government to join with like-minded countries including the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Italy and Spain in making these concerns clear.

“Labor is a strong supporter of the state of Israel – that will never change... Labor has a long and proud history of supporting a just and durable two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We continue to call on both sides of the conflict to refrain from any actions that hamper peaceful outcomes for both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.”

Australian Greens Leader **Adam Bandt** (Greens, Melbourne) Statement – June 26 – “...The misguided and dangerous plan for annexation is driven by the far right in Israel and the US. It is designed to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state, not to create conditions for peace. It’s well past time for Australia to show some leadership and speak out. Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Foreign Minister Marise Payne must make clear to the Israeli Government that serious breaches of international law have diplomatic consequences, including the possibility of Australia joining internationally coordinated sanctions should annexation proceed.”

Tim Wilson (Lib., Goldstein) Facebook post – July 16 – “Shocking stories of antisemitic bullying at Brighton Secondary School [in Melbourne] have continued to surface as brave victims speak out. Antisemitism has absolutely no place in our community. The current investigation by the Department of Education into these allegations should proceed with maximum haste and transparency.”

Senator **Kimberley Kitching** (ALP, Vic.) Twitter post – July 16 – “More deeply disturbing reports from @aus_jewishnews of racism, violence and failed governance at Brighton Secondary College.”

Victorian Education Minister **James Merlino** (ALP, Monbulk) *Australian Jewish News* – July 16 – “I urge any current or former students with similar complaints to contact the Department’s dedicated Report Racism hotline so they can put you in touch with the independent investigator... [Antisemitism is] totally unacceptable and will not be tolerated at this or any other school... My message is clear: you will be taken seriously, and your complaints will be thoroughly investigated.”

Victorian Shadow Minister for Police, Community Safety and Corrections **David Southwick** (Lib., Caulfield) and **James Newbury** (Lib., Brighton) Joint Statement – July 9 – “...Over a period of five years, two Jewish students at this school reportedly endured ongoing bullying based on their faith and identity... Every student deserves to be safe in the classroom, schoolyard and within the school community.”

Muslim minority and several terrorist attacks there have been carried out by the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz,” he said.

On *ABC TV* “The World” (July 8), US nuclear weapons expert Robert Kelley questioned claims of Israeli responsibility for the Natanz explosion while criticising US policy toward Iran, saying, “I think it’s not reasonable to blame them for it. We know that Israel and Mike Pompeo have it in for Iran. They don’t mind sanctions. They’re killing civilians. That doesn’t mean they did it. They’re probably cheering but I don’t think they did it.”

Elsewhere, *SkyNews*’ “The Bolt Report” (July 16) hosted Israeli academic and regular AIJAC guest Dr. Jonathan Spyer, who said Iran has been downplaying the incidents because it wants to “wait out the clock” until the November US Presidential elections in the hope that Donald Trump loses and a “much less aggressive” administration takes over.

CHILLING CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS

Given the media coverage of Israel’s success at containing the spread of coronavirus in the first stage of the pandemic, it was to be expected that a dramatic rise in cases to 1,500 a day would become the subject of media attention.

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* (July 13) veteran Israeli journalist Zev Chafets blamed Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu for telling Israelis in May “go out and have a good time.”

People listened but “few bothered with masks or social distancing,” he said.

Chafets said the Government had also been slow to respond to the economic impact, noting that “unemployment has soared to 20 per cent from four per cent in less than five months. The Government has failed to provide sufficient relief to the unemployed; in fact, hasn’t even tried. Less than half the \$29 billion dollars for virus-

related emergency financial aid has [been] dispersed.”

On July 8, the paper’s website ran a less emotional report which noted that “An Israeli official said government researchers have traced the bulk of new infections to a single category of activity: public gatherings, particularly weddings. The official said an explosion of weddings – some 2092 between June 15 and June 25 – proved to be COVID-19 incubators.”

On July 15, ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek reported on radio, TV and an online article on the crisis, noting that Israeli schools, which can have 30 to 40 students per class, were being blamed for the worsening infection rates and travelers from abroad were not forced to quarantine.

The rising numbers in the West Bank were due to Palestinian workers bringing the virus home from their day jobs in Israel, he said.

Arab-Israeli paramedic Mohamed Zaher Zabbarqah was quoted saying Arab Israelis hadn’t taken enough precautions against the virus and “we saw many people participating in mass gatherings, like weddings and festivals.”

GIVE ME FOUR REASONS

On July 2, ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek gave an almost perfect summary to *ABC TV* “The World” host Bev O’Connor and her viewers of the reasons the Netanyahu Government has given to justify its plans for Israel to extend its sovereignty to areas of the West Bank.

According to Tlozek, “there’s four reasons driving Israel’s approach to the West Bank. And the first is historical. This was an area where Jews used to live. And there was much celebration from the settlers when they started living in West Bank outposts after the 1967 war. There’s a very strong religious reason driving many people’s desire to move back into the West Bank, namely the particularly

religious settlers argue that this land was given to the Jews by God. At an official level, the Government’s approach is that the West Bank is not Palestinian land, it is disputed land to which Israel has, it says, a valid moral, legal and historical claim. And its claims it says are as valid as those of the Palestinians. The fourth reason that’s often cited is of Israel’s security, particularly citing the example of Gaza and what happened there after Israel pulled out. The territory was taken over by Hamas which has had a number of dangerous and deadly conflicts with Israel since then. So those are the four main reasons.”

Tlozek also correctly noted that the Trump peace plan “includes eventual plans for a Palestinian state but allows for annexation.”

Meanwhile, an *AP* report run in the *Australian* (July 1) erroneously claimed “the Trump plan... envisions leaving 30 per cent of the West Bank under permanent Israeli control, while granting the Palestinians autonomy in the remainder of the area.” No, the plan explicitly aims to give the Palestinians a state.

NO COMPLAINTS ABOUT THAT

Following a complaint by AIJAC, ABC radio host Ian McNamara issued an on-air apology on June 28 over an antisemitic slur made by a talkback caller on the May 3, 2020 episode of his program “Australia All Over with Ian McNamara”, and which he had ignored at the time.

The caller, who claimed she was from a town in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley, said the factory she was the manager of in the 1980s had been bought out by a “big Jew” and characterised the purchase as wholly negative for the employees and the general community.

ABC Audience and Consumer Affairs explained that McNamara said he hadn’t heard the remark made by the woman.

The program's website has appended an editor's note of the May 3 episode which states that "This podcast has been edited to remove an offensive comment. ABC Regional apologise for this editorial lapse."

NOT BLACK AND WHITE

AIJAC'S Ahron Shapiro had an opinion piece on the extremist, anti-Israel, often antisemitic positions held by some of the leaders of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement published in the *Spectator Australia* (July 17).

Shapiro countered the claim made by BLM leaders who argue that criticism of Israel is not antisemitic because there are Jews who are anti-Zionist.

According to Shapiro, "They should remember another quote, by Dr Martin Luther King: 'What is anti-Zionist? It is the denial to the Jewish people of a fundamental right that we justly claim for the people of Africa and freely accord all other nations of the globe. It is discrimination against Jews, my friend, because they are Jews. In short, it is antisemitism.'"

Meanwhile, *New York Times* columnist Bari Weiss' dramatic resignation in the form of a 1,500-word open letter claiming she had faced intimidation and antisemitism at the paper was widely covered in the Australian media, but apparently not by the ABC.

MOVIE MADNESS

Australian novelist Christos Tsiolkas' review of the new movie "It Must Be Heaven" by Elia Suleiman, who was born in Israel but identifies as a Palestinian, for the *Saturday Paper* (June 27) included a number of dubious comments.

The movie takes place in Nazareth, Paris and New York. Nazareth has been part of Israel since 1948 and the overwhelming majority of the Arab citizens of Israel do not identify

themselves solely as "Palestinian", but rather as "Arab Israeli", "Palestinian Israeli", or sometimes just "Israeli".

Tsiolkas said, "Suleiman introduces us to the surreal world of Palestinian existence, where the threat of violence always simmers just below the surface of the everyday, and where regulations and prohibitions are often unnamed and seemingly ridiculous."

Arab citizens of Israel, even those who consider themselves Palestinian, are subject to the exact same laws as Jewish citizens.

Tsiolkas praised Suleiman for "daring" to make comedies "out of one of the most intractable and unjust of all global conflicts, the denial of a homeland for the Palestinian people."

Of an earlier Suleiman film, Tsiolkas said, Suleiman had "evoke[d] the tragedy of the Palestinians' dispossession by Israel since 1948" and in this latest film "he is praying that these children will have a homeland, that one day they will see a Palestine."

The tragedy of the Palestinians is that their leaders have consistently picked the path of rejection and violence instead of seizing opportunities to create a Palestinian state when they have arisen – for instance in 1947, 2000, 2001 and 2008 – invariably leading to great misfortune for their people.

HEAVEN SENT

Paul Byrnes' review of "It Must Be Heaven" in the *Nine Newspapers* (July 3), correctly identified Nazareth as being in "northern Israel".

Nine Newspapers' Stephanie Bunbury's review (June 29) quoted Suleiman saying, "My feeling is that the Palestinians might be one of the most oppressed and occupied peoples in the world today" but even people in places like Paris and New York can experience "military... economic and psychological" oppression.

In the *Australian* (June 27), Philippa Hawker's piece quoted Suleiman saying, "If my previous films tried

to present Palestine as a microcosm of the world, my new film ... tries to show the world as if it were a microcosm of Palestine."

Hawker's article quoted Suleiman saying the film's empty streets in the Paris section "express a tension fuelled by racism and police action, a movement towards a state of emergency that he had perceived years earlier as a tendency that would one day come to pass."

Maybe Suleiman is right that the world is a microcosm of "Palestine", but not for the reasons he gives.

Both France and Israel have had to contend with the threat of terror and accordingly have increased security measures. From pro-Palestinian groups in the 1970/80s, right up to the Islamist inspired terror of the last decade, including *Charlie Hebdo*, Hypercacher Kosher supermarket and the Bataclan nightclub, these attacks were not carried out because of perceived racism in French society, but to further extremist political agendas.

The *Australian's* movie reviewer David Stratton claimed (June 27), "there could hardly be a more difficult part of the world to make a film than Palestine."

But this film wasn't shot in "Palestine" but in Israel by an Israeli citizen who is believed to live mainly in Paris.

There are lots of other places that would be much, much more challenging – Syria? Yemen? Kashmir? Libya? North Korea?

Stratton also misquotes a key moment in the film when a fortune teller looks at the camera and says, "There will be Palestine." Stratton incorrectly says it was "Yes. Palestine will be a separate state." The latter implies two states living in peace. The actual line from the film is more ambiguous – and Suleiman is from a town that would remain part of Israel under any two-state resolution, suggesting such a resolution may not be his real agenda in promoting a future "Palestine."

MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

As many sensible analysts predicted, the Netanyahu Government's July 1 date to begin extending Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank came and went without anything happening. Nonetheless, most of the media commentariat was still pontificating on the idea.

On *ABC Radio "PM"* (June 30), veteran US Middle East peace mediator Dennis Ross explained the complicated variables that were always likely to make it difficult for Israel's Government to proceed, including needing Trump Administration approval.

Ross said that while he didn't agree with the Trump peace plan letting Israel absorb all the settlements because of the difficulty of separating the two peoples, he thought the Palestinians could benefit from learning that there is a price to pay for always rejecting peace plans without making a counter-offer.

On July 1, on *ABC Radio National "Breakfast"*, former Clinton and Obama Middle East envoy Martin Indyk also explained the impediments on the Israeli Government and argued that any annexation would be illegal under international law "because Israel signed up to UN Security Council 242...that has a very clear statement that declares the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force... on top of that the Oslo Accords... say that Israel cannot take a unilateral act like annexation."

Former US Democratic staffer turned Sydney University academic Bruce Wolpe predicted that "in raw political terms, annexation would lead to an unprecedented break in bipartisan support in Washington for Israel," *Canberra Times* (July 6).

On *ABC TV's "The World"* (June 24), New Israel Fund Australia's Liam Getreu said the plan was "a dream of Israel's far right wing of the settler movement for many, many years now."

In fact, settler groups have objected to the current plan as not going far enough.

Getreu said Palestinians were excluded from the consultation process "from the start". Actually, they chose to boycott the process. He also claimed Israel would still control millions of Palestinians who would not have full civil rights, but in reality, almost all West Bank Palestinians would remain under Palestinian self-rule, pending Palestinian statehood.

On the ABC's website (July 6), Palestinian activist Samah Sabawi accused Israel of wanting to "drive...out"

Palestinians and "replac[e] them with a preferred Jewish population that has full rights and privileges under Israeli law." Zionist Federation of Australia's Bren Carlill's response alongside it said, "the Palestinian rate of population increase is among the world's highest. Either Israelis are particularly bad at ethnic cleansing or they don't actually possess a nefarious, decades-long plan."

In the *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 26), Professor of

Law Greg Rose, responding to a previous piece by Prof. Ben Saul, explained the legal status of the territories, noting that Jewish rights of settlement there were recognised under the League of Nations Mandate in 1922. He said, "Israel never

abandoned its claims of sovereignty to this area" and since 1967 had offered to withdraw from the vast majority of it, but the Palestinians have refused. According to Rose, "there is no comparable international legal situation in the world today where a country that acquired territory in self-defence and offered to surrender it in exchange for peace was refused."

On *ABC Radio Melbourne* (June 29), academic Scott Burchill said if Israel did proceed, it "should be treated the same way that Russia was treated when it incorporated Crimea into the Russian Federation."

The *Australian* (June 27) ran international law expert Prof. Eugene Kontorovich who said, "annexation has a precise meaning in international law: the forcible incorporation by one state of the territory of another state. The land to which Israel seeks to apply its laws isn't legally the territory of any other state, nor has it been since Israel's independence in 1948... Putting this move in the same category as Russia's seizure of Crimea is entirely misleading."

AIJAC's Ahron Shapiro suggested extending sovereignty might "break the logjam in the moribund peace process," which has stalled since 2014, pointing to "Palestinian Authority PM Mohammed Shtayyeh's recent proposal to the Middle East Quartet for a renewal of direct negotiations with Israel," *Daily Telegraph* (July 10).

A Nine Newspapers' report (June 29) on former Australian PM Kevin Rudd's call for Australia to condemn any Israeli move to apply sovereignty quoted AIJAC's Colin Rubenstein calling for the international community to urge Palestinians to negotiate on the basis of "the Trump peace plan, which does specify the need for a Palestinian state and land swaps from within sovereign Israel."

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

LIFE LESSONS

The words of the child shocked me.

She had just taken the full force of a football, kicked by an older child from close range, in her face.

When I sought to comfort her, she said that “Bad things just happen. We black kids expect it,” and couldn’t work out why anyone cared about her welfare.

A mature 11-year-old, she had internalised that a positive or happy life was not something to which she, as an Indigenous kid, could reasonably aspire.

The encounter happened during my time volunteering in what was known as a “latch-key children’s centre.” High schoolers such as myself, and a few staff, helped with homework and ran sporting and other activities for children who would not have returned to what the community considered positive home environments.

In this inner-city suburb, a large minority were Indigenous children and, after the incident I mentioned above, I found myself often in conversation with Indigenous students about their families, lives and often sad visions for their futures.

I was morally offended that there were Australian children who were being realistic, on the whole, in viewing their lives in their own country pessimistically.

For many of them, the school they attended was a place of security and comfort.

I reflected on this when talking with other Jewish Australians about recent reports of disgusting antisemitic behaviour at educational institutions, sometimes allegedly exacerbated or instigated by those with a duty of care.

Jewish students at a variety of public and private schools have, over many years, been subjected to a range of anti-Jewish racist behaviour, which they have generally accepted as simply a consequence of being part of a small minority.

Whether it has been vile slurs with foundations in Christianity (and sometimes Islam), grubby stereotypes

often relating to money, or even physical intimidation or violence directed at keeping minority members in their place,

Jewish students have tolerated what never should have been tolerated, over and over again.

When I was confronted with anti-Jewish slurs or mockery directed at me personally, I tended to treat the abuse as nothing more than a sad indictment of the anti-Jewish idiot who gained some sort of kick out of attempting to bully someone who generally ignored being bullied. But when I learned of other incidents of antisemitism in my school days, I was motivated to act.

In addition to the insults and bullying by some students, then, as now, teachers could be part of the problem.

When I was at school, one teacher accused a misbehaving (non-Jewish) student of “Jewish arrogance”. While no Jewish student in that class did anything, I raised the matter with another teacher, who then took it up with colleagues and made sure that the offender received appropriate counselling and discipline.

In another incident, a history teacher told his class that “Jews control the banks”, which did not seem to terribly interest most of his class, but piqued my curiosity. After a more senior teacher I asked confirmed that, at the time, there were no Jewish people in influential positions in any major Australian bank, the offending teacher was confronted and exposed as a purveyor of a harmful anti-Jewish slander.

That said, I attended schools where there was both sympathy and understanding, by most of the staff, about antisemitism and the responsibility to confront it.

This does not mean that I cannot produce a list of observations and experiences – but from many of my recent discussions, I know I was amongst the most fortunate of Jewish students at non-Jewish schools.

The recent media coverage of anti-Jewish behaviour at Australian schools has caused concern and distress to Australians hearing about this phenomenon for the first time. The fact is, far too many Jewish students in schools in Australia, over many decades, have experienced antisemitism of one form or another.

The students and their families who are now throwing the spotlight on it deserve our thanks – and also deserve action to minimise, if not eradicate, this stain on our society.



Australian students deserve schools which are a place of security, not racism



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