



MUCH TO DO

The Biden Administration's challenges –
in the Middle East and beyond

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This edition of the *AIR* focuses on the challenges of the newly inaugurated Biden Administration in the US, especially with respect to the Middle East.

Israeli reporter Lahav Harkov explores the issues that Jerusalem will be focussing on in seeking to build relations with the new administration, while US scholar Michael Rubin offers some important policy advice vis-à-vis the vital Iran nuclear file. Plus, noted US columnist Bret Stephens offers a detailed exploration of how the Trump Administration-brokered Abraham Accords normalising relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have transformed the regional landscape, and why it is in US interests to continue expanding them.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the Jan. 6 attack on the US Capitol by far-right extremists, also featured this month are two exposés on the spread of extremist conspiracy theories in Australia. Naomi Levin reports on extremist conspiratorial rhetoric that has crept into federal politics, while academic Ran Porat reveals Holocaust denial at one Australian online conspiracy theory portal.

And don't miss: Amotz Asa-El on the proliferation of new parties in the run up to yet another Israeli election on March 23; Israeli Arab activist Yoseph Haddad's response to accusations of "apartheid" in his country; and Jeremy Jones' reflections on the conspiratorial far-right in the US and Australia.

As always, your feedback is invited at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

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Joe Biden takes the Oath of Office to become the 46th President of the United States in Washington DC on Jan. 20, 2021. Beside him is Dr. Jill Biden. (Photo: Oliver Contreras/Sipa USA/AAP)



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President Joe Biden's inauguration brought with it a sea change in American politics, and the new Administration, bolstered by a slim majority in both houses of Congress, has the capacity to significantly change the policies of outgoing president Donald Trump.

This is as it should be – it is what democratic elections are for. Yet the new Administration would be well advised to try not to throw the baby out with the bathwater when establishing new policies.

President Trump left office in utter disgrace, especially due to his conduct in inciting the violent attack on the Capitol building on Jan. 6, and his ongoing refusal to accept the clear results of a free and fair election.

Yet it would be self-destructive if the Biden Administration were to repudiate those parts of Trump's policies that were working well and serving American interests, in spite of calls from some within the Democratic Party to do just that.

Trump's move to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocate the US Embassy to Israel there and his recognition of Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights have re-grounded US policy on Israel and the Palestinians in realism. His refusal to fund the politicised UN Palestinian refugee agency UNRWA shone a spotlight on the unsustainable way the world panders to Palestinian efforts to perpetuate the conflict.

And the Trump Administration's breakthrough Abraham Accords, brokering peace between Israel and several Arab and Muslim nations, have transformed the Middle East for the better, in a way not seen since Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977.

As Bret Stephens makes clear in this *AIR* (pp. 15-20), American interests dictate that the Biden Administration should continue vigorously trying to extend the Abraham Accords and other peace and normalisation deals between Israel and the Arab and Muslim world.

It should also pursue a reality-based approach to dealing with the Palestinian issue, including recognising inevitable adjustments to the pre-1967 armistice lines in accordance with peace plans negotiated over the past two decades.

The Administration should also recognise that while resumption of some sort of Israeli-Palestinian talks may be possible, the conditions that prevented any final agreement in the past persist, so any major breakthrough looks very unlikely indeed.

On the issue of Iran, the Trump Administration was right to evaluate the 2015 nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as a "bad deal". The decision to withdraw the US from the arrangement and seek to build "maximum pressure" to renegotiate the deal by reimposing harsh sanctions has not yet borne fruit. Yet it leaves the Biden Administration well positioned to hopefully negotiate a much better arrangement, provided it does not let scorn for Trump's legacy impede a realistic assessment of current US interests and options with respect to Iran.

The exposure of Iran's nuclear archive in 2018 and its ever-growing litany of violations of the JCPOA have put an end to the charade that its nuclear program was ever peaceful. Now Iran is increasing its stockpile of 20% enriched uranium, which is technically most of the way to military grade, by a kilo every two days. Iran has also begun building an assembly line for the production of uranium metal, a substance which is used to stabilise the warhead of a nuclear weapon.

Surely President Biden and his team must recognise that the situation has changed

drastically since Biden was part of the Obama Administration's ill-advised focus on entrenching, defending and preserving the deeply flawed JCPOA at almost any cost.

As expert analyst Michael Rubin notes in this issue, the Trump Administration's sanctions program had brought the Iranian regime to its knees financially. Teheran is talking tough and making threatening moves because it is desperate for a lifeline in the form of sanctions relief.

President Biden, who has promised to have the US re-join the JCPOA while at the same time working to "improve and extend" the nuclear deal, should not rush to provide one.

Rather, Biden should recognise that time is not on Iran's side, and make it clear the onus is on Iran to return to full compliance with the JCPOA before any substantive sanctions relief can take place.

Meanwhile, he and his team can consult allies and pause to review the Iranian situation with fresh eyes. They should formulate a clear policy strategy to do what the JCPOA did not – genuinely foreclose a military nuclear option for Iran for the foreseeable future, and also limit and deter Iran's other ongoing rogue behaviours, especially its support for terrorism and subversion across the Middle East.

Furthermore, following the appointment of several

officials closely associated with negotiating the original JCPOA to positions of influence, such as Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, CIA Director William Burns and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Biden would be wise to seek counsel on the subject from fresh-thinking, impartial advisors with no vested interest in the JCPOA.

Of course, as America struggles to pull itself out of the morass of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are naturally

other priorities vying for the White House's attention.

The keystone of American power is its democratic unity and purpose, and little can be achieved without healing the painful rifts which afflict the

United States and finding the cohesion and consensus required to move forward. Biden has a personality which can assist in this regard, if he does not allow the more extreme, angry and shrill elements of his party to dominate political discourse in Washington.

The US is too important to global order for the Biden Administration to keep its focus overwhelmingly domestic. Biden and his team simply have much to do abroad, as well as at home. Australians should wish him every success, for the sake of our own interests, as well as out of a longstanding sense of comradeship and friendship with our US allies.

AIR

WORD FOR WORD

"The President instructed the election committee and all state apparatuses to launch a democratic election process in all cities of the homeland."

Palestinian Authority decree setting dates for the first legislative and presidential elections in 15 years (Guardian, Jan. 16).

"If Jews and Arabs can dance together in the streets of Dubai, they can dance together here in Israel. A new era begins today, of prosperity, integration and security."

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu addressing an Arab Israeli audience before upcoming elections in March (Times of Israel, Jan. 13).

"I think I am in a better position than the prime minister to have an effective and true dialogue with President-elect (Joe) Biden and his administration...I oppose a Palestinian state in the heart of our homeland. I think it will not bring peace and it will undermine stability and security in the region."

Netanyahu challenger Gideon Sa'ar, who founded the New Hope party after defecting from Likud (AP, Jan. 15).

"The production of uranium metal has potentially grave military

implications... We strongly urge Iran to halt this activity, and return to compliance with its JCPOA commitments without further delay if it is serious about preserving the deal."

Joint statement by France, Germany and the UK in response to Iran's latest confirmed violation of the nuclear deal (Times of Israel, Jan. 16).

"We are in no rush and we are not insisting on their [the US's] return [to the JCPOA]. Our demand, which is both logical and rational, is the lifting of sanctions."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (France24, Jan. 8).

"We should not fool ourselves. I don't believe that the spirit [of the Iran deal], with a time limit and so many escape clauses, will do anything other than bring nuclear weapons all over the Middle East and therefore create a situation of latent tension that sooner or later will break out."

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on a return to the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran (Jerusalem Post, Jan. 11).

"The number of precision missiles at the resistance's disposal has now doubled from what it was a year ago. Any target across the area of occupied Palestine that we want to hit accurately – we are able to hit accurately."

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah (Times of Israel, Dec. 28).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

THE VACCINE LIBEL AS CASE STUDY

There have been widespread reports in the media of claims from some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that Israel is violating the Geneva Conventions by failing to supply coronavirus vaccines to West Bank and Gaza Palestinians while it vaccinates its own population.

Nonsense, of course, but it's an interesting case study of how anti-Israel propaganda points originate and spread. As Israel started getting positive publicity for its world-beating coronavirus vaccination program in late December, two primarily European-funded far-left Israeli NGOs, Physicians for Human Rights – Israel (PHR-I) and Gisha, received coverage in the international media on Dec. 17 and 18 demanding Israel supply vaccines to the Palestinians.

A few days later, on Dec. 22, these groups and some other similar foreign-funded Israeli and Palestinian groups published a joint statement making similar demands and laying out the alleged legal justification for their claims.

This was Article 56 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which they said meant that an “occupier has the duty of ensuring ‘the adoption and application of the prophylactic and preventive measures necessary to combat the spread of contagious diseases and epidemics.’”

It is notable that they did not quote all of Article 56, because that would have defeated their purpose. It also states that the occupying power is to act with “the cooperation of national and local authorities” to ensure health care. Furthermore, a 1958 International Red Cross interpretation of that article, generally acknowledged as legally binding, says that “there can be no question of making the Occupying Power alone responsible for the whole burden of organizing hospitals and health services and taking measures to control epidemics. The task is above all one for the competent services of the occupied country itself.”

In other words, the accepted international law is that, under occupation, local authorities – in this case the Palestinian Authority (PA) health care system – are primarily responsible for dealing with healthcare, including in epidemics. This is exactly what Israel had been saying all along, even while offering to help if asked. Furthermore, it is also the language of the Oslo Accords which created the PA and also represents binding international law.

Yet these NGOs continued to insist the Geneva Conventions – which do not even apply since Israel is not an occupier under the plain language of those conventions – override Oslo. But they don't, because there is no contradiction between them on healthcare – unless you insist on a tendentious interpretation of the Geneva Conventions

developed specifically to target Israel.

The NGOs also made the emotive but irrelevant point that kept popping up in news stories that Israeli settlers in the West Bank were getting the vaccines but Palestinians living there were not.

Weeks later, PA officials jumped on the bandwagon of condemning Israel for failing to supply vaccines, even though they never had asked for any. This is because Palestinian political culture would not let them pass up a chance to score points against Israel, but the PA was not the source of these claims. In fact, early reports on Israel's efforts featured PA spokespeople explaining their own efforts to obtain vaccines rather optimistically – efforts expected to come to fruition in late January with vaccines from Russia.

The source of this libel was radical NGOs which are paid, primarily by European governments, to foment international condemnation and pressure Israel in whatever way they can think of. This often requires making up novel interpretations of international law to do so – as in this case.

The media needs to recognise this reality, and treat their sometimes ridiculous claims with a bit more scepticism.

THE HATE WHICH OBSTRUCTS PEACE

In the West today, almost no one admits to being antisemitic and hating Jews except white supremacists and neo-Nazis. That is not to say that antisemitism is not present – a recent study in Britain found 45% of British adults agreed with at least one of six antisemitic tropes put to them by researchers, such as Jews control the media, “chase money”, or “talk about the Holocaust just to further their political agenda.” Twelve percent agreed with four or more of them. Yet I am willing to bet that few of those people would agree that they were antisemitic, or would say they hate Jews.

This was not always the case before 1945. In the 19th century there were reasonably respectable organisations with names like the International Anti-Jewish Congress and the *Ligue Nationale Antisemitique de France* (‘French Anti-semitic League’).

That would be pretty unthinkable today in the West – but many people do not appreciate that this is not true in the Middle East. While Middle Eastern leaders have mostly learned to focus their comments on Israel or Zionism to minimise a Western backlash, real old-fashioned, openly avowed antisemitism is still very much an accepted part of many of their societies. To give but one example, have a look at this flag.

It's the flag of the Houthi movement, an Iranian-allied Shi'ite group, which to this day controls

الله أكبر
الموت لأمريكا
الموت لإسرائيل
اللعنة على اليهود
النصر للإسلام

the majority of Yemen, including the capital, Sana'a. Here's what it says:

"God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse the Jews, Victory to Islam"

No euphemism there. Hatred of Jews is fundamental to the group's identity, and openly proclaimed.

This is hardly unique.

One has only to look through translation services like the Middle East Media Research Institute and Palestinian Media Watch, as I do regularly, to see similar blatant anti-semitism unrelated to Israel appearing constantly – claims straight out of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, references to a genocidal Muslim religious tradition about Muslims killing all Jews before the Day of Judgement, Holocaust denial, positive references to Hitler, etc.

This blatant antisemitism matters – it makes peace and coexistence all but impossible. It's one likely reason Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan never blossomed into warm people-to-people relations – too much ingrained hatred of Jews.

This is another reason why the Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain are so valuable. Not only is this proving to be a warm peace with real human contact between citizens, but it is also explicitly predicated on treating Jews as native to the region. That's why these were called the "Abraham" Accords, referencing the common ancestor of Jews and Arabs and Christians and Muslims. And tellingly, this was not an Israeli idea, but one the UAE apparently pushed for.

The Abraham Accords are set to transform the Middle East region in numerous positive ways. None are perhaps more important than potentially making a dent in the baseless Jew hatred which has plagued it for so long.



Yoseph Haddad

WHAT APARTHEID?

One morning in mid-January, I woke up in my Nazareth home and was astonished to discover I was living under a racist apartheid regime whose only purpose is "the promotion and perpetuation of the superiority of one group of people – the Jews." I rubbed my eyes, read the story in greater depth, and calmed down as soon as I realised the reports were based on yet another report by the left-wing non-government organisation B'Tselem.

The problem is that this report has spread like wildfire around the world, and propaganda is working. B'Tselem, which presents itself as a human-rights organisation, is in fact known as an organisation with a clear political stance

that is in contrast to Israel's position. As it turns out, people have no boundaries. How dare they say that I, an Arab Israeli who served along with Jewish soldiers in the Israel Defence Forces and managed hundreds of Jewish employees, live under an apartheid regime?

How can anyone say our society is living under an apartheid regime when among us you will find doctors, judges, and even lawmakers? How can you say Samer Haj-Yehia lives in an apartheid regime when he is the head of the biggest bank in Israel? B'Tselem has already broken the record for hypocrisy, but to compare Israel to an apartheid regime for its racial laws is not only a distorted lie but an insult to all those South Africans who actually lived through apartheid. It is contempt for and cynical exploitation of the concept.

I am not here to claim that everything in Israel is perfect. Some things need to be fixed, and how. But show me a country where everything is perfect. I look around at our neighbours in the region and thank God I was born in the State of Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East. True, the Arab minority in Israel faces challenges, just as other national minorities do in other countries. Yet while minorities of all kinds across the Middle East – Shi'ite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Yazidi, Kurds, and of course the Christians, are persecuted, the State of Israel is the only country that grants minorities equal rights and the ability to influence their future.

When B'Tselem Director Hagai El-Ad, who is Jewish, decides that I, my Arab family, and my Arab friends are all living under an apartheid regime, he and his organisation are basically telling us they see us as second-class citizens. B'Tselem, don't push your agendas at our expense.



B'Tselem Director Hagai El-Ad

To my delight, thanks to widespread vaccination, Israel will likely be the first country to exit the coronavirus pandemic, and in a few months, people from around the world may be able to come here and see what apartheid looks like in Israel for themselves. Then they will be able to hear Hebrew and Arabic spoken in the Nazareth marketplace, they will see mosques, churches, and synagogues alongside one another in Jaffa, and see the coexistence of the Israeli mosaic across the country. And maybe, just maybe, their visit here will make them want to live under an apartheid regime.

Yoseph Haddad is the CEO of Together – Vouch for Each Other, an NGO which aims to bridge between the Arab sector of Israeli society with Israeli society as a whole. © Israel Hayom (www.israelhayom.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

PRESS PAUSE

COVID-19 has often served as a potent political destabiliser, but in Malaysia's case, the pandemic has helped preserve its shaky governing coalition. Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin's declaration of a nationwide state of emergency on Jan. 12 could give him the power and time he needs to stabilise the country and retain the leadership.

In response to a coronavirus surge that is overwhelming hospitals, Malaysia's king Sultan Abdullah Sultan Ahmad Shah issued the decree at the request of the embattled PM. The state of emergency will be in place until Aug. 1, or until the pandemic is under control. During that time, Muhyiddin and his cabinet will be granted extraordinary powers, including the right to approve laws without parliamentary approval.

The announcement has strengthened the 73-year-old Muhyiddin's tenuous grasp on power, ending speculation that a snap election could soon be called and forestalling any attempt by his political opponents to force early polls.

Muhyiddin has spent months hanging on by a thread, facing down challenges to his leadership from both sides of the aisle. More than two dozen motions of no-confidence during parliamentary sessions last year were procedurally blocked to avoid a test of his legislative majority.

These problems stem from Muhyiddin's elevation to PM in March 2020, a surprising beneficiary of the collapse of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, whose striking election victory in 2018 booted the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) from power for the first time since independence in 1957.

Muhyiddin's breakaway Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (Bersatu) faction entered a marriage of convenience with the corruption-mired UMNO, the rural Parti Islam se-Malaysia (PAS) and Gabungan Parti Sarawak. The core problem for Muhyiddin's Perikatan Nasional (PN) Government has always been that it holds a razor-thin majority in the Parliament, one that has been under constant pressure, and that UMNO feels it has not reaped the rewards of holding the most parliamentary seats in the alliance.

The result has been a government held together by bad incentives. Muhyiddin named the biggest cabinet in Malaysian history, laden with opportunists happy to enjoy the perks that come with a cabinet position. Other rent-seekers were handed plum positions in the country's bloated,

inefficient government-linked companies.

The past few months have seen a split develop within UMNO, between those who prefer the status quo and those who are advocating a break from Muhyiddin's smaller Bersatu. This latter group wishes to go it alone at the next election, relying on its strong political networks and deep pockets to return it to power after its shock loss in 2018. It has since poured pressure on UMNO President Ahmad Zahid Hamidi to break with Bersatu.

On Jan. 3 Zahid obliged by calling for early polls, nearly three months after the party first threatened to quit Muhyiddin's coalition. He said Malaysians wanted to see UMNO and its Barisan Nasional bloc back in power again.

With the two parties on the verge of a schism, the Jan. 5 sacking of Barisan Nasional (BN) Secretary-General Annuar Musa, an UMNO stalwart and Muhyiddin ally who advocates for a closer alliance with Bersatu (and

was not in favour of calling elections during a pandemic), appeared to indicate that the UMNO rank-and-file are rapidly moving towards severing the alliance.

After his dismissal, Annuar hit out, accusing Zahid of colluding with Opposition Leader Anwar Ibrahim in his bid to topple the PN government and even of holding backroom negotiations with the Democratic Action Party (DAP), an ethnic Chinese majority opposition party that UMNO ranks view with deep suspicion.

UMNO's official stance is to not collaborate with Anwar or the DAP, but Annuar suggested Zahid may not be in the "right frame of mind" due to the 88 criminal charges against him on various counts of corruption, initiated by the previous PH government.

A powerful faction within UMNO, together with its supporters, is seething over the fact that Muhyiddin's government hasn't dropped those charges and has also overseen the criminal conviction of former prime minister Najib Razak, further fuelling opposition to Muhyiddin.

Malaysia's mess of acronyms, shifting alliances, patronage networks and personal enmities is perplexing to the uninitiated. And the intrigue comes at a cost — a struggling educational system, a flagging economy that has been downgraded by ratings agencies, growing public anger with the political system, and now, a lagging effort to secure vital COVID vaccines.

With until at least August to get the COVID-19 situation under control, Muhyiddin has space to strike whatever political deals might enable his coalition to survive to the next election, whenever it comes. But the pandemic-induced delay appears to be merely a stay of execution for a government that was cobbled together by defections, and seems destined to also fall the same way.



Muhyiddin: Leadership will survive for now

Alex Benjamin

JEWES ARE SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS IN EUROPE AGAIN

As director of public affairs at the European Jewish Association, I had our press release on the European Court of Justice ruling on kosher slaughter in Belgium all prepared on the morning of Dec. 17. Our media team had it translated into French, Italian and German. I called the press office of the court and had them send me the decision and statement the second it was announced. We were primed and ready.

The problem was I had the wrong press release ready. We were wrong.

We had anticipated that the court would follow the opinion of the Advocate General Gerard Hogan in September which said that bans on kosher slaughter were an impediment to the fundamental right of Freedom of Religion, enshrined in the European Union's own charter of fundamental rights.

We thought there was no way the court would slap a community already struggling under the twin weight of the pandemic and across-the-board spikes in antisemitism, never mind go against its own Advocate General.

We were wrong. The court backed a regulation banning the slaughter of livestock that have not been stunned, putting its idea of animal welfare above freedom of religion.

The European Court of Justice can dress this up in all the legalistic language it wants. A clear decision was made today. Jewish rights, Jewish practice, Jewish belief now enjoy second class European status. Behind animal rights, behind hunting.

I can assure you it pains me to write these words. I can also assure you that I am in no way sensationalising the issue. This is what the court decided. Of course, it won't say it in my words, but as a Jew, I can tell you, that's what it tells me.

You know the irony of the situation? I keep kosher-style, so a ban on kosher meat doesn't even affect me or my family per se. But it affects me and every Jew across Europe profoundly, deeply, painfully, whether we are practising or not.

As a people of faith, our traditions are not archaic remnants, but a living, breathing manifestation of our beliefs.



Europe's approval of bans on kosher slaughter effectively marginalises the continent's Jewish population

Some of us may not choose to live by all the rules, but they are our rules. They make us who we are as a people. They have sustained us, given us our identity for millennia. It is not a matter of adjusting to the latest vogue trend, or "getting with the times." This is about how we choose to live, and how we have lived generation after generation.

And just like that, with the stroke of a pen, at 9:42 am on Dec. 17, when the court's email hit my inbox, this entire glorious, proud and tenacious people was relegated to second class European status. Behind men and women on horses chasing foxes and rabbits around fields in order to tear them to pieces with hounds, and worse, behind the cattle that are led into the mass industrial complexes dedicated to their "humane" slaughter by a bolt to the head before the final cut is made.

I'm not going to go, in the short space afforded me here, into the bogus science surrounding slaughter that claims that slaughter without stunning is inherently cruel. I'm not even going to waste my breath on how some speak on the subject with such authority while ignoring the beauty and sanctity of thought that goes into the kosher slaughter process; how I don't know a single *shochet* – ritual slaughterer – who isn't gentle and kind, whose first and only thought

is making the death of the animal as swift and painless as possible.

Instead, I want to talk about the rank hypocrisy of Europe towards Jews. The well-meaning pats on the back when our synagogues are attacked, our people spat on, cursed at, murdered on European streets.

"Europe isn't Europe without Jews," these people say. They commission reports, they publish them. They line up after a synagogue is firebombed. "We love you," they say, "we are with you."

Not for a split second does it occur to them how two-faced this is. How morally reprehensible it is to us to be told that we are important and that we matter, while they legislate our way of life out of existence in Europe.

The dam was broken on Dec. 17. That morning the Jew was once again relegated to second-class status in Europe. And the leaders said nothing.

Alex Benjamin is the Director of Public Affairs for the European Jewish Association, a Brussels-based NGO which represents and acts on behalf of Jewish communities across the EU and wider European continent, both within the European Institutions and at bilateral level with member states. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

On Dec. 24, Israeli forces arrested a Palestinian suspect for the Dec. 20 murder of Esther Horgen, an Israeli mother of six killed while jogging near her home in the West Bank settlement of Tal Menashe.

Rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza on Dec. 26 and 28, and Jan. 18 and 19. They were either intercepted or fell in open areas or in the sea. Israel attacked various Hamas military targets in Gaza in response.

Year-end statistics released by the IDF showed the West Bank saw 60 terror attacks in 2020, up from 51 in 2019. 176 projectiles were fired at Israel from Gaza in 2020.

ISRAEL INCREASES PRESSURE ON IRANIAN PRESENCE IN SYRIA

Israel has stepped up the number and intensity of attacks on the Iranian presence in Syria, striking at least four times during January. In one of the more extensive attacks, on Jan. 13, Israel bombed at least 15 Iranian and Syrian targets in eastern Syria, near the border with Iraq, including weapons depots and bases hosting Iranians and Iran-funded proxy militias. A senior US intelligence official revealed that information provided by Washington facilitated the Israeli attack.

Analysts explain that Teheran has recently solidified its stronghold on the Syria-Iraq border to smooth the supply of weapons into Syria and to Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. Additional Israeli attacks in January targeted areas near Damascus, Syria's north and the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, where the Iranians are working to set up militias loyal to Teheran close to the border with Israel.

PA SETS ELECTION DATES; EVADES TERROR SANCTIONS

On Jan. 15, Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas issued a decree announcing that elections for the PA Parliament will take place on May 22, and for the presidency on July 31. Despite laws stating elections for these positions are to be held every four years, these would be the first elections held since a presidential vote in 2005 and parliamentary elections in 2006.

Meanwhile the PA is increasingly coming under pressure to halt its monthly stipend to terrorists jailed for attacking and murdering Israelis, and to the families of those who died carrying out terror attacks.

Under an Israeli military decree that came into force on Dec. 31 applying Israeli anti-terror legislation to the West Bank, any person who carries out a transaction which "supports, promotes, funds or rewards" terror will be subject to a prison sentence. This would include directors and staff of banks who process the payments made by the PA to terrorists and their families. Consequently, Palestinian banks are refusing to process the PA stipends.

The PA is reportedly now seeking to establish a new "Independence Bank," through which it would make the payments. However, in the meantime, the PA reportedly made 'pay for slay' payments three months in advance as a lump sum before the legislation took effect.

JOINT EXERCISES IN THE GAZA STRIP

On Dec. 28 Hamas led a joint military exercise with 13 other armed "resistance" organisations in the Gaza

Strip, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad and groups of former Fatah members. During the military training, rockets were launched towards the sea, and attacks staged included the simulated abduction of IDF soldiers, while drones and other technologies were displayed.

Meanwhile, Hamas has bulldozed the homes of around 23 Palestinian families who have lived for decades near the Rafah border with Egypt. On Dec. 15, the Palestinian Land Authority, which is affiliated with Hamas in Gaza, issued a decision to expropriate the lands in question with the aim of expanding the Rafah land crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.

IRAN ENRICHING URANIUM TO 20%

In January, Teheran notified the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that it will start enriching uranium to 20% purity at its Fordow plant. From 20% enrichment, achieving military grade enrichment of 90% is technically quite easy.

Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation head Ali Akbar Salehi said on Jan. 5 that an additional 1,000 advanced IR-2m uranium enriching centrifuges are being installed in sites across Iran. On Jan. 18, Salehi claimed that Iran is creating half a kilogram of 20% enriched uranium every day.

Teheran also reported to the IAEA that it began manufacturing equipment in Esfahan which will be used in the coming months to produce uranium metal – a key material for a nuclear warhead.

These recent moves constitute further major breaches of Iran's obligations under the 2015 nuclear deal.

US HIGHLIGHTS ONGOING AL-QAEDA PRESENCE IN IRAN

Following revelations about the assassination in Iran of al-Qaeda's purported number two Abu Muhammad Al-Masri in August, the US, on Jan 12, identified and sanctioned five other al-Qaeda leaders based in the country. One of these, Abd al Rahman al Maghrebi, is current al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's son-in-law and reportedly oversees the group's communications, including its media department and coordination with regional and global affiliates. The US State Department also confirmed that senior al-Qaeda officials Yasin al-Suri and Saif al-Adel are still based in Iran.

LATEST ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN COVID NUMBERS

As of Jan. 20, there had been 565,629 coronavirus cases in Israel, up from 374,760 at Dec. 20, while 4,080 Israelis had died from the virus. There were 82,652 active cases. By Jan. 19, approximately 2.5 million Israelis, 28% of the population, had been vaccinated, but the country was to remain in COVID lockdown at least until the end of January.

In the Palestinian ruled areas of the West Bank, there had been 153,093 reported cases by Jan. 20, up from 122,643 on Dec. 20, and 1,741 deaths. On Jan. 18, there were 10,754 active cases. In Gaza, there had been 48,341 cases as of Jan. 18, up from 32,158 on Dec. 18.

Reports stated that the Palestinian Authority was expecting its first batches of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine to arrive by Jan. 24, with Israel agreeing to facilitate its importation.

ISRAELI DEAL WITH PFIZER EXPEDITED VACCINE PROGRAM

Israeli media revealed that a deal to share data with the pharmaceuti-



Muhammad Jabarin, the millionth Israeli to be vaccinated against COVID-19, with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Health Minister Yuli Edelstein

cal company Pfizer paved the way for Israel to receive more than 10 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine by the middle of March, sufficient to vaccinate its total population over the age of 16. Israel stands to become the first country to complete its vaccination program.

Israel's Health Minister Yuli Edelstein said the Government will share the data with Pfizer to "see how

it influences, first of all, the level of the disease in Israel, the possibility to open the economy, different aspects of social life, and whether there are any effects of the vaccination."

Israel's efficient universal health care system and compact size mean that it is well placed to efficiently administer the vaccine rollout and to collect the relevant statistical data.

ISRAEL'S POPULATION IN 2021

Israel's population grew by 1.7% in 2020, standing at 9,291,000 by year's end. This comprises approximately 6,870,000 Jews (73.9%), 1,956,000 Arabs (21.1%), and 465,000 (5%) people of other ethnicities.

84% of the increase was due to natural growth, with immigration accounting for the other 16%.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

UNORTHODOX ORTHODOX ANTISEMITISM

Reports of antisemitism are depressingly common, but it is unusual for someone to spout antisemitic statements while trying to deny that there is antisemitism in the body he represents.

However, that's exactly what Ilia Karkadze, a deacon at the Orthodox Trinity Cathedral in Kutaisi, Georgia, did while supporting Ioane Gamrekeli, the Metropolitan of the Diocese in the wake of allegations that Gamrekeli had made antisemitic comments in a sermon.

In his Jan. 4 comments, Karkadze said that Zionist groups were on the side of "unkind forces", that Jewish groups controlled the whole banking system of the former USSR, and that Jewish people had poisoned Russia, asking rhetorically, who was Lenin, and who was Trotsky (in reality, only the latter was Jewish.)

Gamrekeli, in his Dec. 20 sermon, had reportedly called Jewish people a "race of

infidels" and "persecutors of Christians", so clearly no antisemitism there!

The Tolerance and Diversity Institute, based in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, criticised the sermon, so Gamrekeli accused it of seeking to damage Georgian-Jewish relations, as if it wasn't his sermon that had done that.

Ironically, on Jan. 8, Gamrekeli condemned Karkadze's statement defending him, saying it "represents completely groundless accusations against the Jewish people...not based on the teachings of the Church and is inspired with the antisemitic pathos."

That same day, Georgia's Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani wrote on his Twitter page that any manifestation of antisemitism will never find a place in Georgia, adding, "The history of Jewish and Georgian people is the history of brotherhood, friendship, standing by the side of each other, a role model for every country or nation. Even the slightest manifestation of antisemitism will never find a place in the heart and consciousness of Georgians."

Perhaps he should tell his country's clergy that.

COVER STORY

NEW BEGINNING IN WASHINGTON

ISRAEL AND THE BIDEN AGENDA

by Lahav Harkov

As Joe Biden began his term as United States President on Jan. 20, the Middle East probably was not foremost on his mind. Domestic issues are dominating the agenda in the US, including coronavirus and picking up the pieces after the attempted insurrection in Washington on Jan. 6, among others.

That means Israelis will likely be in somewhat of a holding position with the US on a wide range of issues to see how things will change.

But there is one issue that will likely come up very soon, and that is Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu did not even wait for Biden's inauguration to address it. He and his associates have repeated many, many times over the past two months that the US must not return to the 2015 Iran deal, which outgoing President Donald Trump left in 2018.

The urgency is not only because Iran's nuclear ambitions are an issue that is always foremost on Netanyahu's mind, being the biggest external threat to Israel, but because Biden himself has said he would like the US to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the world powers' nuclear agreement with Iran is called.

To be fair, there are caveats to that return. Biden would expect a return to strict Iranian compliance with the JCPOA. He has written and talked about opening negotiations with Iran to strengthen the deal, while others in Biden's orbit have referred more specifically to limiting the Islamic Republic's ballistic-missile program and its malign behaviour throughout the region.

However, at its core, the JCPOA has a major weakness, as far as Israel is concerned. Rather than say Teheran cannot develop a nuclear weapon, it simply delays its ability to do so. At the beginning of the deal, it severely limited Iran's enrichment capabilities.



Israeli leaders have much to discuss with new US President Joe Biden

But as the years go by, the "sunset clauses" lift more and more limitations, so that by 2030, Iran would effectively face almost no barriers to developing a nuclear weapon under the terms of the agreement.

The question remains as to whether the Biden Administration will recognise Iran's recent, increasing violations and change course. Since Biden's terms for a return to the deal include strict compliance by Iran, that return may not even be possible.

But Biden has appointed so many people from the Obama Administration who were instrumental in making the Iran deal happen – such as its top negotiator Wendy Sherman, nominated as deputy secretary of state; National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan; former secretary of state John Kerry in Biden's cabinet, among others – that it seems inevitable they would want to return to what they see as the deal's former glory.

But the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" sanctions regime on Iran has given the US leverage to try to extract greater concessions. It is possible that Biden

could negotiate a different, truly effective deal with Iran and call it “a return to the Iran deal” to save face.

The way Biden handles Iran will also likely have an impact on the Abraham Accords, the peace and normalisation agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.

The Obama Administration’s Iran policies were a major impetus for Israel and moderate Sunni states to build closer relationships based on intelligence sharing and other kinds of security cooperation in facing their shared Iranian threat. Netanyahu’s outspokenness on the issue attracted leaders in the region to join in a sort of coalition against Iranian aggression. The Trump Administration fostered those advances into open, public, official ties between Israel and its friends in the Gulf, and others followed.

It is possible that shared opposition to Biden’s Iran policies could have the same effect. But it seems more likely that without the US providing incentives, America being party to the JCPOA will do what it did in 2015: bolster secret partnerships.

That being said, Biden has spoken very positively about the Abraham Accords and has said he would like more Arab and Muslim states to recognise Israel.

He may encourage them to do so, though it is still unlikely he will put the same emphasis the Trump Administration did on what it viewed as one of its greatest foreign-policy achievements.

Where Biden is highly critical, and has been throughout his nearly 50-year career in Washington, is on the settlement issue.

For the past four years, the Trump Administration not only didn’t care where Israel built homes for its citizens, but encouraged the development of communities in the West Bank by declaring settlements to not be illegal per se and proposing a peace plan in which Israel would retain them all.

Now, it is likely that every announcement related to West Bank settlements will be met with criticism from Washington.

It is important to emphasise that Biden may have been vice president under Obama, but he is a different person. The many Obama alumni who Biden has appointed may be different when they follow “the spirit of the commander,” the Hebrew phrase for echoing a leader’s behaviour.

Biden and Netanyahu do not have the deep personal antipathy that Netanyahu and Obama felt toward one another, even if Biden has been critical at times.

“Bibi, I don’t agree with a damn thing you say, but I love you,” Biden has said publicly on multiple occasions.

Israel, of course, is not just Netanyahu. But when it comes to Biden’s sympathies, the Jewish state will be fine in that regard no matter who wins Israel’s election in March. Biden has called himself a Zionist and has a strong record of positive statements and votes in Israel’s favour.

Furthermore, defence cooperation between Israel and the US is not in question.

But that issue, along with settlements, the Abraham Accords and others, will likely be put on hold for now, while the Biden Administration gets its footing and tries to bring a deeply divided America back from the brink.

AIR

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PATIENT PRESSURE WILL BE KEY ON IRAN

by Michael Rubin

“If Iran returns to strict compliance with the nuclear deal, the United States would rejoin the agreement as a starting point for follow-on negotiations,” Joe Biden promised in a policy essay just weeks before winning the US presidential elections.

While Biden recognises the threat of Iran’s nuclear program, his team’s animosity toward former secretary of state Mike Pompeo’s maximum pressure strategy risks snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Partisan naysayers who call ‘maximum pressure’ misguided and ineffective are wrong. Pompeo’s demands amounted to an end to Iranian terrorism, hostage-taking, illicit nuclear work, ballistic missile breakout, and destabilisations of neighbours. To suggest such demands are unrealistic is to normalise rogue behaviour.

The idea behind pressure is sound. Twice, pressure has



The Iranian Revolutionary Guards are seeking to draw a redline around their ballistic missile program



reversed Iranian policies. In 1981, Ayatollah Khomeini released US hostages to relieve Iran's isolation. Then, in 1988, Khomeini agreed to a ceasefire in the Iran-Iraq War. He likened that truce to drinking from "a chalice of poison," but recognised regime survival required no less.

That Teheran ratcheted up nuclear work under former US president Donald Trump is true, but that does not mean pressure failed. Not all strategies neatly conform to the American political calendar. Iranian leaders burned through currency resources in the hope they could outlast Trump. In October 2020, the International Monetary Fund's estimates of Iran's available reserves were at US\$8.8 billion [AUD\$11.3 billion], a 90% decline from six months before.

Iran's hard currency haemorrhage is evident throughout the region. In December, I visited Nabitiyeh in the heart of Hezbollah-controlled southern Lebanon. After Iranian paymasters had slashed Hezbollah salaries, they learned that perhaps only 10% of the group's members joined for ideology; the rest simply had wanted the cash. The slaughter in Syria – Hezbollah admits to losing 4,000 fighters – and Iran's inability to respond in kind to the assassination of its military and nuclear chiefs have tarnished its image further.

Iran gambled everything in order to survive Trump. Partisans may despise Trump, but Biden could use the legacy of Trump's pressure to his advantage without abandon-

ing his desire for diplomacy. The Obama Administration erred by offering Iran US\$12 billion [AUD\$15.4 billion] simply to come to the table. If Teheran's reserves are near-zero, Biden might simply slowball diplomacy.

Indeed, letting Iran's hard currency reserves burn out may be the only way he can succeed. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, chief of the Revolutionary Guard's Air Force, marked the first anniversary of Quds Force chief Gen. Qassem Soleimani's death by drawing a redline around Iran's missile program. Among the biggest faults of the 2015 nuclear deal was the failure of Western countries to understand that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps controls up to 40% of Iran's economy. Rather than benefit ordinary Iranians, the regime channelled new investment disproportionately into hard-line coffers. To offer Iran relief upfront would allow the Guard Corps to insulate itself rather than incentivise cooperation. If regime survival is at stake, Khamenei might divert cash from Hajizadeh's and Hezbollah's slush funds into provisions for Iranians.

Biden could, however, put a progressive spin on his Iran policy. There is no reason why Democrats should support organised labour everywhere except inside Iran. The George W. Bush Administration missed its Lech Walesa moment when, in 2005, Iranian labour activists staged wildcat strikes to demand back wages and protest poor working conditions.

Every dollar the Revolutionary Guard-owned companies are forced to pay workers is money unavailable to fund nuclear enrichment or build missiles. Rather than simply give the regime cash transfers, money could be better spent on strike funds and in integrating independent Iranian trade unions into international confederations.

Biden might also rally progressives and European Greens to empower Iranian environmentalists. Anyone who has ever visited Teheran witnesses what poor stewards the regime is of the environment. The 5,500-metre Mount Damavand lies less than 80 km from Teheran, but is visible only a few times each year because of Teheran's thick smog. Rather than empower its environmentalists, the regime imprisons them. Simply put, the regime is both suspicious of any organisation that transcends class and politics and fears crossing the Revolutionary Guards, which own the worst polluting companies.

The Islamic Republic played the waiting game to survive Trump. Biden could return the favour to strip Iran of its nuclear ambitions. He might talk but without artificial urgency. And while his chief supporters might want to blunt sanctions, Biden might channel aid to the Iranians most oppressed by the regime rather than those who run it. To succeed, diplomacy should be both smart and bipartisan.

AIR

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*He is author, co-author or editor of nine books on Middle East policy. Reprinted from Inside Sources (www.insidesources.com).
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THE CENTRALITY OF THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

by Bret Stephens

In November 2013, I participated in an interview at the *Wall Street Journal* with Alwaleed bin Talal, a Saudi prince of legendary riches and blunt, if sometimes unsavoury, views.

It turned out to be an exceptionally interesting interview. Three months earlier, Barack Obama had surrendered his red line in Syria, refusing to make good on his prior threats of military action in response to Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons. Instead, Obama seized on a Russian proposal to have Assad voluntarily relinquish his declared arsenal – a proposal that proved remarkably easy to violate while heralding a new era of American fecklessness in the Middle East.



The US-brokered Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain offer some powerful lessons to the incoming Biden Administration

"The US has to have a foreign policy," Alwaleed said that day. "Well-defined, well-structured. You don't have it right now, unfortunately. It's just complete chaos."

As dismayed as Alwaleed was by Obama's climbdown in Syria, he was even more alarmed by Obama's turn toward Iran, in the form of an interim nuclear deal that would later become the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. The prince warned that Iran's supposedly moderate leaders were not to be trusted. He also hinted that Saudi Arabia had a nuclear option thanks to an "arrangement with Pakistan."

And then Alwaleed dropped a little bomb of his own. "For the first time," he said, "Saudi Arabian interests and

Israel's are almost parallel. It's incredible."

That a prominent Saudi prince was willing to say it on the record, in the pages of a leading US daily and in impolitic defiance of an American president, proved how right he was.

In many ways, the meeting with Alwaleed was the first hint of what, seven years later, would bear fruit in the peace deals known as the Abraham Accords. Israel signed the first of them in September with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. It is in the process of finalising (with the help of some US diplomatic bribery) ententes with Morocco and Sudan, will probably soon make a deal with Oman, and seems ultimately destined to strike one with Saudi Arabia itself. The prospect that the Arab–Israeli conflict, long thought to be the world's most intractable, might be brought to an end much sooner than anyone dreamed possible offers powerful lessons to the incoming Biden Administration for how to conduct a successful Mideast peace policy – provided it has the humility and good sense to learn them.



Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal: Predicted Israel rapprochement in 2013

THE ARAB RECKONING

It is not much of an exaggeration to say that Arab civilisation at the beginning of this millennium resembled nothing so much as a gigantic prison of desperate inmates, dangerous gang leaders, cruel wardens, and crumbling walls. It was also a civilisation that had long been in denial about the causes of its failures. As the historian Bernard Lewis pointed out at the time, for centuries much of the Arab world had developed an almost reflexive habit of accounting for its misfortunes by asking: "Who did this to us?" There was never a shortage of scapegoats: Mongol invasions in the 13th century, Ottoman overlords in the 17th and 18th, British and French imperialists in the 19th and 20th, and then, after 1948, the Zionists and their friends in America.

The endless search for outside culprits, Lewis noted, served to deflect a more difficult, if also more productive, question: "What did we do wrong?"

That began to change in 2002, when the United Nations Development Program published the first of five landmark studies, written by prominent Arab scholars.

Among their findings: Spain translated more foreign books into Spanish in a single year than the Arab world had translated foreign books into Arabic in a millennium. Spain also had a larger gross domestic product than all 22 states of the Arab League combined. Half of all Arab women were illiterate. Per capita income growth in Arab countries was the second-lowest in the world, after sub-Saharan Africa's, with 20% of people living on less than US\$2 a



A 2002 UN report compiled by Arab scholars underlined just how poor and dysfunctional most of the Arab world was

day. Unemployment was high and getting higher, especially among the youth. In terms of demography, nearly 40% of all Arabs were under the age of 14, the largest youth cohort in the world.

Though the report contained the obligatory throat-clearing about the alleged evils of Israeli occupation, it was refreshingly candid about where the real problems lay. The Arab world, it argued, suffered from critical deficits in political and personal freedoms, educational resources and scientific know-how, and women's empowerment. These were not the result of perfidious outsiders, but of repressive leaders, corrupt elites, and a broader inability to master the challenges of modernity.

If the conclusions of the Development Report seemed academic, its point would quickly be driven home by a more direct set of challenges. From about 2003 onward, Islamist terrorism – hitherto directed mainly against non-Muslims – turned the weight of its savagery inward. The same Arab leaders and secular intellectuals who privately saw the attacks of 9/11 as an overdue comeuppance for the United States, or had celebrated suicide attacks against Israelis during the Second Intifada, quickly learned how easily such methods could be turned against them.

The hard consequences of Arab economic mismanagement came home to roost as well. In 2007–08, global food prices rose sharply. Arab countries, which import most of their food, were especially vulnerable. In Egypt, consumer prices for bread rose as much as fivefold in the months before the 2011 collapse of Hosni Mubarak's regime.

The hardest shock of all was the Obama Administration's abrupt abandonment of decades of US policy in support of our allies. This came in the form of serial decisions to call for Mubarak's departure, withdraw all US forces from Iraq, steer clear of involvement in Syria, accept a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, negotiate a nuclear deal with Teheran guaranteed to strengthen its regional hand, and treat Russia's military re-entry in the Middle East with near-indifference. If much of the Arab

world's street had been infuriated by the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq, its leaders were no less appalled by the policy of American disengagement carried out deliberately under Obama.

Taken together, these developments underscored to Arab leaders – at least those still standing – the tenuousness of their position. Could they survive major internal upheaval? Would the US continue to guarantee their security? Was it possible to return the genie of Islamist fanaticism to its bottle? How could they reform their economies and societies in ways that provided opportunity and hope? Above all, what could be done to halt Iran's seemingly unstoppable rise?

ISRAEL'S RISE

As Arab leaders struggled to come to grips with their vulnerabilities, Israel was gaining a keener sense of its own strengths.

The Jewish state had also been in a bad state at the turn of the millennium. The misbegotten 1993 Oslo Accords collapsed seven years later in a diplomatic humiliation at Camp David for then-prime minister Ehud Barak. This was followed by an eruption of Palestinian terrorism, in which more than 1,000 Israelis – the proportional equivalent of 43,000 Americans – were murdered. The economy went into a deep recession. Media solons insisted that Israel could not possibly defeat terrorism through mili-

tary means. In many places, Israel was treated as a pariah state.

Yet within a few years, and despite stumbles such as the 2006 Lebanon War, Israel had turned itself around. The IDF crushed the Second Intifada. The economy recovered and thrived, with GDP rising from US\$132 billion (~A\$170 billion) in 2000 to almost

US\$400 billion (~A\$514 billion) in 2019. Israel's demographic picture did not, contrary to the usual anxious predictions, darken: On the contrary, as the Herzl Institute's Ofir Ha'ivry has shown, Israel's fertility rate is by far the most robust in the developed world, while fertility rates in the Arab world (including among Palestinians) have gone into a steep decline.

On the diplomatic front, Jerusalem significantly strengthened its ties with India, Japan, Greece, Oman, Egypt, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda, and Chad – all countries of strategic significance to Israel. And while Israel fought three wars against Hamas following the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, the Palestinian question has, for the time being at least, become less of an existential threat and more of a chronic condition.

What makes Israel's progress all the more remarkable is that it achieved it by consistently defying the reigning international consensus as to what it should do.

“What makes Israel's progress all the more remarkable is that it achieved it by consistently defying the reigning international consensus as to what it should do”

In 2011, then-US secretary of defence Leon Panetta said that Israel was becoming increasingly isolated in the region and that it was time for it to get to “the damn table.”

In 2014, Obama warned in a *Bloomberg* interview that time was running out for Israel to come to terms with the Palestinians. “If Palestinians come to believe that the possibility of a contiguous sovereign Palestinian state is no longer within reach,” the president said, “then our ability to manage the international fallout is going to be limited.”



In contrast to Arab dysfunction, Israel has offered a strong model of strategic, economic and diplomatic success over the past 15 years

Then-US secretary of state John Kerry added his own confident prediction in 2016. “There will be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world,” he said. “No. No, no, and no.”

What was it that Israel’s leaders understood about the region that the Obama Administration didn’t? Four main points stand out.

For starters, Israelis distrusted the so-called Arab street and hence were not enthusiastic about the so-called Arab Spring. Israelis understood, in a way that relatively few Westerners did, that the two most plausible alternatives to a secular dictatorship like Mubarak’s were, on the one hand, a radical theocratic regime led by the Muslim Brotherhood, or, on the other, chaos.

Israelis had also tired of the standard Western analysis that it was “two minutes to midnight” before the last hopes

for peace with Palestinians expired. A solution for the Palestinians would have to wait until Palestinian leaders stopped rejecting every Israeli peace offer and brushing aside every Israeli olive branch.

Israelis understood, too, how vulnerable Arab leaders were in the face of Teheran’s tightening grip over a crescent of Arab capitals that stretched from Baghdad to Damascus to Beirut to Gaza to Sana’a. That vulnerability was all the more acute as it became clear that the Obama Administration was not interested in standing up to Teheran’s imperialism. If Arabs wanted a determined and capable ally, they would have to look elsewhere.

Finally, Israelis knew that, in the Middle East, the coin of the realm isn’t love. It’s respect.

In bidding for the world’s love during the Oslo years, Israel had lost much of that respect. But in the last 20 years, the Jewish state won it back by: crushing the Palestinian terror apparatus; locating and eliminating a North Korean nuclear reactor in eastern Syria; assassinating powerful Hezbollah commanders such as Imad Mughniyeh in Damascus in 2008; challenging Iran across a wide domain; standing up to Barack Obama in Washington; and responding forcefully to attacks and provocations from Hamas. In doing all this, Israel demonstrated to its neighbours that, far from being their enemy, it could well be their most valuable asset *against* their enemy.

In November 2015, Israel opened a full-time diplomatic office in Abu Dhabi, officially as part of the International Renewable Energy Agency, making it the first permanent Israeli foreign-ministry station in a Gulf country. Such contacts would only become more frequent in the years leading up to the Abraham Accords. There were handshakes between senior Saudi and Israeli figures at the Munich Security Conference; there was intensified intelligence cooperation; and PM Binyamin Netanyahu made a public visit to Oman. To anyone paying attention, the Abraham Accords could not have come as any sort of surprise.

AMERICAN FECKLESSNESS

Near the end of the Obama Administration, a friend



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of mine half-joked that Obama had belatedly earned his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize – by uniting Arabs and Israelis in horrified opposition to him. There was more than a grain of truth to it. In the space of a few years, Obama, whose election was supposed to herald a new era of global respect for America, had succeeded in infuriating or betraying nearly all of America's traditional allies in the region while winning no new friends.

This was no way to conduct US foreign policy. Much as many Americans may wish it otherwise, the US continues to have vital interests in the Middle East. The US cannot allow a hostile power to dominate a region that accounts for close to 40% of global oil production (and oil that is much cheaper to produce than what is extracted by fracking from shale). It cannot allow the world's most fanatical regimes to acquire nuclear capabilities, setting off an arms race in the world's most combustible region. It cannot accept the permanent establishment of jihad incubators similar to what the Taliban established in Afghanistan, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Hezbollah in much of southern Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza.

Finally, the US has a long-term interest in encouraging reformers in the region wherever we might find them – whether it's in government ministries in Riyadh, a protest movement in Teheran, or a TV station in Dubai. But such encouragement is a far cry from the sort of democracy promotion that was embraced by the Bush and later Obama Administrations, which wound up legitimising political movements like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the followers of Musa Sadr in Iraq that view democracy merely as a vehicle to establish their own authoritarianism.

Where does the creation of a Palestinian state rank on this list of American priorities? Not high, in the final analysis. There's a shopworn argument that the failure to "solve" the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a major reason for ideological extremism and jihadist terrorism. Yet to the extent that extremists and jihadis care about, and act upon, their Palestinian grievance, it's to destroy Israel in its entirety, not to create a Palestinian state alongside a Jewish one. There is also an argument that a Palestinian state of some kind will be necessary to preserve Israel's Jewish and democratic character. But even if one concedes the point, it's an argument about *Israeli* interests, not American ones.

The infatuation so many US policymakers have with Palestinian statehood has disserved American interests in myriad ways.

- It confuses a vital national interest with a political wish – in this case, the wish of American presidents like Bill Clinton and secretaries of state like John Kerry to be lauded as peacemakers.

- It perpetuates the damaging myth that the plight of

the Palestinians is the gravest in the region – to the detriment of other Middle Eastern people, such as the Kurds, who have fared far worse at the hands of Turks, Iraqis, and Syrians alike.

- It perpetuates the false notion that a solution to the Palestinian issue would somehow solve everything else.

- It allows the Arab world to go on asking "Who did this to us?" rather than "What did we do wrong?"

- It plays into the propaganda of America's radical enemies, led by Iran, that *Israel's* behaviour, rather than their own, is the chief source of turmoil and injustice in the region.

- It asks that this same ally, Israel, weaken its defences and take the proverbial "risks for peace," when what America most needs from Israel is a strong country that can defend itself, come to the aid of its neighbours, provide the US with critical

intelligence and tactical know-how, and serve as a bulwark against the region's radicals.

- It puffs the vanity of Palestinian leaders and encourages them to pursue maximalist demands and reject every compromise, since it is only through the perpetuation of conflict that they remain relevant actors on the world stage.

- It stands in the way of full normalisation of ties between Israel and Arab states by tying normalisation to demands that Israel cannot safely meet, such as relinquishing the Jordan River Valley or allowing the descendants of Arab refugees from 1948 to return to Israel.

- It feeds antisemitic stereotypes. As one French ambassador put it not long after 9/11, "All the current troubles in the world are because of that shitty little country, Israel. Why should the world be in danger of World War III because of those people?"

In sum, not only did the Obama Administration harm US interests and values by overworking the Israeli-Palestinian issue, it harmed Israeli, Arab, and even Palestinian interests as well. Could the Trump administration do better?

To its credit – and to the pleasant surprise of some of its critics, including me – it did, in spades.

TRUMPIAN DISCONTINUITY

In February 2017, I wrote a column titled "Mideast Rules for Jared Kushner." Donald Trump's son-in-law had been handed the Israel-Palestine brief by the new president, and so I addressed him directly. "For Mr. Kushner," I wrote,

"the goal of diplomacy isn't to 'solve' the Palestinian problem. It's to anaesthetise it through a studied combination of economic help and diplomatic neglect. The real prize lies in further cultivating Jerusalem's ties to Cairo, Riyadh, Amman and Abu Dhabi, as part of an Alliance of Moderates and Modernizers that can

defeat Sunni and Shiite radicals from Raqqa to Tehran.”

I don't know whether Kushner read the piece, but the ideas I was expressing offered an intellectual foundation for what would become the Abraham Accords.

To the extent that the Accords are about the Palestinian issue at all, it is that they turn conventional thinking about it on its head.

Instead of the usual view that a Palestinian state is the *precondition* to full Arab-Israeli normalisation, the Accords suggest that a Palestinian state will happen only as a *result* of that normalisation. There is an intuitive and compelling logic to this. If Israel does not have to fear a hostile or chaotic neighbourhood, it has less to fear from a Palestinian state. And if Palestinians observe that good relations between Israel and other Arab states are the norm, there's less of a reason for them to stand out as the violent exception.

Yet the Abraham Accords are not, at bottom, about the Palestinians at all. On the contrary, they are about decoupling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Doing so has obvious benefits for all sides. Israeli airliners no longer

have to take a circuitous flight path to avoid overflying the Arabian peninsula. Abu Dhabi can acquire state-of-the-art F-35 jets from the US without risking a *de facto* veto from Israel's friends in Congress. American military strategists and intelligence operatives can leverage this burgeoning alliance both as an added deterrent and a force multiplier against regional enemies.

The significance of the Accords goes deeper. Had *raison d'état* governed the calculations of Arab statesmen, their quarrels with the Jewish state would have ended long ago. But the longstanding Arab refusal to accept Israel's legitimacy is the expression not of national interests. It's a civilisational impulse. It stems from centuries of faltering confidence and wounded pride, which even the most clear-eyed Arab statesmen – including Anwar Sadat and Jordan's late King Hussein – found hard to challenge.

Overcoming it requires a change not just of policy but also mentality, a willingness to rethink assumptions that are as much cultural and psychological as they are political and strategic. It means looking at Israel as a regional role model and strategic partner, and at Palestinians as just another nation. That at least two Arab leaders were prepared to do all this in exchange for no territorial concessions by Israel is a considerable tribute to their farsightedness. In this sense, the Accords are about finally coming to grips

with the fundamental causes of the decline of the Arab world, not just the immediate threats to its existence.

As for the Trump Administration, whatever else might be said about its conduct of foreign policy, it was refreshingly indifferent to State Department formulas and shibboleths that had governed 50 years of US policy and condemned it to futility.

They also show how little the US gains through a policy of Mideast even handedness. To his considerable credit, Trump shut down the Palestinian mission in Washington. He moved the US Embassy to Jerusalem. He recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. He offered a peace plan for an eventual Palestinian state that clearly

tilted toward Israel. The plan later provided the pretext for the Abraham Accords, after the UAE offered Israel a peace deal in exchange for Netanyahu backing off from his pledge to extend sovereignty to parts of the West Bank.

Simply put, US policy of being maximally pro-Israel did nothing to diminish America's standing with its Arab allies. If anything, it did the opposite. Why? In part because Arab solidarity with

Palestinians has always been opportunistic. But it's also because what Arab states want from the US isn't balance. It's reliability as an ally. An America that supports Israel to the hilt is one that understands the value of loyalty – an attractive feature to any country that looks to the US for support.

I write all this as someone who has never disguised or disavowed my disdain for Trump: I supported both of his impeachments and have never regretted my opposition to him. But I believe in giving credit where credit is due.

Nor am I optimistic about the direction of Mideast policy under Biden, whose sole idea for the region seems to be his eagerness to bring the US back to the JCPOA. But I believe in giving new presidents the benefit of the doubt.

In the short term, Biden's effort to return to the JCPOA will probably strengthen Israel's strategic ties with its new partners – at America's expense. US outreach to Iran will also likely stiffen Israeli resistance to US pressure to resume negotiations with Palestinians. Jerusalem would be rash to cede an inch if sanctions on Teheran are eased, to the benefit of Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and other Iranian terrorist proxies on Israel's doorsteps.

Still, it behooves the incoming administration to at least consider how the Abraham Accords can advance traditional Democratic foreign-policy objectives.



The Abraham Accords came about because of the Trump Administration's indifference to traditional State Department formulas and shibboleths

Peace: American presidents have sought, with mixed success, to normalise Israeli–Arab relations since Harry Truman was in the White House. This is not just a matter of altruism. The US benefits when its allies are not at daggers drawn and Washington doesn't have to worry about placating one side at the expense of the other. The history of Israeli–Arab wars has also been a story of US foreign-policy crises, whether it was the Eisenhower Administration rupture with Britain and France in 1956 over Suez, the nuclear alert during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the US intervention in Lebanon in the early 1980s, or Iraq's Scud-missile attacks on Israel during the 1991 Gulf War. The Abraham Accords are a major step toward ensuring that these sorts of crises never happen again.

Global strategy: If the Biden Administration believes that the US needs gradually to reduce the scale of its Middle-east commitments – perhaps for the sake of pursuing the Obama-era pivot to Asia – then it had better do so in a way that neither leaves chaos in its wake nor creates openings for American adversaries. Broad normalisation between Israel and Arab states can never fully compensate for a diminished US footprint in the region; no Israeli aircraft carriers exist to patrol the waters of the Persian Gulf. But it can help. A united Israeli–Arab front could stymie Iran's bid to become a regional hegemon, prevent Assad from regaining full control of Syria, and undermine transnational threats like Hezbollah or the remnants of ISIS – all of them threats to the US as well.

Regional integration: Israel's relationship with Azerbaijan, to which it sells arms (some of them used to appalling effect against ethnic Armenians in the recent conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh) and which it uses for intelligence purposes against neighbouring Iran, is one model for how Israel could cooperate with, say, Bahrain. A better goal for Israeli–Arab relations would be the old Turkish–Israeli alliance, which involved close commercial ties, extensive tourism, and mutually productive diplomatic cooperation. That relationship held for more than 50 years until the Islamist Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power. Arab–Israeli economic integration cannot by itself address the Arab world's social and economic challenges. But it points the Arab world in the right direction: cultivating human capital, and not letting past grievances stand in the way of future opportunities.

A (somewhat) more reputable United Nations: Imagine a UN whose business was less lopsidedly anti-Israel. Normalisation might dampen the organisation's infamous biases against the Jewish state, restoring some of its long-lost credibility.

Anti-fundamentalism: The biggest prize for Israel, as for the United States, would be for Saudi Arabia to join the Accords, which seemed to come tantalisingly close to fruition after Netanyahu paid a not-so-secret visit to the kingdom late last year. For the Saudi royal family, now deeply riven

over the question, it would also mark the ultimate reversal of policy: from being the principal Sunni underwriter of anti-Western, anti-Christian, and antisemitic Islamism to being a friend and partner of the Jewish state. That, in turn, would require a profound shift in how the kingdom approaches the practice of Islam, what it teaches its school-children, the mosques and madrassas it supports overseas. If what the US ultimately needs most in the Middle East is a region that doesn't export misery and fanaticism, then a prime objective of the Biden Administration's policy should be to push the kingdom toward Israel.

Yes, the Palestinians: A Palestinian state will never come into being on account of US or international pressure. It could, however, come into existence when two conditions are met. The first would come about when Israeli leaders have complete confidence that territorial withdrawals in the West Bank will not lead to Gaza-style results. And the second could happen when Palestinian leaders and people alike abandon their long-held goal of destroying Israel as a Jewish state, both by renouncing the so-called right of return and forswearing the use of terror. Both those conditions would be significantly advanced in a world where Israel had normal relations with most of its neighbours.

CAN BIDEN ACCEPT IT?

Will the Biden Administration pay heed to any of this? Given the usual tendency of incoming administrations from the opposing party to view everything done by their immediate predecessor as dangerous, stupid, or both, my hopes aren't high.

But the new administration ought to pay heed because the alternative will be failure. Iran has made it clear that it has no interest in returning to the JCPOA on anything but the deal's original terms, which would have lifted the arms embargo on Iran last year, and then lift restrictions on centrifuges and enrichment within the decade. Whatever the Biden team thinks of that, it's unacceptable to Israel and its new allies. For the US to return to the deal would bring the region closer to war. Nor will a resumption of talks between Israelis and Palestinians yield better results than the last time they were tried, during Barack Obama's second term.

But what if Biden simply accepted that a new dynamic is at last afoot in the Middle East, and that there can be immense upsides – and more than enough credit to share – by harnessing it to American purposes?

No matter what one thinks of Joe Biden, America desperately needs a successful presidency. The logic contained in the Abraham Accords offers him one shot at success in a place that matters, and where so many others have failed. **AIR**

Bret Stephens is a Pulitzer-prize-winning columnist for the New York Times. © Commentary Magazine (www.commentary-magazine.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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Going to Extremes

Creeping conspiracies in Australian politics

by Naomi Levin

Agrowing number of Australian politicians and political candidates are creating environments that are introducing Australian voters to the same conspiracy theories and extremist views that led to recent violence in the United States. Many of these conspiracy theories can also be traced back to dangerous antisemitic tropes.

This article exposes Australian political figures who are allowing extremist and false theories to flourish on their social media pages and political parties fielding candidates with backgrounds in far-right groups.

The coronavirus pandemic has been a central theme around which some of the world's most enduring conspiracy theories have reorganised themselves. Many of these conspiracy theories draw on age-old antisemitic tropes – that Jews have too much power, are greedy or wish to acquire wealth, and that Jews use human blood for ritual purposes. It is likely, though, that many of the people who are liking and sharing this content are unaware of its antisemitic roots.

Some of the most popular claims include that the virus is not actually dangerous – or even real – rather it is being used as a tool by political leaders to encourage conformity, limit freedoms or impose draconian laws. This is an appealing argument to those tired of living under lockdown restrictions. However, this claim is also used as a gateway to suggestions that a “global elite” is using the cover of COVID-19 to dominate global affairs. It does not take a super sleuth to find evidence of Jewish figures alleged as key actors among this global elite.

From a different angle, so-called “anti-vaxxers” worry that coronavirus vaccinations will alter recipients’ DNA or will somehow include a micro-chip so governments can track or control recipients.

All these claims have been fact checked by reliable sources and been found to be false. Yet they have implications for those concerned about antisemitism, with many of them seeming to be a new spin on the old blood libel smear, as even United Nations Secretary General Antonio

Guterres has recognised. Last November, Guterres said, “With COVID-19, another virus has spread – antisemitism and hatred of many kinds. Age-old blood libels have been given new life.”

AUSTRALIAN POLITICIANS AND GLOBAL CONSPIRACIES

In November 2020, Senator Pauline Hanson introduced a motion to the Australian Parliament calling on the Australian Government to reject “the Great Reset” and boycott the World Economic Forum (WEF). The only two senators who voted in favour of it were Senator Hanson and her one remaining party colleague, Senator Malcolm Roberts. Despite the vote failing on the Senate floor, there are others, on the Coalition benches, who have publicly condemned

the possibility of a “Great Reset,” including former minister Senator Matt Canavan, Member for Hughes Craig Kelly and Member for Dawson George Christensen.

The Great Reset is a collection of vague proposals espoused by the WEF, an independent non-government organisation that encourages cooperation between governments and business. The Great Reset is seen by the WEF as an opportunity to reconfigure the global economy and move toward “stakeholder capitalism” with “stronger and more effective governments” in the wake of the shock of the coronavirus



Craig Kelly's controversial post on “The Great Reset”

pandemic.

While opposition to the vague proposals that make up the Great Reset is of course legitimate, it becomes much more problematic when these proposals are presented as a conspiratorial plot, or an imminent threat to our way of life.

Conspiracy theorists see the Great Reset as benefitting “global elites”, an amorphous group of business leaders, Freemasons, socialists, communists and Marxists. According to the US-based Anti-Defamation League (ADL), “As is so often the case with conspiracy theories, one can find antisemitic sentiments in [critiques of] the Great Reset, with some believers going so far as to accuse Jews of orchestrating the plot or invoking George Soros and the Rothschild family.” ADL research also found that, while much of the concern about the Great Reset is founded in conspiratorial thinking, neo-Nazis and known antisemites are among key promulgators of Great Reset hysteria.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has issued neither support nor condemnation for the Great Reset. However, the *Australian Financial Review's* political editor

Phil Coorey has argued that these vague proposals to “reset capitalism” in a more socialist or communitarian direction are unlikely to be attractive to the current government.

Coorey’s assessment has not stopped a number of federal MPs repeatedly posting online about it. Liberal MP Kelly published a post on the Great Reset to his Facebook page with a photo of World Economic Forum head Klaus Schwab and a photo from a WEF video of a 3D printer with the text “scientists in Israel are creating plant-based meat.” More than 1,000 comments were left on the post, including references to the Jewish Rothschild banking family – a common link made in antisemitic tropes about Jewish power – and false claims suggesting Israel would only be making it for export and would never let its citizens consume the product (Israel actually has one of the largest percentage of vegans in the world).

Senator Roberts warned on his Facebook page that the Great Reset would be “much much worse” than the Weimar Republic – the German era in the early 20th century that immediately preceded the ascent of the Nazis and was politically democratic but very feeble and economically disastrous.

In an interview on YouTube, Senator Roberts describes the Great Reset as a continuation of Agenda 21. Agenda 21 was a non-binding sustainability plan adopted by UN members in 1992. However, some have presented it as a plot for domination by a corrupt global elite, or mechanism to impose socialism on the world.

A 2013 Southern Poverty Law Centre Intelligence

Report noted that some on the far-right are positing that Agenda 21 is a “Satanic Jewish conspiracy to control and enslave the planet,”

while University of Tasmania academic Dr. Kaz Ross has written, “Any talk of ‘global bankers and cabals’ directly taps into longstanding antisemitic conspiracies about supposed Jewish world domination often centred on the figure of billionaire George Soros.”

Both Senator Roberts and Dawson MP Christensen have posted content featuring Soros, a prominent Jewish philanthropist. Soros supports numerous causes in the US and Europe, including many decidedly left-wing ones – some of which, critics argue, are extreme. Soros has long been a target of the extreme right, as well as others, who oppose the causes he funds. Christensen hit back at critics accusing him of antisemitism, explaining that he didn’t

know Soros was Jewish and adding, for good measure, he himself had had a great-grandmother who was one-quarter Jewish.

In posting on their social media accounts about the Great Reset – which most Australians have never heard of, much less have concerns about – these MPs are lighting a flame that draws in conspiracy moths.

Responses to Senator Roberts’ posts include: “Soros [sic] is a fuckin’ old Jew and has never been any good” and “It’s time for a REVOLUTION and the emergence of hunting parties! Look out [Bill] gates, [the director of the US’ National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease Dr Antony] fauci, [Daniel] Andrews the people are coming for you.” More alarmingly for Jewish people, Senator Roberts also allowed this comment to remain on his page: “Hope for the western world ended in May 1945 in Berlin.”

And alarmism over the Great Reset is not confined to social media. Senator Canavan has appeared on *Sky News* calling it a global order that takes away “agency and sovereignty”. It is “crazy, kooky stuff”, he told host



Senator Malcolm Roberts (top) and coalition MP George Christensen (bottom) have posted content focusing on Jewish billionaire George Soros

“In posting on their social media accounts about the Great Reset... these MPs are lighting a flame that draws in conspiracy moths”

Paul Murray.

Conspiracy theories on Liberal MP Kelly’s social media pages are not confined to the Great Reset. He promotes coronavirus-related medical therapies not approved by Australian health authorities, and encourages scepticism about the safety of coronavirus vaccines.

An investigation on news site the *Daily Beast* found that far-right groups are increasingly jumping on the anti-vaxxer bandwagon in order to drive a wedge through their

societies and attract dissatisfied citizens to their cause.

The article quoted Imran Ahmed, founder of UK think-tank Centre for Coun-

tering Digital Hate: “Anti-vaxxers have huge platforms on mainstream social media that are open to exploitation by far-right groups,” Ahmed stressed, “just as they have been exploited by hucksters already.”

Among the comments on Kelly’s Facebook page in response to his anti-vaxxer posts are people equating the coronavirus vaccination with the Holocaust and others pushing arguments raised by those active in QAnon.

QAnon, as described by Canadian expert Marc-Andre Argentino, is “a decentralized, ideologically motivated and violent extremist [sic] movement rooted in an unfounded conspiracy theory that a global ‘Deep State’ cabal of satanic paedophile elites is responsible for all the evil in the

world”. QAnon has also been described by the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* and others as “laced with antisemitism.”

PAULINE HANSON’S ONE NATION CANDIDATES

Unrelated to the pandemic, but equally alarming, during recent elections, Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party endorsed candidates who held extremist and dangerous views.

Dean Smith (no relation to WA Liberal Senator Dean Smith) was 22-years-old when he was pre-selected to contest the regional Western Australian seat of O’Connor on behalf of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation. According to information he provided to the local *Albany Advertiser*, he was a labourer who wanted to invite German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to a dinner party and opposed immigration. The *Australia/Israel Review* has also discovered that prior to the election, he tweeted messages like “Jews gonna Jew, the white will out do”, praised former One Nation Senator Fraser Anning because he “got the mozzies [Muslims] scared” and abused a former South African cricketer for caring more about white rhinos than “white man”. More than 7,000 West Australians voted for him.

After being defeated by Liberal incumbent Rick Wilson, Smith retained his membership in Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, but sought to also connect with members of more hateful movements. He posted Holocaust denial material, continued to spread antisemitism online and, according to the US-based Southern Poverty Law Centre’s Hatewatch blog, Smith participated in an interview with members of “The Base”, possibly with a view to joining that dangerous white supremacist group.

The Base seeks to motivate members and provide train-



Torin O'Brien as One Nation candidate in 2020 (top), and in his previous role as head of the anti-Muslim Patriots Defence League (bottom)

ing to bring about a race war in order to rebuild a white society. Rinaldo Nazario, The Base’s founder, told potential recruits, “You’re going to be stepping into probably the most extreme group of pro-white people that you can probably come across.”

According to the Hatewatch blog, Smith was interviewed by The Base’s leadership one month after Base member 18-year-old Richard Tobin was arrested by US police after he tried to instigate “Operation Kristallnacht” – a plan to vandalise American synagogues. Smith apparently eventually withdrew his application to join The Base, but continued to share racist and antisemitic posts on his Twitter page and his now deactivated YouTube account.

Also representing Pauline Hanson’s One Nation, Torin O’Brien contested the seat of Rockhampton during the 2020 Queensland State elections. He received 12.4% of the vote, third after Labor and the Liberal-National Party.

O’Brien was previously national president of an anti-immigration, anti-Muslim group called the Patriots Defence League of Australia. Researcher Andy Fleming has circulated a photo of O’Brien wearing a Patriots Defence League of Australia t-shirt with the text “national president Torin O’Brien standing up for those affected by Islam.”

The *Australia/Israel Review* is unable to determine if the Patriots Defence League of Australia is still a functioning group, although the *Age* reported in 2015 that the group was deregistered “in the public interest.” Nonetheless, despite all of this information about his past being publicly available, O’Brien was endorsed as a One Nation candidate.

CONCLUSION

In 2020, the world watched as societal cracks widened at a rapid rate, with conspiracy theories and extremist language spread by politicians playing a major role in this trend. Important political figures in democratic countries chose to lend credibility to nonsensical claims, giving them a respectability they do not deserve. In the US, this culminated, in early January, with the violent insurrection at the US Capitol trying to overturn a democratic election. It is incumbent on Australia’s political parties – large and small – to ensure their elected representatives do not take Australia down the same path. If they do, Australia’s tolerant and multicultural society and democratic norms could be at significant risk.

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HOLOCAUST DENIAL AT A CONSPIRACY “ONE STOP SHOP”

by Ran Porat

The Melbourne-based website *Gumshoe News* is a one stop shop for wild conspiracies, including a sizeable amount of Israel-hatred, classical antisemitism and Holocaust denial.

The website claims that “We provide the public and government factual information and knowledge to assist in explaining what is happening in the world today. And that is what our many contributors do: INFORM with FACTS, history, and logic.” My investigation demonstrates that nothing could be further from the truth.

This first part in a series of articles to be published in the *AIR* will focus primarily on *Gumshoe News*’ content that promotes Holocaust denial.

THE EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

The *Gumshoe* team of editors and contributors appears to be comprised of fans of various anti-establishment conspiracies.

Those conspiracies prominently include claims that the coronavirus was invented by an evil global government to reduce the population, amass profits and control humanity through “fake” vaccination.



Dee McLachlan

The founder of *Gumshoe News* is Dee McLachlan, South African born, now residing in Victoria. She is a filmmaker and author of several children’s books with names such

as *The Big Fat Bank*, *The Three Tall Buildings* – about 9/11 – and *The People Who Refused to Be Sheep*.

McLachlan asserts that “The Victorian Govt, headed by Deep State Daniel Andrews (and his hidden WHO Vaccine Mafia bosses), are using fake, and highly paid Nursing Home ‘Covid’ deaths to enhance the Emotive Propaganda in this PsyOp that’s leading to an imminent Vaccine agenda, and a huge reduction in our collective freedoms & long-term social liberties.”

Another *Gumshoe* team member, “Barrister at Law and geopolitical analyst” James O’Neill, peddles conspiracies surrounding the 9/11 terror attacks and the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight WH17 over Ukraine in 2014. A fervent anti-Zionist, O’Neill labels Israel “the regime in Tel Aviv” and “the world’s second greatest lawbreaker (after the United States).” He also quotes from Philip Giraldis

toxic anti-Israeli article “Welcome to Greater Israel” (2016), talking about “a particularly noxious version of Israeli fascism.” He supports a one-state solution that would effectively erase Israel as a Jewish state, asserting that only “a single, preferably secular State in which all Palestinians and Israeli Jews have equal rights” is acceptable. However, he says, Israel will reject such a solution because “A country that builds a massive apartheid wall (never shown on Australian TV), murders women and children on flimsy pretexts, and completely ignores international law is never going to voluntarily share power.”

Sydneysider Phil Hingston’s content on *Gumshoe News* argues, for example, that the coronavirus is a made-up disease manipulated by the “Deep State Cabal” to administer “crook” vaccines in order to take control of Earth’s peoples and resources. Promoting the QAnon conspiracy framework, Hingston brings the Jewish Rothschild family into his conspiratorial worldview – “Financial and monetary corruption has been achieved courtesy of the Central Banking system. We can thank the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers for that.”

MARY MAXWELL

Another important *Gumshoe News* contributor is US-born Adelaide resident Mary W Maxwell LLB, a political activist who ran for US Congress in 2006, and the author of several books promoting conspiracy theories, as well as a play performed at the Adelaide Fringe Festival in 2019 titled *Crikey! Australian Conspiracies*.



Mary Maxwell

She was jailed for a short period in 2019 in Adelaide for breaching Section 121 of the Family Law Act, which restricts the publication of any accounts of any proceedings, or parts of any proceedings, that identify the parties or others involved in a case.

Conspiracy theories promoted by Maxwell include, for example, that the Bush Administration was behind the 9/11 attacks and that vaccinations are “a big fat, hoax.” She filed a suit against various US agencies arguing that the Boston Marathon bombing (2013) was a “psychological operation ... on the people of Boston via a terrorist incident” organised by the US administration. In December 2020, she filed a suit in the US seeking a restraining order against mandatory vaccination for coronavirus.

In her writings, Maxwell does not shy away from antisemitic sources. In one of her books, *Grass Court: How To Use Law To Deal with the Pandemic* she quotes (p. 56-57) from the infamous antisemitic forgery the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to ‘prove’ that the coronavirus is used by an evil world government to control humanity. On *Gumshoe News*, she claimed in August 2017 regarding the *Protocols* that “The

majority opinion is that the protocols are minutes of a meeting held in 1897 by members of the then-new Zionist movement. My opinion is that they were published with the name 'Zion' in order to deceive readers. As to who wrote them, it must have been someone who knew of the plan for control of the world. That control nearly exists today."

While 'analysing' (Apr 2017) the connection between "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and 9/11", Maxwell concluded that "Theodore Herzl, the leader of the Zionists at that time [of the *Protocols*], did not go around preaching anything about world control. I doubt he had the brains for it. I doubt he was sufficiently sociopathic."

"PROTECTING MY JEWISH COMRADES"

Maxwell is a central figure tied to most of the Holocaust denial on *Gumshoe News*. Explaining in a December 2015 post her motivation to deal with this topic, she mused that: "To me it looks almost certain that this Holocaust denial thing is a big set-up, scheduled mainly to harm Jewish people. Honest, I can smell it... My interest in the matter today has to do with protecting my Jewish comrades. Furthermore, we need the famous Jewish drive for justice, which seems somehow stuck in a quagmire. (Perhaps owing to the outrageous bombing of Gaza?)."

Maxwell attacked laws forbidding Holocaust denial because "Jews are victims of this stupid law. Surely Jews today do not want there to be any such law, but they perhaps do not know how to fight it. When I say 'Jews' here I mean Mom and Pop, not the leaders of this or that organization, or [former French President Nicolas] Sarkozy, etc."

Maxwell says that she is questioning the Holocaust's history "to protect my Jewish friends. It looks to me that this crackdown on revisionist historians has a long-term aim of stoking the flames against every Jew!". Discussing how "Jews are fond of pointing out that ever since the Middle Ages they have been shunted around," she rhetori-

cally asks: "Had the Jews (or their leaders) done something to deserve this treatment? Possibly they did, in some instances."

Commenting on one of her articles, Maxwell points at the 'real victims' when it comes Holocaust denial: "I am on record saying that I think the brouhaha re Holocaust denial laws is intended (by the Powers The Be) [sic] to stir up trouble AGAINST any and all Jewish people ... Although it looks like the 'deniers' are the victims – no doubt their lives have been greatly disturbed; they have been persecuted and impoverished by it – it could well be that there is a divide-and-rule agenda here."

Maxwell then expresses support for challenging accepted histories of the Holocaust by arguing that doing so had "maybe done a huge favor to Jews into the bargain. Yay Children of Abraham!"

AN EIGHT PART "HOLOCAUST REVISIONISM" SERIES

From mid-2017 until March 2020 *Gumshoe News* ran a series of eight articles written or edited by Maxwell titled "Holocaust Revisionism" – a euphemism for Holocaust

denial. These articles justify, promote and defend the work of 'celebrity' Holocaust deniers such as Ernst Zundel, Robert Faurisson and Fredrick Toben (Maxwell 'boasted' that the latter, who died last year, was her friend) and Ursula Haverbeck

– described fondly by Maxwell as "very intelligent, elegant German lady ... who has worked hard to restore the good name of her country."

In the series opener, "Thirteen Reasons Why I Am a Holocaust Revisionist" (November 2017) Maxwell talks about her decision to take a "critical look at the 7-decade old narrative of the Nazi killing of Jews en masse." Tout-ing the right to free speech, Maxwell says that she became curious because "there are also many tidbits of research showing that the standard depiction of the Holocaust has real problems." For example, she claims that "Professional, paid witnesses at the 1945-1949 Nuremberg trials [for Nazi war criminals] were relied upon for data about the Holocaust."

Rejecting the official estimate of Jewish Holocaust victims, Maxwell argues that "In numerous publications of the 1920s and 1930s it was claimed that 6 million Jews were killed in the first World War" – repeating a similar false claim she made on *Gumshoe News* in December 2015.

That same month, Maxwell echoed Fredrick Toben's claims, arguing that the number of six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust should be revised because the Auschwitz museum reduced the number of Jews who were murdered there from four million to "only 1.5 million".


"Maxwell expresses support for challenging accepted histories of the Holocaust by arguing that doing so had 'maybe done a huge favor to Jews into the bargain'"

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“Anyone could calculate (if there were no taboo on doing so) that the 2.5 million error had to be subtracted, resulting in 4.5. But no, the 6 million figure was to be held sacred.” The reason for the refusal to reduce the Jewish Holocaust victim count, says Maxwell, is clear: “One thing led to another, and Toben and European revisionist historians figured out that there had been a massive and deceitful propaganda campaign. We now know such a thing to be routine in politics.”

In the next edition of *AIR*, I will address more antisemitism and anti-Israel extremism featured on *Gumshoe News*. 

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PARTY TIME IN ISRAEL

by Amotz Asa-El

Faced with a fourth election within barely two years on March 23, Israelis expected to be served up the same tiringly familiar set of parties and candidates. But that won't be the case.

The names and faces that competed in the three inconclusive elections since April 2019 have been joined by no fewer than seven new ones with a viable shot to enter the Knesset.

While Israeli elections have always sparked the establishment of new parties, most were obscure formations headed by anonymous citizens which failed to get elected and never really entered the consciousness of the voting public. New parties that were successful – and there have been quite a few – usually emerged one at a time.

This time around there is a multiplicity of such new political organisations, all headed by well-known public figures.

The most electorally promising of these, *Tikva Hadasha* (“New Hope”), was launched by former education minister Gideon Sa’ar. Previously representing Likud, Sa’ar was in Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s inner circle until he fell from grace under circumstances neither man has ever publicly revealed.

Sa’ar’s decision in 2019 to challenge Netanyahu for the leadership in Likud’s primaries – which the latter won by



The “eloquent and cool-headed” Gideon Sa’ar is seen as Netanyahu’s most potent challenger

a margin of 72.5% to 27.5% – caused Netanyahu to leave him out of the current ministry. This ostracism in turn contributed to Sa’ar’s decision to break away from Likud and launch a centre-right competitor.

Also on the right, Lt-Gen Moshe “Bogie” Yaalon, a former IDF chief of staff who was Netanyahu’s defence minister from 2013 to 2016, is leading the *Telem* (“Furrow”) party. In the previous three elections, he had run as part of the Blue and White party. However, when Blue and White leader Benny Gantz made a deal to join a unity government with Netanyahu in April 2020, Yaalon and some of his followers joined the half of Blue and White that refused to join Netanyahu in government.

Also on the right, former transport minister Bezalel Smotrich has left Naftali Bennet’s *Yamina* (“Rightward”) party in order to field a new “Religious Zionism” party. Its platform is expected to reflect its leader’s blend of messianic hawkishness and religious ultra-conservatism, including a rejection of gay rights.

Meanwhile, on the opposite political flank, Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai has established a party called “The Israelis”. Though 76-years-old, Huldai is both fit and energetic, a well accomplished mayor with 22 years in office, who before that was an air force general and combat pilot who fought in three wars and downed three enemy airplanes.

To his left looms Ofer Shelah, who for the past eight years has been a senior lawmaker for the centrist *Yesh Atid* (“There is a Future”) party – and also a close friend of the leader of the party, former journalist Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid later became a core constituent of Blue and White). Shelah has now left Yesh Atid to establish *Tnuva* (“Momentum”), after feeling uncomfortable with his original party’s positions on the Palestinian issue, as well as some religious affairs policies.

In the political centre, economics professor Yaron Zelekha, a former accountant-general of Israel’s Treasury De-

“The proliferation of new parties is symptomatic of a growing vacuum in what was once a bipolar political system”



partment who became an anti-corruption crusader, is now fielding *Ha-Kalkalit* ("The Economic" party), promising an economic agenda mixing capitalism and social compassion.

Lastly, and also in the centre, is *Va-tikey Yisrael* ("Israeli Veterans"), a retirees' party fielded by 76-year-old Maj-Gen (res.) Danny Yatom, a former head of the Mossad spy agency who later served as a lawmaker for Labor.

Of the seven newcomer parties, Sa'ar's is clearly the most potent.

An eloquent and cool-headed lawyer, Sa'ar is popular among Likud's activists, and has already been joined by senior Likud personalities, most notably Ze'ev Elkin, who, until recently, was Netanyahu's higher-education minister.

A Zionist activist in the former Soviet Union until his immigration in 1990, the 49-year-old Elkin was one of Netanyahu's closest confidantes, so much that the Prime Minister had Elkin join him in his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin.

Sa'ar's party has also been joined by Likud's former housing minister Yifat Shasha-Biton, a 47-year-old with a PhD in education who is a native of Kiryat Shmona, a northern working class town which has historically been a Likud stronghold.

In recent months, Shasha-Biton emerged as a force to reckon with in her capacity as head of the Knesset Coronavirus Committee, a role in which she frequently challenged the Government and forced it to ease some of its emergency measures. Shasha-Biton will run as Sa'ar's number two.

While Shasha-Biton reinforces his social flank, Sa'ar has similarly bolstered his nationalist credentials by enlisting Danny Dayan, a settler leader and former chairman of the Judea and Samaria Council, who also served as Israel's Consul General in New York.

Sa'ar has also enlisted Likud lawmakers Michal Shir and Sharren Haskel (who was formerly an Australian resident); Eilat Mayor Isaac Meir Yitzhak Halevi, also originally from Likud; and former communications minister Yoaz Hendel and Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee Chairman Zvi Hauser, both originally from Blue and White.

Polls suggest Sa'ar will win some 15% of the electorate, about a third of that coming from Likud voters, and the rest drawn from Blue and White supporters.



New party leaders (from top): Bezael Smotrich, Ron Huldai, Ofer Shelah, Yaron Zelekha

The second most promising new party is Huldai's, which is predicted to win around 6%. Joined by the former head of the Histadrut Labor Federation Avi Nissenkorn, until recently justice minister on behalf of Blue and White, the party is expected to primarily attract former voters of the dying Labor Party.

The rest of the new parties are hovering in polls around the electoral threshold, but experience teaches that one or two might emerge as dark horses, garnering a spontaneous protest vote, the way an obscure pensioners' party won six seats in 2006, and then became part of the government.

In any event, this colourful plethora of political green shoots raises two questions: what does it represent and what will the consequences be?

New parties have rocked Israel's political system repeatedly since 1965, when David Ben-Gurion himself left his own party and established Rafi in a (frustrated) attempt to replace Labor as the ruling party. Some new parties caused major political upheaval through sudden success, most notably the liberal Dash, whose 15 Knesset seats in 1977 caused Labor's first-ever loss of power, and Kadima, which won the 2006 election a mere four months after it was established.

However, this election season's proliferation of new parties, mostly headed by respected and accomplished public figures, is unprecedented. It clearly reflects something larger than just the ambitions of the various political protagonists.

In the narrower, immediate context, it reflects widespread discontent with Netanyahu, a sentiment that all the new parties share, albeit for varied reasons and with differing intensities.

Smotrich, for instance, avoids attacking Netanyahu over his corruption indictments, as does Yamina's Bennett. Both instead focus on Netanyahu's performance in the face of the pandemic, which they say was overbearing, improvised, inconsistent, and exorbitant, both socially and financially.

Sa'ar, by contrast, accuses Netanyahu of having prioritised his own personal legal situation over the national interest.

He has been joined in this allegation, in even harsher words, by Netanyahu's former protégé Elkin. The pair's attitude means the public attack on Netanyahu's moral

record is spreading from the left and the centre to the mainstream right.

In a broader, historic sense, the proliferation of new parties is symptomatic of a growing vacuum in what was once a bipolar political system. One pole, Labor, Israel's founding party, has almost completely vanished and is predicted to fail to win any Knesset seats for the first time in history. At the opposite pole, Likud is arguably in the early stages of its own disintegration, a process which may well intensify whenever Netanyahu departs the political scene.

Polling suggests the seven new parties may, collectively, gain the votes of a quarter of the electorate on March 23. When combined with Yesh Atid, established eight years ago, and Yamina, which is 18-months-old, new parties may prove to collectively represent more than half of Israeli society.

Likud remains, for now, alone on top with a predicted 26-28 of the Knesset's 120 seats according to polls, much more than the next largest parties, Sa'ar's Tikva Hadasha and Lapid's Yesh Atid, which are predicted to get 16-20 each.

Yet, of the newer parties, only two – Yamina and Religious Zionism – do not rule out serving in a government led by Netanyahu. It follows that, even with Likud the largest party, gathering a 61-seat governing coalition is looking like an uphill battle for Israel's longest serving PM.

If indeed he fails to form a government, gone might be not only Netanyahu's premiership, but also the party system in which his 12-year hegemony over Israeli politics thrived.

AIR

AN ISRAELI SCHOLAR “GOES” TO INDONESIA

by Giora Eliraz

More than once, I have been invited to speak at academic forums in Indonesia. However, in the absence of diplomatic relations between Indonesia and Israel, this proved too complicated to realise.

While there is some trade activity by Israeli business-people in Indonesia, academic activity there by Israelis can best be described as non-existent, and the idea of giving lectures from a podium in an Indonesian university seemed fantastic. It became even more far-fetched if the potential talk's topic relates to politics and, as such, might be potentially sensitive. Therefore, as far as I could see, any such scenario remained purely hypothetical.

And yet the coronavirus era offered me an opportunity to make “real” such a hypothetical situation. In the wake of

two articles I published, one in Singapore and the other in Australia, on the delayed and carefully-phrased response by Indonesia to the peace agreements between Israel and both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, I was invited to speak “in Indonesia”. This time, I actually “arrived”.

In October, I addressed a webinar initiated by the Students Association of the Department of International Relations (KOMAH) at the Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII) in Yogyakarta. This city is located in the central part of Java and is known in Indonesia as a centre for higher education. The UII has deep roots in the national history of the Indonesian state.

The webinar topic was: “Normalisation of relations between Arab Countries and Israel: Political interests & the status of Palestine.” I was invited to be the first speaker and to join both the webinar's moderator, Dr. Muhammad Zulfikar Rahmat, and the second speaker, Mohamad Rezky Utama. It is apparent from the UII's website that the normalisation of relations between Israel and the UAE has stirred a particular interest among the students of the Department.

An Israeli scholar speaking at an Indonesian academic forum on the normalisation of relations between Israel and Arab countries, including its implications for the Palestinian issue, is potentially a highly charged topic, for two reasons. As of now, Indonesia strictly adheres to a policy that establishing diplomatic relations with Israel cannot occur until a peace agreement is reached between Israel and the Palestinians that includes the creation of an independent Palestinian state. Second, and more importantly, the Palestinian cause strikes powerful emotional chords in Indonesia, on two different levels.

Indonesia's high level of commitment to the Palestinian cause is strongly tied to the nation's long-standing national commitments to decolonisation and anti-colonialist sentiments, traceable back to both the War of Independence against the Dutch (1945-1949) and Indonesia's role in the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1950s. The second chord is an Islamic one. The majority Muslim population in Indonesia feels considerable solidarity with the *ummah*, the global Muslim community. As such, the Palestinian struggle is also largely perceived as a struggle which engages all Muslims.

In the actual webinar, referring to a background paper and questions prepared by the students beforehand, I opened by saying that describing the move by the two Arab Gulf countries as a violation of the Arab League consensus on Palestine might be missing the big picture. It is an independent move by two successful countries reflecting rapid change in the region and the global system. Normalisation is expected to serve the economic welfare of the entire region, and the two Gulf states have not retreated from their commitment to the Palestinian cause and a two-state solution.

The main part of my talk addressed Israel-Indonesia relations, a question that has been triggered by normalising relations between Arab countries and Israel. I presented a series of arguments to suggest Indonesia may want to revisit its traditional stance on this matter. Among them:

- Indonesia often signals an interest in being involved in Middle Eastern affairs, including in conflict resolution efforts and the peace process for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This interest is closely connected with its concern about the spread of religious extremism from the Middle East. Obviously, the absence of diplomatic relations with Israel makes such a function much less viable;

- Indonesia, as home to the world's largest Muslim Sunni population and as a polity that is strongly inspired by values of religious moderation, tolerance, progress and development, has much in common with countries such as the UAE and Bahrain;

- Indonesia's vision of rapid economic growth also depends on substantial economic cooperation with the Gulf countries. The planned projects associated with normalising relations with Israel attest that broader, more ambitious economic cooperation can be carried out in the context of full diplomatic relations, including direct involvement by governments. By definition, the great potential of economic cooperation between Indonesia and Israel cannot achieve full momentum without diplomatic relations;

- Indonesia's fundamental guiding foreign policy principle of *bebas dan aktif* ("independence and activism") seems to also imply creativity, flexibility and adaptation to changing circumstances. This is exactly the implicit spirit of the normalisation initiative by the two Arab Gulf states;

- The legacy of Indonesia's first democratically elected president, the late Abdurrahman Wahid, includes a call to establish diplomatic relations with Israel and an encouragement of intensive dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Jews.

This last point led interestingly into the presentation by the second speaker, Mohamad Rezky Utama. Last February, he visited Israel as a member of group of Indonesian Islamic leaders and educators conducted under the auspices of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council's Rambam Program. It was described as a trip "In the Footsteps of Gus Dur", intended to honour the memory of president and religious leader, Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur (1940-2009), who sought to improve Jewish-Muslim understanding globally.

I was privileged to have had the opportunity to personally meet Wahid, and my meeting with this great man has

been a source of inspiration for me throughout my career.

It was clearly evident through Mohamad's talk that his intensive visit to Israel, and to the Palestinian Authority territories as well, had a great impact on him. It was an eye-opening experience that appears to have given him and his colleagues a new perspective about the rights and equality enjoyed by the Arab population in Israel, as well as about the geostrategic position of Israel and the risks it faces.

Beginning with a historical review encompassing hundreds of years, Mohamad delivered a message to the young students participating that the Jews have deep historical roots in the land of Israel. He also noted that Muslims and

Jews lived together in peace and harmony for hundreds of years. He mentioned in this context the great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, using the Hebrew acronym Rambam.

At the same time, it could be implicitly understood that Mohamad firmly shares the Indonesian consensus about the need to find a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that secures the rights of the Palestinians to their own state. Smilingly, he rebuked both sides of the conflict for dragging their feet for decades, explaining that it is really hard for Indonesians to understand why the Israelis and the Palestinians have failed to agree on a solution. He added that "if it was our case", a solution that would enable all to live

together in peace would definitely have been reached years ago. Mohamad's claim is not groundless; Indonesia has amassed a positive track record of resolving complicated local conflicts peacefully, including inter-religious and inter-sectarian conflicts.

And finally, the students appeared to fully appreciate this unique event. Their representative body, KOMAHI, even expressed hope that I would participate in their next webinar, and awarded me a Certificate of Recognition for speaking to them.

For me this unique opportunity to talk to young Indonesian scholars offered me yet more proof that societies of the Middle East, including Israel, can benefit a great deal from real people-to-people diplomacy with Indonesia. The Middle East needs the energy and perspectives of young Indonesian scholars and students, who strongly adhere to values such as tolerance, democracy, interfaith dialogue, peaceful conflict resolution, gender equality and progress.

AIR

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President and religious leader Abdurrahman Wahid, and the group of Indonesians who visited Israel last year to follow in his footsteps



The Life of a Celebrated Mass Killer

The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the US and Iran's Global Ambitions

Arash Azizi, Oneworld, 2021, 320pp., RRP\$41.65

by Peter Theroux



Late in Arash Azizi's fluent and groundbreaking new biography of the late Qassem Soleimani, *The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the US, and Iran's Global Ambitions*, the author tells us that the summer before Soleimani was killed, "Israel's former prime minister Ehud Olmert spoke of his old adversary Soleimani in a radio interview: 'There is something that he knows, that he knows I know, that I know he knows, and both of us know what that something is.' He paused for a moment and added: 'What that is, that's another story.'"

Welcome to the shadows. Azizi reads Olmert's remarks as a threat, and perhaps they were, but amid the apocalyptic and violent threats launched from Teheran over 40 years – mostly directed at Olmert's country – the former Israeli PM sounds positively neighbourly.

Soleimani's hatred of Israel was obsessive. So many things he touched were named Quds (the Arabic name for Jerusalem) – the Quds Training Barracks, the Islamic Revolutionary

Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, and a couple of operations in the Iran-Iraq War.

Soleimani endured a Dickensian rural boyhood of shame due to impoverishing family debt and menial jobs. He moved on to steady work, a love for karate, a fondness for *Scarface*-style

"The self-aggrandisement and tolerance for slaughter that were planted in Soleimani's youth achieved their peak during the destruction of Syria"

men's fashion outfits, and religious radicalisation. With the coming of the revolution in 1978 and then the Iran-Iraq War, he sought ever closer engagement at the front, as a member of the nascent IRGC, a militia "which grew to overshadow and dwarf the army ... [Soleimani's] calm and quiet demeanour did little to hide his ambition. He planned to make this war his own."

He was wounded in the grandly titled "Operation Path to Jerusalem", which more modestly did liberate the town of Bostan from Iraqi control.

The Iran-Iraq War showcased the fearlessness within the young Soleimani's damaged psyche. His role in operations "Dawn 8" and "Karbala 4" are noted twice and both operations were debacles. The butcher's bill of

Karbala 4 and 5, indeed the whole futile Iranian war against Iraq from 1982-88, was atrocious – James Buchanan called it the greatest catastrophe to befall Iran since the Mongol invasions – but in Soleimani's world view there was no disaster nor guilt.

The self-aggrandisement and tolerance for slaughter that were planted in Soleimani's youth achieved their peak during the destruction of Syria in order to buttress the Assad regime and the near destruction of Lebanon through the arming of Hezbollah and backing of its attacks on Israel. Soleimani was also particularly proud of the IRGC's role in arming Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and training their bomb-makers and logistics officers to wage missile warfare and suicide attacks. Azizi offers a superb account of the latter group's suicide bomb attack at the Maxim restaurant in Haifa in October 2003 and of the IRGC's real-time delight at the bloodshed from the Quds Force safe room in Damascus.

"As Yasser Arafat condemned the attack in the strongest terms," we read, "the Iranians were jubilant at the credibility it would bring them."

Following the terror attacks on the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, American diplomat Ryan Crocker opened a diplomatic channel to the Iranians on working together against al-Qaeda. Shortly thereafter, in January 2002, US President George W. Bush scolded Teheran as being part of an "Axis of Evil." In Washington DC mythology, the president's description of Teheran's elites – "an unelected few repress[ing] the Iranian people's hope for freedom" and "pursuing nuclear weapons" – so offended the Iranians that their negotiators quit, and American diplomats experienced a "traumatic moment."

My own tiny mind boggles at the fact that a regime, that kept up a daily stream of insults at the United States, with "Death to America" being chanted in its parliament, mosques, and schools, along with ritual immo-

lation and trampling of the American flag for four decades, retreated to a fainting couch at a single insulting reference in a speech and ruled out working together against al-Qaeda – many of whose surviving leaders found refuge in Teheran.

Whether Soleimani and his IRGC cohort preferred to partner with Osama bin Laden, or whether Bush's words were the cause, Soleimani was spared the prospect of partnering with the United States until negotiations came to fruition in Barack Obama's second term. The first locus of that cooperation was in support of the mass-murdering regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, whose survival Obama committed to recognising as an Iranian "interest" that the US would accommodate in his blueprint for a new regional security architecture.

Yet the Iranian regime itself was hardly unanimous in its embrace of Syria's brutal and corrupt tyrant. "We knew Assad was a dictator with no religion," a Quds Force member said – Assad is an Alawite, considered by some Muslims to be heretical. "Some people grumbled about this early on. But when it became clear that the leader had decided personally on this strategy, we all obeyed."

By the time the Arab Spring reached Syria, Teheran had decided that this Baathist domino must not fall. The Iranian Foreign Ministry and army were sidelined, and the entire pro-Damascus project given to the IRGC. "Iran would later link its massive armed intervention in Syria to the rise of ISIS," Azizi writes, but "evidence suggests otherwise. From the very moment Assad faced popular protests, the Quds Force and Teheran were ready to do all they could to save the rule of the Baath Party."

ISIS – "an American-Zionist group," in Soleimani's words – became the IRGC's target in Iraq after

the Americans agreed to withdraw. The Iran-Iraq War was part of a decidedly imperialist Iranian strategy of controlling foreign lands through powerful militias that answered to Teheran. After Hezbollah in Lebanon came Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq among others, which included Afghan and Pakistani mercenaries recruited by



Gen. Qassem Soleimani: An impoverished childhood followed by success during the Iran-Iraq war made him who he was

Iranian agents with Iranian – and later American – money. The formerly discreet Soleimani now strutted around these ruined domains like a Roman proconsul, seeing only proud conquest – his basis of comparison being poverty, carnage, and short, brutal lives that had become normal in Iran under Khomeinist rule.

Azizi is a skilful interpreter of Soleimani's moves, and an astute analyst of how Iran's "living martyr" lied, schemed, and abetted the ugly torture and murder of true revolutionaries and Muslims across the Middle East, and wherever else the IRGC's reach permitted. The supposedly humble and obedient patriot from Kerman sought and achieved authority at the highest levels of Iran's military and terrorist power structure, and was the second-most-powerful man in the regime at the time of his death.

Even so, some of Azizi's revelations verge on the amazing. He records Soleimani's direct order for a Houthi sniper to kill former President Ali

Abdullah Saleh of Yemen. In a well-sourced work of history, this nugget is not footnoted, but it seems consistent with Soleimani's callousness, especially given Saleh's on-and-off ties to the United States and Saudi Arabia. Yet how many critics of the American action to kill Soleimani knew of the latter's own order to murder a foreign head of state – and a Shi'ite Muslim one at that? Further, Azizi asserts that the militia rioting and siege at the US Embassy in Baghdad in January 2020 – almost a mirror image of Teheran in 1979 – occurred on a direct order from Soleimani.

Azizi is also at his best sketching out the complex and shifting array of the pre-revolution feuds and alliances among Iranians in the diaspora.

The devout, canny, Qom-born Sayyid Musa Sadr in Lebanon exemplified one model of patriotic soft power – "one of the most successful transnational transplantations of a political figure in modern history." Azizi also places Ali Shariati, Mostafa Chamran, and Ebrahim Yazdi in this company. Had Teheran gone the Shi'ite soft power route, versus its choice to export the revolution, it might today be a dominant and peaceful regional power enjoying good relations with Washington and the West.

Soleimani's death was greeted with both mourning and rejoicing inside Iran. Azizi describes the joy of Syrians at the news; their country had been savaged by the Baath regime and its Iranian overlords. Iranians, particularly the young and freedom-seeking, would have remembered the paramilitary violence against protesters that Soleimani had personally urged on. They may also have appreciated that the American missiles that incinerated him had spared them his final ambition: "In November 2019, [Soleimani] asked some of his men to look into a presidential run."

Against a backdrop of solid history and ground-breaking reporting, it seems almost churlish to note a few errors of fact in Azizi's fine book. Richard Nixon served in the US Congress as a representative and senator from California, not its governor, as Azizi writes. The Lebanese Phalange Party's armed men, not the Israel-backed South Lebanon Army, committed the massacres in Sabra and Shatila. There are other such examples, none of them major.

Understandably, bin Laden merits few mentions in Azizi's book, since the two killers never met, and yet to grasp Soleimani it is worth a comparison with his Arab coeval (the two men may have been born less than a week apart in March 1957; historians spar over the three possible birth dates for Soleimani, with Azizi favouring the earliest one). They had much in common: high intelligence, a flair for theatrics and motivational speaking, and similar pathologies rooted in early-life humiliation. Both showed the world, and their closest confidantes, modest, humble, and soft-spoken exteriors that masked ruthless egoism and bloodlust.

Some parallels originate in the two regional wars birthed by the Islamic revolution. Iran's torching of its relations with its American ally, and the diplomatic isolation brought on by the hostage-taking of American diplomats – plus the purge of its own senior military personnel (possibly exceeding 12,000, according to historian Abbas Amanat) – emboldened the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan and Iraq to invade Iran, two aggressions unthinkable had the Shah been in power. The Afghan jihad shaped bin Laden as the Iran-Iraq War shaped Soleimani. Both budding psychopaths experienced slaughter at an early age, and both men's world views were formed during the barbarities of those wars, both of which were consequences of a revolution that was a disaster not only for Iran but for multiple neighbouring

countries – yet is still often treated as a somehow necessary and desirable consequence of the Shah's rule, for which the United States is assumed to bear a large portion of responsibility.

Shaped by the consequences of the Iranian revolution, bin Laden and Soleimani became new-style heroes of anti-American jihad running vivid but divergent public relations campaigns. In the mid-2000s, bin Laden suddenly ceased appearing in open-air al-Qaeda propaganda videos. The doe-eyed mujahid, raised in Saudi Arabian luxury, had seemed to relish a soldierly image, clambering over boulders for the camera with his sidekick Ayman al-Zawahiri, or humping his backpack and Russian rifle over rugged terrain in Afghanistan during the war against the Soviets. A wide-shot video clip of a heavily armed bin Laden and al-Zawahiri navigating a steep hike down a gully, stepping like mountain goats while preaching jihad to the camera, probably altered his fondness for outdoor theatrics: Legend has it that the US intelligence community ran the clip past botanists, geologists, and lepidopterists, who studied the rock formations, bird-song in the background, butterflies, and the slant of the sun, and are said to have identified almost to the exact day and square kilometre the site in Helmand Province where the clip

was shot. Bin Laden quickly adapted to a more cautious Punch-and-Judy puppet show format where he spoke within a sort of little stage within a tent with a colourful fabric background, until he later dispensed with video altogether in favour of audio maledictions.

Soleimani's trajectory when it came to discretion versus preening was the opposite. After 20 years in the shadows, he hit his stride in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and seemed to relish that he enjoyed the de facto protection of American power after the 2015 nuclear deal. His threats grew bolder, promising a "bloody intifada" in Bahrain in June 2016 and mocking President Donald Trump in a famously boastful speech in July 2018. He promiscuously immortalised visits to his militia fighters in Iraq with selfies. Whereas bin Laden knew he was being hunted, Soleimani seemed confident that he wasn't. Azizi cites Ryan Crocker as observing that the general "allowed his ego to overcome his judgment... The shadow commander came out of the shadows. He did not live long beyond that world of shadows."

AIR

Peter Theroux is a Los Angeles-based writer and translator. This article is reprinted from Tablet Magazine, at tabletmag.com, the online magazine of Jewish news, ideas, and culture. © Tablet Magazine, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

PYRAMID SCHEME

The *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (Jan. 13) reported on a well-intentioned but likely futile initiative launched in Cairo by Egypt, Germany, France and Jordan to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was quoted saying that “a settlement to the Palestinian cause will change the reality and conditions of the entire region for the better, by opening new paths and horizons for regional cooperation between governments and peoples.”

The report explained that Sisi’s comments were made in the context of the recent peace accords between Israel and Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Sudan and Morocco.

The story crossed over into opinion when it stated that “the Palestinians suffered numerous setbacks under the outgoing administration of US President Donald Trump.”

The “setbacks” included “Trump...sidelin[ing] the Palestinian Authority, recognis[ing] Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and mov[ing] the US Embassy there from Tel Aviv. His administration also slashed financial assistance for the Palestinians and reversed course on the illegitimacy of Israeli settlements on land claimed by the Palestinians.”

However, it said now the Palestinians “[a]re ready to work with the incoming Biden administration.”

But as the *Australian* noted on Dec. 26, Joe Biden “sensibly, has indicated he will not try to dismantle many of Mr Trump’s achievements. He will not revisit the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move mindlessly denounced by Arab loudmouths in 2017 as certain to inflame a major regional conflict.”

STATUS CHECK

An SBS TV “World News” report (Jan. 12) of Israeli intentions to build 800 housing units in settlements on the West Bank claimed that prior to 2019, “America’s long-held position” was “that West Bank settlements broke international law.”

In fact, since the Carter Administration, the US has never said settlements break international law or are illegal.

Rather, the official position for decades was that settlements were unhelpful and not “legitimate”. Even the highly critical Obama Administration carefully avoided labelling them illegal, instead using the word “illegitimate” in its frequent criticisms of construction in settlements.

Successive US administrations accepted that the West Bank and Gaza are disputed territories whose legal status has remained undetermined since the 1948 war when Jordan illegally occupied territory that had been part of British Mandatory Palestine.

In 2019, the US confirmed that its stance was that Israeli civilian settlements in the West Bank are not *per se* inconsistent with international law, which clarified something that had previously been ambiguous but did not reverse a settled policy.

OBSESSION

The Australian Government’s October 2018 announcement of a review to consider whether Australia should recognise west Jerusalem as Israel’s capital sent sections of the media, particularly the ABC and then-Fairfax, now Nine papers, into a frenzy.

It was claimed that such a move would have unforeseen consequences, cause great offence, and risk a free

trade agreement that was being negotiated with Indonesia, the world’s most populous Muslim nation.

But after weeks of negative media, Fairfax eventually reported from Indonesia that demonstrations were orchestrated, poorly attended and many of the protestors were paid to attend and unsure what they were doing there.

Moreover, as AIJAC noted, Indonesian media coverage of Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s review and its outcome was practically non-existent.

Yet, more than two years later, the decision still rankles some media commentators.

The decision popped up in a critique of Morrison’s leadership record by the *Age*’s Sean Kelly (Dec. 21), who wrote, “He...made a bad decision about our embassy in Israel in a clumsy attempt to win a byelection – which he lost.”

Australia did not move the embassy. It recognised west Jerusalem, sovereign Israeli territory, as Israel’s capital, which is what it has been since 1949.

At the same time, Australia recognised that the Palestinian national movement aspires to have a capital in east Jerusalem.

So how exactly that is a “bad decision”, Kelly did not explain.

COLD SHOWER

In the *Canberra Times* (Jan. 15), former federal Liberal leader John Hewson smashed the record of US President Donald Trump – which is fair enough.

However, according to Hewson, “[Trump] didn’t bring peace to the Middle East, indeed dangerously tilted the situation even more in favour of Israel.”

Yet by almost any reasonable measure, the Middle East is better off in 2021 than it was before Trump took office.

In contrast to the dithering of the Obama Administration, Trump was quickly able to neutralise Islamic State as an ongoing regional threat.

Trump's decision, in 2018, to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and reimpose sanctions on the country was extremely controversial in the West. But it was welcomed in the region for reining in the Islamist regime's ability to use its proxies to cause havoc across the Middle East, including in Syria and Iraq.

And most importantly, in the space of three months in 2020, Trump helped broker normalisation and peace agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan to open up a new era of coopera-

tion in the Middle East.

Yet Hewson thinks all this is somehow "dangerous."

CLIVE OF IRAN

In the *Canberra Times* (Jan. 12), academic Clive Williams seemed to imply the threat from Iran and its nuclear program was a figment of Israel's imagination.

Williams claimed the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) "tightly restricted what Iran could do within its nuclear program and established an intrusive [International Atomic Energy Agency] inspection regime in return for the lifting of sanctions."

But, he said, Donald Trump withdrew from the deal and reimposed sanctions on Iran in 2018 "at the urging of Israel's Prime Minister [Bin-

yamin] Netanyahu, *who claimed* Iran had been covertly pursuing a nuclear weapons program [emphasis added]."

He also said Israel, "was almost certainly responsible" for damaging the Natanz enrichment facility and killing Iran's chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh "because it will not tolerate another nation in the Middle East having a nuclear program that *could* lead to a weapon – particularly not Iran, *whom it sees* as an existential threat [emphasis added]."

In an earlier piece in *The Conversation* (Jan. 4), Williams had implied Trump might attack Iran at Netanyahu's behest and Netanyahu was pushing for an attack purely for personal political advantage, saying an attack, "would not only give him [Netanyahu] the opportunity to become a tough wartime leader, but also help to distract the media from his corruption charges."



OUT OF IN PARLIAMENT

Prime Minister **Scott Morrison** (Lib., Cook) asked at a press conference about the release from jail in Indonesia of Abu Bakr Bashir, the spiritual leader of terror group Jemaah Islamiah which carried out the 2002 Bali bombings – Jan. 8 – "... this is very distressing to the friends and families of the Australians, the 88 Australians who were killed in the Bali bombings of 2002... It's hard and it's gut wrenching... we have always called for those who are involved, not just I as Prime Minister, my predecessors of all political persuasions to face tougher, proportionate and just sentences in these cases... We have made clear through our Embassy in Jakarta the concerns we have that such individuals be prevented from further inciting others. And we will continue to follow those sort of issues through."

Opposition Leader **Anthony Albanese** (ALP, Grayndler) asked at a doorstep about Bashir's release – Jan. 8 – "I don't want to see this promoter of terrorism and violence released ever. And I think this will be a difficult day for the families of those who were victims of the Bali bombings and other activities... and I would hope that the Australian Government, I'm sure, are making strong representations to make sure that the closest eye is kept on this bloke to make sure that his activities don't further the, quite frankly, catastrophic human consequences of his ideological position."

Opposition Leader **Anthony Albanese** (ALP, Grayndler), asked in an interview with Marcus Paul on *2SM* about social media

shutting down Donald Trump – Jan. 11 – "You have organisations like QAnon, which spreads all sorts of antisemitic racist rubbish, that is actually dangerous. And it's got to be called out."

Foreign Minister Senator **Marise Payne** (Lib., NSW) in a joint media release with Attorney-General **Christian Porter** (Lib., Pearce) on the announcement that Israel's Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn had confirmed he had signed the extradition order for Malka Leifer to be sent to Australia to face trial on serious allegations of child sexual assault – Dec. 18 – "My thoughts this morning remain with the alleged victims, including Dassi Erlich, Nicole Meyer, Elly Sapper, who have mounted a determined campaign to ensure that the allegations against Ms Leifer are heard by the Australian legal system. They have shown enormous patience and resolve. I hope these developments overnight give them confidence that this chapter in the long-running and difficult process is drawing to a close, and the charges against Malka Leifer can soon be heard in Australia."

Shadow Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA), Shadow Attorney-General **Mark Dreyfus** (ALP, Isaacs) and **Josh Burns** (ALP, Macnamara) issued a joint media release on the announcement of Leifer's extradition from Israel – Dec. 17 – "Labor welcomes the imminent conclusion of the 12 year battle to bring Malka Leifer to justice in Australia..."

"Labor appreciates the statement from Israeli Justice Minister Avi Nissenkorn that 'it is our moral duty to allow the Australian legal authorities to put her on trial.' Labor pays tribute to the courage of Dassi Erlich, Nicole Meyer and Elly Sapper in their long pursuit of justice since Malka Leifer fled Australia 12 years ago to avoid standing trial."

A BETTER DEAL

A published response in the *Canberra Times* (Jan. 19) to Clive Williams by AIJAC's Jamie Hyams stated that "Iran was in breach of the JCPOA even before the US withdrawal" and the agreement "must be renegotiated because it is fatally flawed" and "paves the way for the regime to legally" attain nuclear weapons.

He said Iran had been "concealing its previous nuclear weapons program, as revealed by a daring Israeli raid on the program archive in Tehran. Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency have also recently found evidence of previously unknown forbidden nuclear activity in the past."

Hyams called on the Biden Administration to take advantage of President Trump's sanctions and renegotiate the JCPOA to close loopholes that "allow Iran to limit inspections, and continue work on nuclear-capable missiles. The deal must... be renegotiated to remove the sunset clauses, prohibit missile activity and tighten the inspection regime."

He also noted that Israel was not the only country concerned about the JCPOA, saying Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, "are clamouring for the Biden administration to act firmly and urgently on the Iranian file."

Earlier in the *Canberra Times* (Dec. 15), AIJAC's Ahron Shapiro had debunked claims that the killing of Iran's chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhriadeh was meant to hinder the Biden Administration's ability to return to the JCPOA.

Shapiro quoted veteran US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross' Nov. 30 Tweet that "one can debate the logic of killing of Mohsen Fakhriadeh. But to argue it was done to frustrate the incoming Biden administration ignores reality. Such an operation takes extensive planning, having operatives on the ground, actionable intelligence. It can't be spur of the moment."

HEAVY METAL

On Jan. 15, the *Australian* reported that Iran had informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) it was advancing research into uranium metal production, a new breach of the 2015 JCPOA deal.

The *AFP* sourced report said Iran claims it will use the uranium metal to make advanced fuel for a research reactor but "the topic is sensitive because uranium metal can be used as a component in nuclear weapons."

It said that under the JCPOA, Iran cannot produce or acquire plutonium or uranium metal or their alloys for 15 years, but after 10 years "Iran would have been allowed to initiate research on producing uranium metal-based fuel "in small agreed quantities" but only if the other parties to the deal had given approval.

In contrast to Clive Williams, the report noted that the IAEA has said "Teheran had a structured weapons program until 2003."

SIGNS OF THE TIMES?

In the *Australian* (Dec. 18), columnist Henry Ergas accused the progressive left of "deafening silence" in response to former US President Barack Obama using antisemitic tropes to describe former French President Nicholas Sarkozy in his recently released memoir *A Promised Land*.

Ergas said Obama described Sarkozy as a "quarter Greek Jew" and so it is "little wonder, then, that Sarkozy has 'dark, expressive, Mediterranean features,' which resemble the exaggerated, often distorted figures 'of a Toulouse-Lautrec painting.' Little wonder, too, that he is 'all emotional outbursts and overblown rhetoric,' while his conversation, which reflects unbridled ambition and incessant pushiness, 'swoops from flattery to bluster to genuine insight.'"

According to Ergas, "no other world leader is characterised by

Obama in anything like those terms" and recalls the "insults notoriously hurled at Benjamin Disraeli, the first person of Jewish birth to become Britain's prime minister."

Had "Sarkozy's flaw been that he was black, gay or Muslim, each with its associated stereotypes, the slur would have unleashed storms of protest," Ergas said.

But the "deafening silence" in the reviews of the book "from the *New York Times* to the *Washington Post*" is due to the "normalisation of casual anti-Semitism" from the "progressive side of politics".

Ergas noted the *New York Times International Edition* had reprinted a cartoon of Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu that "could have been lifted from the Nazis' *Der Sturmer*."

Ergas quoted *Times* columnist Bret Stephens saying the *Times'* editorial staff are "hyper-alert" to nearly every "conceivable expression of prejudice" but could not spot "blatant expressions of anti-Semitism" because "torrential criticism of Israel and the mainstreaming of anti-Zionism... has become so common place that people have been desensitised to its inherent bigotry."

PEACE OFF

An online analysis from *ABC* Middle East correspondent Eric Llozek (Dec. 18) on the four peace treaties Israel secured in the last quarter of 2020 included two high profile commentators with track records of espousing extreme anti-Israel opinions.

UK-based, Israeli-born academic Avi Shlaim was quoted saying, "The Trump administration is completely, blindly and absurdly pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian... Trump's foreign policy towards the region very much bears the fingerprints of Netanyahu..."

Deakin University academic Scott Burchill criticised the price paid for Morocco signing a peace deal, saying, "Essentially Trump is saying [to Morocco]: 'If we recognise your colonial

occupation of Western Sahara, will you recognise Israel's colonial occupation of Palestine and we'll throw some drones in for free?' And they said, 'fine'."

Tlozek said that after the JCPOA was signed, "the Sunni Arab states and Israel feared that would allow Iran to increase its support for regional proxy groups they were fighting – like the Houthi rebels in Yemen, Shi'ite militias in Iraq, militant Palestinian factions in Gaza and the Lebanese Shi'ite group Hezbollah – and accelerate its development of advanced weaponry – like precision-guided and ballistic missiles."

He added that "the focus on Iran means the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no longer the predominant problem in the Middle East."

It could actually be argued that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict stopped being the predominant problem in the Middle East in 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, Shi'ite Islamists usurped the Iranian revolution, and extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, igniting the growth of Sunni Islamist extremism.

The consequences of those events shaped the greater Middle East for the next 40 years, including the eight-year long Iran-Iraq war; the invasion of Kuwait; the two Gulf Wars; the rise and fall of al-Qaeda and Islamic State; the "Arab Spring" movement, and the Syrian civil war.

The Middle East covers a vast territory filled with hundreds of millions of people with their own interests and problems that are totally divorced from Israelis and Palestinians. Yet somehow, many in the media appear to have never noticed this until now.

CHANGE IS THE ONLY CONSTANT

In contrast to Burchill and Shlaim, Middle East security analyst and former AIJAC guest Jonathan Spyer in the *Australian* (Dec. 28) took a bird's eye view of the Middle East, noting the shift in the geopolitics of the

region over the last five decades.

Spyer said that "50 years ago... the Jewish state faced a united wall of rejection from the Arabic-speaking states. By contrast, it maintained working diplomatic relations with the two non-Arabic-speaking countries of the Middle East — Iran and Turkey."

The US-brokered normalisation agreements with four Arab states "demolish the notion of anything so simple as an 'Arab-Israeli conflict' remaining in existence," he explained.

He noted that Iran is not the only challenge that is on the minds of the Gulf states who "see Iran and its allies, and Sunni political Islam as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood and the government of Turkey, as central challenges."

Moreover, he said, "it is interesting to note today it is the two other non-Arab states in the region – Iran and Turkey – that form the most powerful opponents of Jerusalem. The same states who, back in 1973, were semi-allies." This is an important lesson too, he added, because "today's enemy can be tomorrow's friend, and vice versa, and in [the Middle East] things can change, for better or worse, completely, and fast."

TO FIGHT THE FAR RIGHT

AIJAC Senior Policy Analyst Sharyn Mittelman, in the *Herald Sun* (Jan. 18), noted that the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation reported that far-right extremism now constitutes 40% of its caseload, which emphasises the "special onus on schools and parents to educate about the dangers of racial and religious hatred."

An important aspect of this is Holocaust education, but "a survey commissioned by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany found two-thirds of young Americans did not know six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, and one in 10 adults under the age of 40 did not know or accept the truth the genocide happened."

She pointed out that there is a proliferation of Holocaust denial and other types of antisemitism on social media and elsewhere, making the importance of education even more pressing.

PHILISTINES TALK OF PALESTINE

Anachronistically calling ancient Israel or Judea "Palestine" is a Christmas perennial in the media.

On Dec. 24, the *Australian* editorial quoted the Christmas message of Archbishop Geoffrey Smith, the Anglican Primate of Australia, saying, "We might be conscious we are living in uncertain times, but the context of Jesus's birth was full of uncertainty. Palestine was oppressed by the occupying Roman empire. Various parties within Judaism were jockeying for influence and enthusiastically trying to recruit people to their cause."

The same day, columnist Tory Shepherd wrote in the Adelaide *Advertiser*, "Was Christ really born in Bethlehem on this day? Well, if you believe he was born from a virgin mother, the precise details of the rest of it probably don't really matter. But biblical scholars are divided. And they're divided because the various gospels are divided. Some say Bethlehem, some say Nazareth. Maybe Palestine, maybe Israel."

The latter answer is straightforward. Jesus was not born in Palestine.

The books of *Luke* and *Matthew* state that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea.

Nowhere in the four Christian gospels does the word Palestine even appear.

It was not until 134 C.E. that the term 'Palestine' was used to describe the Land of Israel or Judea. Following Jewish uprisings, the Roman Emperor Hadrian wanted to obliterate the Jewish identity of the area and chose a name that referenced the Philistines, who had lived on the coastal plain around Gaza but disappeared from history by about 600 BCE.

Allon Lee

TAKING JABS AT ISRAEL

The Australian media's coverage of Israel's world-leading campaign to vaccinate its population against the coronavirus has been marred by some instances of inadequate balance and poor fact checking.

An *ABC Radio* "World Today" report (Dec. 21) from Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek implied Israel has a duty to provide coronavirus vaccines to all Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

Tlozek absurdly stated that Gaza is under Israeli occupation, even though Israel withdrew completely from the territory in 2005 and many senior Hamas officials have publicly acknowledged it is now not occupied, albeit in Arabic.

The report included NGO Physicians for Human Rights spokesperson Ghada Majadle insisting Israel should be "purchasing, providing, and making sure the Palestinian population [is] getting the vaccines."

Tlozek paraphrased an oversimplified version of Israel's response, saying that "Israel's health minister says the country's not responsible for vaccinating Palestinians, even if they are under Israeli military occupation or blockade."

In fact, under the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has responsibility to provide health services and vaccines to Palestinians who live in the West Bank and Gaza.

The story should also have included Israeli Health Minister Yuli Edelstein's widely reported comments that Israel has helped Palestinians all year "with equipment and with medicine" and will consider helping the Palestinians with acquiring vaccines.

The report also ignored the widely reported fact Israel was not asked by the PA to provide vaccines, in part because the PA had boycotted dialogue with Israel from May until December 2020, and had made arrangements to acquire a Russian-made vaccine.

A follow up on *ABC Radio* "AM" (Jan. 5) included Tlozek saying there are five million Palestinians under Israeli occupation – a figure that can only be reached by including Palestinians in Gaza. He again paraphrased the Israeli position, stating that Israel says "the Palestinian leadership hasn't asked" for the vaccine.

Actually, Palestinian media also reported that no such request was made.

Palestinian Health Ministry Director General Dr Ali Abd-Rabbo was heard claiming "international law" says Israel is legally required to provide vaccines because it is "the occupying force... regardless asking or not".

No explanation of the legal basis for Israel's position was included.

An *AFP* report run in the *Australian* on Dec. 21, the same day as Tlozek's "World Today" radio story, noted "Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi has said Israel might provide vaccinations for Palestinians."

But the *Australian's* Jan. 9 print edition was criticised for running a large photo of at least 100 empty graves above a *Wall Street Journal*-sourced report on Israel's vaccination rollout and the Palestinian claims. On closer inspection, the photo's caption read, "Gravediggers wearing protective suits

bury a COVID-19 victim at Vila Formosa, Brazil's biggest cemetery, in Sao Paulo" and it should have been positioned to make it clear it was related to a more relevant, different story elsewhere on the page.

The *Australian's* online version of the report was criticised for claiming Israel occupies Gaza, which was not in the print edition.

Both versions of the article falsely stated that Gaza's borders are "effectively controlled by the Israelis." The enclave has a 15 km border with Egypt that is totally independent of Israel.

However, unlike the *ABC's* reports, this story acknowledged that "Israeli officials say the PA has responsibility for its citizens' healthcare, including procuring vaccines, under the terms of the 1990s Oslo Accords. Israel might provide excess vaccines to the Palestinians once its population is inoculated, the officials say."

Edelstein was quoted denying Israel has a responsibility to vaccinate Palestinians but committing to cooperate with the PA "because it's an Israeli interest."

The report further included a PA spokesman saying Israel was not asked to provide the PA with vaccines.

On Jan. 18, *CNN* correspondent Sam Kiley told *SBS TV* "World News" newsreader Janice Petersen that Israel says the PA is "solely responsible for vaccination campaigns among Palestinians," citing the Oslo Accords.

He noted that the PA has said it is trying to source vaccines but that is in stark "contrast to a world leading vaccination campaign happening inside Israeli territory... [and] on the West Bank among Jewish settlers and indeed if you've got an Israeli ID and you are an Arab resident of east Jerusalem, you qualify."

Kiley also said Israel has agreed that, in the long term, Palestinians will need to be vaccinated because of the close proximity of the two populations.

"Coverage of Israel's world-leading campaign to vaccinate its population against the coronavirus has been marred by some instances of inadequate balance"

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

PATRIOT GAMES

In the 1990s, the AUSI Freedom Scouts was the most public of the Australian groups modelling itself on the type of people who led the violent assault on the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

This group publicly claimed an unlikely 3,000 members and said it was conducting training camps in preparation for the upcoming battle between “freedom fighters” and the Australian Government.

Publishing material referring to the need for the “armed citizen” to “prepare physically for the imminent world crises,” the AUSI Freedom Scouts failed dismally to bring American style far-right thinking to Australia. They were not alone in this failure.

The glossy magazine *Lock Stock & Barrel* sought to create, and tap into, a market of Australians who wanted to imitate the US “patriots” of the type who (dis)graced our screens with their behaviour in Washington DC.

The militia sub-culture to which they belonged included an organisation described by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation as a “clandestine Christian Extremist Paramilitary Group” which “had ready access to weapons and talked about using violence in support of its anti-government, anti-Asia political agenda.”

Those associated with the *Strategy* newspaper, which served as a platform for basically any unhappy, disgruntled and angry potential mob leader, hosted a visit by US conspiracy theorist and anti-government polemicist Jack McLamb. McLamb was promoting his “Operation Vampire Killer”, which aimed at propagandising and recruiting serving members of the police and military for actions such as those which recently took place in the heart of US democracy.

Their loose network included the Confederate Action Party (which was perhaps under the misconception that the US Civil War included Queensland), the Christian Patriots Association (which took credit for shooting attacks on banks), and the Australian Integrity Movement (which

attacked “Jews” and “Jewish leaders”, who, it claimed, “neutralised” safeguards against a “take-over of Australia”).

It is never easy to transpose US experiences to Australia, and this has been even harder for groups such as the Citizens Electoral Councils (now Australian Citizens’ Party), who hold the very American, unAustralian belief that the UK (which is also the Australian) monarchy is a source of secret, conspiratorial evil.

That is not to say that any of the more recent marketers of US-sourced malevolence do not present dangers here.

But in Australia, there are a number of features which militate against the development of a movement such as that which stormed the Capitol, including our social security system, different attitudes to gun ownership, compulsory voting and far less disrespect for the concept of decisions being accepted as legitimate after democratic processes have taken place.

Leaders of our national and regional governments represent the party which has the support of a majority of elected representatives, severely limiting an “outsider on the inside”, becoming Prime Minister or Premier (which should give food for thought to those republicans recommending a directly elected Head of State).

We also have differences of demography, geography and self-perception – although I have lost count of the times I have been told by Australians that they have rights based on amendments to the US Constitution.

That said, I would never underestimate the harm which extremists can cause, with a number of mass casualty crimes committed by single actors who believed they were contributing to saving the world through murder.

Online media, and social media in particular, is creating individuals who often have no awareness of alternative points of view, and can reinforce perceptions which have no relationship to the reality of the society in which they live.

There are real, dangerous, malicious people in Australia. Some affiliate with the extremist organisations which have recently featured in some authoritative pieces in the Australian media, but others are simply waiting for the opportunity to harm both people and the social order.

Australia is not the USA, but we need to be aware of the genuine threats presented by the conspiratorial far-right, as much as by others who rationalise malevolence and violence with religious or other political ideologies.



Australia has its own far-right militia groups, which often try to imitate their US counterparts



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