

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

Israel likely heading for yet another election just as the Biden administration takes over in Washington



UNRWA'S TURNING POINT?

A unique opportunity to reform the controversial UN agency for Palestinian refugees **PAGE 30**

MARRAKECH EXPRESS

Israel's historic normalisation deal with Morocco **PAGE 20**

UNFORGETTABLE LESSONS

Innovative new Holocaust education programs in Australia..... **PAGE 25**

COLD PEACE, WARM PEACE

How the UAE normalisation differs from Israel's longstanding peace with Egypt **PAGE 6**



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EDITOR'S NOTE

This month's *AIR* edition focuses on Israel's apparent drift toward new elections – the fourth in two years – just as the Biden administration takes office in the US.

Amotz Asa-El explains the events that look very likely to lead to Israeli voters going back to the polls in March, while Israeli pundit Haviv Rettig Gur looks at recent developments that may make long-serving Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu more vulnerable this time around. In addition, American columnist Jonathan Tobin argues the upcoming inauguration of Joe Biden makes a new Israeli poll sensible, while, in the editorial, Colin Rubenstein further explores the link between the election and Jerusalem's relations with Washington. Finally, top Israeli security analyst Jacob Nagel discusses how Israel and the Biden administration can coordinate their policies on Iran.

Also featured this month is Raphael Ahren on the historical roots of Israel's recently announced normalisation breakthrough with Morocco, plus Ron Schleifer and Yehuda Brochin on opportunities to reform the long problematic UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).

And don't miss Sharyn Mittelman exploring some unique Holocaust education initiatives in Australia, Jeremy Jones' dive into antisemitism trends in this country, and Allon Lee's review of an odd novel focussed on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Please let us know what you think of any aspect of this edition at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

CONTENTS

FEATURE STORIES

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

BY AMOTZ ASA-EL

Jury-rigged from the start, it held together for a scant seven months. Only created last May, Israel's 35th government seems to have reached the end of its journey PAGE 12

NETANYAHU FACING AN UPHILL STRUGGLE

BY HAVIV RETTIG GUR PAGE 14

THE CASE FOR ISRAELI ELECTIONS

BY JONATHAN TOBIN PAGE 16

BIDEN, ISRAEL AND IRAN

BY JACOB NAGEL PAGE 17

A PEACE RESONANT WITH HISTORY

The Israel-Morocco normalisation deal
BY RAPHAEL AHREN PAGE 20

ASSASSINATION IMPLICATIONS

BY ARDAVAN KHOSHNOOD PAGE 21

YET MORE EXTREMIST VOICES EXPOSED

BY RAN PORAT PAGE 23

LESSONS THAT MUST NOT BE FORGOTTEN

BY SHARYN MITTELMAN PAGE 25

BIBLIO FILE: A NOVEL APPROACH

BY ALLON LEE PAGE 28

ESSAY: UNRWA'S MOMENT OF TRUTH

A chance for urgently needed reforms
BY RON SCHLEIFER & YEHUDA BROCHIN PAGE 30



ON THE COVER

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (R) and alternate-PM and Defence Minister Benny Gantz attend the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem on June 21, 2020. (AFP Photo)



REGULAR COLUMNS

FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN PAGE 4

WORD FOR WORD PAGE 5

SCRIBBLINGS

TZVI FLEISCHER PAGE 6

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

BEN COHEN PAGE 7

ASIA WATCH

MICHAEL SHANNON PAGE 8

AIR NEW ZEALAND

MIRIAM BELL PAGE 9

BEHIND THE NEWS PAGE 10

STRANGER THAN FICTION PAGE 11

NOTED AND QUOTED PAGE 35

IN PARLIAMENT PAGE 36


MEDIA MICROSCOPE

ALLON LEE PAGE 39

THE LAST WORD

JEREMY JONES PAGE 40

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- Tap/click  to return to the Contents page
- All listed articles link to their page.
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FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN

ISRAELI DEMOCRACY AND THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

Barring a hasty, last-minute reprieve of some kind, as of this writing, Israel's Knesset is expected to dissolve itself before the new year, setting the stage for an unprecedented fourth election in two years, probably in mid-March.

After no viable governing coalition emerged from the elections in April and September of 2019, the third, in March 2020, was held against the backdrop of the coronavirus pandemic. It resulted in the shaky compromise of the current national emergency government led by the Likud and the Blue and White parties.

At the time, AIJAC argued this unity government was necessary given the looming pandemic and other challenges. But we also warned that the contrived arrangements put in place to make it possible would be extremely complex and difficult to manage, requiring both considerable good will and political skill. Unfortunately, not enough of these vital commodities were forthcoming, and the unity arrangement never really led to a fully functioning and coherent government.

As the prime minister chosen to lead first in an 18-month rotational arrangement, responsibility for the Government's failures must begin with Binyamin Netanyahu, even if his erstwhile partners from Blue and White are also not blameless. Netanyahu appreciates that his failure to pass a budget is, by law, an automatic trigger for new elections. Given the unprecedented national challenges Israel faces in the spheres of health, the economy and defence, many in Israel consider the refusal to pass such a budget highly questionable.

Netanyahu has undeniable achievements in office, including his leadership in forging peace and normalisation agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and, most recently, Morocco and Bhutan. However, these accomplishments have been marred to some extent by his failure to bring the impending deals to the attention of Defence Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi of Blue and White.

Israel's seemingly endless political stalemate has of course been extremely frustrating, but a fourth election could nonetheless be what the country needs at this time. There are some hopeful signs emerging that, after this round, there may be a different outcome that could lead to some sorely needed stability and policy productivity (see pp. 12-14).

One key reason a new stable government in Jerusalem is urgently needed is in order to establish effective ties with the incoming Biden administration about to assume office in the US.

The current division of key ministries between Blue and White and Likud, and the chronic lack of communication and coordination between them, would make it much harder for the Israeli government to coherently approach the new administration and ensure it fully understands Israel's essential interests and priorities.

One of the crucial issues the Biden administration will consider is dealing with Iranian violations of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal and other ongoing rogue behaviours.

Israel needs to be ready to carry out dialogue with American officials on this crucial policy issue with utmost clarity and unanimity.

Biden's policy is for the US to rejoin the JCPOA and then renegotiate to "improve and extend" the deal on matters such as ballistic missiles and Iran's destabilising regional behaviour.

But if there is anything that can be learnt from the negotiations that led to the nuclear

deal and what has come after, it is that conceding sanctions relief for Iran prematurely would sacrifice US leverage over Iran while encouraging intransigence in Teheran.

Biden's policy of "compliance for compliance" followed by expansion of the agreement, can be workable only if the administration adheres firmly to its ostensible stance that it is up to Teheran to return to full compliance before any significant nuclear-related sanctions can be lifted.

Even then, strong non-nuclear sanctions must remain to address Iran's other misbehaviours – including support for terrorism, missile development, harassment of shipping and attacks on neighbours.

This is the only conceivable way to force Iran to negotiate the improved and expanded deal Biden has outlined.

A return to the JCPOA is, by itself, essentially useless. Not only was the deal thoroughly flawed from the beginning in numerous ways, its sunset provisions, which essentially will allow Iran to enrich uranium to any level in any amounts, will kick in after just a few short years. Keeping up the pressure to make Iran commit beyond the limited JCPOA is the only outcome that matters.

Together with leaders from a growing list of Arab allies, Israeli officials will need to make sure their counterparts in the Biden administration fully comprehend this reality – and are ready to work with Israel and other regional actors to employ all available policy tools to address it effectively.

"One key reason a new stable government in Jerusalem is urgently needed is in order to establish effective ties with the incoming Biden administration about to assume office in the US"

Yet this will require a fully functioning and focused Israeli government, able to promise and deliver competent and coherent assistance to US regional efforts and also encourage Washington to build on the Trump Administration's successful efforts to forge a de facto alliance between Israel and major Sunni Arab states.

On the Palestinian front, there are signs its leadership is starting to recognise they are at a dead end. Regional support for the Palestinian cause is at an unprecedentedly low ebb. The Palestinian "grand strategy" of refusing all negotiations and insisting Israel be isolated and sanctioned until it meets Palestinian demands

looks so obviously hopeless today that even its often willfully blind leadership must see this reality.

Israel will need a cohesive government to encourage actors like the US to make sure the Palestinian leadership and society are forced to grasp this new situation. Then, Jerusalem will need to offer a reasonable way forward into a renewed peace process.

Israel's vibrant democracy, in contrast to its undemocratic neighbours, has given the country many past opportunities to periodically adjust its course and reinvent itself in ways which best serve the needs of its people. One hopes this resourceful resilience and adaptability, two of the country's best assets, come to the fore in negotiating the current challenging impasse.

AIR

WORD FOR WORD

"Likud has changed its character dramatically in recent years. I can no longer support the Netanyahu-led government or be a member of a Likud party led by him... Today Israel needs unity and stability – [PM Binyamin] Netanyahu can offer neither."

Likud MK Gideon Sa'ar announcing he will form his own right-wing party for upcoming Israeli elections (Times of Israel, Dec. 8).

"All relevant administrators must seriously place two crucial matters on their agendas: 1st to investigate this crime and firmly prosecute its perpetrators and its commanders, 2nd to continue the martyr's scientific and technological efforts in all the sectors where he was active."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in response to the assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh (Twitter, Nov. 28).

"Enemies should be awaiting our revenge. The time, place and quality of the operation we will determine."

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Hossein Salami at Mohsen Fakhrizadeh's funeral (AI-Monitor, Nov. 30).

"Israeli governments have arrested thousands of the inhabitants of the lands they are colonising and incarcerated them in concentration camps under the flimsiest of security accusations – young and old, women and men who are rotting there without recourse or justice."

Saudi Prince Turki bin Faisal in a surprising diatribe against Israel speaking at a conference session in Bahrain also featuring Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi (Times of Israel, Dec. 7).

"The Abraham Accords do not come at the expense of the Palestinians. Quite the opposite, they are an opportunity that should not be missed. I call on the Palestinians to change their minds and enter direct negotiation with us without preconditions. This is the only way to solve this conflict."

Israeli Foreign Minister Ashkenazi, responding to bin Faisal (Times of Israel, Dec. 7).

"Slovenia's designation of Hizballah as a terrorist organization in its entirety is a critical step in the fight against Iranian-backed terrorists. We commend Slovenia and other European nations for taking action to prevent Hizballah from threatening their peace and security."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (Twitter, Dec. 5).



SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

COLD PEACE VERSUS WARM PEACE

Here's a story that perfectly illustrates the difference between the warm and genuine peace Israel is currently developing with the UAE and Bahrain, and the "cold peace" it has had with Egypt for more than 40 years, and also with Jordan for more than 25.

Popular Egyptian film star and rapper Mohamed Ramadan is in big trouble in his native land. He has been suspended from Egypt's Theatrical Professions Syndicate, which essentially means he cannot perform either as an actor or singer. A soap opera featuring the actor has also reportedly been cancelled. In addition, the Egyptian Journalists' Union has instructed its members not to publish or broadcast any news or images of the artist. Finally, he is being forced to face court on Dec. 19 on the charge of "insulting the Egyptian people."

His crime? He was photographed in a friendly pose with Israeli singer Omer Adam, and also with Israeli footballer Dia Saba.

The Egyptian unions, including the Theatrical Professions Syndicate and the Journalists' Union, have long-standing policies rejecting any normalisation with Israelis – even after more than 40 years of supposed peace. And this apparently extends to being friendly to any Israeli anywhere.

And it is not just labour organisations dating back to the Nasserist era, or social media, that were outraged. Even popular TV host Ahmed Moussa, known for his loyalty to the Egyptian President, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, slammed Ramadan's action as "a fully-fledged crime" and called for "deterrence measures" to stop further interactions with Israelis.

Yet Sisi is himself openly cooperating with Israel and its government to a much greater degree than any past Egyptian leader.

It is not actually illegal to interact with Israelis under Egyptian law, as it is in some Arab countries, such as Lebanon. Yet the case against Ramadan for "insulting the Egyptian people", brought by lawyer Tariq Mahmoud, illustrates that it is not uncommon in Egypt for individuals to be tried for actions not listed in the criminal code but deemed threatening to social peace – including apparently being friendly with an Israeli.

That is how cold Egypt's peace with Israel is. On a security level ties are quite good, and even diplomatically Egypt and Israel increasingly work together. But Egyptian society, with encouragement from the Government, es-

entially regards it as a crime to have a friendly interaction with any Israeli.

Now let's look at the United Arab Emirates, which is actually where Ramadan's "crime" of being photographed with Israelis took place.

The photos were taken at a party at a Dubai restaurant. The photo of Ramadan and Adam was shared with the world by an Emirati journalist named Hamad al-Mazroui, with the caption, "The most famous artist in Egypt with the most famous artist in Israel. Dubai brings us together."

Al-Mazroui later deleted the photo, but it was clear that, at the time, he thought the picture was a very positive thing, not some sort of crime.

And why would he think otherwise? Israeli singer Adam had been invited to Dubai by Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Nahyan, a senior UAE royal and son of the country's

President. Adam stayed for weeks, and appears to have been welcomed warmly everywhere. One of the country's high-profile sheikhs actually threw him a large party for his birthday in late October.

This is not the only sign that the UAE has been very open to Israeli artists. One of the country's biggest popstars, Waleed Aljasim, even recorded a hit music video, "*Ahlan Bik*", with Israeli singer Elkana Marziano. The song, whose main refrain is "I

hear you friend far away, far away" repeated in Arabic, Hebrew and English, was written and arranged by Doron Medalie, the lyricist and co-composer of the song "Toy," with which Israeli Netta Barzilai won the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest.

Aljasim seems to have suffered no significant repercussions for actively collaborating artistically with Israelis – which, to an anti-normalisation ideologue, must surely be many times worse than simply putting your arms around the shoulder of an Israeli at a party, as Ramadan did.

Or what about Dia Saba, the other Israeli with whom Ramadan committed the "crime" of being photographed? He is an Israeli Arab soccer player who was in Dubai because he plays for the Emirati soccer club Al Nasr. That's right, the UAE has no problem with Israeli citizens playing in its national football league.

Meanwhile, Omer Adam's host, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al Nahyan, has just bought a 50% share in an Israeli soccer club. Not only that, the club in question is Betar Yerushalayim, which is notorious for a particularly right-wing fanbase which has been intolerant of Arabs at times.

Sheikh bin Khalifa dismissed any concern about potentially racist fans, saying, "We want to set an example to both nations that Jews and Muslims can work together."

As Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu said of the deal, "It's instructive that an Emirati has bought Betar Yerushalayim. It tells you how things are changing so rapidly."



L-R: Israeli singer Omer Adam, Egyptian actor Mohamed Ramadan and Israeli footballer Dia Saba on a Dubai rooftop

Any of this would be unimaginable with the Egyptians, even after 40 years of peace, as the ridiculous persecution of Ramadan demonstrates.

Yet the Israel-UAE honeymoon shows how much the Middle East is changing, with Israel becoming an accepted part of the region, despite the still unresolved Palestinian issue. Someday, the Egyptians will have to catch up with this new reality. Hopefully it will not take another 40 years.

AIR

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

Ben Cohen

A DEFINING PROBLEM REGARDING ANTISEMITISM

A group of Palestinian and Arab intellectuals, 122 in all, endorsed a statement published by *The Guardian* newspaper on Nov. 29 that attacked the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism. These intellectuals [including Australian academic Dr. Ghassan Hage – Ed.] were concerned because the definition continues to be adopted by hundreds of governments, local authorities and civic associations in the United States and across the world as an effective instrument for countering the hatred of Jews.

It's not that these Arab intellectuals endorse antisemitism. They declare early on that "no expression of hatred for Jews as Jews should be tolerated anywhere in the world." They recognise, too, that antisemitism "manifests itself in sweeping generalizations and stereotypes about Jews, regarding power and money in particular, along with conspiracy theories and Holocaust denial."

Yet despite featuring the names of some of the Arab world's most respected academics, writers and filmmakers, the statement on the IHRA definition at no point acknowledges that antisemitism as a social and religious phenomenon is deeply embedded within the Arab civilisations that these intellectuals represent. Instead, antisemitism is depicted as someone else's problem, primarily Europe's.

It is hard to take seriously the expressed commitment to fighting antisemitism in this statement in the face of such blatant airbrushing of Middle Eastern history. For millennia, Jews occupied a precarious place in Arab and Islamic societies, occasionally experiencing more benign rulers, but frequently serving as the targets of official discrimination and popular violence.

None of this is apparently relevant to these intellectuals, who see their role as nourishing the national mythologies of the Arab world – specifically, that antisemitism is not an Arab problem and, relatedly, that the problem of antisemitism has been imposed upon the Arabs as a result

of European and American backing for Zionism, and the consequent "ethnic cleansing" of the Palestinians during Israel's War of Independence in 1948.

It is this last claim that gets to the heart of the objection these intellectuals have towards the IHRA definition. Recognising that antisemitism is a dynamic phenomenon, the definition includes as examples both classic tropes about Jews and more modern ones that revolve around Israel and Zionism. Asserting that Jews as a nation have no right to self-determination and depicting the State of Israel as a racist original sin against the Palestinians are, under the terms of the definition, indubitably antisemitic.

Not surprisingly, this grouping of intellectuals is infuriated that the very positions they promote – that Israel is a racist undertaking, that Jews are an invented nation, that Israeli policies towards the Palestinians are a reincarnation of the Nazi persecution of the Jews – are defined as antisemitic, and therefore as morally and politically tainted, by a growing segment of international opinion. But instead of honestly reviewing these positions in light of historical changes, they have simply doubled down on the discredited anti-Zionist campaign that was waged by Arab regimes before Israel even came into existence.

Centrally, they want to establish as an uncontested fact – in exactly the way that the Holocaust or the Cambodian genocide or the Transatlantic slave trade are uncontested facts – the Palestinian claim that Israel's creation was a *nakba* ("catastrophe"). "As it currently exists, the state of Israel is based on uprooting the vast majority of the natives – what Palestinians and Arabs refer to as the *nakba* – and on subjugating those natives who still live on the territory of historical Palestine as either second-class citizens or people under occupation, denying them their right to self-determination," the statement reads.

Those states and bodies that have endorsed the IHRA definition understand this argument very differently. They do not see it as an objective statement of fact, but as a highly politicised account of the origins, nature and policies of the Jewish state. They do not accept as uncontested the claim that Israel, in the process of establishing its independence, deliberately expelled 750,000 Palestinian Arabs, or that Israel is solely responsible for the perpetuation of the refugee question almost 80 years on.

Indeed, partly because of the IHRA definition's spread, a growing number of opinion-shapers are beginning to understand that the anti-Zionist explanation for the plight of the Palestinians is itself built upon an antisemitic caricature of the Zionist undertaking.

As the strategic significance of the Palestinian issue has receded over the last few years, the use of the *nakba* as a narrative to undermine both the Jewish claim to national self-determination and the fight against antisemitism in its anti-Zionist guise is becoming less and less effective. In time, perhaps, some Arab intellectuals will realise that

this development was, above all, a stroke of good fortune for the Palestinians, helping to liberate them from their damaging shibboleths towards a life of peace and looking forward.

AIR

Ben Cohen is a New York City-based journalist and author. © Jewish News Syndicate (JNS.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

NOT READY YET

The creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was meant to herald an era of peace and much needed economic development in the Philippines' troubled southern region. Yet, the transitional government installed in February 2019 will not be able to meet its reform timetable due to the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing instability generated by Islamic State-linked militant groups.

Murad Ebrahim, head of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority, has asked Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte for an extension of his term by three years, to 2025, before local voters get to elect their own government.

The menace of Islamic State-aligned groups has stalled a major reform goal – decommissioning the weapons of the former Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) guerrillas – says Murad, the former chief of MILF. The group was once the largest of the guerrilla organisations fighting for a separate Muslim state in the Philippines since 1978. It later dropped its demand for an independent state, and settled for expanded autonomy.

The phased handover of weapons is part of the peace deal with the government that led to the establishment of the BARMM. Each combatant who hands over weapons is expected to receive a cash payment, including money for education. Currently 12,000 firearms, or about 30% of the estimated 40,000 such arms said to be held by MILF members, have been turned over and destroyed.

The decommissioning process has been slow because the former guerrillas have been reluctant to give up their weapons amid ongoing attacks from diehard militant groups. Prime among these diehards are the Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf, based in the small, southernmost islands, and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), based in the Mindanao mainland, which broke away from MILF over peace negotiations with the government.

As if to justify the apprehension, about 50 heavily-armed BIFF members attacked a town in Maguindanao province on the evening of Dec. 3, terrorising residents in

scenes reminiscent of the Marawi siege of 2017. An army company stationed nearby, along with the town's small police force, repelled the attack until back-up forces arrived, prompting the militants to withdraw an hour later.

A BIFF spokesman named Abu Jihad said the group torched police vehicles in Datu Piang because it believed police were involved in illegal activities in the town. "The law of Islam prohibits all wrongdoings... we are just enforcing it," he said over local radio. "We will not stop and no one can stop us until there are no illegal activities in the town."

While the latest attack paled in comparison with the five-month Marawi siege, it showed that Islamic State-linked groups still have clout in the autonomous Muslim region.

Rommel Banlaoi, chairman of the Philippine Institute for Peace, Violence and Terrorism Research think tank, recently told the *Asia Times*, "The attack in Datu Piang by pro-IS militants associated with the BIFF is a strong indication that the threat of terrorism in Mindanao persists three years after Marawi liberation."

Banlaoi cautions that there is no guarantee that the establishment of the new Bangsamoro region would lead to the eventual defeat of pro-IS groups in Mindanao, which, he said, is being seen by foreign militants as their "new land of jihad" after the weakening of IS in the Middle East.

Meanwhile on the southernmost islands, former MILF guerrillas are already helping the police go after militants associated with the Abu Sayyaf, which is now divided into several factions.

Some 39 members of the IS-linked faction of the Abu Sayyaf militant group surrendered to the Philippine military during the first week of December, in the southern islands of Tawi-Tawi and Sulu.

Among those captured was Alsadi Hanain, who is said to have participated in several high-profile kidnappings and executions of foreigners over the past several years, and operated under the command of Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, the leader of the IS-linked Abu Sayyaf faction.

Sawadjaan is believed to have been killed earlier this year in a clash on the island of Jolo, an Abu Sayyaf stronghold, although the military has not confirmed his death.

The Abu Sayyaf appears to have lost its central leadership, says Murad Ebrahim. "We don't know now who the real leader is," he said. "We are also starting to reach out to them, to try to convince them [to give up fighting]."

But the Abu Sayyaf is not only splintered into factions, it appears to be dispersing geographically as well, due to sustained military pressure upon its traditional strongholds.

More Abu Sayyaf activity is being picked up in smaller, outlying islands and even further afield, including off the coast of Zamboanga City, one of Mindanao's largest cities. All of which points to a heightened risk of attacks in maritime and coastal areas across the not-yet-ready BARMM.

AIR

Miriam Bell

MAHUTA TAKES FOREIGN AFFAIRS REINS

After the New Zealand Labour Party's landslide re-election in October, the country is currently seeing a re-shuffling of the deck, rather than a changing of the guard. There have been significant changes to the make-up of Parliament and some new faces in key ministerial roles.

Labour's outright majority meant there was no need for it to include the Green Party in its governing arrangement, despite the Greens' strong showing in the election. However, perhaps with an eye to the future, Labour has entered into a cooperation arrangement with the Greens.

The Green Party co-leaders, James Shaw, who recently condemned the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and Marama Davidson, an anti-Israel activist who joined a Gaza-bound flotilla in 2016, will both get non-cabinet portfolios. However, these portfolios are not likely to have direct relevance to New Zealand Jewish affairs.

A more notable change comes as a result of New Zealand First's failure to achieve the 5% threshold necessary to get into Parliament. That means the party's leader, Winston Peters – New Zealand's longest-serving MP and foreign minister in the previous Labour government – is now out of Parliament.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's appointment to replace Peters as foreign minister came as a surprise to many – long-standing Labour Party MP Nanaia Mahuta.

A Labour MP since 1996, Mahuta was Labour Minister in one of Helen Clark's governments and served as Local Government and Maori Development Minister in the Ardern Government's first term.

Much attention has been focussed on the fact that not only is Mahuta the first woman to become New Zealand's foreign minister, she is also the first Maori woman. Mahuta, who has a *kauae moko* (a traditional Maori facial tattoo), is seen as presenting a distinctively New Zealand, and proudly Maori, face to the world.

Her appointment is more than just a statement though. According to *Newsroom* political editor Sam Sachdeva:

"As both the Maori Development Minister and Associate Trade and Export Growth Minister in the last term of Parliament, Mahuta worked to grow the Maori economy through indigenous partnerships with other nations, while she won praise for her low-key but deft relationship-building in the local government portfolio."

Not much is known about Mahuta's views on matters relating to Israel and the Middle East, but Israel Institute of New Zealand co-director Ashley Church said that, at this early stage, she seems to be taking a balanced approach to her portfolio.

"I've been told that she is balanced in her position on policies and the way she is going about things. She is keeping her cards close to her chest and doesn't appear to be making assumptions about any foreign policy issues until she has better information on the issues involved."

Church said this could be a good sign – especially as long-standing local anti-Israel activist John Minto has already started directing missives to the new minister demanding that New Zealand adopt his strongly pro-Palestinian stance.

"The real problem is [the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's] influence on the policy of successive governments towards Israel and also on New Zealand's voting pattern on Israel at the United Nations," Church said. "To address this, we need a foreign minister who is an independent thinker to ask 'why are we doing this and is it really the best approach?' Maybe that person is Nanaia Mahuta."

The NZ Jewish Council is also optimistic about Mahuta's potential as foreign minister. The Council's spokesperson, Juliet Moses, said it is looking forward to meeting her and developing a positive relationship with her. "As an indigenous person, we believe she will understand and respect the importance of Israel to our community and our connection to it, as our ancestral homeland."

Another new appointment relevant to New Zealand's Jewish community is the new Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities, Priyanca Radhakrishnan. She was the Parliamentary Private Secretary for Ethnic Affairs before the election.

Moses said the NZ Jewish Council had a good relationship with her predecessor Jenny Salesa and is looking forward to building on those foundations with Radhakrishnan. "She attended the Auckland Hebrew Congregation synagogue for Rosh Hashanah last year and I sat next to her... she was very interested in the service and community."

However, while these two key ministerial appointments have been greeted favourably, the community does have some concerns regarding certain other MPs.

Church points out that alongside Marama Davidson, Golriz Ghahraman, the Green Party's foreign affairs spokesperson, is also vociferously pro-Palestinian, while Labour MP Duncan Webb, a vocal BDS supporter, remains in Parliament.

Ghahraman was joined at a recent Palestinian solidarity event by two other new MPs – the Greens' Teanau Tui-ono, and Labour's Ibrahim Omer, an Eritrean refugee who spent many years working in UN refugee camps.

All three MPs took a pledge to form a new parliamentary Palestine friendship group and to "raise the voices of Palestinian people in New Zealand's parliament."

This scenario suggests that the new ministers, particularly Mahuta, will come under concerted pressure from pro-Palestinian activists both inside and outside of Parliament. How these ministers respond could have a considerable impact on the New Zealand-Israel relationship going forward.

BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

On Nov. 21, two rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza, with one intercepted by the Iron Dome missile defence system and the other causing property damage. Israel retaliated by striking Hamas targets in Gaza.

On Nov. 22, IEDs were discovered near Rachel's Tomb and the Qalandiya Crossing in the West Bank. Suspects involved in both incidents were arrested.

A Palestinian man was shot dead after ramming his car into a border guard at a checkpoint in east Jerusalem on Nov. 25.

Incidents of Palestinians throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails in the West Bank have reportedly increased over recent weeks.

IRAN'S PARLIAMENT EXPANDS NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Following the Nov. 27 assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the head of Iran's nuclear weapons program, the Iranian Parliament (Majlis) passed a law calling for an increase in the scope and scale of the program. While the bill itself has existed for some time, it has now been ratified by the Council of Guardians as a response to the assassination.

The law requires the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) to increase uranium enrichment levels to 20% – far above the 3.67% allowed by the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) – which would drastically cut the time needed to refine it to military grade. The JCPOA only allows Iran to retain a stockpile of 202.8 kg of low enriched uranium, but the new law orders the AEOI to stockpile 150kg of uranium enriched to 20%, as well as increase stocks of low-enriched uranium (which are already at 12 times

JCPOA permitted levels)

The law also says the AEOI must install 1,000 advanced IR-2m uranium enrichment centrifuges at Natanz, as opposed to the slower IR-1m centrifuges allowed by the JCPOA; operate a uranium metal production plant; and design another 40 megawatt heavy water reactor like the one at Arak, which was temporarily disabled under the JCPOA.

Under the law, if the incoming Biden administration fails to lift sanctions on Iran within a specified time, Iran will cease cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and expel its inspectors.

Iran's Defence Minister also said Fakhrizadeh's organisation, the Defence Research and Innovation Organisation (SPND), would have its budget doubled.

NUCLEAR SCIENTIST SECRETLY RECORDED

According to Israeli media reports in early December, Israel had obtained secret recordings of assassinated Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh discussing his work, including mentioning plans to manufacture "five warheads". Material from Iran's secret nuclear archive exposed by Israel confirmed that the Amad project, headed by Fakhrizadeh, was aimed at producing five nuclear warheads.

Israel's former prime minister Ehud Olmert reportedly privately played the secret recording to then-US president George W. Bush during his visit to Jerusalem in May 2008.

IRANIAN SOLDIERS REPORTEDLY PROPPING UP VENEZUELAN REGIME

On Dec. 2, the top US military

commander for Central and South America, Admiral Craig Faller, revealed Iran had supplied arms and paramilitary support to help Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro maintain his regime's grip on power.

According to Faller, Venezuela is "See[ing] a growing Iranian influence" and it is "alarming and concerning" to see military support by Iran in the region.

"We're concerned about what we see... It's not just oil shipments, it's arms shipments as well," he added.

Faller also expressed concerns over members of the large Lebanese diaspora in South America, including in Venezuela, having ties to Hezbollah.

RUMOURS: KHAMENEI UNWELL

On Dec. 6, an Iranian reporter-in-exile claimed that Iran's Supreme Leader, 81-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, transferred powers to his son, Sayyid Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei (51), due to health concerns. The news was vehemently denied by Iranian officials.

Additional sources suggest that Khamenei recently cancelled some scheduled meetings. In 2015, international media reported that Khamenei suffers from prostate cancer.

In addition, the Arabic press claimed that another leader close to the regime in Teheran, Hezbollah head Hassan Nasrallah, was considering moving to Iran, or may have already done so.

The unconfirmed reports stated that the move was discussed between Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Hezbollah. Other sources claimed that Nasrallah had cancelled all travel and boosted security around himself in light of the killing of Fakhrizadeh.

ISRAEL-BAHRAIN AGREE ON NEW TOURISM AND DIRECT FLIGHTS

On Dec. 1, Bahrain's Minister of Industry, Commerce and Tourism Zyed Bin Rashid al-Zayani arrived in Israel with a delegation of around 40 businesspeople. Al-Zayani and Israeli Tourism Minister Orit Farkash-Hachon signed a historic memorandum of understanding (MOU) regarding tourism in Jerusalem. It is the first MOU of its kind between Israel and an Arab Gulf state.

Al-Zayani also signed an MOU to allow direct flights between Tel Aviv and Manama for the first time. The first direct flight is reportedly scheduled to take place on Jan. 7, 2021.

NEW MISSILE BOATS FOR ISRAELI NAVY

On Dec. 2 Israel took delivery from Germany of the first of four new missile boats which form part of a major naval upgrade to help counter the threat from Iran.

Head of naval operations, Rear Admiral Eyal Harel, said the new fleet of Sa'ar 6-class corvettes – equipped with “the (most) sophisticated radar on board any vessel in the world” – would strengthen the navy's capacity to defend offshore natural gas rigs against attack from the Teheran-backed Lebanese Shi'ite terror group Hezbollah.

NEW WAVE OF ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL

More than 500 members of Ethiopia's Jewish community arrived in Israel on Dec. 3 and 4. Their arrival marked the first phase of a plan to bring around 2,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel by the end of January, in what has been named “Operation Rock of Israel”.

The mission is being headed by Israel's Absorption and Immigration Minister Pnina Tamano-Shata, who



Joyful Ethiopian immigrants arrive in Israel

herself arrived in Israel as a child in the 1984 Operation Moses airlift, which brought 6,000 Jews from Ethiopia to Israel.

Thousands more Jewish Ethiopians are today seeking to emigrate to Israel. Around 140,000 Ethiopian Jews live in Israel today.

ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN COVID-19 NUMBERS

On Dec. 8, following legal challenges, Israel's coronavirus cabinet cancelled a planned nightly curfew that was to begin the following day,

just prior to the Chanukah holiday, and continue until Jan. 2.

A recent resurgence saw 1837 new infections recorded on Dec. 7, the highest number in nearly two months.

Despite this, Israeli shopping malls, museums and outdoor markets – which had remained closed even after the partial lifting of restrictions in October following the country's second lockdown in September – were allowed to re-open on Dec. 9.

As of Dec. 11, Israel had recorded 352,397 cases including 2,961 deaths, with 16,045 cases still active. In the West Bank, there were 104,879 cases and 910 deaths recorded, with 25,254 active cases, while Gaza had 26,817 total cases.

On Dec. 3, a delegation of Arab Israeli doctors, organised by Physicians for Human Rights – Israel (PHRI), entered Gaza to provide free medical treatment for Gazans and training for Palestinian medical teams.



REMOTELY POSSIBLE?

The Nov. 27 killing of Mohsen Fakhriadeh, the head of Iran's nuclear weapons program and senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officer, was no doubt hugely embarrassing to Iran's rulers and security establishment.

That is probably why explanations about how it happened have been increasingly far-fetched. Seemingly, an assassination carried out by more exotic means makes the failure to protect such a high value target more excusable.

Initial reports suggested that his convoy was stopped when a truck exploded on the side of the road, after which a team of assassins emerged and shot him dead.

However, this explanation quickly changed to claims that a remote-controlled machine gun mounted on the truck shot at his car as he drove past, and then shot him when he got out to investigate. Only then was the truck supposedly

blown up to obscure the evidence.

This second explanation was met with considerable scepticism among experts, who noted significant risks such as the unmanned gun being detected or running out of ammunition, not to mention the high precision required to shoot one individual from a sizeable distance.

Thus, on Dec. 6, Brigadier-General Ali Fadavi, the IRGC's deputy commander, said the machine gun was equipped with an intelligent satellite system and was using artificial intelligence.

At least the reason Fakhriadeh was killed seemed straightforward – his leading role in Teheran's secret nuclear weapons project. However, Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami claimed it was because Fakhriadeh “had recently innovated a Corona test kit...and they didn't want us to succeed in this struggle.”

Ten days after the killing, an Israeli flag and a sign reading “Thank you Mossad” was hung from a bridge in Teheran. So far, no Iranian authority has claimed it was placed there by remote control or satellite.

COVER STORY

IRRECONCILABLE
DIFFERENCES

WHY A FOURTH ELECTION LOOMS IN ISRAEL

by Amotz Asa-El

Jury-rigged from the start, it held together for a scant seven months.

Only created last May, Israel's 35th Government seems to have reached the end of its journey after the Knesset approved a bill to disband itself on Dec. 2. The Knesset's House Committee subsequently tabled a bill for a new election, suggesting it be held on March 16.

The political saga that preceded the vote appears to have left its protagonists little choice but to march toward yet another general election, Israel's fourth in hardly two years.

Technically, Israelis will likely be called to elect the 24th Knesset a mere 23 months after they elected the 21st, because their government failed to pass a state budget.

Furious over Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's disregard for repeated demands to introduce a budget as required by the coalition agreement, Netanyahu's main coalition partner, Blue and White, decided to support an opposition bill to disband the Knesset.

Just what motivated Netanyahu's inaction is a matter of interpretation. Netanyahu claims constraints caused by the coronavirus pandemic made it better to work for a while without a long-term budget's fiscal brakes.

There is logic to this argument, considering that the coalition agreement said the budget would be biannual, a commitment that became difficult to meet given the sudden need to provide aid to shuttered businesses and support to nearly a million newly jobless people.

However, the coalition agreement was written when the pandemic was already raging. Blue and White argues that Netanyahu inserted the clause stipulating a biannual budget in order to create a pretext for prematurely dis-



Estranged and heading back to the polls: Israeli Defence Minister and Alternative Prime Minister Benny Gantz and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu

banding the coalition he was building.

Yet what drove Blue and White was not differing interpretations of the coalition agreement. It was frustration and distrust.

The coalition deal signed last April between Netanyahu and Blue and White's leader Benny Gantz was the most complex in Israel's political history.

Though Blue and White and its two satellite parties brought only 17 lawmakers to the coalition – as opposed to Likud's 36 with another 16 from three satellite parties – the agreement gave both the Likud camp and the Blue and White camp 16 cabinet seats each. In addition, Gantz and Netanyahu were to rotate the premiership between them, with Netanyahu going first and then Gantz getting the top job in Nov. 2021.

Moreover, Blue and White received both the Defence Ministry, the most powerful and prestigious position in any Israeli government after Prime Minister, and the high-profile Foreign Ministry.

It was a shaky structure from the outset, and distrust animated the coalition's work pretty much from day one, when Blue and White's demands that the Government appoint a state prosecutor and police commissioner to fill vacancies in both crucial posts were left unanswered. Both positions have been filled by interim substitutes throughout the Government's short tenure.

Gantz's sense that Netanyahu was deliberately foot-dragging on practically all issues was heightened by Likud's failure to allow the ministerial legislation committee to assemble. Blue and White increasingly felt they were being manoeuvred to stand in the background as extras in a show Netanyahu was producing, directing and starring in.

Perhaps most painfully, Netanyahu kept Gantz in the dark concerning the normalisation agreements he crafted with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – with the assistance of the United States – and didn't even have Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, Gantz's number two in Blue and White, attend the signing ceremony at the White House.

Increasingly, Blue and White's leaders also felt Netanyahu had no intention of fulfilling the rotation agreement, preferring instead to return to the polls sometime before the handover to Gantz in November next year.

These were the circumstances that ultimately led Gantz to put his foot down and announce that he and his party would support the opposition's bill to disband the Knesset.

Ugly though this divorce is, the outgoing Government can boast one significant cooperative achievement.

A so-called "Corona Cabinet", headed jointly by Netanyahu and Gantz, met regularly, monitored the medical situation, managed a lockdown system, created compensation packages, and purchased in advance the vaccines that will hopefully end the pandemic that was this Government's original *raison d'être*.

In this regard, the outgoing coalition upheld a 53-year tradition, whereby Israel responds to national emergencies with unity governments. That is what happened in the 1967 Six Day War, in the 1984 economic crisis, and in the 2001 war with Palestinian terror known as the Second Intifada.

However, the political ailments that predated the medical crisis that gave rise to this Government will not be cured by its demise, and in fact will likely only become worse.

Israeli politics was initially thrown into turmoil by Netanyahu's legal entanglements. Three separate charge sheets against him involving allegations of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust have created an unprecedented situation whereby an Israeli prime minister is in office while under criminal indictment.

Netanyahu's response, a flat denial of all charges and an insistence on remaining in office, created a constitutional crisis. His rivals insist an indicted prime minister must step aside until his legal situation is resolved. His supporters say that if any indictment forces the departure of a prime minister convicted of no crime, this would amount to giving the judicial system the ability to overturn the will of Israeli voters at any time without having to actually prove any malfeasance.

The sense of historic crisis has been further exacerbated by Netanyahu's insistence that he has been the victim of a conspiracy which encompasses the judiciary, the media, and the police.

Following Netanyahu's indictment, the political plot thickened as the veteran PM lost the support of three key conservative allies.

First, following the 2019 election, Netanyahu lost former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman of the Israel Beiteinu ("Israel our home") party when he repeatedly refused to join Netanyahu's coalition. Then, in last winter's election, Netanyahu lost Naftali Bennett, also a former defence minister, after Netanyahu refused to appoint him health minister to lead the coronavirus response.

Finally, Likud lawmaker and former education minister Gideon Sa'ar announced his resignation from the Likud on Dec. 8 in order to run independently as head of a new party, expected to be called "New Hope". Once a Netanyahu protégé, the 54-year-old Sa'ar is popular among Likud members and was widely seen as a leading contender to succeed him.

Sa'ar will be joined by Communications Minister Yoaz Hendel and Knesset Defence and Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Zvi Hauser, both former Netanyahu aides who ran as part of Blue and White, and then created their own faction.

In losing Lieberman, Netanyahu lost some of the Russian-speaking electorate. In losing Bennett, Netanyahu risked losing some of the modern-Orthodox electorate. In losing Sa'ar, he risks losing some of Likud's core supporters.

Given the coalition arithmetic which always applies in Israel, whereby amassing 61 seats from disparate parties is the key to government, it was Lieberman's departure from the Netanyahu-led conservative bloc that lay at the root of Israel's repeated electoral indecision since Dec. 2018. Ideologically, however, Lieberman's critique of Netanyahu is not focussed on his personal conduct, but on his concessions to the ultra-Orthodox sector on various issues, especially exemptions from conscription.

Bennett, meanwhile, has also largely avoided discussing Netanyahu's legal situation, attacking instead his perfor-

“Following Netanyahu's indictment, the political plot thickened as the veteran PM lost the support of three key conservative allies”

mance, claiming Netanyahu mishandled the pandemic twice: first, by refusing to let the IDF lead the response to COVID-19, a task for which it had both resources and contingency plans; and secondly, by imposing a sweeping lockdown which, according to Bennett, unnecessarily debilitated thousands of businesses.

Sa'ar, meanwhile, charges that under Netanyahu's rule all internal debate within Likud came to an end and the long-established party instead became the Prime Minister's personal cheer squad.

Before Sa'ar's announcement, polls suggested that Bennett's Yamina ("Rightward") faction – which currently has six Knesset seats – could win more than 20 seats, and thus become the second largest faction. Sa'ar's new party is expected to syphon off some of that electorate, and also possibly further shrink Likud, as well as take votes from Blue and White.

The first question the approaching election raises, therefore, is whether Bennett and/or Sa'ar would be open to joining a centrist coalition to unseat Netanyahu.

On the one hand, that would be disagreeable to many of their potential voters. On the other hand, any deal Netanyahu might offer them for their support would likely appear unreliable to them, especially considering what happened between Netanyahu and Gantz. Furthermore, if both Bennett and Sa'ar were to enter a coalition with centrists, conservatives could not credibly accuse either of them of betraying the Right by abandoning Netanyahu.

Another key question is what will happen with Gantz and his estranged political partner, Opposition Leader Yair Lapid of the Yesh Atid ("There is a future") party.

Lapid went into the last three elections as Gantz's key colleague and second-in-command in Blue and White. The pair parted ways in the wake of the pandemic, which Gantz thought demanded a broad government, while Lapid insisted a narrow government without Netanyahu was both obtainable and imperative. Both men now say they are open to a reconciliation, but only if the other will agree to follow his lead.

Whatever the centre's ultimate configuration, between them Gantz, Lapid, Sa'ar, Bennett and Lieberman look likely to collectively command too many Knesset seats for Netanyahu to remain in power, unless he can somehow find a way to win support from at least one of them. If that is indeed the result of the upcoming Israeli poll, Sa'ar's jab may prove to have been for Netanyahu's career what Brutus' famous stab was to Julius Caesar.

AIR

IS NETANYAHU NOW FACING AN UPHILL STRUGGLE?

by Haviv Rettig Gur

The first shipment of coronavirus vaccines from Pfizer landed in Israel on Dec. 8, with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on hand at Ben Gurion Airport to welcome the flight and make sure he got the full measure of credit for its arrival.



Veteran Likud lawmaker and Netanyahu protege turned rival Gideon Sa'ar

It's a moment that could have signalled the beginning of a turnaround for Netanyahu's political prospects, the start of the return of right-wing voters to his Likud party after they had been abandoning it in recent months in anger at the Government's handling of the pandemic.

But an hour after the plane's arrival, Likud MK Gideon Sa'ar handed in his resignation to Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin, and set back Netanyahu's hopes for victory by a long way.

Netanyahu was already in trouble before Sa'ar's announcement on Dec. 7 that he was launching his own party. Naftali Bennett's right-wing Yamina party has been polling at between 19 and 24 seats for several months now, and Bennett is widely believed to be seeking to oust Netanyahu from power. If the polls are even close to right – if Bennett can draw even 15 seats on election day – Netan-

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yahu will not have enough seats alone to ensure the current prime minister is also the next one.

Nor will Netanyahu have any willing partners across the aisle. After his refusal to fulfill his rotation deal with Blue and White leader Benny Gantz, it will be hard to find a political leader in the current Knesset willing to sign a similar agreement with him in the next one.

One Israeli radio station managed to commission and publish a flash poll between Sa'ar's announcement of his new party on Dec. 7 and the Dec. 8 morning news broadcasts. Sa'ar would win a stunning 17 seats, it found.

The poll, produced by Panels Politics, showed Sa'ar's broad appeal on the centre-right. He would draw three to four seats apiece from Likud, Blue and White, centrist Yesh Atid, and rightist Yamina.

That's bad news for Netanyahu, especially after Sa'ar openly declared his opposition to Netanyahu's leadership and vowed not to serve in a government with him.

Likud had changed, said the former party no. 2, becoming "a tool for the personal interests of the person in charge" and "a cult of personality."

"I can no longer support the Netanyahu-led government or be a member of a Likud party led by him... Today Israel needs unity and stability – Netanyahu can offer neither."

That's a more direct challenge to Netanyahu, and a more explicit vow not to serve with him, than anything Yamina leader Bennett has said in public.

All of which turns Sa'ar's initial polling numbers into a potential existential political threat to Netanyahu.

According to the poll, Sa'ar, among the most popular figures among the Likud rank and file until he challenged Netanyahu's leadership last year, moves some four seats from pro-Netanyahu Likud to an anti-Netanyahu offshoot. And while he also weakens Yamina and Yesh Atid, it is Netanyahu who cannot afford the drop.

The danger is now so acute for the Prime Minister that it quickly became a matter of conventional wisdom among Israeli pundits that Netanyahu would look for ways to avert an election at the last minute, even if it means passing a state budget for 2020 and 2021 and being forced to hand the rotating premiership to Gantz, as promised in the agreement the two men signed back in May. .

ENEMIES

The tragedy for Netanyahu is that his current predicament – the dwindling ranks of those likely to be willing to

join a future government under his stewardship – is of his own making.

If one takes even a cursory look at the leaders of the centrist and right-leaning parties whose backing Netanyahu needs if he is to sidestep Sa'ar or Bennett and produce his future coalition, one finds a long list of people who believe they were abused and betrayed by Netanyahu

over the years.

Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman was once Netanyahu's closest confidant, rising to the post of director general of Netanyahu's Prime Ministerial Office during his first term as premier in 1996. After they fell out in 1998, Lieberman spent years building his own Yisrael Beiteinu party in the hopes of one day merging it into Likud and returning to his old home, a goal stymied repeatedly by Netanyahu.

It was Lieberman's refusal to ever again serve with Netanyahu that denied the Likud leader a government after the April and September elections in 2019.

Bennett, together with fellow Yamina MK Ayelet Shaked, once ran Netanyahu's office and served as his chief of staff from 2006 to 2008,

before experiencing a similar falling out. Netanyahu has spent the years since working hard to undermine Bennett at every turn.

In the current Knesset, Bennett and Lieberman hold a combined 12 seats between them. In every poll for the past five months, they account for 25 or more. In the past, Netanyahu wasn't able to form a right-wing government without seven-seat Yisrael Beiteinu. He will now have to contend with a 25-seat Lieberman-Bennett alliance bent on seeing him out of office.

Sa'ar is only the latest Likudnik to abandon the party over his disgust with its leader. Netanyahu is now surrounded by people with both personal and political grudges against him that they're willing to take to the ballot box.

Netanyahu managed to thread the needle for years, handing both Lieberman and Bennett ever-increasing political prizes up to and including the Defence Ministry – after publicly declaring both unfit for the post – to keep them from abandoning him.

If Bennett draws 19 seats in the next election (never mind 24, as some recent polls have given him), no defence minister post will suffice. But it's not clear Netanyahu has more to give. Would Bennett agree to a rotating premiership, given Netanyahu's very recently broken commit-



Waiting in the wings: former right-wing allies of Netanyahu turned antagonists Avigdor Lieberman (top) and Naftali Bennett (bottom)

ments to Gantz? What of Sa'ar, flush with 17 seats (or, to be safe, even just 12)? What will he demand of a Netanyahu he knows he cannot trust?

Likud has 36 seats in the current Knesset, and 16 more in the two ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and United Torah Judaism, which have stuck loyally by Netanyahu in recent years. That's 52 seats reliably in Netanyahu's corner, nine short of a minimum 61-seat parliamentary majority.

But that's the outgoing Knesset. The next Knesset, according to the latest polls, could see the Likud-ultra Orthodox bloc drop to just 41.

That's less than the whopping 43 seats that right wing anti-Netanyahu parties (Sa'ar, Yamina, Yisrael Beytenu) may get. With the centre-left now led by the firmly anti-Netanyahu Yair Lapid, Netanyahu appears to be running out of options.

AIR

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BIDEN AND THE CASE FOR ISRAELI ELECTIONS

by Jonathan S. Tobin

This isn't what Israelis want to hear right now, but they need to hold another election. The prospect of a new administration in Washington is cause for concern, even if it may not prove to be the end of the world. But the challenge that the new administration will pose requires Jerusalem to speak with one voice.

An Israeli government with the prime minister's office at odds with both the defence and foreign ministries is a luxury the Jewish state might have been able to afford as long as President Donald Trump was in the White House, and the US-Israel relationship was one rooted in close co-operation and a common vision about strategic issues. But with President-elect Joe Biden about to take office with a foreign-policy team committed to many of the Middle East policies of the Obama administration, Israel's margin for error is about to be reduced.

Even if that means that Israelis must suffer through the agony of a fourth election inside of two years, a divorce between unity government partners Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Benny Gantz has become a necessity.

After having held three inconclusive elections inside of a year, yet another trip to the ballot box would seem to be

the last thing the Jewish state needs. In April and September of 2019, and then again in March of this year, Israelis headed to the polls to elect a Knesset. Each time resulted in a stalemate with neither Netanyahu nor his chief rival – Blue and White Party leader Gantz – able to muster a majority.

The standoff finally ended in April of this year, when Gantz split his party by joining a unity government with Netanyahu. Doing so made no political sense for him since the only point of Blue and White was to topple the prime minister rather than to enact different policies. But realising the futility of the continued stalemate and responding patriotically to the crisis that the coronavirus pandemic presented to the nation, he decided that throwing in with



Tough road: Benny Gantz deserves credit for his patriotic decision to join up with nemesis Binyamin Netanyahu in the face of the coronavirus crisis

his nemesis was the right thing to do.

Many in his own party denounced him as a traitor and a fool. The terms of the deal he cut with Netanyahu not only brought the rump of Blue and White who stuck with him an outsized share of government posts, it also offered him a pathway to the prime ministership since it called for the two to switch jobs in 18 months. Yet few at the time thought Netanyahu would stick to that deal, and nothing that has happened in the eight months since then has changed anyone's mind about that.

Netanyahu is a political mastermind, and his ability to outmanoeuvre and undermine Gantz – a former chief of staff of the Israeli Defence Forces who is still a novice in his new profession – at every turn has made the conduct of the country's government a dismal spectacle. Though the tall, handsome and personable Gantz seems like a political consultant's dream candidate, his inability to keep up with Netanyahu has made the power struggle within the cabinet something of a mismatch. And with the Prime Minister personally managing the country's key responsibilities – the relationship with Trump and Israel's new Gulf state allies, as well as its defence strategy – Gantz's frustration at being boxed out by the Prime Minister at every turn has been painfully obvious to all.

As long as Washington was prepared to follow Netanyahu's lead, and largely ignore Gantz and his Blue and White

colleague Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, this farce had no impact on anything other than the two ex-generals' egos.

But with US foreign policy about to be put in the hands of Obama administration alumni, Israel's divided Cabinet is about to be transformed from a cruel comedy at Gantz's expense into a distinct political liability for the country.

A Biden administration will not be content, as Trump's was, to let communications between the two governments be managed through the friendly conduit of Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer, who reports directly to Netanyahu. Biden and Secretary of State-designate Antony Blinken may not be about to seek the same "daylight" that President Obama tried to create between the two countries. But their differences with the Israeli consensus on the impossibility of peace with the Palestinians and the need to confront, rather than appease, Iran are bound to create trouble.

The stakes involved in properly managing relations with Biden and avoiding the kinds of conflict that happened under Obama are too high for Israel to continue with a dysfunctional coalition.

Holding an election during a pandemic, or even one held while the arrival of a vaccine may be starting the process of ending the crisis, won't be easy.

No matter what choice Israelis make, they'll be better off with a government not at war with itself. Whether it is led by Netanyahu or someone else, the end of the Trump era in Washington should also mean the end of Israel's latest unhappy experiment in "unity".

AIR

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ISRAEL, BIDEN AND IRAN

by Jacob Nagel

Following President-elect Joe Biden's election victory, the United States is widely expected to re-enter negotiations with Iran. In advance of the election, some advisers to Biden circulated a white paper exploring a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the flawed 2015 nuclear deal.

One controversial option was a return to the interim 2013 deal, the Joint Plan of Action, which yielded Iran hundreds of millions of dollars as a show of good faith. Israel is understandably concerned by the possibility of going back to a process that yielded sanctions relief and other

concessions far too beneficial for Iran, as far as Israelis were concerned.

Faced with this challenge, Israel must demonstrate internal unity. This begins with discipline in speaking with the press. Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu can enforce this with a directive for officials speaking on or off the record, with reporters or in official meetings.

Such a directive should have the support of Netanyahu's coalition partners, including Defence Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, and be enforced across the rest of the Israeli bureaucracy dealing with the Iran file. This was the way the Israeli expert team worked with the six world powers involved in negotiating the JCPOA. The Israeli team, under clear instructions, explained to the negotiators their concerns while trying to mitigate the JCPOA's mistakes and improve the flawed deal on the margins.

Such a unified message should also be crafted with Israel's new peace partners in the Middle East. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain harbour similar concerns about Iran. Israel must coordinate closely with them and perhaps other governments, such as the Saudis, to speak with one voice. The concerns of America's regional partners were ignored last time. They should not be ignored again.

In voicing their concerns, Israel and its new friends must be wary of joining forces with US Republicans who are also opposed to making concessions to Iran. Indeed, this cannot appear to be a partisan issue. At the same time, it is not a bad idea to convey that the next presidential election in 2024 could yield a different policy, making any business with Iran very risky.

Israel and its partners must also convey that Iran's malign activity has not ceased. Since 2018, when the United States withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal, the regime has engaged in nuclear blackmail, enriching more uranium, installing new and advanced centrifuges in underground facilities, and taking other dangerous steps in the nuclear arena.

In fact, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) recently issued an unusually harsh report on Teheran's violations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran's



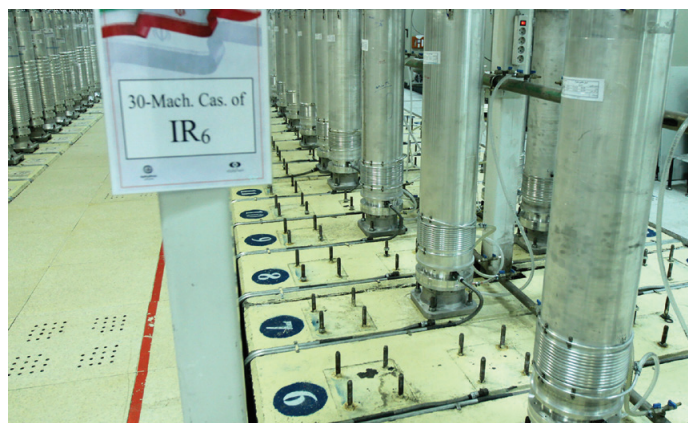
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By deploying advanced centrifuges like these IR-6s, in violation of the JCPOA nuclear deal, Iran is gaining the ability to “sneak out” to a nuclear weapon

nuclear safeguards agreement, and the 2015 nuclear deal. That report is backed by documents the Mossad captured from Iran’s atomic archive, not to mention site visits in Iran by the nuclear watchdog. Recent IAEA visits yielded new and interesting findings about Iranian violations.

Unfortunately, the international community has failed to take decisive action. The Iranians wisely waited for the US election in the hope that they might be able to outlast current pressure. Israel and its partners should convey to the incoming administration that this cannot be rewarded.

Biden wants a new agreement. That in itself is not the problem – Israel wants one too. The devil is in the details. Israel must press for the next deal to be a good one that does not enable Iran to continue its nuclear activity. A new agreement must not be more of the same with minor improvements. The goal must be to establish new, clear terms to address the absurdity of Iran’s “civilian nuclear program” in underground facilities. Moreover, a new agreement should include all three elements of Iran’s illicit nuclear program: fissile materials, weaponisation, and means of delivery.

Weaponisation is very difficult to define and monitor. This was made clear from the atomic archive. Therefore, the next deal must require the regime to come clean about all previous activities. No deal can be concluded without Teheran’s admission of previous violations and declaration of its past inventory.

The means of delivery, namely ballistic missiles, requires more than United Nations resolutions that are subject to interpretation. The next deal should unequivocally halt the development of missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons.

Fissile materials (uranium and plutonium), along with all the technology necessary to produce them, should be completely banned and monitored by the IAEA. There must be no room for negotiation on this.

The US and its allies must also stop hyper-focusing on “breakout time.” This is an outdated concept. Iran will not “break out” but will rather “sneak out” to a bomb via ad-

vanced centrifuges, increased research and development, and underground or clandestine facilities. Any future agreement cannot allow underground facilities, open possible military dimensions questions, or allow weaponisation groups such as the now-sanctioned organisation known by its Farsi acronym, SPND.

Finally, the JCPOA included dangerous “sunset” clauses. These are terms of the deal that expire over the course of a decade or so. If sunset clauses are included in a new deal, they should be set to expire many decades from now. Iran must not be led to believe that it has a patient pathway to nuclear weapons.

Some might say these terms would never be accepted by Teheran. This is the wrong mindset for negotiations. The next administration should bring its demands and be in no rush to negotiate. After all, America has many other challenges in the wake of the pandemic and global tensions with China, Russia, and North Korea. If Iran’s regime wants sanctions relief and an end to the current Administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign, it should be ready to compromise at the negotiating table. The new administration must categorically reject the assertion by Iran’s leaders that the US should atone for President Trump’s Iran policy.

Some Biden advisers may believe that sanctions relief will help achieve an agreement and help avert conflict. This, too, is wrong. Sanctions represent leverage that will help America reach the right agreement and prevent conflict. Without sanctions and a credible military threat, the Islamic Republic will not come to the table or negotiate meaningful changes to the last deal.

Sanctions can also help push the regime for other changes in behaviour. But Israel and its partners must differentiate between the nuclear program and other concerns. Indeed, it would be a mistake to bind Iran’s terror support or malign actions in Syria and Lebanon to the nuclear negotiations. After solving the nuclear problem, all others can be tackled. Merging the two can lead to dangerous nuclear concessions.

Important decisions await the incoming administration. It must move deliberately and wisely, learning from mistakes of the past. Israel can help, particularly if it speaks in one voice and coordinates carefully with other partners seeking to prevent a return to the flawed agreement of 2015.

AIR

Brigadier General (Res.) Jacob Nagel is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defence of Democracies (FDD) and a visiting professor at the Technion Aerospace Engineering Faculty. He previously served as Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s acting national security adviser and head of Israel’s National Security Council. This article originally appeared in the Washington Examiner. © FDD (www.fdd.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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A Peace Resonant with History

The Israel-Morocco normalisation deal

by Raphael Ahren

The surprise announcement on Dec. 9 about Morocco agreeing to establish diplomatic relations with Israel was not a Chanukah miracle, as many Israeli politicians gushed when they lit their holiday candles, though the timing was indeed brightly appropriate. Rather, it had been a long time coming, as the North African kingdom has deep cultural and religious ties with the Jewish state, and had long been expected to join the current wave of Arab countries normalising ties with Israel.

As opposed to Egypt and Jordan, which signed peace treaties with Israel decades ago, and in contrast to the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan, three Arab nations that normalised relations with Israel this year, Morocco and Israel have a profound and ancient Jewish connection, and the Moroccan Jewish community, though small, still thrives today.

Moroccan Jewry's origins date back 2,000 years, to the destruction of the Second Temple and exile. In the modern era, the community reached a high of some 250,000 in the early 1940s, when Sultan Mohammed V resisted Nazi pressure for their deportation. Numbers dwindled with the establishment of Israel, and today only some 2,000-3,000 Jews remain, but hundreds of thousands of Israelis are proud of their Moroccan origins. US President Donald Trump's senior envoy Jared Kushner on Dec. 10 put that number at "over a million."

The *mimouna* party, which the community traditionally celebrates right after Passover ends, has become a fixture on the Israeli cultural calendar, with countless people barbecuing in parks and politicians rushing to as many *mimouna* celebrations as possible, eating *mufletot* and other Jewish-Moroccan delicacies.

While Israeli tourists have begun discovering the Gulf only very recently, they have been flocking to Rabat, Mar-

rakech, Casablanca, Tangiers and Fez via third countries for many years. Once the two countries establish diplomatic relations and open direct air-links, that number can be expected to increase dramatically.

In 1995, following the 1993 Oslo Accords, Morocco and Israel opened mutual "liaison offices," but they were closed a few years later after the Second Intifada broke out in 2000.

Both Moroccan King Mohammed VI and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu cited the long and deep ties binding Morocco and Israel in their statements on the historic agreement.

"Everybody knows the tremendous friendship shown by the kings of Morocco and the people of Morocco to the

Jewish community there. And hundreds of thousands of these Moroccan Jews came to Israel, and they form a human bridge between our two countries and our two peoples, of sympathy, respect, of fondness and love," Netanyahu said during a Chanukah ceremony at the Western Wall.

"Morocco has played a historic role in bringing the peoples of the region together and supporting security and stability in the

Middle East... [there are] special ties that bind the Jewish community of Moroccan origin, including those in Israel, to the person of His Majesty the King," a statement from Morocco's royal court said.

Still, the King did not suddenly decide that his love for the Jewish people required him to recognise the State of Israel; it was rather a US-brokered deal that pushed him to take the plunge.

Trump announced, in a tweet followed by an official proclamation, that Washington as of now recognises Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory and "reaffirms its support for Morocco's serious, credible, and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara territory."

The UAE got an Israeli commitment to halt plans for a unilateral West Bank annexation and it appears to have secured the F-35 fighter jets it long coveted. Sudan got taken off the US terror list and received promises of massive aid. And Morocco got a first, vital Western country to formally recognise its claim over the contested territory claimed by the Algeria-backed Polisario group, which seeks to establish an independent state there.



Morocco's King Mohammed VI: He did not just suddenly decide to normalise relations, but saw an opportunity

Some countries, like France and a few members of the Arab League, have long supported Rabat's claim to Western Sahara, but so far no country has formally recognised the kingdom's sovereignty over the entire area. (The Emiratis in October opened a consulate-general accredited to Morocco in the Western Sahara city of Laayoune, which some analysts consider as de-facto recognition.)

Evidently, King Mohammed reasoned that incoming US President-elect Joe Biden would be unlikely to make the move, so he took advantage of Trump's last 40 days in office.

Netanyahu on Dec. 9 predicted a "very warm peace" with Morocco, but time will tell if the kingdom's 35 million citizens — virtually all Muslim Arabs — will welcome the deal as warmly as Emiratis and Bahrainis have.

According to a recent poll, only 16 percent of Moroccans have a favourable view of Israel, while a whopping 70% view Israel unfavorably. In contrast, three-quarters of respondents expressed positive sentiments toward the Palestinians.

The survey, conducted by Jerusalem-based pollster Mitchell Barak on behalf of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, also found that only 17% of Moroccans support Israel's Abraham Accords with the UAE and Bahrain, while two-thirds oppose them. Indeed, only 26% believe that Israel has a right to exist, according to the poll.

In a call to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on Dec. 9, King Mohammed reiterated his staunch support for a two-state solution, stressing that his position was "unshakably supportive of the Palestinian cause."

The monarch was reportedly expected to participate in a phone call with Netanyahu and Trump soon after that, but it's noteworthy that he felt it necessary to speak to the Palestinian leader first.

In the call with Abbas, the King also noted his "distinguished relations with the Jewish community of Moroccan origin, including hundreds of thousands of Moroccan Jews in Israel," according to a readout provided by the royal court.

Many of those Israelis may already be planning their

next vacation, hoping to see where their parents and grandparents once lived.

AIR

Raphael Ahren is the diplomatic correspondent at the Times of Israel. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FAKHRIZADEH ASSASSINATION

by Ardavan Khoshnood

On Friday, Nov. 27, 2020, at 18:17 Iranian local time, the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) of the Islamic Republic of Iran issued a press release stating that Mohsen Fakhrizadeh had been assassinated. It confirmed that a car containing Fakhrizadeh had been attacked and that he was fatally injured during a shootout that broke out between his attackers and his security detail.

Information on Fakhrizadeh is highly limited. His full name was Mohsen Fakhrizadeh Mahabadi, and he was born in 1957 or 1958 in the religious city of Qom. He was married and had three sons. He was a brigadier general of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and a professor of nuclear engineering. He was linked with Imam Hossein University, which is run by the IRGC.

Fakhrizadeh is believed to have been the architect of the Islamic regime's nuclear program, and his alias in governmental communications is assumed to have been Dr. Hassan Mohseni. He worked as a senior scientist at the MODAFL and previously headed the Ministry's Physics Research Centre (PRC). Because of his vital role in Iran's nuclear program, he was included in *Foreign Policy's* 2013 list of the world's 500 most powerful individuals. Because



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of Iran's refusal to allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to interview Fakhrizadeh with respect to his time as head of the PRC, the UN Security Council sanctioned him in Resolution 1747 (March 2007).

At the time of his killing, Fakhrizadeh was head of the Organisation of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND). The SPND, based in Teheran, is supervised by the MODAFL and is focused on nuclear weapons research.

Coincidentally, Fakhrizadeh's assassination took place on the same day that the trial of an Iranian diplomat, As-sadollah Assadi, began in Belgium. Assadi stands accused of plotting to bomb an Iranian opposition rally in 2018.

Fakhrizadeh was assassinated at approximately 14:00

local time in the city of Absard, 70km from Teheran. According to the *Fars News Agency*, a van near Fakhrizadeh's car exploded simultaneously with a salvo of gunfire from a team of assassins. Iranian Minister of Defence Brig. Gen. Amir Hatami said in an interview that it was the explosion of the van that caused Fakhrizadeh's fatal injuries. He said Fakhrizadeh was attacked while "traveling near Teheran today" without disclosing exactly where he was going.

Fakhrizadeh's killing is believed to be the fifth assassination of a scientist connected to the Iranian nuclear program. The full list is as follows: Majid Shahriari (Nov. 29, 2010); Dariush Rezaeinejad (July 23, 2011); Masoud Alimohammadi (Jan. 12, 2012); Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan (Jan. 11, 2012); and Fakhrizadeh (Nov. 27, 2020).

There is no doubt that these assassinations, other attacks on the Iranian nuclear program, the killing of IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, and the recent slaying of al-Qaeda's number two, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, in Teheran in August, collectively constitute a grave counterintelligence failure on Iran's part.

The elimination of Fakhrizadeh was highly professional and well-planned. The assassins had vital knowledge of both Fakhrizadeh's security detail and his route. How could this be?

There are three possible scenarios, and they are not mutually exclusive.

First, it could be that Iran's counterintelligence organisations are weak, unstructured, and highly amateurish, and are not able to take even the most basic precautions to secure their intelligence and protect important officials.

Second, the regime's technical knowledge might be

so poor as to leave it vulnerable to its opponents and/or foreign powers that are able to hack important databases and networks and thereby map sensitive individuals and locations.

And third, the country's intelligence community could be compromised. If this is the case, it means individuals inside Iran's intelligence organisations are disclosing information directly to opponents of the Islamic regime.

IRANIAN REACTIONS TO THE ASSASSINATION

Soon after Fakhrizadeh's killing, Iranian officials blamed the "Zionists" and, as is customary, threatened the enemies of the Islamic Republic.

Maj. Gen. Muhammad Bagheri, the armed forces Chief of Staff, stated that "severe revenge awaits the perpetrators of the assassination of martyr Fakhrizadeh."

IRGC Commander-in-Chief Maj. Gen. Hassan Salami said, "the perpetrators will be severely punished," while Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi wrote in a message that everything possible will be done to punish the offenders.

Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Muhammad Bagher Ghali-baf, himself an IRGC commander, declared, "Today, the way of appeasement is closed" and called for revenge.

Minister of Intelligence Mahmoud Alavi assured the Iranian

people in a press release that the Ministry "will avenge the blood of the dear martyr from the perpetrators."

The day after the killing, Brig. Gen. Esmail Gha'ani, Commander of the IRGC Quds Force, said in a written statement that he sympathised with Fakhrizadeh's family and promised to "ally with all the forces defending the Islamic homeland in avenging the blood of this dear martyr and all the martyrs of the terrorists and their masters."

The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a statement demanding that those who conducted and masterminded the killing must be "severely punished."

Iranian newspapers published various reactions. Hard-line and government-linked newspapers like *Resalat* and *Iran*, as well as centrist and pro-reform papers like *Etemad*, *Ettelaat*, *Hamshahri* and *Shargh*, all used quite neutral headlines on their front pages. Three other papers used more confrontational headlines.

The IRGC-linked *Vatan-e Emrooz* (Homeland Today) printed on its front page: "They Will Strike If We Don't".



The alleged site of the assassination (top); Fakhrizadeh's state funeral (bottom)

The conservative *Kayhan* printed Khamenei's statement on its front page calling for the severe punishment of those involved in the assassination.

The English-language *Tehran Times* had a longer headline on its front page stating that Israeli footprints with the backing of the "incoming US" government could be seen.

HOW WILL THE ISLAMIC REGIME RESPOND?

The elimination of Fakhrizadeh is a massive setback and an embarrassment for the Islamic Republic. As it has thus far failed to avenge the killing of Soleimani in more than a token way, there will now be renewed demands for retaliation. What, then, are the regime's options?

Doing nothing is not an option, and the regime will have to act both at home and abroad. Domestically, the coming days – maybe weeks – could see operatives from the Ministry of Intelligence arresting one or more individuals on suspicion of links to the killing. In accordance with the regime's modus operandi, these people will be paraded on TV, admit to working for Israeli intelligence, and then be executed.

As far as options abroad are concerned, the regime has two choices: save face or go to war. Scenario one is the more likely. However, in order to show that it has done something, the regime might conduct a limited operation in which missiles or mortar shells are fired at Israel by Iranian proxies. In this way, Teheran will show that it has retaliated and will thus save face. Behind the scenes, Iran will of course continue its malign activities against Israel and other countries deemed to be enemies of the Islamic Republic.

Scenario two would entail a serious Iranian attack along the lines of coordinated raids on Israeli embassies, the firing by Hezbollah of more powerful rockets at Israel, attacks on US forces in the region, or the launching of missiles at the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

These more extreme scenarios are highly unlikely, as they would put Teheran on the brink of all-out war—a result the regime does not want at present. While Iran probably will respond to the killing at some point in a larger manner (as in the case of the attack on the Ayn Assad Airbase in Baghdad, which was a response to Soleimani's killing), this will most likely take place after Joe Biden has been sworn in as president of the US. Until then, Teheran may well show restraint.

There are already indications that Iran will not act too rashly. On the day of the killing, Brig. Gen. Hossein Dehghan, a prominent IRGC commander, presidential candidate for the 2021 elections, and current military aide to the Supreme Leader, tweeted: "In the last days of their gambling ally's political life, the Zionists seek to intensify and increase pressure on Iran to wage a full-blown war." After writing an Iranian proverb suggesting that patience

is important and one should not rush into things, Dehghan concluded, "We will descend like lightning on the killers of this oppressed martyr and we will make them regret their actions!"

The day after the assassination, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, in a meeting at the National Headquarters for Coronavirus Disease Management, mentioned the assassination of Fakhrizadeh and stated that "the relevant authorities will respond to this crime in a timely and appropriate manner."

AIR

Dr. Ardavan Khoshnood, is a non-resident associate at the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies at Bar Ilan University (BESA centre), and a criminologist and political scientist with a degree in intelligence analysis. He is also an Associate Professor of Emergency Medicine at Lund University in Sweden. © BESA centre, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

YET MORE EXTREMIST VOICES IN AUSTRALIA EXPOSED

by Ran Porat

Continuing my ongoing coverage of this topic, below are yet more examples from the past few weeks of extremist, antisemitic and hateful comments in the Arabic language media in Australia, and amongst local Australian Muslim voices here. These toxic messages include both vehement anti-Israel declarations and calls for violence in light of the tension between the French leadership and extremist Islamists following recent Islamist terror attacks in that country.

AUSTRALIAN MUSLIM TIMES (AMUST)

Responding to the killing of Iran's chief nuclear weapons program scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on Nov. 27, the *Australian Muslim Times* (AMUST) December editorial claimed, "Israel gets away with murder behind the cloak of antisemitism." The paper's editor, Zia Ahmad, argued that "While the notorious Israeli secret service Mossad led by its director for the last five years, Yossi Cohen is stealthily wheeling and dealing with Arab autocrats coercing then (sic) into normalising relations with Israel, it keeps assassinating civilians all over the world that it considers a threat to the Jewish state."

In an argument reminiscent of antisemitic tropes about the wealth and power of Jews, Ahmed concludes that "Treatment of Israel, as the holy cow who can not (sic) be touched in spite of all its excesses and its secret service

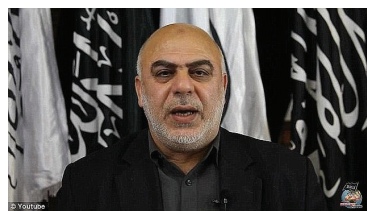
that can get away with murder, by the rich and powerful supporters of Israel in Western capitals is immoral, unjust and illegal and must be challenged.”

The December *AMUST* edition also featured an article analysing the results of the US presidential elections, by Dr Aslam Abdullah, stating that “The US does not exist to patronise dictators, and human rights violators in India, Israel, Saudi Arabia, or any part of the world. The primary obligation of a US Administration is to serve Americans and not the state of Israel or the multinational corporations.”

Toeing the same line, the editors of *AMUST* chose to publish in the paper’s readers’ comments section a comment by “Burhan”, labelling both US vice president-elect Kamala Harris and former US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley – “Slave[s] of America and Israel.”

HIZB UT-TAHRIR AUSTRALIA

Isma’il al-Wahwah (also known as “Abu Anas”), leader of the Australian branch of the pan-Islamic Hizb Ut-Tahrir (HuT) movement, has often made headlines with his hateful rhetoric, peddling of conspiracy theories and antisemitic views, including Holocaust denial and calls for the destruction of Israel. Recently, he also blamed Israel



Australian Hizb Ut-Tahrir leader
Isma’il al-Wahwah

for the Beirut blast and labelled the Jewish state a “cancer”.

In October, al-Wahwah posted on social media his video, “A Message to the Officers and Armies!” In it, he urges soldiers in Arab states to

answer the call to serve the Islamic nation, “Otherwise, being underground is a million times better for you than to be on Earth’s surface. By Allah, you do not deserve the air that you breathe.”

Al-Wahwah calls on these Muslim soldiers to free Al-Aqsa (Jerusalem). “O Quds ... It’s crying with tears of blood. Palestine is crying tears of blood!” If they fail to “bring the battle to a decisive end and clear this dark-

ness from the Ummah”, warns Al-Wahwah, “by Allah you [Muslim soldiers] do not deserve to be humans!” Glorifying death, he promises Muslims serving in military roles, “Jannah [heaven] awaits you! The glory of Islam awaits you! Saving the Ummah awaits you! Liberating Al-Aqsa awaits you!”

During a protest in Sydney against French President Emmanuel Macron on Nov. 7, leading HuT Australia preacher, Wassim Doureihi, conspiratorially stated that the terror attack in Vienna on Nov. 2 by an Islamic State sympathiser was not what it seemed. Doureihi claimed that the person accused of the attack was “miraculously” released from prison by the Austrian authorities, who then allowed him to purchase weapons and to freely enter Austria from abroad.

Hinting that the Austrian Government, and other governments, are behind both this attack and most other Islamist terror attacks, Doureihi proclaimed, “[T]his is a story that we hear in this country and in so many other countries, that people here in Australia who are monitored more than anyone in this country miraculously appear in places and at times that are convenient only to the state, only to the government.”

SHEIKH YOUSSEF NABHA

Shi’ite preacher Sheikh Youssef Nabha of the Arrahman Mosque in Sydney is a supporter of the Iranian regime and a fervent anti-Zionist. Last year he blamed the bushfires in Australia on the close relations between Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Zionists in Australia. Despite this outlandish claim, he was recently awarded a special honorary certificate from NSW Labor MP Shaoquett Moselmane.

Nabha used his weekly Friday sermon on Oct. 23 to attack Macron, stating that “What the French President and his hateful media did [condemning extremist Islamists] is no less in criminality than the criminal act” of the Jihadi terror attack by Muslim fanatics against people outside a church in Nice (Oct. 29).

Nabha further argued that the West is in fact responsible for the terror attacks by Muslims, because of what he claimed was Western support for Islamic terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

“It is no secret that what the West is suffering [from] now is a result of their support of the Takfiri [infidel] movements that have distorted Islam and made both Muslims and Christians suffer from their crimes in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon... Muslims will not accept the West using the Takfiri criminals again to offend the messenger of humanity Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him) desecrate the sanctities of the Muslims and insult them,” he concluded.

WISAM HADAD

According to the US-based Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Sydney-based Wisam Hadad is

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“a central figure in the radical Salafi and jihadi community in Australia and among English-speaking jihadi followers on social media.”

His video titled, “The Ultimate Response On The Insults Of Our Prophet”, was posted on his social media accounts and accumulated close to 1,500 views on the Salafi Central YouTube channel. It starts with a short excerpt from a French ISIS song called “Blood for Blood”.

As expected, Hadad attacks President Macron for his condemnation of extremist Islam, arguing that freedom of speech in the West is hypocritical because it allows people to “insult the Messenger of Allah and the Muslims” on the one hand, while forbidding others, for example, to defame the Anzac forces in Australia. He also notes that “in some countries of the world, including this one [Australia] it is illegal to speak about the Jews that were killed in the Holocaust, killed by Hitler. It is punishable in these Western countries to speak against them in a bad way or in a bad term” and that could lead to jail. “So you can see that this freedom of speech they [the West] talk about is not that free,” he claimed.

Hadad calls on Muslims to react to attacks on the prophet, which are punishable by death both for Muslims and non-Muslims: “My dear brothers, we should know that we should react in whatever way [we can] [...] A person who insults [the prophet] – Muslim or not – is to be put to the sword... And we do not and we should not hide away from this.”

AIR

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

LESSONS THAT MUST NOT BE FORGOTTEN

by Sharyn Mittelman

Seventy-five years after the Holocaust ended, its memory is tragically already fading from public awareness. As the last survivors pass away, it has become critical to preserve their testimonies and teach their stories to future generations, especially as antisemitism and Holocaust denial become increasingly widespread online.

Survey after survey has revealed shocking results. In September 2020, a survey commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany found

that two thirds of young Americans do not know that six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and one in 10 adults under the age of 40 does not believe the genocide happened. The survey involved interviewing 10,000 people between the ages of 18 and 39 – 200 from each US state. Meanwhile, a 2019 poll in the UK found that one in 20 British adults does not believe the Holocaust happened, and 8% said that the scale of that genocide has been exaggerated.

Thankfully, there are a number of initiatives now being undertaken in Australia to ensure that children are being taught about the Holocaust and its universal lessons. Following disturbing reports of antisemitic incidents at public schools in Victoria last year, in February the Victorian Government announced various programs to counter antisemitism and also stated that education on the Holocaust would be mandatory for Years 9 and 10. The Victorian Minister for Education James Merlino stated, “It is critical that each generation understands how hatred and discrimination led to something as horrific as the Holocaust in order to fight intolerance and prejudice in our own communities.”

While Holocaust education on its own is not sufficient to stop antisemitism, it can help in countering religious, racial and political sources of anti-Jewish hatred, and is of course essential to learn about in and of itself.

Currently Victoria and NSW are the only states in Australia to make education on the Holocaust compulsory, despite it being included in the Australian curriculum which all states and territories are expected to use as a guide.

In February, Minister Merlino announced that the Victorian Government would work with Gandel Philanthropy and the Jewish Holocaust Centre to review and develop resources for the Victorian curriculum based on adaptations of existing teaching resources and lesson plans produced by the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Memorial Centre in Jerusalem.

The Victorian Government appears to have called on Gandel Philanthropy for assistance because of its impressive track record in the area. Over the past 11 years, the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program for Australian Educators (“the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program”) has trained around 350 Australian teachers to both teach about the Holocaust and explore its universal implications using an inter-disciplinary and age appropriate approach.

“Over the past ... years, the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program for Australian Educators (‘the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program’) has trained around 350 Australian teachers to both teach about the Holocaust and explore its universal implications”

GANDEL HOLOCAUST STUDIES PROGRAM

Recently, Philanthropy Australia conferred its Bolder Philanthropy Award on Gandel Philanthropy and the Australian Foundation for Yad Vashem in recognition of the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program. This award category acknowledges “philanthropic investment that is used as ‘social risk capital’ to provide early stage support for an initiative, helping to scale or evolve it to deliver sustained positive change.”

Over the years, the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program has expanded from being a learning segment at Yad Vashem into a year-long professional development program for teachers across Australia. It includes pre-departure online learning elements and the delivery of a Holocaust educational project by teachers in their schools upon return. Key partners in the program include the Australian Foundation for Yad Vashem, the Raoul Wallenberg Unit of B’nai B’rith Victoria, the Jewish Holocaust Centre, Sydney Jewish Museum, Courage to Care Victoria, and B’nai B’rith NSW.

Natalie Baker, who completed the program in 2012, said of it, “The Gandel Program is such an effective program because it humanises the Holocaust in classrooms. It provides current best practice pedagogy and resources for teaching the personal narratives of survivors, and gives guidance on how to approach challenging content such as Holocaust Denial and Antisemitism. It gives teachers access to world-class educators, and that access doesn’t start or finish with the study tour to Yad Vashem.”

She added, “There is now a network of like-minded teachers across Australia who are a pretty connected community, who have a chance to share ideas and resources relevant to Australian educational needs, and this is invaluable as we try and build a Holocaust-aware society.”

Duane Galle is a graduate of the program from 2013, and is currently a teacher at Banora Point High School in NSW. Since returning from the program he has developed a number of educational resources for teaching about the Holocaust. He told *AIR*: “Since completing the program I’ve become an advocate for Holocaust education. I’ve delivered professional development to teachers at national and state History Teachers’ Association conferences, run webinars for teachers throughout NSW, and developed teaching programs and resources that are now used by well over 100 teachers throughout NSW and Australia.”

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT REVIEW

A Steering Committee and Working Group for the Victorian Government’s review of curriculum and resources regarding education on the Holocaust was established in



Melbourne’s Jewish Holocaust Centre

May. The Working Group was comprised of representatives from the Department of Education and Training, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority and several Jewish community organisations including: the Jewish Holocaust Centre; Jewish Museum Australia; Courage to Care; the Jewish Community Council of Victoria; the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (represented by Sue Hampel OAM); Yad Vashem (represented by Richelle Budd Caplan); Monash University’s Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation; the United Jewish Education Board; and five graduates from the Gandel Holocaust Studies Program.

Many of the Working Groups’ recommendations have been adopted by the Victorian Government, and on Dec. 9, the Victorian Minister for Education, James Merlino, announced that new teaching and learning resources will be ready for schools in 2021 to teach the Holocaust and address antisemitism. The announcement stated: “This includes lesson sequences, a bibliography of Holocaust-related texts and a comprehensive suite of historical sources that teachers can draw on to enhance existing or develop new Holocaust education programs. There will be more than 280 resources available such as diary extracts, documents, interactive online exhibitions, virtual tours, poems, newspaper articles, videos and images.”

It added, “New school policy and teaching guidelines have also been developed that includes a requirement for schools to teach the Holocaust in secondary schools in Year 9 or 10.”

The Victorian Government also announced \$50,000 in funding for the Jewish Holocaust Centre to develop a professional learning program for teachers to help them develop learning programs in Victorian secondary schools, as well as increased funding to Courage to Care.

In addition, the Victorian Government has established a dedicated hotline to report racism intended for use by schools, students and parents, and created a new student

advisory group to make recommendations on addressing antisemitism and ensuring Victorian schools are inclusive communities.

Commenting on the experience of working with the Victorian Government to improve education on the Holocaust, the Jewish Holocaust Centre's Director of Education Lisa Phillips told *AIR*: "It was a privilege to co-chair the working group with the Department of Education... Over three months, 13 amazing individuals representing diverse organisations with differing priorities, working under COVID conditions, united in the goal of the project and the passion for excellent Holocaust education."

Regarding teacher training, she added, "Our 10 step professional development plan has been created to give schools and teachers confidence in using the guidance material and resources now available on FUSE [a learning resources database]. It is designed to support schools if they have not implemented Holocaust studies into the curriculum or for those teachers and schools who would like assistance in ensuring they are teaching this difficult topic in a meaningful and engaging way. Our trial will begin in 2021."

Natalie Baker also participated in the Working Group to help develop resources for the teaching of content related to the Victorian History Curriculum. Discussing the experience, she said, "It was invaluable professional development, really honing in what we considered to be essential Holocaust education for Victorian students. Collectively, we used our knowledge bank to find the best, most appropriate resources that would be most accessible for student needs. It was an incredible collaborative experience, something that was an extraordinary process to be a part."

Similarly, Gandel Philanthropy's CEO Vedran Drakulic praised the Victorian Government's work with Jewish community organisations, telling *AIR*: "It has been a fantastic collaborative success, beyond our expectations. I congratulate the Department for doing it and taking up recommendations, but also for being very collaborative to ensure they had the best materials they could get." He added, "But it's not the end of the journey, other state governments can do the same thing, capitalise on it, undertake a similar process themselves. First and foremost, they should set the policy framework which makes education on the Holocaust mandatory in years 9 and 10, because we feel that story is important to be told, not as an optional one but as a compulsory one."

As a teacher in NSW, Galle argues that NSW could improve how it teaches about the Holocaust, "The fact that NSW has mandated Holocaust education for all Year 10 students since 2012 is fantastic. However, it is often covered in a very superficial manner and generally by teachers with no specific training in Holocaust education. The Year 10 curriculum also allows schools to develop their own school-based units, and many are now delivering Holo-

caust units of upwards of 10 hours. I think this is excellent, and would like to see the NSW Education system develop exemplar units of work and teaching resources. At this stage this is being done by the Sydney Jewish Museum, but a more coordinated 'top down' approach would help get in-depth Holocaust education into more schools. I also think there is value in providing opportunities for the Holocaust being taught in non-history settings (such as English and art), which is an area that both the Gandel Program and the education unit of Yad Vashem have been working towards."

As the memory of the Holocaust fades, not simply education on the Holocaust, but quality education on the Holocaust and quality professional development for teachers, become critical.

The Gandel Holocaust Studies Program has certainly played a significant role in achieving this goal, and over the years its alumni have taught thousands of students across Australia.

The Jewish Arts Quarter in Melbourne, currently being developed with Victorian Government and local Council support, and which will include a remodelled Jewish Holocaust Centre and Jewish Museum of Australia/Gandel Centre of Judaica, will also play a vital part in teaching future generations. And while it may initially have been slow to act on reports of antisemitic incidents in public schools, the Victorian Government has done a commendable job by making education on the Holocaust mandatory and developing best practice resources to help teach about it. If implemented successfully, these could be used as a model for other jurisdictions in Australia and around the world.

AIR

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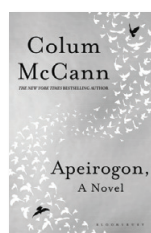
THE BIBLIO FILE

A Novel Approach

Apeiogon

Colum McCann, Bloomsbury, 2020. 224 pp. \$29.95

by Allon Lee



A*peiogon* (pronounced “a para-gon”) is a new novel from Irish author Colum McCann that delves into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The title refers to an object with an infinite number of sides and complexity.

While *Apeiogon* was longlisted for this year’s Booker Prize, the eventual winner was *Shuggie Bain*, by first-time novelist Douglas Stuart, and based on his own lived experience of poverty in Glasgow, Scotland.

By contrast, McCann’s novel has nothing to do with his own story.

Rather, it is the fictionalised account of two other real people – Rami Elhanan, an Israeli, and Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian.

Both men belong to an organisation called Combatants for Peace which is dedicated to promoting dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians by “speak[ing] out: against the Occupation, humiliation, murder, torture.”

Both men have experienced the unfathomable loss of their daughters.

Rami’s daughter, Smadar, 14, was murdered in a suicide bombing in 1997.

Aramin lost his ten-year-old daughter Abir in 2007 – when he was already a member of Combatants for Peace. A stray rubber bullet fired by an Israeli soldier during clashes in the

Palestinian town Anata in the West Bank hit Abir in the back of the head.

Aramin had an epiphany when he learnt about the Holocaust whilst in jail for carrying out a terror attack.

The percentage of the book that is actually factually true is unclear. A rider at the start says, “Bassam and Rami have allowed me to shape and reshape their words and worlds.”

An afterword says, “This is... a work of storytelling which, like all storytelling, weaves together elements of speculation, memory, fact, and imagination.”

McCann deals with the complexity and the trauma of the two fathers by keeping the reader off balance.

The narrative is not chronological. Time is elastic. Many of the chapters contain only a few sentences and many seemingly bear no connection to the main story.

Despite the confusion, *Apeiogon*’s message is not obscure – Israel’s occupation must end and the ongoing conflict is not inevitable but a choice.

McCann’s prescription is simple, courtesy of a bumper sticker that says, “It will not be over until we talk.”

Talking is the essence of recognising each other’s humanity. Yet some pro-Palestinian reviews have insisted there has been too much talking.

But at base, McCann is onto something.

Over the past 20 years, the Palestinian Authority has spent only a handful of months in direct peace talks with Israel. Hamas, none at all.

Despite this appeal to the two nations’ better angels, the book’s overriding theme seems to be ‘here are the Palestinians who are victims of Israelis and here are Israelis who agree that the Palestinians are their victims.’

McCann is eager to show Jews, Arabs, Christians and Muslims how they share a common cultural patrimony, writing in one chapter:

“[Eliezer] Ben-Yehuda, like Einstein, said that Jews and Arabs were mishpacha, a family, that they should share the land and live together. Many of the new Hebrew words that he helped coin were derived from Arabic roots. The two were, he said, sister

languages which, like the people, could live with and alongside one another.... The bombs went off near the conjunction of Ben Yehuda and Ben Hilel Streets, also known as Hillel Street, named after Hillel the Elder, author, in the first century before Christ,

of the ethic of reciprocity: That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.”

Yet questions of authenticity ripple throughout the text.

The provenance of the ancestors of the Israeli protagonists is noted. Most of them are from European nations.

The Palestinians, meanwhile, are repeatedly depicted as rooted in the land. Indeed, Aramin says he was born in a cave.

Elsewhere McCann writes:

“The Israeli hospital. At Ein

“The book’s overriding theme seems to be ‘here are the Palestinians who are victims of Israelis and here are Israelis who agree that the Palestinians are their victims’”

Kerem. An ancient Palestinian village, once... Where Smadar was born."

Archaeology shows Ein Kerem was a Jewish village during the time of the 1st and 2nd Temple – long predating the term "Palestinian". But that is not noted.

It is hard not to feel that McCann has missed a trick.



Irish author Colum McCann

Decades before Zionism got its act together, resistance, violence and anti-semitism were directed at the trickle of Jews who arrived in the Holy Land.

In 1881, the Sultan ordered that Jews could settle anywhere in the Ottoman Empire bar the Land of Israel. Maybe this was too trivial.

In his effort to inject some humility into the sides, the book is a veritable cornucopia of trivia seemingly unrelated to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but apparently intended to show how everything is interconnected.

Sometimes it is interesting, other times it is just trite, such as the chapter which states that:

"The M-16 used to shoot Abir was manufactured near the town of Samaria, North Carolina... Samaria also being home of the ancient capital of the Kingdom of Israel."

Many chapters have an ornithological focus, hinting that borders are artificial, and birds who enjoy more freedom than Palestinians show there is a world that exists beyond humanity's petty squabbles.

Extending the bird metaphor, McCann writes of the moment when Bassam's daughter Abir is hit by a rubber bullet "crushing the bones in her skull like those of a tiny ortolan."

The ortolan is a tiny endangered bird that is prepared by French chefs for a decadent and illegal meal, consumed in one gulp. Custom dictates the meal be eaten under a napkin to hide the shameful of the act.

Other recurrent and problematic themes include references to Christian martyrdom and intimations that Israel is exploiting the Holocaust to justify its actions.

Also contentious is the false equivalence made between the deaths of the girls Smadar and Abir.

Is the one murdered in a deliberately planned suicide bombing attack in Jerusalem's busy Ben Yehuda Street really the same as the other who was in the wrong place, at the wrong time and died after being shot by a rubber bullet that, in most instances and by design, will not kill?

Was the Israeli family, who are hardly typical, the best choice to focus on?

Of Smadar's mother, Nurit, McCann writes:

"The killing was not the fault of the bombers, she said. The bombers were victims too. Israel was culpable. The blood was on its hands. On Netanyahu's hands. On her own hands too, she said. She was not immune, everyone was complicit. Oppression. Tyranny. Megalomania. She was shown on national TV. Pundits said she was just in shock. It wasn't shock at all, she replied. The only shock was that the Palestinian bombings didn't happen more often. "Israel was inviting its own children to be slaughtered, she said. They might as well put Semtex in their schoolbags. It would never be at peace until it recognized this."

That would be Nurit Peled-Elhanan, whose father, Matti Peled, was once an Israeli general but became one of its most radical peaceniks.

Her brother, Miko Peled, is a well-known US-based anti-Israel activist who supports the Boycott, Divest-

ment and Sanctions movement against Israel.

McCann writes of Israelis accusing Matti Peled of being a traitor for meeting with PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, but also of his trenchant criticism of the Oslo Accords – damned by him in 1994 before they were even given a chance.

The Elhanan/Peled family are, of course, entitled to their own political opinions.

But do other less radical Israelis not crave an equitable solution?

Also contentious is McCann's decision to ignore Israeli PM Ehud Barak's offers in 2000/01 to create a Palestinian state, which, if Arafat had accepted instead of initiating the terror of the Second Intifada, might have averted Abir's death in 2007.

Yet, unlike Arafat's exhortation in 1974 to the UN – "Do not let the olive branch fall from my hand" – which appears in the book five times, Barak doesn't rate a mention even once.

And what of other consequential Israeli leaders?

Smadar is depicted disparaging Shimon Peres – the real father of Oslo, the historic breakthrough that led to both sides talking openly for the first time.

Some pro-Palestinian critics have objected to the book's title on the grounds that it implies there are two sides and the issue is complex – which they insist is not true.

There is nothing new in this view of the Jewish presence in Israel.

Amos Oz's pithy observation that the conflict "is a clash between right and right" has never enjoyed much traction on the Palestinian side.

Given the book is a catalogue of damning allegations against Israel, it is hard to understand their objections.

At a more basic level, it is an undeniable truth that Israeli offers to "talk" to end the occupation have been rejected over and over again.

Until that attitude changes, maybe, for now, there is nothing to talk about.



ESSAY

UNRWA's Moment of Truth

A chance for urgently needed reforms

by Ron Schleifer & Yehuda Brochin

Seventy years after its founding with an 18-month mandate to provide emergency aid to the “Palestine refugees,” the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has grown into a gargantuan US\$1.2 billion, 30,000-strong “phantom sovereignty” that has done more than any other international actor to perpetuate the “refugee problem” it was established to solve.

With the Trump Administration having slashed US donations to the agency, and the Gulf states and the Europeans demanding greater transparency regarding its finances and operations, UNRWA may at long last be approaching its moment of truth.

THE ORIGINAL MANDATE AND ITS DEMISE

The Lausanne Conference – convened by the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine, April 27–Sept. 12, 1949 – failed to produce an agreement on resettling the “Palestine refugees” in the host states as was the case with most global conflicts of the time. Consequently, the UN established the Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East “to examine economic conditions in the Near East and to make recommendations for action to meet the dislocation caused by the recent hostilities.”

In its report to the UN Secretary-

General on Nov. 16, 1949, the mission recommended that:

...steps be taken to establish a programme of useful public works for the employment of able-bodied refugees as a first measure towards their rehabilitation; and that, meanwhile, relief, restricted to those in need, be continued throughout the coming year. These recommendations are intended to abate the emergency by constructive action and to reduce the refugee problem to limits within which the Near Eastern Governments can reasonably be expected to assume any remaining responsibility.

The mission specifically stressed the need for an 18-month program of public works, “calculated to improve the productivity of the area,” which was to be carried out in cooperation with the Arab host states and to begin by April 1, 1950.

By way of implementing this recommendation, UNRWA was established on Dec. 8, 1949, beginning its operations on May 1, 1950.

However, of greater significance than UNRWA’s founding date was its intended termination date: Ration supplies to the refugees were to be suspended by Dec. 31, 1950, with the relief and works program ended by June 30, 1951 – by which time the

Arab host states would have assumed responsibility for the refugees in their territories.

This was not to be. By the mid-1950s, it had become clear that the works and resettlement program was stillborn. From that point, UNRWA was gradually transformed from a short-lived “relief and works” organisation into a permanent, quasi-governmental human development agency providing social welfare services of health care, shelter, and education – the very services that were supposed to be transferred to the host countries.

With the passage of time, UNRWA took on responsibilities traditionally assigned to state institutions in the fields of education, health, and social services. It began running its camps like a “phantom sovereignty,” to use the words of an Arab commentator.

It did so by utilising a system of camp services officers (CSOs) gleaned from among camp residents, who, more often than not, were known for their political activism and/or affiliation with the reigning terror groups (the Palestine Liberation Organisation [PLO], and later Hamas). CSOs’ de-facto authority extended, among other things, to cutting off rations for individuals who did not conform to UNRWA’s social and political agenda.

DRIFTING FROM THE MANDATE

By way of disengaging from its specific short-lived original mandate and consolidating its self-styled role as a human development agency, UNRWA adopted a string of measures that ran in stark contrast to international law and practice regarding refugees. These ranged from adopting a unique and highly inclusive definition of a refugee as “a needy person, who, as a result of the war in Palestine, has lost his home and his means of livelihood”; to registering hundreds of thousands of sham “refugees” on its initial rolls; to uniquely making the refugee status hereditary so as to

allow its indefinite transference to descendants of the original refugees; to keeping on its rolls refugees who became citizens of the Arab states in which they reside in flagrant violation of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which denies this status to any refugee who “has acquired a new nationality, and enjoys the protection of the country of his new nationality.”



UNRWA's headquarters in Gaza, where the UN body has always collaborated with the PLO and Hamas in running the refugee camps

Thus, for example, some 1.9 million Palestinians in Jordan are registered as “refugees” despite holding Jordanian citizenship and enjoying the same rights and duties as their indigenous compatriots (with “only” 15 percent of them residing in UNRWA camps).

As for the non-naturalised Palestinian “refugees” in the Arab states, as early as September 1965, an Arab League summit in the Moroccan city of Casablanca passed a resolution that conferred on them a string of rights and privileges, including the right to equal employment and freedom of international travel.

In Syria, where UNRWA claimed until recently some 450,000 registered beneficiaries, Palestinian “refugees” enjoy most of the rights enjoyed by the indigenous population. They are not confined to refugee camps and can reside anywhere in the country, with a 1956 law stipulating that they are to be treated as Syrians “in all matters pertaining to ... the rights of employment, work, commerce, and national obligations.”

Accordingly, Palestinians in Syria have not suffered from massive un-

employment with only a quarter of them (or 111,208 beneficiaries) living in UNRWA’s refugee camps. And while there are certain differences between the rights of the Palestinian refugees and those of Syrian nationals (e.g., refugees cannot own more than one home or purchase farmland), these have become largely irrelevant given the mayhem and dislocation of the 10-year-long civil war, which have driven an estimated one-third of the Palestinian community to join the general population in fleeing the country.

In Lebanon, where Palestinian refugees enjoy fewer privileges than in other Arab countries, UNRWA has 475,075 registered refugees on its rolls, about 45 percent of whom live in the agency’s 12 refugee camps. But the first-ever official census of Palestinians in Lebanon (published on December 21, 2017) showed that only 174,422 Palestinians lived in the country, providing further proof of UNRWA’s self-serving, inflated figures.

What this means is that there is no justification for continued international support for the millions of “Palestine refugees” who do not meet the standard legal definition of this status and who receive far better treatment than all other refugees. Most do not live in “refugee camps,” which, in any case, should have been disbanded years ago with their occupants moved to conventional neighbourhoods – as envisaged by UNRWA’s original mandate.

POLITICAL PARTISANSHIP, HATE INCITEMENT, AND TERROR COMPLICITY

In blatant disregard of its original mandate to operate as a politically neutral relief agency, UNRWA’s activities progressively acquired an eminently political dimension that has gradually become embedded in the Palestinian “resistance movement”.

In the late 1960s, for example, UNRWA’s acquiescence in the PLO’s takeover of UN refugee camps in Jordan allowed the terror group to estab-

lish a de facto state-within-a-state and to use it as a springboard for subverting the ruling Hashemite monarchy. This led to vicious internecine strife that culminated in the bloody events of the 1970 Black September in which thousands of Palestinians and Jordanians were killed, and in the PLO’s subsequent eviction from Jordan.

Having substituted Lebanon for Jordan as its base for terror attacks on Israel, the PLO quickly established yet another state-within-a-state with UNRWA refugee camps providing this terrorist entity with training and deployment bases and serving as its foremost recruitment and indoctrination centres. And as in Jordan, it did not take long before this destructive practice helped trigger in Lebanon one of the worst civil wars in Middle East modern history, which raged for over a decade and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives.

These devastating experiences did not dissuade UNRWA from close collaboration with the PLO in running UN refugee camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. UNRWA’s education system soon became the effective funder and distributor of the PLO’s anti-Israel and antisemitic indoctrination after the terror group gained control over 95% of the territories’ population in the 1990s as part of the Oslo “peace process”.

Having committed itself in the Oslo Accords to eschewing anti-Israel incitement and to teaching “peace education” to its schoolchildren, the PLO entered into a formal arrangement with UNRWA on Aug. 1, 2000, under which the UN agency would adopt PLO-mandated content for all schoolbooks. The agreement further stipulated that PLO-issued schoolbooks would be the sole source of UNRWA’s curriculum.

UNRWA offered the unconvincing excuse that adherence to the “host state’s textbooks” was proper, ignoring not only that this violated its obligation to complete neutral-

ity across its educational system but also that the PLO had never been a host state. A series of studies examining UNRWA textbooks and teachers' guides in 2000-20 uncovered pervasive anti-Israel and antisemitic incitement, including:

- Delegitimisation of Israel's very existence and any Jewish attachment to the land of Israel, based on the supposed exclusive Palestinian right to the land.
- Demonisation of Israel and Jews through the use of derogatory terms, references to evil, and attribution of wholesale culpability for any and all Palestinian misfortunes.
- Outright rejection of peaceful coexistence with Israel and calls for violent uprisings against it, with "martyrdom" and jihad taught as bedrock beliefs and values to be striven for.

Small wonder that in June 2013, UNRWA appointed "Arab Idol" singer Muhammad Assaf as its regional youth ambassador even though, both before and during his time as ambassador, he released songs and music videos extolling terror as well as dedicating performances to "martyrs" (i.e., slain terrorists). When an Israeli fan called into a radio show featuring Assaf, the UNRWA youth ambassador replied, "I spit on you and Israel."

Yet, despite full knowledge of the anti-Israel, anti-peace, and anti-coexistence messages of Assaf's musical content and appearances, UNRWA renewed his contract for four more years, blatantly rebutting its own "Peace Starts Here" slogan and a multitude of other declarations.

Aside from sponsoring an ambassador of hate and violence and inculcating Israel- and Jew-hatred in its schoolchildren, UNRWA also helped spread incitement by hosting terror groups' activities in its installations, notably the Hamas-funded Islamic Bloc's "student clubs".

Many Hamas terrorists willing to sacrifice their lives in suicide attacks have come from the Bloc's branches, which have long served as Hamas

recruitment and indoctrination hubs. One example is the suicide bomber who murdered 30 people (and wounded another 140) at the Park Hotel Passover massacre of March 27, 2002, which triggered Operation Defensive Shield, which was Israel's largest counterterrorist operation since the 1982 Lebanon war. Yet, to date, UNRWA has taken no steps to exclude these clubs from its facilities.

Far worse, when Hamas violently expelled the PLO from Gaza in the summer of 2007 and took control of the Strip, UNRWA became ever more entwined in the Islamist terror group's activities: It employed numerous Hamas members throughout its humanitarian and educational apparatus. In 2017, for example, two senior UNRWA officials in Gaza were forced to resign after their election to Hamas' political bureau was publicly exposed.

In addition, UNRWA has effectively supported Hamas' terror attacks on Israel. This ranged from regular use of UNRWA schools during summer vacations as paramilitary training camps and the introduction of a military training program into the agency's schoolwork, undertaken by thousands of students every year as part of their studies; to establishing military facilities and stockpiling weapons and military equipment in close proximity to UNRWA schools – at times inside schools; to digging underground terror tunnels under UNRWA premises; to using UNRWA's facilities during military encounters with Israel, including transferring weapons and ammunition in UNRWA vehicles, firing rockets and mortar shells on the Israeli civilian population – a war crime in international law – from schoolyards and near-school positions, to booby trapping educational installations.

AN AGENCY WHOSE TIME HAS GONE?

UNRWA's decades-long collaboration with Palestinian terror organisations and its blatant anti-Israel

prejudice reinforce lingering doubts regarding its self-styled apolitical image, its continued necessity, and indeed the legitimacy of its very existence. By comparison, while all post-World War II refugee situations, involving tens of millions of displaced persons (some 16 million in Europe alone) were handled by the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), established by the UN General Assembly in December 1946 and succeeded in January 1951 by the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Palestinians received their own relief agency.

Nearly 70 years later, this unique privilege has remained intact, with UNRWA spending four times as much on each Palestinian "refugee" in 2016 as the UNHCR spends on refugees elsewhere in the world: US\$246 compared to US\$58.

And while all other refugee problems were resolved in a timely manner by IRO/UNHCR, with the vast majority of displaced persons (including Holocaust survivors) resettled elsewhere by refugee-welcoming nations, UNRWA built the "Palestinian refugee problem" into a thriving enterprise, one that continually fed the coffers of the Arab regimes and animated Western supporters who professed admiration and support for every nascent post-World War II national movement – save for the Jewish one. In the words of the late American economics professor Fred Gottheil:

What is significant about 50 years of UNRWA is ... that the majority of Palestinians have reintegrated into the open economies of the Middle East and elsewhere de facto, and that most of those who still remain in refugee camps ... do so in the Palestinian homeland. ... the refugee status of the overwhelming numbers of Palestinian refugees should have expired somewhere along that 50-year range. ... And therein lies the essence of its moral hazard. UNRWA was reinvented to serve politi-

cal agendas ... it became strictly a caretaker agency, dispensing entitlements to refugees who, by UNHCR standards, would not be so defined. All this at enormous cost.

A number of myths have served to perpetuate UNRWA's self-serving *raison d'être* as the agency morphed into an enterprise never envisioned by its original mandate, including "impoverishment" of refugees – despite rejection of true rehabilitation efforts funded in the billions of dollars; "occupation" – despite the fact that only a small part of the entire "refugee" population resided in Israeli-controlled territories after 1967, and that 95% of them had been transferred to Palestinian rule by 1996-97; and "economic strangulation" – despite the fact that the West Bank and Gaza economy enjoyed an unprecedented economic boom due to the vast opportunities provided by Israel's control of these territories in 1967-97.

As these myths melt away – or at the very least are no longer sanctioned by Western and Gulf governments – UNRWA reforms must respond to the growing calls for transparency regarding expenditures, governance, and the education of its beneficiary children.

FIRST STEP TO REFORM

Perhaps the most important step UNRWA can take is to adopt the same standards as the UNHCR. Specifically, UNRWA must take real measures toward the ultimate resettlement of refugees in the host states as envisaged by its original mandate, so as to transform them from passive welfare recipients into productive and enterprising citizens of their respective societies. This is not something that can occur overnight, or even in a few years, but unless a realistic 10-year resettlement plan is crafted, the ever-increasing numbers of perpetual "refugees" kept in squalid camps will never decrease.

While there have been numerous studies, audits, and assessments of UNRWA's operational deficiencies – from resistance to reform, to cover-up of gender issues and sexual abuse by UNRWA workers, to overall human resource and commercial transaction mismanagement- no independent, external financial audit has ever been demanded by the donor states to account for the use, or possible abuse, of their decades-long massive donations to UNRWA.

How much of this money is spent on anti-Israel and antisemitic incitement through funding of PLO-dictated textbooks and teachers' guides? How much money is spent on wages for Hamas-affiliated employees who are not legally permitted to be on UNRWA's payroll, and how much on providing facilities for summer training of schoolchildren in terrorism? And above all, how much donor money is spent on perpetuating the Palestinians' "refugeedom" rather than to "start [the refugees] on the road to rehabilitation and bring an end to their enforced idleness and the demoralizing effect of a dole," to use the words of the 1949 Economic Survey Mission, whose recommendations informed UNRWA's original mandate.


Donor states are not only entitled to know how their taxpayers' monies are being spent but have an obligation and responsibility to assure that they are spent on the purposes for which they were donated, and not on those that violate UN directives or international law. To date, this has not been done. Only an audit by the donor states will empower reform.

The time has come for the geopolitical realities of the 2020s to be confronted head-on. The PLO, while clinging to its eternal rejectionism as evidenced among other things by its "destroy the Zionist entity" school curriculum, is nevertheless not the PLO of Yasser Arafat. Hamas, though still committed to its ultimate goal of destroying Israel, is amenable to

suspension of hostilities in return for humanitarian aid, either directly (e.g., regular flow of Qatari money to Gaza) or indirectly (e.g., training Gaza medical students in Israeli hospitals, hospitalising serious COVID-19 patients in Israeli hospitals). And the Arab states seem less inclined than ever to make their national interests captive to the whims of the Palestinian leadership as evidenced by the recent normalisation accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Sudan and the strengthening relations between the Jewish state and the other Arab states.

In addition, UNRWA faces its greatest challenge in decades after Washington, its largest donor, slashed its financial support while the UN's own oversight watchdogs investigated the agency's financial irregularities, as it pleads impoverishment over a deficit figure variously ranging between US\$332 million and over US\$1 billion.

UNRWA's plea seems to strike a weaker chord even in the European Union where the narrative of the perpetually impoverished Palestinian refugees seems to have worn thin and where the unquestioned propping up of UNRWA's failed mission is coming under growing scrutiny by those who used to be its most vocal champions.

As the Arab and Western states face their long-overdue obligations to help proactively resolve the Palestinian "refugee problem," the agency's 70-year-long "works" must either profoundly reform or become irrelevant. 

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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

WHY'S AFTER THE FACT

Following the release of Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert from captivity in Iran, media discussion was dominated both by the possible reasons for Iran making ludicrous spying charges against her and by the price paid to free her. Dr. Moore-Gilbert was freed in a deal that saw the release of three Iranians jailed in Thailand over a 2012 plot to attack Israeli diplomats.

The *Australian* editorial (Nov. 27) quoted US-based Iran expert and regular AIJAC guest Behnam Ben Taleblu saying that the “outcome... would embolden Tehran to engage in further hostage-taking.”

AIJAC's Colin Rubenstein was quoted warning that the freed Iranians “will again present a threat of terrorist violence to innocent people.”

The newspaper said the episode is a reminder that “Iran is the most serious threat to Middle East peace,” referencing its threats to “the existence of the only democratic state in the region”; support for Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis in Yemen and “surrogate forces... in the residue of the Syrian war”; the “unprovoked harassment of vessels attempting to cross the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman”; not to mention Iran's “cyber capabilities” and ongoing commitment “to the acquisition of nuclear weapons.”

The *Age/Sydney Morning Herald* (Nov. 29) said “the brutal truth is she found herself a pawn caught in a high-stakes diplomatic game between Iran and the Western world...her release... makes travel to Iran for any Australian...dangerous...and potentially unshackle[s] terrorists who would have otherwise stayed behind bars.”

The *Herald Sun* (Nov. 27) editorialised that Iran's “tyrannical regime has long used...political prisoners as

bargaining tools all the way back to the 1979 US embassy hostage crisis” and as “a major state sponsor of terrorism with ongoing efforts to obtain nuclear weapons... must be met with even harsher sanctions and international condemnation.”

MOORE THAN MEETS THE EYE?

ABC Radio National “Breakfast” fill-in host Hamish MacDonald (Nov. 27) asked former Australian ambassador to Israel and current federal MP for Wentworth Dave Sharma if Kylie Moore-Gilbert was more than just an unlucky academic.

MacDonald said there were many “unusual things” and “glaring black holes” and suggested it “was clearly significant” that the Israeli Government was involved in the “discussions” over her release.

According to MacDonald, “It strikes me as highly unusual that this whole thing would've been orchestrated by Nick Warner, the Director General of National Intelligence here in Australia. Obviously, the fact that Kylie has a partner who is an Israeli citizen was not reported, at least in Western media, during her period of captivity...does this all tell us something about how highly valued Kylie Moore-Gilbert was?”

Sharma said Iranian state TV reports claiming Dr. Moore-Gilbert was an Israeli spy should be taken with a “grain of salt.”

MacDonald then himself demonstrated the baselessness of his own question by noting media reports that Warner was previously based in Iran and had contacts there, which helped facilitate her release.

A HANDSOME RANSOM

News Corp columnist Andrew Bolt questioned the price paid to secure Moore-Gilbert's release (Nov. 30), writing that “Iran has clearly worked out we're a willing customer in the hostage trade. Its exchange rate has rocketed from two Australians for one Iranian last year [referring to two travel bloggers released in exchange for an Iranian man held in Queensland pending extradition to the US], to one Australian for three Iranian terrorists today. That's not because Moore-Gilbert is a big catch. She's just an academic who was yet silly enough to fly to Iran two years ago for a conference. Silly because Iran is a paranoid Islamist regime that's been arresting foreigners on fake charges of spying. It is still holding men and women from Britain and the US – even an artistic affairs officer, a conservationist and a journalist – as bargaining chips, and Moore-Gilbert was an easy mark. She had an Israeli boyfriend, which is catnip to Jew-hating ayatollahs. Even better, she's a citizen of Australia, weak enough to pay blackmail. And we paid a lot for her – agreeing to fly three Iranian terrorists from Thailand back to Iran.”

On *Channel 9's* “6pm News” (Nov. 26), political editor Chris Uhlmann said, “this was a highly complex exchange which would have demanded the agreement of at least three nations – Iran, Thailand, and Israel. The last because it would have had to have been alerted to the fact that the men who once tried to murder its diplomats were about to be released.” He also, rightly, referred to Iran as a “rogue state”.

TITLE FIGHT

An *Australian* report (Nov. 20) on Bahrain Foreign Minister Abdellatif

al-Zayani's historic visit to Jerusalem was given the strident title, "Make peace, Bahrain tells Israel."

The *AFP*-sourced article was more nuanced, stating that al-Zayani had actually said, "to achieve and consolidate... peace, the Palestinian and Israeli conflict needs to be resolved... I therefore call for both parties to get around the negotiating table to achieve a viable two-state solution."

TOM AND JOE

In the *Australian Financial Review* (Dec. 4), *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman said the incoming Biden administration would be

"unwise... to give up the leverage of the Trump-imposed oil sanctions [on Iran] just to resume the nuclear deal where it left off. We should use that leverage to also get Iran to curb its exports of precision-guided missiles to its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iraq, where they threaten Israel and several Arab states."

Friedman said, "Biden's team is aware of that argument and does not think it is crazy – but for now they insist America's overwhelming national interest is to get Iran's nuclear program back under control and fully inspected. In their view, Iran's development of a nuclear weapon poses a direct security threat to the US and

to the global nuclear weapons control regime, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons."

Earlier, AIJAC's Ahron Shapiro told *SBS Radio*'s "Shalom Australia" (Nov. 15) that Biden's "record is overwhelmingly pro-Israel. And the thing is, if we were not [just] coming out of a Trump presidency, we would be all talking about, 'ooh, well, Joe Biden is such a good friend of Israel because his history is just that.'"

Shapiro said he doubted Biden would've signed off on the Iran nuclear deal if he had been president in 2015 and said Biden wants to return to it as a "starting point" for negotiations.



IN PARLIAMENT

Senator **Eric Abetz** (Lib., Tas.) – Dec. 3 – "I, and also on behalf of Senators **Kitching, Molan, Wong, Rennick, McLachlan, Keneally, Askew, O'Sullivan, Ryan, Antic, Carr, McGrath, Sheldon, Dean Smith, Van, Hughes, Henderson, Ciccone, Fawcett, O'Neill, Griff, Roberts** and **Hanson**, move: That the Senate—

(a) notes that: (i) 4 November 2020 marked 25 years since Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated... (iv) Yitzhak Rabin promoted peace and co-existence... concluding the Oslo Peace Accords with the Palestinians in 1993, for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty in 1994; and

(b) affirms Australia's ongoing commitment to Yitzhak Rabin's vision of a peaceful and enduring two-state solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, mutually negotiated and agreed by the Israelis and the Palestinians."

Senator **Janet Rice** (Greens, Vic.) – Dec. 3 – speaking on the Rabin condolence motion: "If this Senate truly affirms a vision of a peaceful and enduring two-state solution, which we believe it should, then we should also be urging the Australian government to call out the breaches of international law that present a huge obstacle to achieving this vision. Australia needs to make clear to the Israeli government that increasing settlement-building and the threat of annexation, not to mention the regular demolition of Palestinian homes, are massive obstacles to achieving peace. We urge the government to finally recognise a Palestinian state, as so many other countries have done."

Shadow Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) – Dec. 3 – responding to Senator Rice: "I express my regret that the Greens felt, in relation to a motion commemorating such an honourable and decent man, the need to make a political

statement... We all have views about the foreign policy issues to which the Senator adverted. I think there is support across the chamber for a two-state solution."

Foreign Minister Senator **Marise Payne** (Lib., NSW) – Dec. 3 – responding to Senator Rice: "[This motion] acknowledges [Rabin's] promotion of peace and coexistence at that time, but we know for all time, given the nature of his leadership and his legacy. The motion very clearly refers to an enduring two-state solution... mutually negotiated... That it is not possible [for the Greens] to extend with courtesy, diplomacy and generosity of spirit an acknowledgement of this resolution... is profoundly disappointing."

Prime Minister **Scott Morrison** (Lib. Cook) – Dec. 9 – Chanukah message: "A Chanukah menorah represents so much more than just a nine-branched candelabra – it speaks to the triumph of light over darkness, the human capacity to endure, and the intensity of life itself."

"The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth, was an inspiring and compassionate voice about the role of Judaism in our ever-changing world. On the occasion of Chanukah some years ago, he wrote: 'There always were two ways to live in a world that is often dark and full of tears. We can curse the darkness or we can light a light, and... a little light drives out much darkness.'"

Opposition Leader **Anthony Albanese** (ALP, Grayndler) – Dec. 10 – Chanukah message: "May your homes and synagogues be filled with the warm glow of your menorahs during this festival of light. ...even amid all this upheaval, Chanukah will stand tall as a striking expression of your faith and devotion. ... Like so many Jewish holidays, it is also a time to reflect on a time when Jewish people faced not only persecution, but an existential threat just for being Jewish."

"I send my deepest gratitude to the Australian Jewish community for the contribution you have made to the great Australian story that is our multicultural society."

WINKIN' AT BLINKEN

The *Australian Financial Review* (Nov. 25) quoted former US Bush administration national security council official Michael Singh's approval of Joe Biden's nomination of Antony Blinken for US Secretary of State, and Jake Sullivan – who set up a back channel to Iran under President Barack Obama – to be his national security adviser.

Singh said, “[they] are highly experienced and... non-ideological... They are pragmatic foreign policy practitioners with a history of working across the aisle.”

The *LA Times*-sourced report said Blinken “has acknowledged that some Trump-era steps will be difficult to reverse” and, “Biden does not plan to return the US embassy in Jerusalem to Tel Aviv...but...will work to bring the Palestinians back into negotiations after they were sidelined by Trump.”

The Palestinians were not “sidelined”. Their leaders decided to boycott talks with the Trump Administration after the US demanded that they stop inciting violence and financially rewarding terror.

TWICE AS NICE

The *Australian* (Nov. 25) also endorsed Blinken and Sullivan as “committed centrists [who] were on the more hawkish side of Obama-era policy debates. Mr Blinken, whose stepfather, a Holocaust survivor, was brought up in Melbourne, is a strong supporter of Israel and favoured the 2003 Iraq war and US intervention in Libya. Mr Sullivan supported sending US missiles to Ukraine, a policy Barack Obama opposed. Together with the expected appointment of the vastly experienced Michele Flournoy as defence secretary, they are expected to form a team that should stand up to adversaries better than Mr Obama did.”

The newspaper warned against returning “the US to the Iran nuclear deal... in the form negotiated by [the

Obama administration which gave] away far too much to the ayatollahs. Mr Trump leaves a legacy of strength and solid achievement in the Middle East that will be at risk if Mr Biden tries to cosy up to Tehran again.”

LABOR INTENSIVE

Federal Labor Deputy Leader Richard Marles' contribution to a new book called *The Write Stuff: Voices of Unity on Labor's Future*, offering future policy directions for the party, was quoted in the *Australian Financial Review* (Dec. 4).

Marles warned that “Australia has dropped out of the top 20 most innovative countries in the OECD” and said Australia should model itself on “Israel, a country that commercialises research well and consequently has a more complex economy that is expected to grow at well above our economy over the next six years.”

TURKI RUFFLES FEATHERS

The *Australian* and the *Herald Sun* (Dec. 8) picked up on an anti-Israel diatribe from Prince Turki al-Faisal, a high-profile former intelligence chief of Saudi Arabia – a country some have suggested might be on the verge of normalising relations with Israel.

At a conference in Bahrain that included Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi participating via video link, Turki accused Israel of apartheid, putting Palestinians in concentration camps, and being a Western coloniser, and disparaged the recent peace deals with the UAE and Bahrain as painkillers for a gaping wound.

The report noted that Ashkenazi rejected Turki's claims, saying, “the Abraham Accords do not come at the expense of the Palestinians” and called on Palestinians to return to peace talks that were frozen in 2014.

The *AFP* report concluded that “despite Prince Turki's blunt rhetoric, mutual concern over Iran has gradually brought Israel and Gulf nations

closer, and Riyadh has quietly been building relations with the Jewish state for several years.”

BRIDGING THE GULF

Yet more media coverage was given to reports of a secret meeting in Saudi Arabia between Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

On *ABC TV* “The World” (Nov. 24), Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek suggested Netanyahu leaked the news “for domestic politics” just as his “political rivals” launched an investigation into alleged corruption.

Tlozek said it is not politically prudent for Saudi leaders to admit the two countries have cooperated for “at least 10 years” because the kingdom is seen as a “leader in the Muslim world”.

He also noted that MBS is “not as tied” to Saudi Arabia's formal policy of “no normalisation with Israel before a Palestinian state is created... the Crown Prince is looking to move forward on this issue, but the older heads within the Saudi government are being more cautious.”

Citing Trump's election loss and the ongoing hostility in the US Congress over the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, Tlozek said MBS “needs Israel and... the links and influence that Israel has in Washington, and with an incoming Democrat administration. That's probably why the meeting occurred at this time.”

SBS reporter Rena Sarumpaet's story for *SBS TV* “World News” (Nov. 24) on the alleged meeting paraphrased academic Amin Saikal, saying he “predicts... eventual normalisation but not... before President-elect Biden's stance on the Middle East becomes clear.”

MACK TALKS SMACK

On *ABC Radio National* “Breakfast” (Dec. 1), David Mack, a former US

ambassador to the UAE, implied the Trump Administration's special envoy Jared Kushner wants reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar to further his own business interests and because he failed to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Mack said that "the young Jared Kushner wants to show that even though he failed to achieve the deal of the century with a final peace agreement between Israel and the Arab states, that he has done some things. Normalisation between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain and Sudan. All of whom had strong interests of their own to do it. And it wasn't really peace. These weren't countries that were at peace [sic]. So people are saying what has he really accomplished? So he's turning his attention to this."

MODERATELY INCORRECT

An *SBS TV* "World News" (Dec. 2) report on the Iranian Parliament voting to halt unrestricted access by the International Atomic Energy Agency to the country's nuclear sites and increase uranium enrichment levels from 4.5% to 20% incorrectly gave a misleading impression of moderation within the regime.

SBS reporter Amelia Dunn noted that the parliamentarians chanted death to America and Israel and that if implemented, the bill would be "a direct violation of the 2015 nuclear deal to which they are still a part."

Dunn added that "the conservative dominated parliament does not have the final say. Iran's nuclear policy is dictated by the Supreme National Security Council, a body much more invested in keeping international diplomacy alive." Dunn's report included Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh saying, "the Government has said the bill is neither necessary, nor useful."

But as a *Reuters* story on the ABC website noted (Dec. 3), the Guardian Council, which has greater authority than the National Security Council,

subsequently approved the bill.

It also explained that the 2015 nuclear "deal caps the fissile purity to which Iran can refine uranium at 3.67 per cent... Iran breached the 3.67 per cent cap in July 2019 and the enrichment level has remained steady at up to 4.5 per cent since then."

WHO SAYS ISRAEL'S NOT TO BLAME?

On *ABC Radio National* "Breakfast" (Nov. 24), Gerald Rockenschaub, head of the World Health Organisation's Office for the occupied Palestinian Territory, refused to blame Israel for hampering Gaza's ability to deal with COVID-19.

Despite Rockenschaub attributing rising infections to the social behaviour of Gazans, host Fran Kelly asked, "the Hamas leadership are calling on the international community to provide Gaza with the support it needs. But Gaza has been under blockade since 2007. Israel and Egypt sealing the borders around the territory. How is that impacting on the response to the pandemic? Particularly the ability to get ventilators in or PPE in, or testing kits in?"

Rockenschaub answered that "it's not necessarily that getting the stuff in is the major obstacle," but getting "the necessary quantities due to global shortages... and, to the logistics around this, is a constant challenge."

Kelly asked if the logistical challenges "include the blockade? I know that there is constant mediation going on with Israel to allow some of the supplies in. What's the situation there?"

Rockenschaub explained that WHO "have actually relatively good collaboration with the Israeli authorities and when it comes to life saving supplies and the essential equipment, we don't face major obstacles. Sometimes there are bureaucratic obstacles to overcome but usually we see quite good collaboration with the Israeli authorities to be able to get humanitar-

ian supplies and essential equipment into the Gaza Strip."

GIVE IT A REST

Israel issuing tenders to build 1200 new housing units in Givat Hamatos, a neighbourhood in the southern part of Jerusalem on land captured in the 1967 war, was red meat for the ABC.

A brief on *ABC TV* "7PM News" (Vic) (Nov. 16) said, "Opponents say the project will sever [east Jerusalem] from Bethlehem, damaging prospects for a Palestinian state. They've also accused Israel of trying to sneak the development in before the new Biden administration takes over in the United States."

Later that night, *ABC TV*'s "The World" said, "Israel was pushing ahead with a controversial plan to build a new Jewish settlement on the edge of occupied east Jerusalem."

Givat Hamatos is not a new settlement, rather a 30-year-old neighbourhood of Jerusalem surrounded by other Jewish and Arab neighbourhoods of the city.

Neither report included any balance from Israeli spokespeople.

Three days later, ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek's report ran on both ABC programs.

"The World" host Bev O'Connor's introduction claimed the buildings "would block access between Bethlehem and east Jerusalem."

Tlozek claimed the "development would separate Palestinian towns in the West Bank from suburbs in east Jerusalem which Palestinians want as their capital for a future state."

In fact, anyone who looks at a map can see that Givat Hamatos cannot block access to Jerusalem because it actually nestles alongside the rather large Palestinian neighbourhood of Beit Safafa which itself is positioned directly across from Bethlehem with no obstacle between the two areas.

Moreover, Israeli media reported that hundreds of the proposed new housing units are actually slated for Arab residents of Beit Safafa.

MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

DEATH OF A “SCIENTIST”

The assassination of Iran’s top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh provoked a plethora of questions over what the operation was intended to achieve.

SBS reporter Ben Lewis’ informative report on *SBS TV* “World News” (Nov. 28) included Iran’s Defence Minister Amir Hatami praising Fakhrizadeh’s “big accomplishments in the field of defence”. Lewis reported that Iran claims its nuclear program is peaceful but Western intelligence agencies believe Fakhrizadeh was in charge of a “covert” weapons program. CNN correspondent Jomana Karadsheh told SBS newsreader Anton Enus the killing is extremely embarrassing for Iran, given he was one of the country’s best guarded individuals.

The next day on *SBS TV* “World News”, reporter Catalina Flores talked of the threat to Israel from Iran, showing on a regional map that Iran “has forces at its disposal surrounding Israel, including troops and proxies in neighbouring Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.”

The *Australian* (Nov. 30) said, “Fakhrizadeh was working secretly at building Tehran’s nuclear weapons. That should convince Mr Biden of the need to keep the pressure on Tehran... Mr Biden must insist that unless Tehran comes clean about its nuclear program there will be no talks.”

Similarly, AIJAC’s Jamie Hyams in the *Daily Telegraph* (Dec. 3) wrote, “Fakhrizadeh... was also a Brigadier-General in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is not only the main instrument of hard line control and repression within Iran, but also organises and funds various proxy terror groups and militias across the Middle East, and even further afield. The IRGC also controls Iran’s nuclear weapons program, making Fakhrizadeh a senior officer in a terrorist military organisation leading an illegal nuclear weapons program.”

The News Corp papers (Nov. 30) quoted former Obama counter-terrorism adviser John Brennan’s condemnation of the killing as a “criminal act and highly reckless” which “risks lethal retaliation and a new round of regional conflict.” The Obama administration faced similar accusations for killing al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, which Brennan coordinated.

The *Guardian Australia* (Nov. 30), denounced the killing, saying, “Trump evidently believes Netanyahu

when he claims Iran is building a bomb, despite a lack of clear evidence. He has swallowed the simplistic right-wing narrative of Iran as evil, existential threat... If Iran retaliates for the assassination, it could plunge the Middle East into violent chaos and wreck Biden’s hopes of a new start.”

On the ABC podcast “The Signal” (Dec. 4), Iranian-American journalist Negar Mortazavi said the goal of the killing was to make diplomacy harder for Biden and to “provoke Iran into a violent or lethal retaliation... and then pull them into a wider conflict or provide a pretext for military engagement between Iran and the Trump Administration.”

On *ABC Radio National* “Breakfast” (Nov. 30), American academic and regime sympathiser Trita Parsi predicted Iran’s nuclear program would be “set... back [only] a couple of months... in the past... these assassinations have tended to take place... when a breakthrough in diplomacy was likely to happen.”

Later that day, on *ABC Radio* “World Today”, *NY Times* security correspondent David Sanger said, “it’s been interesting over the past four years, for all the people who thought that Donald Trump would be trigger happy. The one thing he’s been reluctant to do has been get the United States more deeply involved in conflicts in the Middle East.”

On “Breakfast” the next day, former US Ambassador to the UAE David Mack said he concurred with UAE Foreign Minister al-Nahyan’s description of the killing as “heinous”, and believed “people in Washington are finally getting the message that this kind of brass knuckles approach to relations with Iran... does not really work.”

Meanwhile, on *ABC Radio National* “Breakfast” (Dec. 12), Israeli journalist Barak Ravid said he doubted Netanyahu would order a “military strike against Iran... [he] had several chances in the last decade... The Israeli military was prepared to do it, and Netanyahu at the last minute decided not to. So I don’t think that there’s a real risk right now.”

Ravid also said Biden’s team is telling Netanyahu, “don’t fight us on going back to the first deal. Work with us on forming a new deal... that would be for another decade that will also deal with missiles, that would also deal with regional things.”

“Reporter Catalina Flores talked of the threat to Israel from Iran, showing on a regional map that Iran ‘has forces at its disposal surrounding Israel, including troops and proxies in neighbouring Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon.’”

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

NUMBED BY NUMBERS

We have a proud history in Australia of nominating or electing Jewish Australians as Governors General, military leaders, senior members of Parliament and in many other positions which, for much of history and in many places, were not available to the best candidates if those candidates happened to be Jewish.

That said, there have always been antisemitic elements in Australia.

These include individuals or organisations with broad racist agendas which included Jews among the nominated undesirables, and some others which direct their animosity specifically towards Jews, drawing on a historiography of hatred from essentially European Christian sources.

In recent times, we have seen antisemitism imported from countries and cultures spreading well beyond Europe including, but not limited to, those whose cultural well-springs are Arab or Muslim.

It is never easy to measure the amount of anti-Jewish activity or the extent of adherence to antisemitic beliefs.

The peak organisation of the Australian Jewish community, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), has applied a uniform analysis of data collected on antisemitism for over 30 years, compiling and issuing comprehensive annual assessments. I was their author for more than 20 years, with the most recent reports compiled by Julie Nathan.

We both have attempted to document a phenomenon that goes well beyond physical incidents, with consideration also of antisemitism in public discourse, the activities of organisations which are specifically antisemitic or include antisemitism in their activities, and analyses of broad ideological trends.

When the first Annual Report was issued in 1990, there was general shock across the community to learn that Jewish Australians reported they had been victims of assault, harassment, intimidation or vandalism at a rate of more than ten times per month.

Ten years later, this figure had risen to close to one report every day – of incidents ranging from physical assault, arson of

synagogues, threatening telephone calls and abuse shouted at people walking to and from houses of worship.

The annual totals of incidents have fluctuated greatly, but over 30 years there have been almost 12,000 reports received by the ECAJ, including more than 750 which have involved physical assault or property vandalism, and more than 2,000 involving face-to-face harassment.

In the most recent report, much public commentary revolved around the facts that the 331 reports received in that reporting period were fewer than the 368 the year before, and the total was 14% below the average of the previous 30 years.

One of the problems in compiling these statistics is the way abusive, threatening and intimidatory emails have been reported and recorded, as this seems dependent on people's filters as much as on the actual activity in this area.

If email reports are treated separately, we see that the 2020 figure was actually 11% higher than the previous 30-year average – which might be a more realistic representation of overall activity.

The fact that there were any incidents at all should have been a matter of serious concern and a clarion call to immediate action.

There is no objective way the lower figure can be seen as a sign of something happening which is right – just that slightly less wrong seemed to have been reported.

When the figure is divided into attacks as against threats, the total of attacks, 188, was a worrying 40% above the average of the previous 30 years.

Face-to-face harassment reports were 91% above the previous 30-year average and hate mail incidents, although below average, were at the highest level since 2009.

There is an ongoing discussion and debate on the level of physical antisemitic activity, as against rhetoric and belief, present in Australian society. But we should never forget that each and every incident is a stain on our society nor that, in a “below average” year, no two days pass without a Jewish person being targeted and having their quality of life diminished simply for being Jewish.

This is completely unacceptable and something which should always be high on the agenda of our legislators and educators.



Statistics show that no two days pass without a Jewish person in Australia being targeted for antisemitic harassment or abuse



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