

AN ELECTION LIKE NO OTHER

The unprecedented politics of Israel's
March 23 pandemic-era poll

CONSPIRACIES FOR KIDS

An exclusive exposé of children's books
that promote hate and extremism **PAGE 21**

A GAME OF NUCLEAR CHICKEN

Iran sets itself on a
collision course with
the Biden Adminis-
tration**PAGE 24**

JAKARTA'S JIHADISM PROBLEM

Islamist extremism
following the
release of Abu Bakar
Bashir**PAGE 28**

HISTORY OR HIS STORY?

Former US Presi-
dent Obama's
misleading Mideast
claims **PAGE 31**



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EDITOR'S NOTE

The March edition of the *AIR* focusses on analysing Israel's unusually complex election campaign in the lead up to the fourth national vote in two years on March 23.

Amotz Asa El explains why this election is looking very challenging for long-serving incumbent PM Binyamin Netanyahu, while *Times of Israel* Editor David Horovitz explores how traditional left/right blocs in Israeli politics have been reconfigured into pro-Netanyahu and anti-Netanyahu groupings.

In addition, Ahron Shapiro breaks down the campaign messaging of all of Israel's significant political parties, while Sean Savage speaks to experts about the implications of Palestinian plans to hold their own elections in a few months.

Also featured this month are American academic Charles Lipson's look at how Israel came to be the world leader in coronavirus vaccinations, and Australian academic Ran Porat's compelling and frightening exposé of extremist conspiracy books aimed at children aged five to 12.

Finally, don't miss: terrorism expert Zachary Abuza on the Islamist threat to Indonesia in the wake of the release of Bali bombing spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir; and Allon Lee's deep dive into former US President Barack Obama's re-writing of Middle East history in his memoirs.

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

Tzvi Fleischer

CONTENTS

FEATURE STORIES

AN ELECTION LIKE NO OTHER

BY AMOTZ ASA-EL

Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu faces the verdict of the voters – again... Even though he and his party, the Likud, are leading handsomely in all polls... Israel's fourth election in less than two years looks markedly different from the previous three.PAGE 12

ISRAEL'S LEAST IDEOLOGICAL VOTE

BY DAVID HOROVITZPAGE 14

CAMPAIGNING AMID CAMPAIGNING FATIGUE

BY AHRON SHAPIROPAGE 15

PALESTINIANS ALSO HEADING TO THE POLLS

BY SEAN SAVAGEPAGE 18

CONSPIRACY THEORIES FOR KIDS

Books promote hate and antisemitism

BY RAN PORATPAGE 21

WHY ISRAEL LEADS IN VACCINATION

BY CHARLES LIPSONPAGE 23

IRAN'S NUCLEAR GAME OF CHICKEN

BY LAZAR BERMANPAGE 24

ISRAEL, BIDEN AND THE JCPOA

BY MICHAEL HERZOGPAGE 26

ABU BAKAR BASHIR A FREE MAN

BY ZACHARY ABUZAPAGE 28

BIBLIO FILE: HIS STORY, NOT HISTORY

Barack Obama's account of the Middle East

BY ALLON LEEPAGE 31



ON THE COVER

A worker from the Central Election Commission in Israel wearing a full protective suit during a media demonstration of special polling stations for people infected with coronavirus as part of preparations for the upcoming Israeli general elections, in Shoham, Israel, Feb. 23 2021. (Credit: Abir Sultan/EPA/AAP)



REGULAR COLUMNS

FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEINPAGE 4

WORD FOR WORDPAGE 5

SCRIBBLINGS

TZVI FLEISCHERPAGE 6

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

FRIENDS OF ISRAEL INITIATIVEPAGE 7

ASIA WATCH

MICHAEL SHANNONPAGE 8

AIR NEW ZEALAND

MIRIAM BELLPAGE 9

BEHIND THE NEWSPAGE 10

STRANGER THAN FICTIONPAGE 11

NOTED AND QUOTEDPAGE 35

IN PARLIAMENTPAGE 36


MEDIA MICROSCOPE

ALLON LEEPAGE 39

THE LAST WORD

JEREMY JONESPAGE 40

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- Tap/click  to return to the Contents page
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EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN****COLIN RUBENSTEIN****POLITICAL STABILITY AT
LAST?**

While it would be easy to view Israel's fourth election in two years as a sign of chronic political dysfunction, there are reasons to be optimistic that a stable government is not far away. Perhaps Israel is finally on the road to recovery from its political crisis, as it is with respect to the COVID crisis that has gripped the country for the past year.

For one, rather than a replay of the previous rounds of elections, the March 23 contest has introduced new players, like Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope party, and added more prime ministerial contenders to the field, such as *Yesh Atid's* Yair Lapid and *Yamina's* Naftali Bennett.

Current PM Binyamin Netanyahu will once again face judgement at the ballot box, even as his trial on corruption charges hovers over him. Though indisputably the leader of Israel's largest party, he still needs to find enough willing partners to govern, something that has become increasingly difficult with every passing election.

Yet he has shown extraordinary political skill in the past – a viable Netanyahu-led coalition of the centre-right with a Knesset majority remains very much a possibility. Despite widespread criticism of his handling of aspects of the coronavirus pandemic crisis last year, Netanyahu will make a case for re-election based on his strong diplomatic achievements internationally, a solid economic record, cautious yet attentive management of Israel's vital security challenges and his personal orchestration of Israel's world-leading vaccination campaign.

On the other hand, his opponents – some of them long-time former colleagues including Sa'ar, Bennett and former foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman – will doubtless go beyond criticising his handling of the pandemic. They will also be attempting to tap into a growing sense among many Israelis that, after more than 11 continuous years in power, and amid a corruption trial which increasingly preoccupies his focus and attention, it is time for Netanyahu to retire in favour of new blood – someone with different policies, messages and/or style of governance.

One encouraging sign at this election is indications that Israel's Arab citizens are engaging with the country's legislature in a more politically diverse way than in the past.

The Arab party *Ra'am* has reversed the traditional reluctance of Israeli Arab parties to support a Zionist-led coalition and has been expressing a willingness to consider supporting the next Israeli government in exchange for new and expanded programs to meet the pressing needs of Israeli Arab communities.

Indeed, Israeli Arabs also have a good chance of entering the Knesset on the Labor and Meretz lists, and, for the first time, an Israeli Arab appears on the nationalist Likud slate.

Yet paradoxically and disappointingly, the same Likud that placed an Arab Israeli on its list cynically played matchmaker for the anti-Arab *Otzma Yehudit* and far-right Religious Zionism parties, convincing the latter to unite with the former for the sake of salvaging some votes from the very fringes of politics. Deplorably, this barefaced horse-trading will likely result in bringing unrepentant followers of the late racist demagogue Rabbi Meir Kahane into the Knesset.

Yet whatever happens on March 23, what's certain is that Israel's leaders post-election will face many of the same challenges the country is experiencing today, only hopefully with a fresh mandate to act.

Completion of the country's vaccination program is a top priority, as is charting a recovery for the nation's economy, which saw its GDP shrink and deficits and unemployment soar in 2020 as a result of COVID-19.

Israel's next government will also need to work hard to heal the rifts in society that grew during the darkest days of the pandemic, with polls showing a large drop in social solidarity and cohesion over recent months due largely to controversies over adherence to coronavirus restrictions within some sectors of Israeli society.

The government, however it is comprised, will certainly seek to expand the circle of Arab and Muslim countries that have normalised relations with the Jewish state under the landmark Abraham Accords and, just as importantly, validated the right of the Jewish people to be regarded as a legitimate part of the region where they became a people.

It will have to continue to put considerable effort into preserving and building Israel's special relationship with its most important ally, the United States.

Based on past experience and the record of the vast majority of candidates, we know that the next Israeli government will work constructively with American negotiators to try to find ways to nurture and preserve paths to peace with the Palestinians, even if all sides acknowledge that conditions are not ripe for an agreement to end the conflict in the near future.

No conceivable Israeli leader will be prepared to stand aside and allow one of the world's most dangerous regimes – and foremost sponsor of terrorism – to build the world's most dangerous weapons. Therefore, first and foremost, it is a top priority for the next Israeli government to persuade the US, Europe and other major international stakeholders to refrain from easing sanctions on Iran until

it returns to full compliance with the terms of the 2015 nuclear deal known as the JCPOA.

But all conceivable Israeli leaders will also urge US and EU negotiators to retain valuable negotiating leverage essential for pressuring Teheran to permanently extend and strengthen that totally inadequate deal – which not only ignored Iran's ballistic missile program and regional aggression, but has actually brought the Iranians closer to

crossing the nuclear threshold thanks to its sunset clauses and other flaws.

Despite everything, Israel's robust democracy has successfully weathered a very difficult time over the last

two years and doubtless will continue to do so even if this election also proves inconclusive and leads to yet another early trip to the ballot box. But we join the vast majority of Israelis in hoping it does not have to face this test and badly needed, stable, effective government returns after March 23.

AIR

CONGRATULATIONS TO RABBI DR JOHN LEVI AC

AIJAC wishes a hearty mazel tov to editorial board member Rabbi Dr John Levi AC for his elevation to Australia's highest civilian honour, the Companion of the Order of Australia, in this year's Australia Day awards. Rabbi Levi received the award for "eminent service to Judaism through seminal roles with religious, community and historical organisations, to the advancement of interfaith understanding, tolerance and collaboration, and to education."

WORD FOR WORD

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today by phone with Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel. The President affirmed his personal history of steadfast commitment to Israel's security... Together, the leaders discussed the importance of continued close consultation on regional security issues, including Iran. The President emphasised US support for the recent normalisation of relations between Israel and countries in the Arab and Muslim world."

Media announcement regarding the first telephone call between Joe Biden as US President and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (White House, Feb. 17).

"[A] return to the nuclear deal from 2015 or even a similar deal with a few improvements is bad and wrong... operationally and strategically. Operationally, because it would again allow at its end, or before, the Iranians to enrich uranium, develop centri-

fuges, and a weapons capability... Strategically, it would present an intolerable threat to Israel and apparently spark a nuclear arms race in the Middle East."

IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi offering strong criticism of the plans to return to the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran (JNS, Jan. 28).

"If we notice the slightest mistake on the part of the Zionist regime towards the regime of the Islamic republic, we will strike both the missile bases, which, according to them, are intended to strike Iran, and in the shortest time will level Haifa and Tel Aviv to the ground."

Iranian military spokesman Brig. Gen. Abolfazl Shekarchi responding to Kochavi's remarks (Israel Hayom, Jan. 28).

"When the ICC investigates Israel for fake war crimes, this is pure antisemitism... the court established to prevent atrocities like the Nazi Holocaust against the Jewish people is now targeting the one state of the Jewish people."

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu on the International Criminal Court granting itself jurisdiction to investigate claims of war crimes in the "State of Palestine" (Times of Israel, Feb. 6).



SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

FATWA CHANCE

Here's a quote everyone who is following the debate about Iran's nuclear program should be aware of. It comes from Iran's Intelligence Minister, Mahmoud Alavi, a man thought to be quite close to Iran's Supreme Ruler, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Alavi said this on Iranian state television on Feb 8:

"Our nuclear program is a peaceful program and the Supreme Leader clearly said in his fatwa that producing nuclear weapons is against religious law and the Islamic Republic will not pursue it and considers it forbidden. But let me tell you, if you corner a cat it might behave differently than a cat roaming free. If they push Iran in that direction, it would not be Iran's fault but the fault of those who pushed Iran."

He was referring to a supposed *fatwa* (religious ruling) issued by Khamenei in 2003, forbidding the production of nuclear weapons. Many defenders of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal have referred to the supposed fatwa in arguing that Iran can be trusted not to use the deal to pursue nuclear weapons.

Alavi was not only implying that the fatwa might not apply in some circumstances, but more than this, he was also hinting what those circumstances were. He made the remarks above in the context of making the case that sanctions against Iran must be lifted – which is the Iranian regime's consistent message to the outside world at the moment. In other words, he was implicitly saying, if sanctions are not lifted, Iran might have no choice but to build nuclear weapons. This does not seem like a very high barrier to reversing the fatwa's supposedly comprehensive religious prohibition on nuclear weapons.

Nor was Alavi alone in sending such messages in recent weeks. Even more explicit was former Iranian diplomat Amir Mousavi, who told a Lebanese television station on Jan. 30, "A fatwa is issued in accordance with developing circumstances. Therefore, I believe that if the Americans and Zionists act in a dangerous manner, the fatwa might be changed."

And Supreme Leader Khamenei himself has appeared to join this game of signalling regarding the fatwa's inability to stop Iran. In a speech to the Assembly of Experts on Feb. 22, Khamenei denied that Iran wanted nuclear

weapons, but, unlike in past such speeches, he made no mention of the fatwa, saying only that "Islamic thought and principles" were the reasons Iran was not seeking nuclear weapons. Moreover, in what seemed to be a veiled threat along similar lines to Alavi, he added, "The international Zionist clown is constantly saying 'We won't allow Iran to obtain nuclear weapons' – but he should be told that if the Islamic Republic [of Iran] decided to obtain nuclear weapons, neither you [Israel] nor those greater than you [the US] would be able to stop it."

The truth is the fatwa was always a red herring, despite its past use by both regime spokespeople and apologists for the regime. Even though the fatwa has been repeatedly mentioned by regime leaders as part of their propaganda efforts arguing their nuclear program was always peaceful, the text of this fatwa has never actually been published –

unlike all of Khamenei's other fatwas. Which is odd in itself.

But even more interestingly, the Iranian Government released an information sheet about the fatwa which says it is based on an anti-chemical weapons fatwa issued by Khamenei's predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Yet Khomeini reportedly reversed that fatwa during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, and Iran employed chemical weapons during that war (as did Iraq, on an even

larger scale). The US State Department assesses that Iran is currently pursuing chemical weapons capabilities – and Iran is also thought to have helped expand the chemical weapons program of its ally Syria.

Moreover, we know from the Iranian nuclear archives captured by Israel in 2018 that Iran had concrete plans to build five nuclear warheads before 2003, and that these plans were only partially suspended after that.

In other words, the never-published fatwa was likely intended merely as an order to pause Iran's nuclear weapons program due to growing international scrutiny. Iran continued developing its capability to build nuclear weapons, but was not going to actually build them until the time was propitious, so the fatwa prohibited actually building them, but not working on them, until that point. When the regime decides the time is right, the fatwa would be no more of a barrier to constructing those nuclear weapons than Khomeini's chemical weapons prohibition was to Iran's past and current alleged chemical weapons stockpiles.

Alavi, Mousavi and Khamenei were also probably trying to pre-emptively blame America, Israel and others who oppose Iran's aggressive rogue behaviour for "pushing" Iran toward atomic arms despite Teheran's supposed peaceful intentions.



Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's supposed prohibition on nuclear weapons is now being watered down (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

The world must not fall for this Iranian campaign of extortion – and needs to also recognise the supposed nuclear fatwa for the red herring it always was. AIR

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

The Friends of Israel Initiative

A LETTER TO THE ICC

Mr. Karim Khan, Chief Prosecutor of the ICC
Office of the Prosecutor, The Netherlands

Dear Mr. Khan,

Congratulations on your election as Chief Prosecutor of the ICC [International Criminal Court]. We are the Board members of the Friends of Israel Initiative, an independent body of former heads of government, cabinet ministers and others...

We are writing to urge you to re-evaluate the decision taken by your predecessor, Ms. Fatou Bensouda, to investigate Israel over “alleged crimes committed in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, since 13 June 2014.” As you are aware, the ICC’s Pre-Trial Chamber recently adjudged that the Court has jurisdiction over these allegations.

The Friends of Israel Initiative has opposed this investigation since a preliminary examination was initiated at the request of the Palestinian Authority in 2015. In addition to the substance of the allegations against Israel, which we firmly believe to be spurious, we have several other serious concerns.

Israel is not a party to the Rome Statute and has not consented to the Court’s jurisdiction. The request for an investigation was made by an entity which is not a sovereign state within the terms of the Rome Statute, under which only sovereign states may delegate jurisdiction to the Court over their territory. This view is strongly supported by the government of the United States of America, as well as the governments of Rome Statute state-parties Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Australia, Canada, Uganda and Brazil, as well as by leading international law scholars.

In assigning itself jurisdiction, the ICC disregards and undermines the Oslo Accords, an internationally binding set of agreements that remain in force and continue to be recognized by both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Under the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority has no criminal jurisdiction over Israelis anywhere in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip or East Jerusalem. That jurisdiction, by agreement of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, remains with Israel alone. Therefore, even if it were a state-party, the Palestinian Authority could not delegate any such authority to the ICC.

As you know, the ICC is mandated to investigate and try the gravest crimes of concern to the international community, as a court of last resort, when national jurisdictions are unable or unwilling to do so. This does not apply to Israel, which has a long-established and internationally respected legal system with a track record of investigating such crimes and prosecuting individuals when appropriate.

In addition to these concerns over jurisdiction, we believe that, by commencing this investigation, the ICC would actively undermine the prospects for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Recent months have seen unprecedented progress in the Middle East peace process, with peace agreements signed between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Building on these developments, the new US administration may now have an opportunity to further negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. For an international body with the prestige of the ICC to support the abrogation of the Oslo Accords and unilaterally endorse one side’s claims in a bilateral dispute would cripple the likelihood of future negotiations.

Finally, we have profound concerns over the effects of such an investigation on the ICC’s judicial integrity and, therefore, on its mandate of achieving international criminal justice, which is of the utmost importance in an increasingly turbulent world. It is essential that the Court continue to observe the tenets of international law scrupulously, to operate within the mandate proscribed for it by the Rome Statute, and to avoid acting through political motivation or through the appearance of such.

We believe that pursuit of this fundamentally flawed investigation jeopardises all of these objectives. We agree with the words of the ICC Pre-Trial Chamber’s presiding judge, Peter Kovacs, who wrote: “I find neither the Majority’s approach nor its reasoning appropriate in answering the question before this Chamber, and in my view, they have no legal basis in the Rome Statute, and even less so, in public international law.”

We wish you every success in your new role as ICC Chief Prosecutor... AIR

Hon. Stephen Harper, Chairman, former Prime Minister of Canada; Hon. José Maria Aznar, Honorary Chairman, former President of Spain; Lord William David Trimble, former Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1998; Hon. John Howard, former Prime Minister of Australia; Hon. Luis Alberto Lacalle, former President of Uruguay; Mr. John Baird, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada; Mr. Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, former Defense Minister of Germany; Ambassador Giulio Terzi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy; Mr. Bill Richardson, former Governor of New Mexico; Ambassador Zoran Jolevski, former Minister of Defense and Ambassador of Macedonia; Mr. Uri Rosenthal, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands; Mr. Carlos Bustelo, former Minister of Industry and Energy of Spain; Mr. Elliot Abrams, former United States Spe-



cial Representative for Iran and Venezuela; Col. Richard Kemp, former British Army Commander; Professor Andrew Roberts, British historian, visiting professor at King's College London; Mr. Carlos Alberto Montaner, Exiled Cuban author and journalist; Mrs. Fiamma Nirenstein, Italian journalist, author and politician; Mr. George Weigel, Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center; Mr. Rafael Bardají, Executive Director, Friends of Israel Initiative.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

BALANCING ACT

Israel is but one among many middle power countries placed in a bind by the emergent superpower rivalry between China and the United States, trying to balance its burgeoning economic relationship with the former and its security and diplomatic ties with the latter.

Relations between Israel and China are currently the widest-reaching since diplomatic normalisation in 1992, with China now Israel's second-largest trading partner. Since China emerged as the world's second-largest economy in 2010, advanced technology has been the national priority in its 12th Five Year Plan and it has turned to the 'Start-up Nation' for innovative solutions to its domestic needs.

Since then, bilateral trade between Israel and China has doubled, with US\$11.53 billion in Chinese capital flowing into Israeli tech firms and infrastructure contracts. Meanwhile, the latest figures show Israeli exports to China amounted to US\$548.5 million in January 2021, compared to US\$355.4 million dollars in the same month last year.

But the growing relationship has caused growing unease in Washington. Last year, then-US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on Israeli officials to cease Chinese investments and partnerships in the country, claiming that it put "Israeli citizens at risk" and compromised intelligence sharing, communications and security issues between the US and Israel.

Of foremost concern is China's investment in Israel's Port of Haifa. In June 2019, despite US pressure on Israel, Chinese company Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) secured a 25-year contract to build and operate a large commercial shipping port on the Mediterranean, set to begin operations in 2021. Israel recouped US\$290m in the deal.

US authorities have expressed concerns that the Chinese company would be operating adjacent to an Israeli naval base where ships of the US Sixth Fleet frequently dock and could potentially collect intelligence. The US has cautioned that its Navy might no longer use the base if the Chinese state-owned company takes over management

of the port. The naval base reportedly also houses Israeli nuclear weapons-capable submarines.

Israel is taking heed of these warnings to some degree, recently denying a Hong Kong firm's investment bid worth US\$1.5bn to build Israel's Sorek B desalination plant, in favour of the Tel Aviv-based IDE Technologies. Israel also established a foreign investment oversight committee in 2019, and after an independent review by Israel's Ministry of Defence and consultations with Washington, Jerusalem is expected to exclude Chinese companies from tendering to build Israel's 5G infrastructure.

Now a Washington think tank, the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA), has weighed in, arguing in a new report that China's involvement in Israel could undermine the US-Israel strategic relationship, and calling for the US to assist Israel in protecting itself against Chinese exploitation, including elevated intelligence-sharing and expanded US investment in Israel's infrastructure and technology sectors.

JINSA's report, titled "Curtailling Chinese Investment in Israel: A Comprehensive and Cooperative US-Israeli Strategy," expresses strong concern over the Haifa port deal, and that "Israel could find itself outside of trusted US military, financial, commercial, and technological networks, unless it acts decisively" to limit Chinese investments in the country.

The pro-Israel think tank argues that China is aiming to fuel and expand its own military and industrial influence by buying and investing in Israeli technology. "Beijing's strategy seeks to turn economic power into geopolitical dominance and civilian technology into a military advantage," the report added.

Finally, the report advocates that the United States and Israel sign a new bilateral investment treaty and update the US-Israel Free Trade Agreement.

Another perspective recently appeared in Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper, where Gedaliah Afterman and Theresa Hoffmann of the Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya noted that China "has substantially expanded its engagement in the Middle East in ways that are already altering it," positioning itself as the largest investor in the Middle East and the largest trading partner of the Arab League.

"Israel simply can no longer think about the Middle East without thinking about China. It has no substitute for the United States – certainly not on the defence and diplomacy fronts, but China's growing importance on other fronts is already a reality," they argue.

"A clear strategy and comprehensive policies vis-à-vis China, signalling reassurance to the US that its concerns are addressed while reflecting a longer-term approach towards the Middle Kingdom, will lower risks of strategic mistakes with both Washington and Beijing – mistakes that Israel, dependent on both, cannot afford."

Miriam Bell

CONCERNS OVER ANTI-ISRAEL MPS

Times of uncertainty and fear, such as we are living through in this COVID-ravaged world, have long been known to prompt a growth in intolerance, racism and hatred.

And, as Jewish people around the world are well aware, a common manifestation of this is a rise in antisemitism.

New Zealand is not immune to any of this.

Not only did last year's Shifting Jewry 2019 (Gen19) survey reveal that 44% of respondents thought antisemitism was a problem in New Zealand, but there's growing concern among the Jewish community about the anti-Israel movement – as personified by some politicians on the Left.

Over the years, there have been various MPs who have taken biased pro-Palestinian views to worrying extremes.

Current Green Party co-leader Marama Davidson participated in a "peace flotilla" trying to break Israel's blockade of Hamas-ruled Gaza back in 2016. Former Green Party foreign affairs spokesperson Kennedy Graham constantly criticised the Government for not condemning Israel or offering greater support to the Palestinians on various matters.

However, more recently, there have been two MPs, one Labour, the other Green, who have been repeat offenders when it comes to fervent anti-Israel activity.

Labour MP for Christchurch Central Dr Duncan Webb has long been an outspoken proponent of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel.

In 2019, Webb claimed there was a "strong Zionist Jewish lobby" controlling US politics.

That same year, the NZ Jewish Council criticised him for his support of BDS. In a letter to leading figures in the Labour Party, including Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the Council said it saw widespread BDS activity overseas affecting Jews in many countries by increasing antisemitism, and expressed concern "that promotion of BDS here threatens the security of the New Zealand Jewish community."

Such concerns haven't stopped Webb's activism. In early 2020 he lobbied to prevent the Wellington City Council adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, citing free speech concerns.

Recently, the Israel Institute of NZ reported that Webb is an active member of a Facebook group, Aotearoa Standing With Palestine, which regularly features antisemitic posts and comments, including Holocaust denial.

Meanwhile, the Green MP and current foreign affairs spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman has also become known for a series of anti-Israel outbursts.

In a 2019 tweet, she described Mary and Joseph, the mother and father of Jesus, as "Palestinian refugees". That same year, she also accused Israel of genocide at an anti-Israel rally.

This year, she has shared a Jewish Voice for Peace post on her Instagram account accusing Israel of "medical apartheid" for not providing COVID-19 vaccines to the Palestinians.

The Israel Institute said Ghahraman's post was "disappointing" and that the comparison to apartheid was "disgusting".

NZ Jewish Council spokesperson Juliet Moses told *Newshub* that she has never accused any other MP of antisemitism, but Ghahraman repeatedly spreads disinformation and antisemitic tropes about Israel.

"If she wishes to criticise Israel, she has a duty, as an MP and someone who professes to be concerned about hate speech and the marginalisation of minority communities in Aotearoa, to do so on the basis of correct, contextualised information... The leaders of her party should intervene," Moses added.

In addition to Webb and Ghahraman, there are several other MPs who are members of either the Aotearoa Standing With Palestine Facebook group or a similar rabidly anti-Israel Facebook group, Kia Ora Gaza.

Israel Institute of NZ director David Cumin said New Zealand MPs belonging to such groups and engaging with online hate groups mirrors some of the issues that the UK had when Jeremy Corbyn was leader of the Labour party.

"An MP as prominent as Webb participating in an on-line group rife with vile antisemitism makes a mockery of the work done by the Labour Party post the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks and calls into question his fitness for the role as public servant," Cumin said.

He added that the Israel Institute has written to Labour Party leaders about Webb being an active contributor to Aotearoa Standing With Palestine and to the Green Party co-leaders about the participation of some of their MPs.

To date, none of the party leaders have responded.

Cumin said there are myriad ways to support the Palestinians without having to associate with hate groups, "Likewise, there are plenty of legitimate criticisms of Israel to be made without wading into conspiracy theories that reflect ancient tropes."

But he noted that it was positive that New Zealand's Human Rights Commission has said that it does "not condone, and are very concerned by, any alleged association of MPs with forums that express discrimination or racism and agree that antisemitism should not be allowed to grow in New Zealand politics."

Cumin said he hopes the Commission will show leadership on this issue, as the British Equality and Human Rights Commission did with respect to the UK's Labour party.

BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

No rockets have been fired from Gaza into Israel since Jan. 19.

A Palestinian attempted to stab an IDF soldier on Jan. 31 near Gush Etzion junction in the West Bank, but was shot and killed. On Feb. 5, a Palestinian drove onto a Jewish farm near Ramallah yelling “Allahu Akbar” and trying to break into a home. He was also shot and killed.

On Jan. 29, a bomb exploded outside the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, causing no casualties. According to Indian counter-terrorism officials, as well as Israeli diplomats, Iran is considered the primary suspect in the attack.

Israeli security agencies announced on Feb. 15 that they had disrupted attempts by Hamas in Turkey to fund operatives in the West Bank via front companies, seizing more than \$US100,000 in cash and goods.

QATAR BROKERS DEAL TO SEND ISRAELI GAS TO GAZA

A soon-to-be finalised agreement that aims to end Gaza’s chronic electricity shortage by piping in Israeli gas was announced by Qatari envoy Mohammad al-Emadi on Feb. 14. Converting Gaza’s single power plant from diesel to natural gas will also save the Palestinian Authority (PA) millions of dollars and reduce air pollution.

The deal involves a contract for the gas purchase by the PA from Israel’s Delek corporation, and another relating to the construction of the pipeline into Gaza. The EU is expected to fund the pipeline’s installation from the power station to the Gaza maritime border, and Qatar will fund the extension to Israeli gas rigs in the Mediterranean.



Gas for Gaza? An Israeli natural gas platform in the Mediterranean (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Work has reportedly already commenced and is expected to be completed in two and a half years.

ISRAELI STRIKES IN SYRIA

The frequency and scope of alleged Israeli strikes in Syria have increased substantially since the beginning of 2021.

There was a rare daytime strike against an Iranian weapons shipment travelling from Iraq to Syria on Feb. 10, and other strikes against numerous targets in Syria on Feb. 3 and Feb. 15.

Meanwhile an opposition-aligned media outlet in Syria has claimed that Iran is using a dummy container terminal at Damascus International Airport to store weapons, particularly missiles and missile parts, using UN and DHL-marked containers, before distributing them to its proxies.

IDF PREPARING ITSELF AGAINST HEZBOLLAH

The latest annual forecast by Israel’s military intelligence included a warning that in coming months a few “fighting days” between Israel and Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy terrorist organisation in Lebanon, could escalate into a wider conflict.

Accordingly, the army conducted a massive surprise military drill dubbed “Rose of Galilee” from Feb. 14-16.

IDF air, land and sea forces practised a snap response to a regional war scenario in Lebanon, Syria and Gaza, including simulating hitting more than 3,000 targets in a single day.

In response, on Feb. 16, Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah threatened that if Israel attacked Lebanese cities, “Israel’s home front will experience things that have not happened” since the state was created. He also bizarrely accused Israel of killing “many Jews in different countries because they refused to move to Israel.”

IRAN LIMITS IAEA MONITORING

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported in early February that radioactive uranium was detected in samples collected at two sites in Iran which had not been declared by Teheran as nuclear sites. The discoveries – most likely from sites at Marivan and Teheran – indicate illicit Iranian operations designed to produce atomic weapons. The IAEA also reported that Teheran continues to escalate its breaches of the 2015 nuclear deal by installing more cascades of advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges in various locations and feeding them with uranium hexafluoride.

Meanwhile, following a Feb. 21 snap visit to Teheran by IAEA Chief Rafael Grossi, Iran has ‘agreed’ to only partially implement for three months a law passed in its Parliament mandating that the Government curb IAEA monitoring of its nuclear program. Teheran announced on Feb. 23 that footage from IAEA surveillance cameras at nuclear sites would be withheld for three months, and then only passed on to the IAEA if sanctions had been lifted. In addition, inspections at non-declared sites would be barred.

On Feb. 1, Iran reported the launch of its newest satellite-carrying rocket “Zoljanah”, which it said was able to reach an altitude of 500 kilometres. *Forbes* reported that this development is seen as a big step forward “for both Iran’s space program and its effort to develop delivery vehicles for possible future nuclear warheads.”

THINKTANK: IRANIAN-BACKED MILITIAS SURGED AFTER JCPOA

According to research released on Feb. 11 by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, “the premise that Iran would moderate its commitment to creating and sponsoring militias due to the thaw in US-Iranian relations after the 2015 nuclear deal and sanctions relief for Tehran was false. The number of militias created by the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] surged after this period, and the Guard’s presence abroad peaked, with the Quds Force expanding its operations in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.”

The report added that these militias were the greatest threat to stability in the Middle East.

The thinktank has also launched an online tracker showing how the IRGC has spread its ideology around the world, undermining international security through a network of militias and soft-power organisations. It identified 194 IRGC operations in 51 countries since 1979.

LATEST ISRAELI AND PALESTINIAN COVID-19 NUMBERS

As of Feb. 22, there had been a total of 754,998 coronavirus cases in Israel, up from 565,629 a month earlier, with a total of 5,596 deaths, up from 4,080. By mid-February 2021, more than 3.9 million Israelis – 44% of the population – had received their first dose of the coronavirus vaccine, and 2.6 million had also received the second dose.

Four days after Israel’s vaccine rollout commenced in December, the highly contagious UK variant was detected in four cases in Israel. It now accounts for some 80% of new cases. However, on Feb. 15, the number of seriously ill COVID-19 patients in Israel dropped below 1,000. Meanwhile, a study released on Feb. 14 revealed that 75% of new Israeli cases were amongst those below age 39 – the least vaccinated group.

In the Palestinian-ruled areas of the West Bank, there had been 173,635 cases by Feb. 22, up from 153,093 on Jan. 20, and 1,976 deaths. In Gaza, there had been a total of 54,460 cases as of Feb. 21, up from 48,341 as of Jan. 18.

ISRAEL PROVIDES VACCINE SUPPORT TO PALESTINIANS

In early February, the Palestinian Au-

thority (PA) administered its first coronavirus vaccines after Israel transferred 5,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine to support front-line healthcare workers. This marked the second time Israel had sent vaccines to the Palestinians, after an initial 100 doses provided to Ramallah for medical personnel.

On Feb. 17, Israel approved the transfer of 1,000 Russian-made Sputnik vaccines to the Gaza Strip. Initially the PA and Hamas accused Israel of withholding 2,000 doses, but later clarified it was 1,000 ‘two-dose sets’ of the vaccine. The doses were delivered after a two-day delay.

While some Israeli politicians had opposed facilitating vaccine transfers to Gaza, Israeli officials attributed the delay to ongoing discussions over vaccine transfer policy.

On Feb. 19, Israel agreed to inoculate 100,000 Palestinians who regularly cross into Israel to work.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

IRAN’S IDEOLOGICAL VIRUS

In most countries, the arrival of coronavirus vaccines is long-awaited good news. However, in Iran, the Middle Eastern country most severely affected by the virus, it is just another occasion for ideologically-driven paranoia, conspiracy theories and regime incompetence.

In January, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei announced Iran wouldn’t accept vaccines from the US or UK because they are “untrustworthy” and “it’s not unlikely they would want to contaminate other nations.”

Iran’s officials, however, still plan to import the UK-developed AstraZeneca vaccine by describing the company, jointly listed on the UK and Swedish stock exchanges, as Swedish to avoid Khamenei’s prohibition.

In the meantime, Iran will use inferior vaccines from other sources. These include Cuba, which is still trialling a vaccine, Soberna 2. Teheran is very trusting when

it comes to Cuba, allowing it to carry out late-stage clinical trials on Iranian citizens.

It will also be using Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine, even though Russia has promised quantities beyond its manufacturing capacity, and is therefore exporting a diluted version, dubbed “Sputnik Light”. This is given in a single dose, and only provides limited, temporary immunity.

Meanwhile, a senior Iranian cleric, Ayatollah Abbas Tabrizian from the holy city of Qom, posted on his Telegram account on Feb. 9, “Don’t go near those who have had the COVID vaccine. They have become homosexuals.” Apparently, the Ayatollah believes that, like COVID, homosexuality is highly contagious.

This is yet another example of Iran’s barbaric attitude to homosexuality. According to a 2008 British WikiLeaks document, between 4,000 and 6,000 gays and lesbians had by then been executed in Iran since 1979. A German intelligence report from last June confirmed these executions are continuing.

Tragically, it appears it is even more dangerous to be a member of the LG-BTQI community in Iran than to catch coronavirus there.

COVER STORY

A CAMPAIGN LIKE
NO OTHER

A TENSE TENTH ELECTION FOR BIBI

by Amotz Asa El

Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu faces the verdict of the voters – again.

Having recently begun his 13th consecutive year in power and 16th overall, Israel's embattled Prime Minister is now the developed world's longest serving leader after Germany's Angela Merkel. It is a status he might lose following the March 23 vote, even though he and his party, the Likud, are leading handsomely in all polls.

That's because Israel's fourth election in less than two years looks markedly different from the previous three. The most crucial difference is that Likud's main rival in those contests, Blue and White, has disintegrated and no longer possesses a following roughly equal to Likud's.

Blue and White split last year when its leader, current Defence Minister Benny Gantz, decided to join Netanyahu's coalition. His main partner and number two, former finance minister Yair Lapid, refused to join him, and thus became Leader of the Opposition.

In this election, Lapid is again fielding his original party, *Yesh Atid* ("There is a Future"), with polls predicting he will win some 15% of the vote. Gantz is forecast to win hardly a third of that and may not even pass the threshold to enter the Knesset. This leaves Likud and *Yesh Atid* – which looks likely to be the second largest party in the next Knesset, according to opinion polls – with a predicted ratio of votes that is nearly 3:2 in favour of Likud.

However, while Likud can bask in its apparent defeat of the Blue and White challenge from the political centre, it must now contend with challenges from the Right.

The key challengers are former defence minister Naftali Bennett and his *Yamina* ("Rightward") party, and former education minister Gideon Sa'ar and his New Hope party, which between them are currently forecast to garner between 20-25% of the vote – potentially comparable to the Likud's predicted 24-27%



Netanyahu visiting a coronavirus vaccine storage centre: The PM is hoping the Israel's successful vaccine program will boost his political fortunes (Credit: Ashernett)

On the face of it, these seem to be similar challenges to some that Netanyahu has already faced in the recent past. For instance, former finance minister Moshe Kahlon left Likud and established a party called *Kulanu* ("All of Us"), which in 2015 won nearly a 10th of the electorate. However, that party later dissolved. Similarly, former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman left Likud and established *Yisrael Beteinu* ("Israel our home"), which in 2009 won 15 of the Knesset's 120 seats. However, since then it has lost more than half of that following.

Then again, the context is different this time around. Bennett and Sa'ar are attacking Netanyahu in ways he has never been previously challenged from the Right.

The biggest change since last March's election has been the coronavirus pandemic.

The crisis which has rattled the entire world since then has added yet more contentiousness to Netanyahu's already controversial image, arming both sides of the debate regarding his record and future.

Netanyahu and his followers celebrate Israel's vaccination program, which has indeed been remarkable.

Israel had vaccinated 3.8 million people by mid-February – 44% of the population. That's twice as high a proportion as the next highest vaccinator, Britain. The rest of the world is well below these levels, The US and Germany, for instance, had vaccinated 11.1% and 3.3% of their populations respectively at that time, according to "Our World in Data".

Netanyahu, who did indeed personally lead the effort to purchase millions of vaccines ahead of other countries, is making this a central feature of his campaign, claiming he led Israel to victory over the virus.

Netanyahu's opponents point to the pandemic's exorbitant economic cost, and the Government's haphazard policy-making toward it over the course of last year, which they portray as "shoot from the hip" administration and political chaos.

The pandemic's special spending, including swollen unemployment payments and compensation packages for businesses, resulted in a NIS 160.3 billion (approximately A\$62.26 billion) budget deficit, equal to 11.7% of GDP – a shortfall Israel had not seen since the hyperinflation crisis of the 1980s. GDP itself contracted last year by an unprecedented 4.2%.

Bennett and Sa'ar blame these numbers on Netanyahu personally, citing in particular his failure to pass a national budget since the last election. This failure was indeed the cause of the current early election, and Netanyahu's opponents claim that not passing a budget and forcing an election was the PM's aim all along, in the alleged hope a new Knesset would be elected which would pass a law postponing his trial on corruption charges until he leaves office.

Netanyahu's opponents also say that his Finance Minister, Yisrael Katz, kept improvising and imposing upon the civil servants, causing both the budget director and the director-general of the Treasury Department to resign, instead of working collegially and methodically with them.

In terms of the policy itself, Netanyahu's opponents, especially Bennett, say the repeated sweeping lockdowns of workplaces, schools and malls over the past year were medically unnecessary and economically destructive.

These contradictory impressions concerning Netanyahu's coronavirus record – positive regarding the vaccine rollout, less so with respect to previous pandemic management – may have cancelled each other out as electoral factors if not for the added controversy over the ultra-Orthodox community's response to the plague.

Netanyahu's opponents charge that the Government's failure to shut down Ben Gurion Airport until late January was a surrender to his ultra-Orthodox political allies, who wanted American students to continue flying back and forth to Israel's religious seminaries. It was, they claim,

part of a broader picture.

There have been massively attended ultra-Orthodox weddings and funerals in stark violation of the pandemic's restrictions, with police apparently turning a blind eye. In addition, some ultra-Orthodox elementary schools remained open while all other schools were shuttered.

Many voters whose children spent a full year at home, struggling to study through Zoom and with parents having to somehow keep them busy and active, are angry at what they see as a double standard. Some of them might punish Netanyahu at the ballot box.

This may well help explain predictions from pollsters that Netanyahu and his Likud party, despite their handsome lead overall, are likely to lose roughly one-fifth of the 36 Knesset seats they currently hold.

Moreover, beyond these pandemic issues, Netanyahu also faces an unprecedented rightwing attack on his moral record.

Netanyahu's original right-wing competitors, namely Bennett and Lieberman, avoided criticising him in the wake of the charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust that he is currently facing in court. Sa'ar has broken that pattern, and charges Netanyahu with imposing his personal legal situation onto his party's politics, and prioritising his own personal interest in avoiding facing justice over the national interest. Likud, Sa'ar said in a televised address, has ceased to serve ideas, and instead serves its leader.

This assault, too, will be tested in this election, with New Hope offering voters a "clean government" ticket that is also impeccably right-wing, so much so that its candidates include former minister Benny Begin, son of the late Likud founder and guiding light, former PM Menachem Begin.

Netanyahu, for his part, hopes to offset these challenges by emphasising the peace and normalisation agreements he has delivered with four Arab states.

Just how this exceptional constellation of pandemic, diplomatic, and legal circumstances impresses voters is what will decide whether Netanyahu's protracted incumbency will continue or end.

If polls are correct, Netanyahu's Likud and its allied ultra-Orthodox parties will end up with even fewer seats than the 52 they currently hold. That figure, which falls well short of half the Knesset's 120 seats, is what compelled Netanyahu to create a coalition with Benny Gantz last year.

Sa'ar had made a very clear public commitment not to serve under Netanyahu after the election. Bennett, however, has made no such statement, saying he is against such political boycotts. Netanyahu thus hopes Bennett will

"Beyond...pandemic issues, Netanyahu also faces an unprecedented rightwing attack on his moral record"

provide him the backing he will need to create the kind of narrow, right-wing coalition in which he, Netanyahu, feels most at home.

However, Bennett has been humiliated by Netanyahu repeatedly over the years, and is believed to have a deep mistrust of the PM he once served as chief of staff. Moreover, Bennett has worked well with both Lapid and Sa'ar.

Chances are therefore looking high that the three will team up to unseat Netanyahu, even though this would appear to require a colourful and very broad governing coalition ranging from Lieberman and Bennett on the Right to Labor and Meretz on the Left. Those two left-leaning parties are expected to garner some 7% of the vote, though one of the two might push the other under the electoral threshold.

Another factor which could raise the prospect of Netanyahu being replaced is, paradoxically, the legitimacy he himself lent to Israeli Arab politicians, whom he used to deride as anti-Zionists and supporters of terrorism.

Netanyahu held talks with one such lawmaker, Dr. Mansour Abbas, a dentist with Islamist beliefs, seeking Abbas' support for his coalition. Abbas, for his part – now running as the head of his own party – has said only Likud could make peace, and called on his former partners in the Joint List, a federation of Israeli Arab parties, to consider backing a Likud-led coalition in return for expanded budgets for Israeli Arab causes.

This precedent makes it more likely that Arab lawmakers could vote in favour – or at least abstain – in a parliamentary vote to unseat Netanyahu and crown the liberal Lapid, or even the nationalist Sa'ar, as his successor after this election.

That is in the case the pandemic protest vote proves insufficient to unseat Netanyahu. Then again, Netanyahu's self-congratulatory stance as pandemic saviour and peacemaker may yet deliver him the victory he craves. In ten prime ministerial bids over a quarter of a century, including two defeats and three inconclusive elections, such a victory would be Netanyahu's fifth. From his personal point of view, it would also almost certainly be the sweetest.

AIR

ISRAEL'S LEAST IDEOLOGICAL VOTE

by David Horovitz

For decades, when trying to simplify the presentation of survey data for Israel's baffling array of parties during election campaigns, Israeli pollsters would divide the competing forces into two blocs – right-wing and left-wing. On one side, you'd have Likud and its satellite parties, which latterly included the ultra-Orthodox. On the other, you'd have Labor and its allies, including the Arab-dominated parties, which might be set off in a slightly different shade to show they wouldn't actually be invited into the government.

That right/left, two-bloc chart fell apart after the elections in April 2019, however, when Avigdor Lieberman and his Yisrael Beiteinu party shatteringly prevented Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu from forming the coalition he thought he had sewn up, and thus sentenced Israel to the second of what have turned out to be four (so far) quickfire election campaigns.

Lieberman was and is emphatically a man of the political right – a settler, a proponent of redrawing Israel's boundaries to exclude some of its Arab citizens, a former Netanyahu aide and a minister in multiple Likud-led coalitions. There had been no doubt that Yisrael Beiteinu belonged in that right-wing bloc. Except that, since its leader had deprived Israel and Netanyahu of a right-wing government, with devastating political consequences that reverberate to this day, it manifestly didn't.

Unfazed, the pollsters soldiered on with their two-bloc summations. In the last two elections, they produced their familiar graphic, but with minor modifications – right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties on one side; centre, left and Arab parties on the other; and that curious beast, Lieber-

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man's right-wing, anti-Netanyahu, anti-ultra-Orthodox Yisrael Beitenu, afforded a place of its own in the middle.

Now, though, in the run-up to election number four on March 23, the whole easy-to-follow two-bloc solution has melted down altogether. The cacophony of competing parties is certainly marked by the familiar left-right ideological differences. But the next Israeli government is unlikely to be assembled on the basis of affinity between similar-minded parties.

For these are shaping up to be the least ideological elections in Israeli history.

Israel's big issues haven't evaporated. Iran is closing in on the bomb. The army constantly faces threats on numerous other fronts. The Palestinians aren't going anywhere. The settlement enterprise remains divisive. We have a relationship to nurture with a new US administration. A need to build better bridges with Diaspora Jewry. Domestic inequalities are widening. The social and cultural gulf between the ultra-Orthodox and the rest is yawning. And overshadowing everything right now is COVID-19.

There is no shortage of parties old and new competing for our support with policies on all these and other familiar issues; it's just that they do not line up in potential coalitions on that basis. The question of right or left is, more than ever before, subservient to the only 2021 electoral divide that really matters: for- or anti-Netanyahu. Never mind whether a party's ideology is similar to Likud's on some or other key matters. It's a matter, almost solely, of are you with him or against him.

This isn't the fault of the pollsters, of course. And, undeterred, rather than ditching their familiar two-bloc system, they have thus far merely changed the labels. On one side, nowadays, they place Netanyahu's Likud and its two dependable partners, the ultra-Orthodox parties Shas and United Torah Judaism. And on the other side, they group all the anti-Netanyahu parties, irrespective of their ideology, thus creating a graphic alliance of extraordinarily improbable political bedfellows, from ex-Likud minister Gideon Sa'ar's New Hope party on the right, via Lieberman, across to Yair Lapid's centrist *Yesh Atid* and Benny Gantz's shrivelling Blue and White, and on to the reviving Labor party of Merav Michaeli, and thence to left-wing Meretz and finally the Arab parties.

What they're quite sensibly showing us, in other words, is Netanyahu versus the rest. And in the middle slot that was invented for Lieberman in 2019, we now have the *Yamina* party – a firmly right-wing entity but one, nonetheless, whose leader Naftali Bennett is neither promising

to serve alongside Netanyahu nor promising not to, and instead declaring that he has his eyes firmly set on the premiership himself.

The trouble with this latest graphic representation is that it still doesn't quite capture what's going on. Bennett might indeed turn out to hold the balance of power between the pro- and anti-Netanyahu forces when all the

votes are in – but only if Likud, the ultra-Orthodox parties, and Yamina can muster at least 61 of the Knesset's 120 seats between them. And that is something that our (rather unreliable) polls currently suggest is far from certain.

If, by contrast, the other bloc, the bloc whose only common denominator is the declared goal of ousting Netanyahu, has 61 or more seats, the pollsters' graphic could prove highly misleading, in part because Netanyahu's osten-

sible "natural allies," the ultra-Orthodox parties that have stuck with him these past three elections, cannot be relied upon to stick with him again. If a Netanyahu-led alliance cannot win a Knesset majority, they have intimated that other permutations might be viable – including membership in a coalition alongside the likes of New Hope, Yamina and Yesh Atid.

Numerous other permutations could also come into play, including the very real possibility that, yet again, there's no viable, stable coalition at all, and we are condemned to yet another... (Sorry, I cannot bring myself to complete that sentence.)

AIR

David Horowitz is Editor in Chief of the Times of Israel. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

CAMPAIGNING – AMID CAMPAIGN FATIGUE

by Ahron Shapiro

Entering the final weeks before Israel's March 23 national election, parties have unveiled their campaigns – while struggling to say something fresh after three previous campaigns in just the past two years. With 39 parties jockeying for 120 Knesset seats – up from 30 in the last election – and at least four parties hovering around the four-seat minimum threshold for entering the Knesset, competition for undecided voters is fierce.



A worker prepares materials for Israeli elections at the Israeli Central Elections Committee Logistics Center in Shoham, Israel (Credit: Gil Cohen Magen / Shutterstock)

In the age of smartphones and social media, the traditional campaign commercials which begin airing on Israeli television a couple of weeks before an election, no longer carry the impact they once had. But while the medium has changed, the name of the game – crafting persuasive messaging to convince voters to choose your party’s ballot paper once they enter the voting booth – has not. The following is a survey of campaign messaging by parties likely to enter the next Knesset, presented in order of each party’s current popularity in the polls.

Likud (polls estimate: ~29 seats; current Knesset seats: 36)

Slogan: “Only the Likud will bring a fully right-wing government”

Post-election scenarios suggest three potential challengers to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu – *Yesh Atid*’s Yair Lapid, New Hope’s Gideon Sa’ar, and *Yamina*’s Naftali Bennett – but Likud has singled out Lapid as Netanyahu’s true rival, a matchup which polls best with right-wing voters. A recent attack ad portrayed Lapid as weak on the economy, COVID-19 response and the Iranian threat. Addressing the other challengers as an aside, the Likud’s campaign ad warns “Every vote for Sa’ar or Bennett is a vote for Lapid, who will form a left-wing government.”

Likud appears on track to receive nearly 25% fewer votes than it received at the last election, but the party is hoping that Israel’s successful vaccination campaign, led by Netanyahu, will lure former Likud voters back to the fold. In tandem with its campaign ads, Likud has also released apolitical ads aimed at younger Israelis urging them to get vaccinated.

Yesh Atid (polls: ~18 seats; current Knesset seats: 16)

Slogan: “Sane government”

Yair Lapid’s *Yesh Atid* (“There is a Future”) party is polling strongly, perhaps close to the high point it achieved in 2013 of 19 seats, outdoing Sa’ar and Bennett. This leaves Lapid well-situated to be recommended for prime minister in any alternative coalition which succeeds in displacing Netanyahu, or at least to get first go in a rotation agreement.

Lapid’s ads explore the theme of an alternative “sane” government, as opposed to what they call today’s “insane” Government, sometimes in humorous ways, other times in a more serious tone. Its logo for the election replaces the zero in the year 2021 with an image of a rising sun.

In one of Lapid’s popular ads, he lists reforms he promises to pass within his first 100 days in office: unemploy-

ment benefits for the self-employed; term limits for prime ministers; limiting the number of government ministers; legalising civil marriages; reforming surrogacy laws to include members of the LGBTQI community and amending the controversial Nation-State law.

New Hope (polls: ~15 seats; new party)

Slogan: “Gideon Sa’ar. Prime Minister for all.”

Former Likud MK Gideon Sa’ar established New Hope in December along with other former Likud members who were unhappy with the party’s direction under Netanyahu. Sa’ar has recently fallen back in the opinion polls after initial surveys suggested he might get 20 or more seats.

New Hope’s ads are aimed at disgruntled Likud voters who support Likud’s right-wing policies but find the party dysfunctional under Netanyahu.

One New Hope commercial shows an Israeli flag shattered like glass, while a voiceover tells potential voters that Netanyahu is to blame for Israel’s political instability. “The one who broke [the system] can’t be the one to fix it,” it says.

As a response to the claim that “Only Netanyahu can bring about a fully right-wing government”, an attack ad by New Hope reminded voters that Netanyahu had formed governments with many left-wing figures including Ehud Barak, Tzipi Livni and Amir Peretz, and that Netanyahu had recently been making overtures to Islamist Mansour Abbas of the Ra’am party.

Yamina (polls: ~12 seats; current Knesset seats: 3)

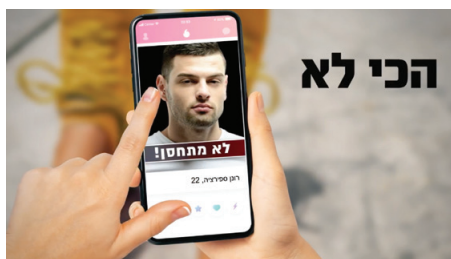
Slogan: “Naftali Bennett. There is alternative leadership”

Yamina (“rightward”) party leader Naftali Bennett soared in the opinion polls over the past year as chief critic of the Government’s COVID-19 response, only to fall back considerably when Sa’ar entered the race.

Bennett’s ads, like those of Lapid and Sa’ar, tout Bennett as an alternative leader to Netanyahu in his own right-wing niche. Unlike Lapid, Bennett speaks as a trusted figure on the right with whom Likud voters can identify. Unlike Sa’ar, Bennett can criticise the Government as someone who spent the last year in opposition.

Bennett’s ads have urged Netanyahu to stick to the issues in the campaign, debate him and “let the public decide” which candidate’s plans are better.

Bennett has recently begun promoting a plan to expedite Israel’s economic recovery by reducing taxes and regulation using Singapore as a model.



A Likud ad (top) shows a woman using a dating app and only liking men who have been vaccinated for COVID-19; while (bottom) a New Hope ad shows Gideon Sa’ar welcoming former Likud minister Benny Begin to his party

Joint List (polls: ~9 seats; current Knesset seats: 11)

Arabic slogan: "Dignity and rights"

The Ayman Odeh-led Joint List is going into the election without Mansour Abbas' Ra'am faction, which has chosen to run on its own but is currently polling under the electoral threshold, raising the spectre that up to three seats worth of support from Arab voters may end up unrepresented. Arabic language social media by the Joint List focuses on major problems in Israel's Arab community that the party hopes to target, including gun violence and crumbling infrastructure. The party's Hebrew language campaign has yet to be rolled out.

Shas and United Torah Judaism (polls: ~15 seats combined; current Knesset seats: 16)

Slogans: Shas: "Israel chooses God";

UTJ: "It's united or nothing!"

For the purposes of brevity, and owing to their similarities, the Sephardic and Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox or "Haredi" parties, respectively, are discussed here together.

For the most part, the reliable base of both parties delivers between seven and nine seats for each without the need for much campaigning, but both parties use ads to trawl for non-religious voters sympathetic to their traditional and social welfare-heavy agendas. In its campaign videos, Shas has used archival footage of deceased but respected Sephardic rabbis and touted its credentials as a party that looks after the needs of the vulnerable. UTJ has used its social media to shame anti-Haredi campaigns by other parties, but is waiting until closer to election day to launch its own campaign.

Yisrael Beitenu (polls: ~9 seats; current Knesset seats: 7)

Slogan: "Lieberman. The end of Haredi rule!"

Riding a wave of frustration over violations of lockdown regulations by some members of Israel's ultra-Orthodox community, Avigdor Lieberman's secularist, right-wing Yisrael Beitenu party – part of the anti-Netanyahu bloc – has been producing campaign material that targets voters who support, above all, changing the current Government for one without the participation of Haredi parties.

Labor (polls: ~6 seats; current Knesset seats: 2)

Slogan: "Truth in politics"

Newly-elected Labor leader Merav Michaeli has been the face of Labor's social media campaign. Labor's videos have claimed that Netanyahu is a liability in terms of

convincing the Biden Administration to take a strong stand against the Iranian nuclear threat, and that Israel's successful vaccination campaign, as touted by Netanyahu, could not have been possible without a public health care system that was created by early Labor governments.

The seventh candidate on Labor's Knesset list, Arab filmmaker Ibtisam Mara'ana, was disqualified by the Central Elections Committee on Feb 17 over anti-Zionist comments she had made in the past but has since disavowed. Her disqualification is expected to be overturned by the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, the Likud and the far-right *Otzma Yehudit* faction have targeted Mara'ana in ads attacking Yesh Atid's Lapid, as he would likely require Labor's support to form a government.

Meretz (polls: ~5 seats; current Knesset seats: 4)

Slogan: "Only Meretz will fight for your values. Meretz, the home of the left."

Meretz social media ads highlight the issues that the party supports, such as fighting for civil marriage, and opposing religious coercion and West Bank settlements.

Meretz had been criticised in the past for failing to include Israeli Arabs in realistic spots on its Knesset list, but this election the party has reserved a spot for Arab educator Rinawie Zoabi, and has been promoting this move in some videos.

Religious Zionism (polls: ~5 seats; current Knesset seats: 2)

Slogan: "The only way to a right-wing government"

Religious Zionism party leader Betza'el Smotrich parted ways with Yamina's Bennett in early January.

At the urging of Netanyahu, who is seeking to ensure right-wing votes are not wasted by going to parties that fall under the electoral threshold, Religious Zionism agreed to run together with Itamar Ben-Gvir's far-right *Otzma Yehudit* ("Jewish Power") party and the anti-LGBTQI rights Noam party. As part of the deal, Netanyahu also reserved a spot on the Likud list for a Religious Zionism candidate.

Religious Zionism's social media is aimed at drawing right-wing votes from other parties in the bloc and it has focused its fire at Yamina, which it sees as its main rival. A vulgar video circulated by *Otzma Yehudit* in the name of the Religious Zionism party smeared several Arab-Israeli politicians and was widely condemned.

Blue and White (polls: ~4 seats; current Knesset seats: 12)

Slogan: "Honest government"

Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz has a well-



Yisrael Beitenu ad (top) shows Benjamin Netanyahu with haredi coalition partners: "The power went to their heads"; while (bottom) Labor ad features leader Merav Michaeli and the slogan "Truth in Politics"

funded campaign centred around his reputation as a clean and honest politician, that includes front-page ads in newspapers and well-crafted videos.

Nevertheless, his party continues to flirt with missing the electoral threshold according to polls. A full-page open letter in the Hebrew daily *Yediot Ahronot* on Feb. 22, signed by former prime minister Ehud Barak and tens of other former top security officials, called for Gantz to pull his party out of the race in order not to waste votes that might otherwise help topple Netanyahu.

AIR

PALESTINIANS ALSO GOING TO THE POLLS – OR ARE THEY?

by Sean Savage

Israelis are not the only ones headed to elections in the first half of 2021. Palestinians made headlines recently for an unexpected reason: the announcement of new elections for the first time in 15 years.

Rival Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah agreed to an election timetable that will see the first elections held in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in nearly a generation.

Jonathan Schanzer, Senior Vice President for Research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told *JNS* that he remains sceptical of the Palestinian announcement.

“Cynics will say that this is another episode of ‘Lucy and the football,’ with the Palestinians gesturing yet again that they are willing to end their inter-cine conflict, only to later renege,” said Schanzer, referring to the “football gag” in the well-known Charles Schultz “Peanuts” cartoon.

“Optimists will look at this as an opportunity to finally end the Palestinian civil war and return to political unity. I tend to be more of a cynic about this, having observed that the rift has only widened over the years,” he said. “But one can never be sure. It’s the Middle East, after all.”

After a two-day meeting in Cairo, Palestinian factions agreed to an election timetable, and to “respect and accept” the results of the election. Palestinian parliamentary elections are scheduled for May 22, with a presidential vote set to be held on July 31.

In a joint statement issued by Fatah, Hamas and 12 other

Palestinian factions, the parties promised to “abide by the timetable” of the elections, allow unrestricted campaigning and establish an “election court” to adjudicate any disputes.

The move by the Palestinians to hold elections this year comes just weeks after US President Joe Biden was sworn in. The Palestinians have pinned their hopes on a more friendly Biden Administration after boycotting the Trump Administration since December 2017, when Jerusalem was recognised as Israel’s capital, with the US embassy moved there nearly six months later in May 2018.

Biden and his top officials have signalled a friendlier approach to the Palestinians, promising to reopen the PLO’s mission in Washington and to restore humanitarian aid to the Palestinians cut by Trump. Yet Biden himself has paid scant attention to the Middle East, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian arena, in the weeks since taking office.

However, it appears that with elections moving forward, the Palestinians may be attempting to force the Biden Administration to contend with their affairs, especially since it appears that Hamas – a US-designated terror group – will likely make gains in the election.

“The Biden Administration will undoubtedly welcome elections. Israel will also likely be cautiously supportive,” said Schanzer. “The problem for both is that Hamas could win. This would bring us right back to where we started.

It was the concern about a Hamas government that prompted the protracted crisis we have been in for more than a decade.”

‘THE SAME OBSTACLES REMAIN’

The last Palestinian elections were held on Jan. 29, 2006. In that election, Hamas won 74 out of 132 parliamentary seats, with Fatah winning 45. Voter turnout was reported to be nearly 75% in Gaza and 73% in the PA-controlled areas

of the West Bank.

A Hamas-controlled government, which Fatah refused to join, was sworn in two months later on March 29. The following month, the United States and the European Union suspended aid to the newly installed government due to Hamas’ victory.

By September of that year, Fatah and Hamas announced they would form a unity government, though they failed to agree on its terms. By the end of November, talks were at a dead end. A call by Fatah leader and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in December 2006 for early elections triggered fighting between the factions and by June 2007, Hamas had ousted Fatah officials from the Gaza Strip and taken control of the area, where it remains the de facto government today.



Palestinian employees of the Central Elections Committee in Gaza work to educate and register citizens in preparation for parliamentary and presidential elections (Credit: Abed Rahim Khatib / Shutterstock)

Since then, there have been several attempts to forge unity agreements between Hamas and Fatah, as well as hold elections. However, both sides have not only kept their distance but become bitter enemies, with Fatah cracking down on Hamas activity in the West Bank and Hamas similarly viewing Fatah-aligned factions in Gaza with suspicion.

More importantly, Hamas is still very much engaged in a bitter struggle against Israel with a number of deadly conflicts over the last several years and continued attempts to fire rockets at Israeli civilian populations that threaten to escalate into a wider war.

“The same obstacles faced by previous attempts of reconciliations remain,” Hussein Aboubakr Mansour, director for Emerging Democratic Voice in the Middle East for EMET (the Endowment for Middle East Truth, a Washington-based thinktank), told *JNS*.

“There is a set of whole new pressures from the bottom – Palestinian discontent – and from above – regional and international. Egypt also seems to be throwing all its weight behind this,” he explained. “But the obstacles remain. Hamas is the Islamic Resistance Movement. Armed resistance is its identity.”

Additionally, there are questions about the future of the Palestinian leadership. Abbas is 85 and reportedly in failing health. His largely secular Fatah movement, which has controlled the PA since the mid-2000s, has become increasingly autocratic and unpopular among Palestinians in the West Bank.

He also has no clear successor within Fatah. He could face a leadership challenge from Marwan Barghouti, who is currently serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison for planning terror attacks during the Second Intifada; or Mohammed Dahlan, a former Fatah security chief in Gaza who now lives in exile in the United Arab Emirates after facing charges in absentia by the PA. On top of that, a December 2020 poll by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research indicates that Hamas’ Ismail Haniyeh – who briefly served as PA prime minister in 2006-07 and is the de-facto political chief in Gaza – would handily defeat Abbas in the presidential election (*although Hamas recently told Al-Jazeera that it would not nominate a presidential candidate, Ed.*).

“There is the question of whether Abbas is doing this because of health issues,” added Schanzer. “There is a chance that he is allowing this to move forward because he has little choice in the matter.”

‘REGIONAL ACTORS ARE WATCHING CAREFULLY’

Hamas also faces its own internal challenges.

In the 15 years that Hamas has ruled Gaza, the area has faced economic devastation as a result of its three wars with Israel and the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the coastal territory.

One consideration is that Hamas – the de facto ruling government in Gaza for more than a decade – now faces many of the same pressures that the Fatah-controlled PA has faced as the governing political body over the Palestinians. In the last round of elections in 2006, Hamas was still a novice to politics and could criticise Fatah without having a record of its own. However, in the Gaza Strip today, Hamas faces an array of challenges from other terror factions, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and even Salafi extremist groups tied to ISIS.

While on the surface they are all terror organisations, Hamas is held responsible by Israel’s Government for the security situation in Gaza, and has been and will be blamed for any rocket fire or terrorism coming from the coastal territory. Similarly, Gazans hold Hamas responsible for civilian affairs in Gaza from social services, like garbage collection, to education and healthcare. There have also been complaints about corruption levelled against Hamas and its top officials.

Qatar pours hundreds of millions of dollars in aid into the Gaza Strip, helping Hamas to stay in power and to pay its civil servants, while the terror group imposes high taxes on imports, exports and businesses that have hurt everyday Gazans. Hamas has cracked down forcefully on protests against the taxes.

“Hamas now has to deal with as much popular frustration as the PA does and it is unclear how much ... the support of Hamas change[d] from 2005 till today,” said Aboubakr Mansour.

“If elections are to be held freely, this will be the first electoral test for Sunni political Islam since the Arab Spring, which means that many regional actors are watching carefully. But an even more difficult question is what will happen if Hamas loses the elections. The likely answer to all these questions is that nothing will happen either way,” he said.

If Hamas does replicate its success in the last Palestinian elections in the mid-2000s, then the outcome could cause even more uncertainty.

“This is the million-dollar question. If Hamas wins, a new mess will emerge,” said Schanzer, arguing that there needs to be an emergence of new Palestinian leadership if unity and peace are ever to be achieved.

“The key to solving this is for the international community to pressure the Palestinians for political reform,” he emphasised. “There needs to be new parties in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip to challenge the terrorist Hamas faction and the corrupt Fatah faction. Right now, there are no alternatives to these terrible options.”

AIR

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Conspiracy theories for kids

Books promote hate and hidden antisemitism

by Ran Porat

Wild and baseless conspiracy theories, often tinged with antisemitism, are bread and butter for a notable Australian website promoting extremist and hateful content, *Gumshoe News*. In the previous edition of the *AIR*, I covered the promotion of Holocaust denial on that website.

This article focuses on a series of children's books written and published by Dee McLachlan, the founder and editor of *Gumshoe News*. The books appear likely to indoctrinate young minds with dangerous conspiracy theories, bias and prejudice. Instead of teaching children to use logic, healthy critical thinking and reason, the books use scare tactics, teaching them to reject logic and rely on fear – always doubting and dreading governments, scientists, businessmen and bankers. Hidden in the plots of the books are innuendoes and references to classic antisemitic tropes.

DEE MCLACHLAN

Dee McLachlan (whose birth name was Duncan McLachlan) was born in South Africa in the early 1950s. She settled in Victoria after immigrating to Australia in 1999 and later transitioned her gender.

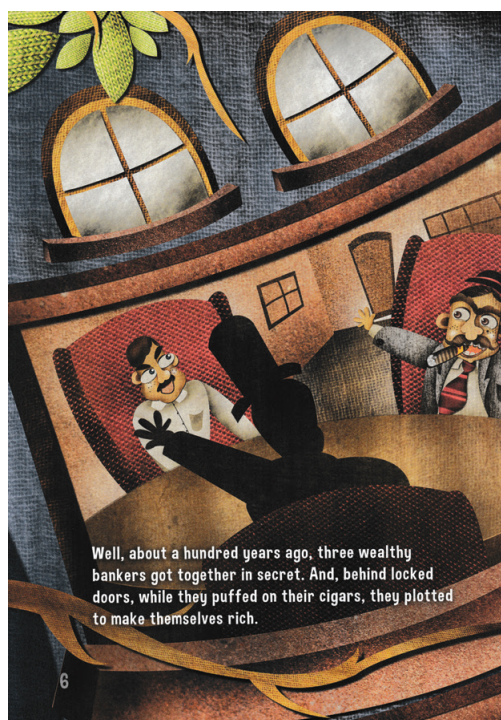
McLachlan directed, produced and wrote the script for several films. She won awards for “The Jammed” (2007), which dealt with human trafficking and sexual abuse, and her “Who Wants to be a Terrorist” (2012) featured a story about a reality TV show to choose the best terrorist.

An avid anti-vaxxer, McLachlan actively opposes the Australian Government's COVID-19 approach, while claiming the virus is a part of an evil conspiracy to control humanity and reduce its population. Along with other extremists, she participated in an online group agitating against coronavirus lockdowns, which also included Australians Max Igan and Sufyaan Khalifa, both promoters of antisemitic material.

“Living in muzzle-city (Melbourne) this last winter,” McLachlan noted in a recent article, “was like being on a dystopian film set. The city was named after Lord Melbourne, but Lord's [sic] real surname was Lamb – most apropos for obedient Melbournian sheeple being prepped for their genetically altered destiny.”

In her 2016 book *Enough is Enough* – intended for adults, not children – co-authored with *Gumshoe* contributor and Holocaust denier Mary W. Maxwell, McLachlan talks about “Chilling Similarities between 9-11 and [the 1996] Port Arthur [massacre].” Maxwell explains in the preface that the book shows that the Port Arthur massacre, in which Martin Bryant shot dead 35 people and wounded 23 others at a Tasmanian historic site, was actually “part of a very well-planned effort by persons who would be in a position immediately after the event to control the police, the hospital, the media, and the law courts. Persons who could lie, plant evidence, intimidate witnesses.”

Other conspiracy theories, fake news and anti-Israel blood libels promoted by McLachlan include claims that the 1963 assassination of US President John F. Kennedy and the 9-11 terror attacks were both “inside jobs” that were somehow also masterminded in Israel; that an Israeli missile struck the *USS Cole* in Yemen in 2000; and a story about “Project Pogo & Project Zypfr”, which she claimed were plots by Israel's Mossad intelligence agency to kill Americans.



A page promoting a traditional conspiracy theory about bankers from the book *The Big Fat Bank*

DOING IT FOR THE KIDS

Between 2012 and 2013, McLachlan published five children's books under the pen name Dalia Mae Lachlan. The books are all avail-

able for purchase in Australia (for example, via Dymocks, which ships the books from a US warehouse). Collectively, the book series is titled “Awaken Your Kids” and promoted through the website www.awakenyourkids.com. Every book in the series includes an introduction, where McLachlan states that:

“When your kids grow up as informed, open minded and questioning adults, they will have the insight to lead and choose leaders who reject violence and corporate greed. The books are one early step to understanding the complex world we live in, and to encourage the desire to question and ask for truth.”

Yet, truth is hardly a central feature of McLachlan's children's books. Instead, the characters are situated in plots echoing and promoting crazed conspiracy theories and lies, about governments hiding the truth while trying



to control the brains of citizens, and about evil people of power and money and malevolent scientists – all of whom are white men.

While McLachlan is careful not to specifically mention the Jews as her villains, some parts of the plots in her books appear to be based on classical antisemitic tropes and/or anti-Israel slurs.

THE THREE TALL BUILDINGS

The Three Tall Buildings is a gloomy and dark story about the 9-11 terror attacks. It claims, for example, that Osama bin Laden (“an evil man living in a cave far, far, far away”) may not be responsible for 9-11 and that the impact from the airplanes hitting the World Trade Centre in New York City was not enough to topple the buildings. Instead, it says, “someone had put explosives” to take them down – a lie refuted many times over.

The story also says:

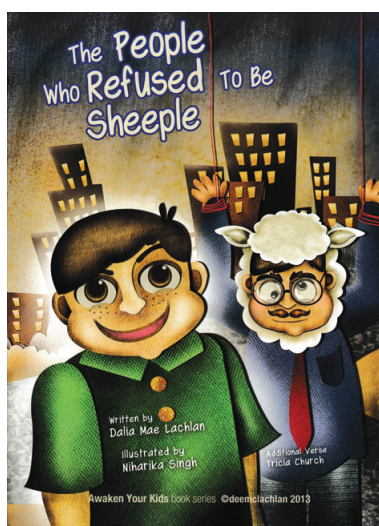
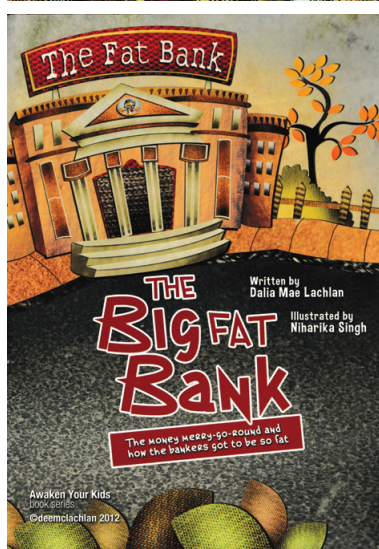
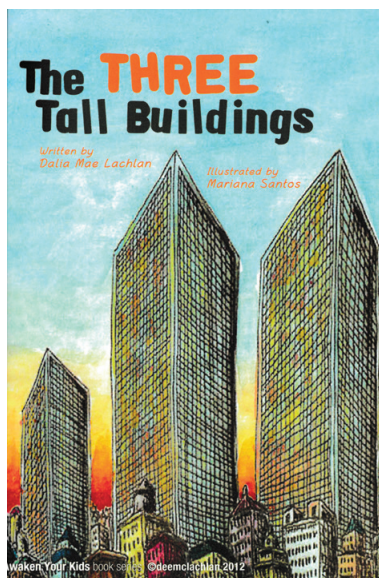
“Then one day a secret message was sent out.
‘Don’t come into the new city,’ one message said.”

This paragraph from the book is alluding to an antisemitic email sent using the Israeli messaging software Odigo to two employees of the company in Israel on the day of the attack. The message included a general warning of an attack, without indicating a location. Similar messages are very common and sent daily. Unsurprisingly, on *Gumshoe News*, the Odigo story has been presented as proof Israel was behind the September 11 2001 terror attacks in some way.

Another baseless conspiratorial claim about 9-11 advanced in *The Three Tall Buildings* is related to the US stock market, with the book suggesting that “Other people even put bets on that something bad was going to happen.”

THE BIG FAT BANK

A second book, *The Big Fat Bank*, depicts bankers as evil, greedy and blood-thirsty, and appears to be loosely based on a classic conspiracy theory that includes strong antisemitic elements. The original conspiracy talks about three families – the Rockefellers and two Jewish families, the Rothschilds and Sassoons – and their alleged plot to take control of the world’s most powerful political financial institutions.



Some of Dee McLachlan’s conspiracy-laden books for children ages 5-12

The book says:

“Well, about a hundred years ago, three wealthy bankers got together in secret. And, behind locked doors, while they puffed on their cigars, they plotted to make themselves rich. Very rich.

The bankers were greedy and wanted to be richer than all the kings, all the emperors, and all the rulers of the world.”

In the book, the bankers’ evil actions include money printing, high interest loans, political intrigues, destroying the environment and starting wars to divert attention from their mischief.

THE PEOPLE WHO REFUSED TO BE SHEEPLE

In another book, *The People who Refused to be Sheeple*, the plot focuses on “the super-rich” (gathering at the Bohemian Groove) who conspire to reduce Earth’s population and enslave humanity by planting mind-control chips into their bodies: “They [the super-rich] said: People are vermin and it will be mayhem like mice in a plague, we need to control them.”

McLachlan throws a variety of conspiratorial and fearmongering fables into the plot. For example, to control people, the protagonists use money, mobile phones and fluoride. They conspire to brainwash children in schools and on TV, buy the press and create puppet political leaders to send people to die in wars.

Published almost a decade prior to the coronavirus pandemic, *The People Who Refused to be Sheeple* is also the flagship of McLachlan’s antivax campaign, presenting vaccines as a means to take over humanity: “Problems they’ll solve with a giant vaccinator and control all your lives with a global dictator.”

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES

The Factory that made Guns is a story about a greedy businessman converting an agricultural factory to a weapons factory. In order to boost his profits, he plants a bomb to scare the king into a war on a “kingdom in the desert that was just minding its own business” – most likely a reference to the US wars in Afghanistan and/or Iraq in recent years, and possibly to 9-11.

The Great Monster Corn touts conspiracy theories about the effects of genetically modified corn.

According to McLachlan's website, she is working on several new children's books: *Felix and his Bum-Chip*, *The Brave Little Drone*, *Saving Hawk*, *The Electric Car*, *The Naked Flyer* and *The Girl that came by Boat*.

It would be a mistake to judge McLachlan's children's books as ridiculous or harmless; they are not. These books may well result in the poisoning of the minds of children between the ages of five and 12 with hatred and blind rejection of authority, reason and logic, leading kids to accept wild and disproven conspiracy theories. And that is not funny at all. AIR

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

WHY ISRAEL LEADS THE WORLD IN VACCINATION

by Charles Lipson

No country has been more successful in getting the coronavirus vaccine to its citizens than Israel. Why? Three reasons stand out, and the third one is likely to help people around the world.

Israel can vaccinate the population quickly because it has a very competent, comprehensive national health system, based on several Health Maintenance Organisations, all supervised by the Ministry of Health. The system includes digitised medical records for everyone in the country.

Israel bought enough vaccine. Earlier in the pandemic, it contracted for millions of doses from Moderna. More recently, it agreed to buy millions more from Pfizer so that everyone over the age of 16 can be vaccinated by the end of March. To clinch the Pfizer purchase, Jerusalem gave the company two incentives: It paid well above the market price, and it offered to share medical data with the company – data that few other countries could gather.

Israeli biostatisticians can pair the medical reactions of millions of vaccine recipients with each one's medical history and demographic data. This will allow public health professionals worldwide to gain a nuanced understanding of how the vaccine works, both in the entire population and in various subgroups, such as women over 80 or people with type II diabetes.

The country could afford the mass purchases thanks to decades of economic growth, grounded in high-tech, medical research, water conservation, sophisticated weapons development, cybersecurity and more.

To distribute the doses, Israel is depending on its effective public health system, which can reach the entire population in emergencies. Israel has had a lot of preparation for those crises, unfortunately, after decades of threats from terrorists and hostile neighbours. Faced with these ever-present dangers, the Government learned how to contact everyone quickly with vital information and respond to emergency conditions anywhere in the country. These communication and public health systems mean that the Government can reach the entire population, tell people where to get vaccinated, explain why it's so important and then execute this complex operation.

In terms of the logistics of Israel's vaccination program, the vaccines arrive at Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport. From there they go to an underground facility, run by the country's pharmaceutical giant, Teva, with enough freezer capacity to hold five million doses. The doses are then sent to 300 to 400 vaccination locations, established by the Health Ministry. Those locations not only include major hospitals but also drive-through stations, numerous small sites and more than two dozen mobile stations, all equipped to keep the vaccines at the required temperature: -70 degrees Celsius.

All shots are free, with priority for the elderly, health-care workers and patients with pre-existing conditions.

"What we basically said to Pfizer and Moderna and to the others was that if we will be one of the first countries to start vaccinating, very soon these companies will be able to see the results. It's a win-win situation," said Health Minister Yuli Edelstein.

This win-win was amplified when Israeli scientists figured out ways to improve delivery, beyond the manufacturer's own ideas. One, approved by Pfizer, was to



Public vaccination station against COVID-19 in Be'er Sheva (Credit: Olga Mukashev / Shutterstock)

repackage the large frozen packets of vaccine that were flown into the country into many smaller ones, the size of pizza-delivery boxes. The small ones could be delivered efficiently to remote sites.

Reuters reported that Israeli doctors have also discovered ways to get more than the advertised number of doses from each vial.

Israel offered Pfizer something valuable besides a premium price – it could provide the company with reliable, comprehensive data on how well the medicine works in a very large population. This data goes far beyond the 50,000 people Pfizer worked with in phase three trials. Equally important, each recipient's response to the vaccine can be paired (anonymously) with that person's health record and demographic details. That's possible because Israeli health authorities have maintained and digitised more than 30 years of medical history for the entire population.

Pairing this data with Pfizer vaccinations means that the company and public health officials around the world can gauge how well the shots work with different groups, such as people over 65 with asthma or pregnant women. Is the vaccine more effective with some groups than others? Are there any rare side effects that tests on smaller populations might have missed?

This data should be pouring in soon since, by late March, a majority of Israelis should be fully inoculated.

What have we learned so far? The earliest data covers the whole population, not subgroups, but it is very encouraging. It shows that the vaccine is actually more effective than Pfizer reported from its phase three trials. By Jan. 30, six weeks after Israel began inoculations, more than 1.7 million Israelis had received two doses of the Pfizer vaccine. Another 1.3 million had received their first dose. Of those who received the full inoculation, only around 300 later showed any significant COVID symptoms (less than 0.5%). Only 16 needed hospital care, less than 0.002%.

Encouraging as this data is, the country has suffered badly from the pandemic. Israel's lockdown has been the longest in the world [for any country as a whole, *Ed.*], and not everyone has complied willingly.

And despite a successful vaccination program, "herd immunity" is months away.

Still, Israel's rollout of the new vaccines has set the pace for the world. The hope now is it generates data and distribution strategies that will help other nations achieve better outcomes.

AIR

Dr. Charles Lipson is a professor emeritus of political science at the University of Chicago, where he founded the International Politics, Economics, and Security Program. Reprinted from the Jewish News Syndicate (JNS). © Jewish News Syndicate (JNS.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

IRAN'S GAME OF NUCLEAR CHICKEN WITH BIDEN

by Lazar Berman

With each step Iran takes to advance its nuclear program, a path out of the dangerous quagmire becomes even more murky.

On Feb. 23, Teheran officially suspended its implementation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty Additional Protocol, which gave nuclear inspectors increased access to Iran's nuclear program, including the ability to carry out snap inspections at undeclared sites.

"As of midnight tonight, we will not have... commitments beyond safeguards. Necessary orders have been issued to the nuclear facilities," said Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's envoy to international organisations in Vienna.

A day earlier, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said that Teheran could enrich uranium to 60% purity if it so desired. US State Department spokesman Ned Price said the comment "sounds like a threat" and referred to it as "posturing."

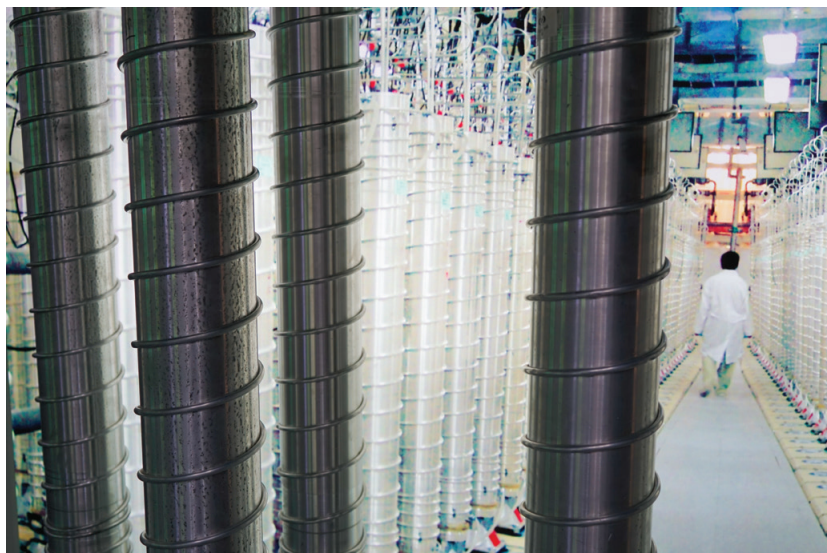
Analysts believe both the move to limit inspections and the enrichment threat are aimed at bolstering Iran's negotiating position as it and US President Joe Biden's Administration manoeuvre ahead of expected talks aimed at bringing Washington back into the 2015 nuclear deal. But even if intended as bargaining chips, they carry the risk of moving Iran significantly closer to nuclear weapons capabilities.

"Biden is playing a game of chicken over who will reverse course first," said Joab Rosenberg, former deputy head analyst in the Israel Defence Force's Military Intelligence Directorate. "There is an extremely unstable situation here, and a vector of deterioration and Iranian progress toward a bomb."

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Iranian centrifuges spinning away as Teheran goads the Biden Administration to offer incentives to get them to stop (Credit: Inspired By Maps / Shutterstock)

The 2015 nuclear deal limits the Islamic Republic to 3.67% enrichment, a threshold it long ago passed as part of a series of escalating violations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action between Iran and six world powers, better known as the Iran nuclear deal.

Uranium enriched to 60% is short of what Iran needs to make a nuclear weapon, but it would show that Teheran is going beyond the 20% to which it began enriching in January.

Levels above 20% are considered highly enriched uranium, or HEU, with few non-military uses. The jump from 20% to 90% enrichment, the level needed for most weapons-grade applications, is fairly simple, and any move to begin enriching above 20% is liable to raise major alarm bells.

In 2013, Iran's parliament pushed for a bill to enrich to 60%, which it said was allowed for nuclear-powered submarines. At the time it claimed it was developing such naval vessels, but today is not known to have any in its fleet, raising suspicions that the plans had been a feint.

While Iran's nuclear program progresses, the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) ability to keep an eye on Teheran's nuclear program is moving in the other direction. On Feb. 21, IAEA chief Rafael Grossi told reporters after an emergency trip to Teheran that Iran's Government would begin offering "less access" to UN weapons inspectors – involving unspecified changes to the type of activity the watchdog can carry out.

"It is totally clear that from Tuesday [Feb. 23], the oversight of Iran will be damaged," said Rosenberg.

The move to restrict inspectors was in line with a law passed by Iran's parliament in December requiring the Government to cease implementation of the Additional Protocol.

"This law exists, this law is going to be applied, which means that the Additional Protocol, much to my regret, is

going to be suspended," Grossi said, referring to a confidential inspections agreement between Teheran and the IAEA reached as part of the nuclear deal.

Teheran has been gradually suspending its compliance with most of the limits set by the agreement in response to Washington's abandonment of the nuclear deal, which provided sanctions relief in exchange for enrichment restrictions, and the failure of other parties to the deal to make up for the reimposed US penalties.

In July 2019, Iran announced it had exceeded the 300 kilogram limit of its 3.67% low-enriched uranium stockpile. A week later it began enriching uranium to 4.5% at the Natanz plant.

In September of that year, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that "all of the commitments for research and development under the JCPOA will be completely removed by Friday." The IAEA verified in November that Iran's heavy water stockpile had exceeded the JCPOA's 130 metric ton limit.

On Jan. 5, 2020, Iran announced its fifth planned violation, forgoing any limits on the number of centrifuges it operates.

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In January 2021, Teheran revealed that it was taking steps to produce uranium metal, days after it resumed enriching uranium to 20% purity at the underground Fordo facility.

According to a report on Feb. 19, IAEA inspectors last summer found uranium particles at two Iranian nuclear sites to which Iran tried to block access.

Iranian authorities had stonewalled the inspectors from reaching the sites for seven months before the inspection, and Iranian officials have failed to explain the presence of the uranium, the *Reuters* news agency reported, citing diplomats familiar with the UN agency's work.

The inspections took place in August and September of 2020, the report said. The IAEA keeps its findings secret and only shared the details of the find with a few countries.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported the suspicious findings earlier this month, without identifying the material.

IAEA chief Grossi tried to put the Feb. 21 agreement on inspections in a positive light, stressing that monitoring would continue in a "satisfactory" manner, pointing to a three-month "technical understanding" reached to ensure some type of inspections would continue.

"My hope, the hope of the IAEA, has been to stabilise a situation that was very unstable. And I think this technical understanding does it, so that other political consultations at other levels can take place," Grossi told reporters.

But the IAEA has refused to detail what the deal allows, and critics fear that it will still give Iran more leeway to make progress in its nuclear program while dictating what kind of access international inspectors will have.

"Based on Grossi's evasiveness, it doesn't seem like he achieved much in this agreement," said Rosenberg.

He noted the possibility that Iran actually made more significant concessions but that Grossi agreed not to go into detail so as not to arouse criticism of the Government from Iran's parliament, which nonetheless termed the agreement "illegal".

Richard Goldberg, a senior adviser at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, assailed the lack of demands for clarity from the White House.

"The US should not accept that the terms of this agreement are secret," he said.

While the Administration of former US President Donald Trump had pursued a "maximum pressure" policy against Iran, Biden has signalled a more conciliatory approach, albeit while leaving the reimposed sanctions in place. On Friday, Biden said the US was "prepared to reengage in negotiations with the P5+1 on Iran's nuclear program."

Goldberg said the Iranians had been testing their boundaries by violating the nuclear deal, and were now seeing how far they could push the Biden Administration. He noted an attack by Iranian-backed militias on Erbil in northern Iraq, in which a foreign contractor was killed and

an American service member was injured, which carried "no consequences for Iran."

"Next they will test existing sanctions and whether they will be enforced," Goldberg predicted. "Unenforced sanctions are the same as lifting sanctions."

AIR

Lazar Berman is the Times of Israel's diplomatic reporter. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ISRAEL, THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION AND THE JCPOA

by Michael Herzog

On January 26, Israel Defence Forces Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi publicly warned against returning to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran or anything similar, adding that he had ordered the IDF to prepare fresh military plans for addressing the Iranian nuclear challenge. For a military official to air such warnings is controversial in Israeli public discourse, yet the essence of Kochavi's remarks underscores the broad Israeli consensus on three crucial points: that Teheran never abandoned its ambition to become nuclear-armed; that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal left pathways open for realising this ambition; and that a nuclear Iran would pose a grave threat to Israel.

During his confirmation hearing a week prior to Kochavi's remarks, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted that in preparing to address the Iranian challenge, the Biden Administration intended to consult with Israel and other regional allies "on the takeoff." Jerusalem welcomed this pledge and is eager to start discussing the issue; Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu tasked National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat with this mission. Ultimately, Israel hopes to convince the Biden team to refrain from returning to the original deal or, failing that, to highlight the most critical JCPOA flaws that must be fixed.

THE ISRAELI CRITIQUE

The political and defence leadership of Israel is deeply concerned about President Biden's stated plan to revive the JCPOA by going back to its original terms and then striving to make it "longer and stronger." In their view, the deal does not properly cover the three main dimensions of a military nuclear program – fissile materials, delivery systems, and weaponisation:

• The JCPOA sunset clauses will ultimately allow Iran to become a nuclear weapons threshold state by legitimising enrichment activities of a dangerous character and magnitude and removing the international community's authority to thoroughly monitor the program as a whole, making it difficult or even impossible to prevent the regime from quickly leaping across that threshold. Even letting Teheran reach the threshold would likely inject acute instability throughout the region, including a potential nuclear arms race.

• Iran's missiles are solely covered by the feeble, ambiguous UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which has yet to slow the country's missile development efforts since its adoption and is set to expire in October 2023.

• Following the JCPOA, the International Atomic Energy Agency closed the file on the "possible military dimensions" (PMD) of Iran's program, ignoring its own reports on the matter. Yet the archive seized from Iran by Israel in 2018 uncovered new information about the specific goals, scope, and progress of Teheran's military nuclear program. The archive's very existence reveals the regime's intention to preserve this know-how for future use.

• The JCPOA inspection and verification regime has proven deficient in terms of short-notice challenge inspections of undeclared sites and the questioning of related personnel.

These factors, along with R&D on advanced centrifuges and other activities, have shifted the 2015 baseline to which the parties are supposed to return and significantly shortened Iran's timetable for reaching threshold status even if it comes back into full compliance.

Israelis also fear that lifting significant sanctions in the process of returning to the deal would give financial oxygen to an unmoderated, emboldened Teheran, thereby facilitating its destabilising activities and depriving the United States of essential leverage for reaching a better deal.

Citing historical precedent, Israelis also argue that diplomacy and related incentives cannot block Teheran's path to a nuclear weapon unless they are constantly backed by robust disincentives and a demonstrated determination to follow through with them if needed – including viable military options. Israel's "grey zone" campaign against Iranian military entrenchment in Syria demonstrates that such assertiveness can push back against the regime's destabilising activities abroad and at the same time deter it from escalating in response. In contrast, the United States and its European allies appear to prefer relatively weak disincen-



Iranian missile test (Credit: AAP)

tives and have yet to exhibit the stomach for raising the stakes of Iran's escalating brinkmanship. Israel is sceptical that it will significantly increase the pressure if Teheran comes back into compliance with the JCPOA but refuses to move toward an enhanced deal.

REDRAWING THE JCPOA—AND DRAWING REDLINES

Despite these concerns, Jerusalem is not rushing toward an Obama-like public spat with the Biden Administration over Iran policy – it is preparing for dialogue. Israeli officials believe that once they lay out their full findings from the captured nuclear archive, they will be able to make an impact on the policies pursued by an administration that

shares the goal of preventing a nuclear-armed Iran and has implicitly acknowledged the JCPOA's flaws.

As the two governments approach such dialogue, Israel is emphasising that the United States should not throw away essential leverage in pursuit of "compliance for compliance." At the same time, many in the Israeli policy community acknowledge that although President Trump's "maximum pressure" policy exacted a heavy economic toll from Iran, it failed to stop the nuclear program or push Teheran back to negotiations.

Where exactly should the line be drawn between the JCPOA's original terms and former secretary of state Mike

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Pompeo's maximalist terms for an improved deal? Ideally, Iran should be denied the ability to maintain indigenous enrichment capabilities and master the nuclear fuel cycle, yet many Israelis recognise that Washington is unlikely to engage on this point because the train has long left the station.

Therefore, they have focused on extending the JCPOA's sunsets by decades and establishing an intrusive "anytime, anywhere" inspection regime. There is also broad consensus in Israel's Government on the need to ban development of sophisticated centrifuges, properly address the dangerous dimensions of Iran's missile program, and reopen the PMD file in light of findings from the nuclear archive.

As for Teheran's malign regional activities, the idea of addressing them through renewed nuclear talks or a parallel negotiating track is not viewed favourably by Israel, which sees the nuclear file as the most critical issue and does not want it to be overloaded. Here there is some divergence with Gulf partners, who prioritise Iran's regional threat over the nuclear threat (though they have often coordinated with Israel in expressing opposition to full JCPOA reinstatement). Israeli officials also worry that parallel discussions could put pressure on them to curb their ongoing military pushback in Syria. In their eyes, Teheran's regional activities should be countered primarily on the ground rather than being negotiated or given a pass for fear of undermining a nuclear settlement.

Furthermore, Kochavi's speech highlighted the option of taking military action against Iran's nuclear program, which Israel seriously considered in 2010-2012. Such discourse is not mere posturing. It represents a deep belief that Israel must have a last-resort military option available in case certain scenarios come to pass, such as failed negotiations and continued Iranian nuclear violations up to a critical point, or a return to the JCPOA with no moves toward a better deal, which would eventually allow for dangerous nuclear advancements as restrictions begin to sunset. Israelis doubt that the United States will act militarily if all other options to stop Iran are exhausted (e.g., diplomacy, covert or clandestine action).

For now, the situation is not yet at a boiling point, but it is slowly heating up. According to updated Israeli intelligence estimates recently presented to the cabinet, Iran's breakout time (i.e., how long it would need to produce enough weapons-grade fissile material for one bomb) has shrunk to four months, and it would need around 21-24 months for weaponisation, potentially in parallel to its high-enrichment effort (assuming it does not already have a weaponisation task force at work).

CONCLUSION

As the Biden Administration considers how to factor Israeli concerns into its developing Iran strategy, it would

do well to keep the following paramount factors in mind:

Critical Israeli national security interests are at stake, and the Government is determined to protect them.

Other regional allies are stakeholders as well and share Israel's concerns.

Israel's normalisation breakthrough with Arab states and its campaign to counter Iranian activities in Syria have each given the United States extra leverage against Teheran in the nuclear and regional contexts. Washington can capitalise on these assets in numerous ways not enumerated here.

The Iranian file presents a major test for the Biden Administration's standing in the Middle East and its relations with Israel. The best approach for both governments is to internalise lessons from 2015 and enter a comprehensive, continuous, and discreet discussion that focuses on constructive ideas and shies away from public posturing. The stakes are too high for a dialogue of the deaf.

AIR

Brig. Gen. Michael Herzog, IDF (Res.) is the Milton Fine International Fellow with The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Previously, he served as head of the IDF's Strategic Planning Division and chief of staff to the minister of defence. © Washington Institute, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

INDONESIAN JIHADISM AND ABU BAKAR BASHIR

by Zachary Abuza

Abu Bakar Bashir is a free man. The hate-spewing former spiritual head of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), who later declared allegiance to the Islamic State (IS), was released from Indonesian jail on Jan. 8. He had been sentenced to 15 years in 2011 for providing financial assistance to running a terrorist training camp in Indonesia.

It is another affront to the rule of law and a diplomatic poke in the eye to Australia. But will it have an impact on violent extremism in Southeast Asia?

On the one hand, at 82, Bashir is not a young man, and unlikely to want to be re-arrested. On the other hand, he is an egotistical hate monger who loves the limelight. He would chafe at having someone else assume the mantle of jihadist leadership.

And so Bashir is likely to steer a course between those two ends. He will return to al-Mukmin school in central Java, the spiritual home of terrorism in Southeast Asia that he and Abdullah Sungkar founded in 1972. He will have his ego stroked by his students, who will laud his martyrdom,

and lap up every word he says. He will have a platform from which to continue preaching his vitriol. Politicians will show up to kiss his rings for pre-electoral photo-ops.

But his release comes at a time when Islamist militancy in Indonesia is in flux, and it's hard to see how Bashir will affect its direction.

The threat of IS never reached its terrifying potential in Indonesia. Many groups, splinters of JI, followed the lead of Bashir and declared *bai'at* ("fealty") to IS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, starting in mid-2014. More Indonesians went to join IS in Iraq and Syria than ever went to join al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

By November 2014, there were enough Southeast Asians (mainly Indonesians, but, on a per capita basis, more Malaysians) in Syria to establish a Bahasa-speaking military company. Soon after, they established a Bahasa language school for their children, where they were filmed engaging in military training.

Most importantly, 2014-15 saw a surge in Bahasa language propaganda from IS media organs. This included recruitment videos, appeals from militants in the field, weekly newsmagazines, and the ubiquitous beheading videos.

Four Southeast Asians joined the senior leadership ranks of IS. And yet their record in terms of fomenting violence in Southeast Asia was decidedly mixed.

And, to IS, the violence is the key. IS's founding document, *The Management of Savagery*, originally an al-Qaeda manifesto to challenge bin Laden's strategy, makes it clear that the level of violence has to build to a crescendo, so that people eventually acquiesce to IS control and imposition of *Sharia* law. You cannot have an Islamic State without an orgy of violence. Most al-Qaeda leaders blanched at the scope of violence IS said was needed.

There were attacks in Indonesia, to be sure, but they were uneven in terms of lethality and professionalism.

Unlike the al-Qaeda-linked JI, which was very hierarchical and tended to micro-manage its attacks, the pro-IS groups in Indonesia, such as the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), are far more decentralised. IS has always been happy to take credit for attacks perpetrated by fellow travellers and people who subscribe to IS ideology.

The January 2016 takeover of a Starbucks in central Jakarta portended a lot of violence. Since then, we've seen some very amateurish attacks, and some very professional

and well-resourced ones.

The May 2018 suicide bombings, involving entire families including small children, may be seen as a manifestation of the frustration experienced by some JAD militants with their colleagues who were proving unwilling to perpetrate the necessary violence. JAD attacks have largely focused on security forces, such as the November 2019 suicide bombing at a police station in Medan.

No doubt, Indonesian security forces have been far more proactive than they were with the advent of JI. The

budget and personnel of Indonesia's elite Densus-88 counter-terrorism force was doubled in 2019. There are now Densus-88 forces deployed in every province. They continue to have good discipline and commitment to the mission, and are intelligence-driven. Most importantly, they have significant political cover to do their jobs effectively.

The Indonesian Government's pressure on the online portal Telegram was also important. While there is little it can do vis-a-vis encrypted person-to-person messages, the closure of large public chatrooms on Telegram was a huge loss for IS and JAD.

Perhaps the high point for IS in the region was mid-2017, when two pro-IS groups in the Philippines, assisted by foreign

fighters from across Southeast Asia, took over the Philippine city of Marawi and held off the Armed Forces of the Philippines for five months. Though ultimately a loss, it was an enormous propaganda victory for IS, which was then losing substantial amounts of territory in Syria.

As IS sought to return to its insurgent roots, it searched for new battlegrounds from which to wage a global insurrection. IS encouraged foreign fighters from Southeast Asia to travel to Mindanao, and yet, and while some did, it never really gained traction there. If the shift to a global insurgent model was a strategic goal, its manifestation in Southeast Asia has fallen short.

The horizontal nature of IS and its willingness to take credit for any attack, no matter how amateurish, made the group seem much larger than it was. But a smaller, more disciplined group, with better command, control, and professionalism, is far more dangerous. It's reminiscent of a famous video of three professional soccer players taking on 100 kids.

Which is what makes the quiet return of JI so concerning.



Bali bombing spiritual leader Abu Bakar Bashir: Now a free man (Credit: AAP)

Jl's last militant attack was in 2011, a suicide bombing of a mosque in a police compound. By that point, Jl had been seriously weakened and was woefully divided between a pro-al-Qaeda faction that wanted to continue to attack the "far enemy" – that is, Western-linked targets – and a group that saw that strategy as not morally wrong, but counter-productive. They promoted a line based more on fomenting sectarian violence against the country's minorities, something Jl had been doing in 1998-2001. Neither side carried the day and Jl continued to splinter.

With the emergence of IS in 2014, many splinter groups began to declare their allegiance to al-Baghdadi. The Mujahideen Indonesia Timur (MIT), based in central Sulawesi, was the first, but many others followed. The

JAD was originally established as an umbrella group for all of those pro-IS militants, before morphing into a terrorist organisation in its own right by 2016.

The reality is that for the past decade, Jl has ceased to be a militant organisation. Consumed with the rise of IS, the Indonesian Government gave Jl tremendous space to operate its mosques and madrassas; to proselytise; and to run businesses, publishing houses, and charities – as long as they were not engaged in violence. But Jl never renounced violence; the past decade was a tactical hiatus until its ranks and resources were replenished. Jl patiently let its rivals in IS take the brunt of the security forces' efforts.

In mid-2019, Indonesian authorities arrested Jl's spiritual chief, Para Wijayanto. It was a sobering wakeup call. The organisation was by then larger, wealthier, and better resourced than it had been even at its height in the 2000s.

Although Indonesian authorities arrested more than 200 members of IS/JAD in 2020, some 30 members of Jl were also arrested, the first major crackdown on the group since 2010. Most importantly, the arrests include Jl's operations chief, Zulkarnaen, as well as the group's top bomb-maker, and its latest spiritual leader. Jl is back on the security forces' radar screen.

And the timing is essential for two reasons. First, Jl has clearly been positioning itself to pick up the pieces of a much weakened IS/JAD and poach its adherents. It's important to note that in Southeast Asia, unlike the Middle East and South Asia, jihadism is more fluid. People can defect from pro-al-Qaeda groups to pro-IS groups and back again, without penalty, let alone fear for their lives. And because of the patron-client system of relations in the region, a defecting senior militant can bring an entire network with him, as happened in 2014 when Bashir declared *bai'at* to al-Baghdadi.

"Jemaah Islamiyah never renounced violence; the past decade was a tactical hiatus until its ranks and resources were replenished"

Second, Jl is set to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic much stronger than its rivals. All militant groups in Indonesia will use the pandemic to scapegoat Chinese and non-Muslims, and seek to discredit the Government

for its poor handling of the pandemic. All will provide some social welfare, but MIT is too small and localised, while the JAD's experience in social welfare has been to support its in-group, in particular the families of incarcerated militants. Jl is the only group with a nationwide organisational structure and experience in running charities and providing social welfare to out-groups.

Is there a role for Abu Bakar Bashir in any of this? Perhaps, but it shouldn't be over-stated.

There are far more critical issues to deal with. In Indonesia two things must happen: First, the security forces must start to take apart the social welfare networks of the militants. Second, the Government must crack down on the groups that act as entry-points for militants. While the Government recently banned the Islamic Defender's Front, it is just one of many "anti-vice" organisations that ideologically predispose their members to commit violence against out-groups. To date, the Indonesian Government has been too reluctant to take them on.

AIR

Dr. Zachary Abuza is a Professor at the National War College, in Washington, DC, where he focuses on Southeast Asian politics and security issues.

WITH COMPLIMENTS

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His Story, Not History

A Promised Land

Barack Obama, Penguin UK, 2020, 768 pp., RRP \$65.00

by Allon Lee



When volume one of former US President Barack Obama's two-part presidential memoir dropped in November, there was considerable anticipation over what it might reveal.

His presidency was punctuated by frequent disagreements with current Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu over Iran, settlements and peace talks with the Palestinians.

The chapter dealing with the Arab-Israeli issue and the period of 2009-2011 is mostly short on fireworks. Instead, what we get is a slow burn that repeatedly roasts Israel and especially Netanyahu, while only occasionally singeing Arab leaders.

Marred by numerous sins of commission and omission, the chapter's chief value lies in the direct access it offers into Obama's thinking.

AN UNPROMISING START

Reading the former President's history of the Arab-Israel conflict, one can infer that, in essence, Obama views Zionism as colonialism.

Obama incorrectly sequences the start of the conflict to the 1917 Balfour Declaration, and incorrectly states that "the British, who were then occupying Palestine, committed to create a 'national home for the Jewish people.'"

The Balfour Declaration was issued prior to Britain capturing the territory from the Ottoman Empire and was issued only after gaining the support of Britain's French, American and Italian allies, as historian Martin Kramer has demonstrated.

More problematic still is Obama's anachronistic terminology about "occupying Palestine", suggesting a recognised, well defined state.

The reality is that no such state had ever previously existed and it was four years after Balfour before the geographic boundaries were finalised into what is sometimes referred to as "historic Palestine".

There is a hint of the lawless Wild West in Obama's account of Jews trying to create a homeland in Palestine over the following 20 years – describing a "surge of Jewish migration into Palestine" and "Zionist leaders... organis[ing]... highly trained armed forces to defend their settlements."

Obama doesn't explain how the supposedly "highly trained armed forces" grew up in response to murderous mobs fired up by antisemitic rhetoric perpetrating pogroms and other violence.

The chapter does acknowledge Arab opposition to the 1947 UN Partition Plan which would have created a Palestinian Arab state, but explains it

away as due to the Arabs "just emerging from colonial rule."

Moreover, loath to blame the subsequent violence on rejectionism toward the two-state formula by the Arab side, Obama says "as Britain withdrew, the two sides quickly fell into war."

Yet the reality is that – following the Arab League's stated intentions to launch a "war of annihilation" against any Jewish state – a wave of terror against Jewish targets started the day after the Partition Plan passed.

This became a wider conflagration as five neighbouring Arab countries tried to snuff out the nascent Jewish state militarily when it was declared six months later.

In contrast, the mainstream Jewish leadership advocated pragmatism, compromise and for all sides to peaceably implement the two-state formula.

Yet Obama dismisses the moderation of Israel's leadership as growing out of the barrel of a gun, writing, "with Jewish militias claiming victory in 1948, the State of Israel was officially born."

It feels somewhat ironic given the book's title – *A Promised Land* – that Obama appears to lack understanding and sympathy towards Zionism – the political term Jews use to express their right to self-determination in the land where they became a people.

He also arrogates to the US an oversized responsibility for perpetuating the conflict because it "became Israel's primary patron – and with that, Israel's problems with its neighbours became America's problems as well."

Except that, until 1967, US support for Israel was almost wholly political and moral, with France meeting Israel's materiel needs.

Post-1948, Obama takes as a given the myth that Palestinians were denied opportunities or options to improve their situation – ignoring Jordanian and Egyptian occupation of the West Bank and Gaza until 1967, with no moves to create a Palestinian state.

Of the 1967 war he writes, “Palestinians living within the occupied territories, *mostly* in refugee camps, found themselves governed by the Israel Defense Forces.” [emphasis added]

This is mostly wrong.

In 1961, *Life* magazine’s Martha Gellhorn visited Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank, noting that “over half of the registered Palestinian refugees do not live in camps.”

The significance of Arab leaders rejecting the land for peace formula in 1967 also does not appear to have been understood by Obama.

This then is the intellectual suitcase that Obama brought into the White House.

PALESTINIANS – 1, ISRAEL – 0

Entering the White House, Obama sees peace as a strategic value and Israel and especially Netanyahu as the barrier to achieving it.

He says former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat’s “tactics” were “abhorrent” and agrees that “Palestinian leaders had too often missed opportunities for peace,” but makes it clear that he views this as less significant than the fact Palestinians live under Israeli occupation, which, he thinks, is why terror exists.

He writes of the barriers to peace in 2009, that “*most important*, Israeli attitudes toward peace talks had hardened, in part because peace no longer seemed so crucial to ensuring the country’s safety and prosperity.” [emphasis added].

He says Netanyahu’s “reluctance to enter into peace talks” is “born of Israel’s growing strength” whilst portraying Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as a man of peace prevented from pursuing it by “political weakness.”

HISTORY? WHAT HISTORY?

Obama justifies these assertions by effectively sweeping contrary history under the carpet.

In Obama’s account, peace efforts ended when Israeli PM Ariel Sharon and US President George W. Bush assumed office in 2001.

Obama writes, “The Bush administration’s focus on Iraq, Afghanistan, and the War on Terror left it little bandwidth to worry about Middle East peace, and while Bush remained officially supportive of a two-state solution, he was reluctant to press Sharon on the issue.”

Conveniently forgotten is Israeli PM Ariel Sharon’s pivotal withdrawal of all settlers and settlements from Gaza and three areas on the West Bank in 2005, at the end of the Second Intifada.

In return, the Bush Administration assured Sharon of US support for Israel to modify its borders to retain the large settlement blocs under any future peace deal.

Bush’s 2007 Annapolis peace conference – including Israel, the Palestinians, the Arab League, the EU and others – is also ignored, as are then-US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s mediation efforts in 2007/08. Those efforts culminated in then-Israeli PM Ehud Olmert’s offer of a Palestinian state – the most generous offer Israel has made – which Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas rejected, as he himself said, “out of hand”.

Simultaneous with these peace-making efforts, Hamas staged a violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007 that led to thousands of rockets being fired into Israel, culminating in the first Gaza war in December 2008.

None of this was ancient history and none of it involved Netanyahu, who had been out of power.

Neither Israel nor Netanyahu were against “peace talks” based on “Israel’s growing strength”, but were sceptical because of this history. Yet in Obama’s account, it never happened.

DAYDREAMING ABOUT DAYLIGHT

Convinced that Netanyahu was the

main impediment to peace, Obama determined to try a different method to advance peace talks.

He says his first chief-of-staff Rahm Emanuel advised him early on that “you don’t get progress on peace when the American president and the Israeli prime minister come from different political backgrounds.” (This is historically dubious. The breakthrough Israeli-Egyptian peace deal in 1979 was signed with right-wing prime minister Menachem Begin in Jerusalem and centre-left President Jimmy Carter in Washington.)

We know from contemporary media reports in 2009 that Emanuel also counselled Obama to follow a policy of “tough love” with Netanyahu.

The pair settled on a policy of what became colloquially known as “putting daylight” between the US and Israel (although Obama does not explicitly embrace that term).

In fact, this “daylight” policy ran against the grain of all past US experience.

As reported in July 2009, senior mainstream US Jewish leaders told Obama “that the past eight years had demonstrated that the best chance for peace came when there was no daylight between the US and Israeli positions, Obama pushed back, noting that the close ties between the Bush Administration and the governments of Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert had in fact produced no significant progress toward peace” (again forgetting Olmert’s unprecedented 2008 offer and the Gaza withdrawal).

According to Michael Oren’s memoir of his stint as Israeli Ambassador to the US, also feeling that such “daylight” ran counter to an understanding of how the US-Israel relationship functions best, was Obama’s own Vice President, Joe Biden.

ISRAEL AS CARROT AND STICK

Obama says that he needed to “coax” Netanyahu and Abbas to the negotiating table.



Binyamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama in the Oval Office, 2013 (Credit: IGPO)

Yet no Israeli leader would refuse a US request to talk peace, and the fact that Obama insisted on “tangible concessions” from Israel to give Abbas “political cover” to enter negotiations proves it was not Netanyahu preventing talks.

Obama says the plan devised to restart talks was to freeze all building in West Bank settlements, and implies his approach was backed by “a talented group of diplomats, starting with Hillary [Clinton], who was well versed on the issues and already had relationships with many of the region’s major players... I appointed former Senate majority leader George Mitchell as my special envoy for Middle East peace.”

But Obama actually appears to have ignored his own handpicked team’s advice. Clinton’s 2014 memoir states that she and Mitchell opposed the policy, fearing that “we could be locking ourselves into a confrontation we didn’t need, that the Israelis would feel they were being asked to do more than the other parties, and that once we raised it publicly Abbas couldn’t start serious negotiations without it.”

Of course, Obama does not mention this opposition, and even today apparently cannot see what Clinton saw in 2009.

He bemoans that people were complaining “we were picking on Israel and focusing on settlements when everyone knew that Palestinian violence was the main impediment to peace.”

Obama is here verballing mainstream American Jewish leaders.

Frustrated by the criticism, Obama grumbles that “policy differences” with Israel “exact[ed] a domestic political cost that simply didn’t exist when I dealt with the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Japan, Canada, or any of our other closest allies.”

Obama’s analogy is illogical and offensive. He never asked of those countries anything similar to what he asked of Israel, espe-

cially after Israel had taken tangible risks by signing the Oslo Accords and making territorial withdrawals and in exchange had unlocked a Pandora’s box of genocidal threats and record Israeli civilian fatalities.

Moreover, it is hard to take seriously Obama’s claim of a “political cost”, when, as he admits, Jewish voter support at the ballot box remained “more than 70 percent.”

Obama insinuates that hostility to him and his approach to the conflict was due to the power of pro-Israel lobby groups, and perhaps racism.

He also quotes a confidant telling him, “You’re a Black man with a Muslim name who lived in the same neighborhood as Louis Farrakhan and went to Jeremiah Wright’s church.”

But as Obama’s own officials saw, his policy approach was misguided, and the fact that Americans who care about Israel correctly said so had nothing to do with the colour of his skin.

UNHOLY ROW

Back to the settlements freeze, which Netanyahu implemented for 10 months.

Here, Obama shows some rare clarity, admitting that “no sooner had Netanyahu announced the temporary freeze than Abbas dismissed it as meaningless, complaining about the exclusion of East Jerusalem.”

Abbas finally agreed to direct talks “just one month before the settlement freeze was set to expire” but “conditioned... participation... on Israel’s willingness to keep the settlement

freeze in place – the same freeze he’d spent the previous nine months decrying as useless.”

Yet Obama quickly dismisses Abbas’ dilatory tactics as minor, especially compared to the crisis caused by the “Israeli Interior Ministry announcing permits for the construction of sixteen hundred new housing units in East Jerusalem” just as Vice President Biden paid a “goodwill visit” in March 2010.

Obama dismisses as “fiction” Netanyahu’s claim the timing was a “misunderstanding” – even though Israeli officials involved in the decision confirmed the PM had nothing to do with that timing.

Moreover, the proposed housing was in Ramat Shlomo, a long-established area immediately adjacent to the pre-1967 armistice line which leaked Palestinian documents show Palestinian negotiators had long conceded would remain Israeli in any future peace.

It is widely understood that the Obama Administration seized upon the announcement – which did not violate any Israeli pledge to the US – as a pretext to create a crisis in relations and pressure Netanyahu.

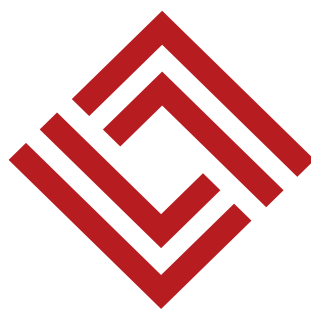
Biden admitted as much in a speech whilst still in Israel, saying he strongly condemned the announcement “at the request of President Obama.”

LESSONS NOT LEARNED

The chapter concludes with Obama chiding Netanyahu, Abbas and other Arab leaders for lacking vision.

Yet instead of drawing appropriate conclusions and realising that maybe the time was not right for major peace initiatives, Obama would return to this challenge in 2013-14, with arguably grievous consequences.

But to hear about those, readers will have to await volume two of Obama’s memoirs, which will also include Obama’s take on his frictions with Netanyahu over Iran’s nuclear program.



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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

EYES WIDE SHUT

The *Australian* (Feb. 22) asked how the Biden Administration can contemplate “resurrecting” the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) given Iran’s recent behaviour.

The editorial noted that “powerful Iranian-linked militia groups” have “stepped-up rocket attacks... on residual US forces in neighbouring Iraq. The attacks are part of Tehran’s relentless drive to achieve Shia regional domination and force a total US retreat from Iraq.”

A Belgian court has just “sentence[d] a senior Iranian diplomat to 20 years’ imprisonment for a 2018 terrorist plot intended to blow up a rally of thousands of exiled Iranians outside Paris. They were rallying in opposition to the ayatollahs’ regime and in favour of democracy.”

And Iran has further breached its commitments under the 2015 deal by announcing it will limit scrutiny of its nuclear activities and “is moving to make uranium metal, which has no civilian use but could be part of a nuclear weapon.”

“Rewarding the ayatollahs for their continuing villainy would be absurd,” the paper asserted.

REALITY CHECK

In the *Daily Telegraph* (Feb. 9), AI-JAC’s Tzvi Fleischer and Oved Lobel argued that if the Biden Administration returns to the JCPOA it must fulfil its promise to fix the deal’s flaws.

Iran, they said, is “attempting to panic” the Administration into resuming US participation, without pushing to renegotiate the deal or doing so only after sanctions have been lifted and the leverage to force changes has gone.

Without changes, “starting in 2025, ‘sunset clauses’ in the JCPOA begin

gradually lifting all restrictions on enriching uranium, permitting Tehran to enrich it to any level in any amount. Once that happens, Iran can effectively build nuclear weapons at any time without warning,” they wrote.

MUDDLED EAST REPORTING

On Jan. 27, *SBS TV* “World News” wrongly framed opposition to the US returning to the Iran nuclear deal as solely an Israeli concern.

SBS reporter Abbie O’Brien said the Biden Administration has the “challenging task of restoring relations with Iran, while keeping Israel on side.”

This was emphasised by academic Clive Williams who was broadcast saying, “it will be very difficult for... Biden... to come up with something which would please or satisfy both Israel and Iran.”

Williams added that “what worries Israel is that Iran would no longer be the international pariah that it was under Trump... sanctions would be lifted, including by Australia, and that would all be very positive for Iran.”

Australia never joined the US in re-imposing sanctions on Iran in 2018, so Williams is wrong on that. Meanwhile the Sunni Arab states are as opposed to the JCPOA as Israel is.

Furthermore, on *SBS TV* “World News” (Feb. 17), academic Amin Saikal welcomed US President Joe Biden’s Middle East policy shifts as a signal that the Trump Administration’s policy of “developing an Arab-Israeli front against Iran” was over.

KOREAN TAKEAWAY

SBS TV “World News” (Feb. 9) earlier reported on a new UN report alleging that North Korea and Iran are

cooperating on missile research.

Roger Boyes of *The Times* (UK), republished in the *Australian* (Jan. 18), pointed out that Iran seized a South Korean tanker in the Persian Gulf with intelligence obtained from Pyongyang.

DIEHL’S WRONG NUMBER

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review* (Jan. 21), veteran *Washington Post* columnist Jackson Diehl said the “prime reason” the Trump Administration gave for “arming and defending Sunni Arab regimes that, when it comes to domestic oppression and foreign aggression, are hard to distinguish from Shi’ite Iran – Saudi Arabia and Egypt chief among them” was “defence” of Israel.

But, Diehl said, “Israel... has shown that it is more than capable of defending itself against Iran’s conventional threats.”

The Trump Administration sold weapons to some Gulf States on the basis they were needed against Iran and its proxies, which threaten numerous states across the region – which is why it is ridiculous to accuse these states of being as aggressive as Iran is. Moreover, the Administration had to bring Israel into the equation to explain why it was selling equipment that potentially could erode a long standing US commitment to maintain Israel’s “qualitative military edge” in the region.

THE I RANT FILE

The *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (Feb. 24) seemed to suggest that the Biden Administration re-joining the 2015 Iran nuclear deal was somehow the key to a needed US policy to “champion democracy, disarmament and human rights consistently across the region.”

The paper said continuing a “partisan stance favouring selected Arab dictatorships as well as Israel’s supremacy” would mean “Washington’s long history of difficulties in the region is likely to continue.”

It is widely accepted that the Obama Administration overlooked Iran’s aggressive regional activities and domestic human rights abuses to maximise its chances of convincing Teheran to sign and adhere to a deal on its nuclear weapons program. In other words, the deal was inimical to championing “democracy, disarmament and human rights consistently.”

Thus, the Administration was heav-

ily criticised for its lowkey response to Iran’s violent suppression of demonstrations against the regime hijacking the 2009 Presidential election result.

Yet, in 2011, the Obama Administration pressured Egypt’s authoritarian ruler Hosni Mubarak to resign during massive demonstrations against his rule.

During the Syrian civil war, Obama remained disengaged as Iran helped the Assad regime slaughter hundreds of thousands of Syrians and commit numerous war crimes.

The editorial said returning to the JCPOA “will not be simple. Iran has returned to intensive uranium

enrichment and increasingly engaged in ‘hostage diplomacy’, including the imprisonment of Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert.”

Uranium enrichment is only the tip of the Iranian nuclear weapons iceberg.

The JCPOA is fatally flawed because it permits Iran to research and test advanced centrifuges and ballistic missiles whose only purpose can be the delivery of nuclear warheads. Enforcement of the deal was compromised by a reluctance to force Iran to disclose its program’s past military dimensions, which, as the nuclear archive Israel stole in 2018 revealed, was



IN PARLIAMENT

Foreign Minister Senator **Marise Payne** (Lib., NSW) – Media Statement – Feb. 6 – “Australia has deep concerns with the ruling of the Pre-Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Court that it has jurisdiction in relation to the ‘Situation in Palestine’. Australia does not recognise a ‘State of Palestine’, noting that matters relating to territory and borders can only be resolved through direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. ... The International Criminal Court should not exercise jurisdiction in this matter.”

Senator **Janet Rice** (Greens, Vic.) – Feb. 16 – “The Australian government’s position is a disgrace and deeply disappointing for Australians who support accountability for crimes, including alleged crimes, no matter who commits them or where ... We call on the Australian government to advocate human rights equally everywhere and to cease its opposition to this ruling by the ICC. Of course, at the same time, we reiterate our call that they should recognise the state of Palestine...”

Julian Leeser (Lib., Berowra) – Feb. 22 – “I move that this House: “(1) notes that 27 January 2021 marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day, ... where we remember the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime and its collaborators, and reaffirm our promise to ‘never forget’ the 6 million Jews and 11 million others including Roma, homosexuals, people with intellectual disabilities, political prisoners, Poles, Serbs and Soviet citizens who were exterminated during the Holocaust; “(2) acknowledges the importance of International Holocaust Remembrance Day in honouring the memory of all Holocaust victims, and the ongoing efforts of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance to advance and promote Holocaust education to ensure the history and stories of its victims are passed on to successive generations...”

Josh Burns (ALP, Macnamara) seconding the motion – Feb.

22 – “The final point I would make on this debate in this place is to reaffirm Australia’s commitment to the lessons of the Holocaust and to the lessons against persecution. Over summer, we saw in the Grampians... what I would describe as a display of confidence by Neo-Nazi figures in Victoria... I say to the House that there is nothing less Australian than pro-Neo-Nazi symbols and gatherings. Australians fought and died fighting the Nazi regime. We remain committed to learning the lessons of the Holocaust to make sure it never happens again.”

Tim Wilson (Lib., Goldstein), **Milton Dick** (ALP, Oxley), **Dave Sharma** (Lib., Wentworth), **Brian Mitchell** (ALP, Lyons), **Fiona Martin** (Lib., Reid) and **Steve Georganas** (ALP, Adelaide) spoke in support of the motion, while Prime Minister **Scott Morrison** (Lib., Cook), Shadow Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) and Treasurer **Josh Frydenberg** (Lib., Kooyong) recorded video messages for the Australia-wide commemoration of International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Senator **Concetta Fierravanti-Wells** (Lib., NSW) – Feb. 22 – “Of course, there is the hypocrisy of Twitter. They’re prepared to let totalitarian rulers continue to promote their bile... to take action in relation to President Trump but still let the head of Iran continue with his activities, particularly calling, as Iran does, for the wholesale eradication of Israel.”

Senator **Mehreen Faruqi** (Greens, NSW) – Feb. 17 – “The unequal and inhumane treatment of Palestinians has continued through the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Israeli government rolled out the vaccine to a large proportion of its population... very few Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have been vaccinated... The poverty and destitution that many Palestinians live in under occupation only makes more urgent the need to vaccinate them against COVID-19... Australia must push for an end to occupation, oppression and violence against Palestinians.”

Senator **Anne Urquhart** (ALP, Tas.) – Feb. 16 – “... the cynical use of the slur of anti-Semitism as a tool to silence critics of Israel for that state’s exhaustively documented human rights abuses against Palestinians must stop.”

far more extensive than it claimed.

Moreover, hostage taking has been an unshakeable pillar of Iranian foreign policy since the US Embassy seizure in 1979.

The editorial also falsely accused Israel and the Saudis of being “deeply opposed to any understanding” between the US and Iran.

In fact, Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu has consistently argued that, while the JCPOA is fatally flawed, it should be replaced by a better and more comprehensive agreement.

CRITICAL APPRAISAL

In the *Courier Mail* (Feb. 22), AIJAC’s Dr. Colin Rubenstein argued for the Biden Administration “to impartially weigh the effectiveness of Trump’s individual policies in isolation from the tawdry controversies that surround the former president.”

Rubenstein pointed out that many of Trump’s Middle East policies “should be counted among his successes, often achieved through non-conventional approaches that involved rethinking the US Foreign Policy establishment’s sacred cows.”

He cited the peace agreements signed by Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco and Sudan with Israel in 2020, noting that as “late as 2016, then-Secretary of State John Kerry said, ‘there will be no advanced and separate peace (between Israel and) the Arab world without the Palestinian process and Palestinian peace... That is the hard reality.’”

The new Administration knows that some of Trump’s policy changes were working, Dr. Rubenstein said, pointing out that it has “made clear that it will not reverse Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, a move that was long overdue.”

Unfortunately, it hasn’t accepted that Trump was right to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and has appointed “several officials closely associated with negotiating the original JCPOA to positions of influence.”

But the situation has changed since 2015, he added, with “the exposure of Iran’s nuclear archive in 2018 and its ever-growing litany of violations of the JCPOA.... end[ing] the charade that its nuclear program was ever peaceful.”

ON THE BLINK

Israel-based commentator Michael Friedson told *ABC TV* “The World” (Feb. 8) that the Biden Administration may claim to be seeking to “strengthen and lengthen the deterrence, strengthen and lengthen the obligations of the Iranians” but “Middle Easterners feel he will probably blink first.”

According to Friedson, the Biden Administration does not “want to appear to be guilty of that which the critics of going in the treaty in the first place are suggesting and that’s that they’re weak.”

The problem is that “the Iranians aren’t budging and... Middle Easterners feel he will probably blink first and everybody is waiting to see if that will be the case.”

Asked “how much damage was done by Donald Trump’s handling of Iran?”, Friedson explained that there is a gap between the critics’ “rhetoric” and “the practicality on the ground”.

He said “most experts believe the deterrence created by the economic sanctions is very powerful and is a tool the new President must embrace. He really can’t go very far without that deterrence. And that deterrence is ultimately traced to the position of President Trump.”

BE HISTORICAL, NOT HYSTERICAL

In the *West Australian* (Jan. 21), *Daily Mail* writer Tom Leonard asked “might history remember [former US President Donald] Trump more kindly than his current critics?”

Leonard said Trump “did sometimes deliver. Granted, some of his

key achievements could so easily have backfired badly, but he occasionally got results that might have eluded a more measured leader.”

According to Leonard, Trump’s achievements included “the raid that killed the ISIS supreme commander Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2019. And Mr Trump also ordered the killing of Iran’s Maj-Gen. Qasem Soleimani, widely applauded as long overdue given his involvement in so many terror outrages. The UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco have all opened diplomatic relations with Israel – a ‘normalisation’ that had long seemed impossible.”

CRISIS MISMANAGEMENT

In the *Australian Financial Review* (Jan. 22), UK *Financial Times* international affairs editor David Gardner cited a confected and overblown “crisis” from 2010 to try to remind US President Joe Biden that settlements are supposedly the main impediment to Israeli-Palestinian progress.

According to Gardner, “In March 2010, then US vice-president Joe Biden, a stalwart supporter of Israel, arrived in Jerusalem with a brief from president Barack Obama to try to revive moribund peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis. Benjamin Netanyahu, then and now Israel’s leader, had reluctantly agreed to a temporary moratorium on Jewish settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank. Yet Biden had no sooner pledged unyielding US support for Israel than the Netanyahu government unveiled a big expansion of settler housing on Palestinian land annexed to occupied Arab East Jerusalem after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Instead of kickstarting stalled negotiations, Biden got a kick in the teeth he is unlikely to have forgotten.”

Gardner is wrong. By March 2010, the settlements building freeze had already been in place for more than three months and it never applied to east Jerusalem.

Moreover, the “big expansion” was in fact 1,600 housing units to be built in the well-established neighbourhood of Ramat Shlomo, right along the old pre-1967 armistice lines – an area that Palestinian negotiators had already conceded would become part of Israel in any future peace deal.

And it has long been confirmed by the officials involved that the timing of the announcement was chosen by bureaucrats acting without government knowledge.

And as Biden revealed in a speech whilst in Israel, the only reason he condemned it was because President Barack Obama – who was looking for an occasion to more strongly pressure Israel on settlements – told him to.

CHILD ABUSE?

ABC Middle East correspondent Eric Tlozek attracted criticism for an online report (Jan. 19) that was provocatively titled “Israeli authorities killed seven Palestinian children last year. Their parents are calling for justice.”

The report, which included sub-headings like “Why are children being shot?”, quoted from the families of children killed or injured.

The Israeli NGO B’Tselem (which has been accused by former employees of manipulating incidents and testimony to attract EU funding) was quoted claiming “for years, Israel has been implementing a reckless, unlawful open-fire policy in the West Bank.”

An Israeli Defence Forces statement explained deaths and injuries occur in the context of responding to Palestinian violence.

But as critics noted, the report left out vital context, which even B’Tselem felt obliged to include in its reports.

The story focused on 15-year-old Ali Abu Alia who was killed whilst allegedly only in the vicinity of a demonstration and Malek Issa, who was not killed but injured when Israeli troops were responding to rioting.

But not mentioned by Tlozek was that most of the seven “children” killed were teenagers who were engaging in terrorism. These include 17-year-old Mahmoud ‘Omar Sadeq Kmeil, who was shot “after he opened fire at a police post near Bab Huttah” and 16-year-old Muhammad Damer Hamdan Matar, shot whilst “trying to light a gas balloon.”

POISON PENMANSHIP

In the *Canberra Times* (Jan. 23), TJ Collins’ review of former Israeli Shin Bet chief Ami Ayalon’s book *Friendly Fire* was more focused on deploring Israel’s existence, rather than on the book’s merits.

Ayalon’s thesis is that since the 1993 Oslo Accords were signed, Israeli governments have not done enough to foster a climate of trust with Palestinian leaders.

But Collins was not interested in how to achieve the goal of two states living in peace.

According to Collins, “If you were to...ask [Palestinians] how Israel became its own worst enemy, they’d probably tell you that establishing a Jewish state in Palestine was a pretty good start.” He accused Israel of expelling “hundreds of thousands of people... from their ancestral lands” in 1948.

Instead of implementing the UN Partition Plan that would have established an Arab state alongside a Jewish state, Arab leaders decided to go to war. While that war led to the Palestinian refugee problem, with some exceptions in particularly vital military areas, these refugees were mostly not expelled. In fact, the majority never even saw any Israeli soldiers before fleeing.

After losing a war they started, Arab states refused to make peace, or to establish a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, and kept the refugees permanently in camps to use as a political weapon.

COME AGAIN?

On *ABC Radio National* “Overnights” (Feb. 27) Australian commentator Keith Suter tried to answer a question about why former US President Donald Trump, who is not known to be religious, was supported by evangelical voters, but confused listeners with muddled and misleading comments about the status quo on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Suter said, “the religious right have been mobilised by Trump because he is carrying out their agenda. He’s moved the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Australia, I think, is still keeping the embassy in Tel Aviv, as is most other countries. But he’s moved it across. We’re getting ready to clean out the Islamic architecture from the Temple Mount and rebuild the Third Temple. So, this fits very much with the idea of clamping down on gay rights and transgender issues and all the rest of it. Trump played to that constituency even though he’s a person of low morals himself.”

Suter is right that the Australian Embassy in Israel has not moved from Tel Aviv, but the Morrison Government did recognise west Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in December 2018.

However, something was clearly lost in translation when Suter said, “We’re getting ready to clean out the Islamic architecture from the Temple Mount and rebuild the Third Temple.”

Israel and the Israel Antiquities Authority ensure the holy sites of all religions are respected and absolutely no plans exist to remove “the Islamic architecture on the Temple Mount” – which remains under the control of the same Islamic *Waqf* (religious trust) which has controlled the area since 1948.

Perhaps Suter meant to say that the next goal of some fundamentalist evangelical Christians is to “clean out the Islamic architecture from the Temple Mount and rebuild the Third Temple” which they believe is a necessary precondition for the Second Coming of Jesus? But he should definitely have been clearer.

Allon Lee

COURTING CONTROVERSY

The International Criminal Court's (ICC) pre-trial finding that a "State of Palestine" exists which can legitimately give the court jurisdiction to investigate alleged war crimes in Gaza and the West Bank was widely reported in the media as largely directed at Israel.

An *Age*/Sydney Morning Herald report (Feb. 6) was headlined "ICC clears the way for Israeli war crimes probe". The online version stated that "The

ICC could also potentially investigate crimes committed by Palestinian militants. [ICC prosecutor Fatou] Bensouda has said her probe would look into the actions of Hamas, which fired rockets indiscriminately into Israel during the 2014 war." Yet this was cut from the papers' print edition.

Both versions of the article did note that "Israel's military has mechanisms to investigate alleged wrongdoing by its troops, and despite criticism that the system is insufficient, experts say it has a good chance of fending off ICC investigation into its wartime practices."

The content and headline on the ABC's website (Feb. 6) were similar.

On SBS TV "World News" (Feb. 6) newsreader Anton Enus said the decision "pav[es] the way for an inquiry into allegations of war crimes by both" and reporter Rena Sarumpaet said Bensouda "previously cited Gaza's rulers Hamas and other armed groups there for firing rockets into civilian areas in Israel and using Palestinian civilians as human shields."

An SBS online report (Feb. 7) quoted a Human Rights Watch spokesperson saying that it was "high time that Israeli and Palestinian perpetrators of the gravest abuses" faced justice.

On the *Spectator Australia*'s website (Feb. 9), British commentator Stephen Daisley was less credulous, saying, "The pre-trial chamber opinion is keen to stress that it would be looking for potential 'war crimes' committed by Israel or the Palestinians. But anyone with a passing familiarity... knows which of the two is likely to face greater scrutiny."

A *Courier Mail* (Feb. 7) report explained that "Gaza is controlled by the Islamist group Hamas... [which] ousted loyalists of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas from the territory in 2007" and quoted Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu's accusation that the ICC has undermined the right of democracies to defend themselves against terrorism.

On Feb. 7, *Sky News*' Sharri Markson said of the de-

cision, "The ICC now looks like the rest of the United Nations, another discredited organisation, politicised with little credibility." Her guest, Liberal Senator James Paterson, concurred.

In the *Australian* (Feb. 8), University of Wollongong Professor Greg Rose called the decision "predictable" and "primarily political", adding that Bensouda had "collaborated closely with the Palestinian Authority and NGOs."

Prof. Rose noted that "The most important feature of the judgment is that it finds the 'state of Palestine' was established under UN General Assembly resolution 67/19 in 2012... [and] elevate[s] UN General Assembly recommendations into international law for the ICC to enforce... This undemocratic global legalism merely empowers lawyers... It is a legal regime for a fantasyland."

The *Australian* editorialised (Feb. 9) that President Abbas' "real aim is... to achieve Palestinian statehood through the back door with recognition of it by key international bodies... rather than through negotiating directly with Israel." The editorial quoted AIJAC's Dr. Colin Rubenstein saying that "Palestine is not a state and international law should not be abused in order to manufacture one. A Palestinian state will only be created after negotiations with Israel to resolve important issues such as borders, refugees and the status of Jerusalem."

In the *Canberra Times* (Feb. 23), AIJAC's Allon Lee also noted that the judges had relied "almost solely" on a UN General Assembly resolution to recognise a Palestinian state, noting that these kinds of "resolutions are not legally binding." Moreover, "thanks to the automatic support of the 57 members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and some additional allies, the PA routinely musters enough votes to pass politically charged, factually dubious General Assembly resolutions such as that one."

Lee added that the decision was reached by "trashing... legal principles... According to the [ICC's] Statute... only signatories to it can be investigated, unless the ICC receives a [UN Security Council referral]... Israel has not joined the ICC and no Security Council referral has been issued... The ICC was established to investigate the most heinous war crimes in circumstances where a country cannot or will not do so... Israel's... fiercely independent legal system routinely investigates and, if required, prosecutes individuals accused of the sorts of crimes that fall under the ICC's purview."

"University of Wollongong Professor Greg Rose called the decision 'predictable' and 'primarily political'"

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

A TIMELY INQUIRY

When a bomb exploded in the carpark of the old Haikoah Club in Sydney's Bondi Beach in 1982, it reinforced concerns within the Jewish community and beyond that even Australia was in the sights of international terrorists.

Earlier the same day, a bomb had caused damage to the building which housed the Consulate of Israel only a few kilometres away. These incidents sent shock waves through the community.

A decade before, officials of Jewish organisations had been the addressees for explosive devices sent through the mail and, not many years later, there would be further evidence of the targeting of Jewish Australians by international terrorists.

I have firsthand experience of a number of these successful and foiled attempts. Only a late change of plans removed me from the spot where one bomb exploded and a change of meeting dates another.

On more than one occasion, I have been given security advice regarding my daily movements based on the temporary presence in Australia of individuals whose reason to be in this country was to further terrorists' goals. At least one had a target list with my name and working address on it.

Due to the international nature and agenda of the individuals and organisations believed responsible for these incidents, there was, for some, a misguided belief that the cancer of terrorism was something which could be perceived as foreign and alien to Australia.

However, in more recent times, we have seen evidence of Australians who openly identify with the aims, tactics, strategies and actions of groups such as Islamic State.

The current Parliamentary Inquiry into Extremist Movements and Radicalism in Australia is not just an important opportunity to examine contemporary threats and associated problems when it comes to groups with international agendas, but also to look at other and more local radical and violent extremists.

Again, this is an issue of which I have not just professional but personal knowledge.

Not long after the representa-

tive of an overseas political organisation was awoken by a gunshot fired into his home – which lodged not far from a sleeping child – I received verbal threats after I was identified as a serious enemy by the racist far-right.

Another person named Jeremy Jones, who some extreme right-wingers thought was me, was the subject of harassment and vandalism, while a different "J Jones" had their home plastered with racist slogans. Other incidents

occurred which suggested that violent groups were taking Jewish community opposition to them quite seriously.

It has been a blessing that most of the Australian far-right-wing groups have been led by individuals as foolish as their ideology, and as incompetent as one could hope for.

As we have seen in certain recent attempts by the racist extreme right to organise rallies or to attract mem-

bership, their organisational capacity and appeal is essentially non-existent.

However, just as their predecessors in recent decades have been involved in thuggery, violence and a range of criminal activities, these people cannot be ignored, either as individuals or parts of organisations.

With modern technology, we have the phenomenon of handfuls of individuals based in one country aligning with, affiliating to, and even carrying out instructions from, overseas overlords.

As we have seen in far too many places, it does not take many individuals or particularly clever men and women to cause considerable loss of life and to also take away the quality of life of vast numbers of people whom they would categorise as intended victims.

We must be aware not simply of the need to have suitable legislative and security protections from overseas extremist movements, but also for protection from people in Australia inspired by them, and likely to seek to imitate their violent behaviour.

The inquiry is still at an early stage. We must all hope that our legislators are able to develop not just protections for Australians, but a broader program to help build a safer, more secure and cohesive Australia in the future.



Swastikas daubed on a mural at Bondi Beach
(Credit: Jeremy Jones)



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