

POST-BALLOT BLUES



After another indecisive election, Israel prepares for difficult coalition negotiations

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WITH COMPLIMENTS



FOR A BETTER WORLD

WITH COMPLIMENTS

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This *AIR* edition focusses on the complex and ambiguous outcome of Israel's national election on March 23, and where Israeli politics might go from here after four indecisive elections in two years.

Amotz Asa-El explains why the results of this election look a lot like those of the previous three, and explains the difficult coalition negotiations now likely to occupy Israel for some months. An *AIR* factsheet looks at the potential components of any such coalition, while Ariel Ben Solomon reports on the changing role of Israeli Arab parties. Plus, Herb Keinon explores some quirky ironies of the campaign, while Nathan Jeffay witnesses what it is like to vote in a COVID-19 ward.

Also featured this month is former senior US official John Hannah offering the Biden Administration a playbook for dealing with Iran's escalating nuclear blackmail, and Naomi Levin's look at new efforts to confront Iran's policy of holding foreign citizens like Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert as hostages.

Finally, don't miss a look at the upcoming Palestinian election from the IDF's top commander in the territories, Lazar Berman on what Syria's now decade-long civil war has meant for Israel, and Jonathan Marks reviewing an effort to correct misinformation about Palestinian universities.

Please give us your feedback on any or all of it at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

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Israeli voters walking by political posters and slogans outside an election polling station in Holon, Israel, 23 March 2021. (Credit: Roman Yanushevsky/Shutterstock)



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www.aijac.org.au**FROM THE
EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN****COLIN RUBENSTEIN****THE VACCINATION NATION
VOTES**

As widely predicted, Israel's fourth election in two years appears to have failed to provide a clear and decisive winner.

After all the votes had been counted, neither incumbent PM Binyamin Netanyahu nor his rivals appeared to have anything like an easy path to a governing coalition.

Outgoing President Reuven Rivlin has until April 7 to select a prime ministerial candidate to try to form a coalition, and has hinted he is in no rush. The person given Rivlin's mandate then has 28 days to form a government and can potentially receive an extension. If he or she fails, the mandate can then be given to someone else. In other words, in a best-case scenario, Israel is at the beginning of a process likely to last more than a month, but which may last considerably longer than that.

Most Israelis will understandably find this outcome very frustrating after the two-year political logjam that has created a situation whereby their representatives in Jerusalem seem to have spent more time campaigning than governing.

Yet perhaps the upcoming weeks will allow passions to cool, and encourage political parties to tone down their rhetoric, iron out differences and find a way to avoid a fifth election that is surely the last thing the country needs.

Perhaps it will also allow Israeli political and opinion leaders to reflect on the self-evident need for intelligent electoral reform to prevent the country from continuing the chronic political instability of recent times. A governing coalition that could unite for the express purpose of developing and passing such reforms, thus guaranteeing the current impasse could never recur, would likely win the lasting gratitude of much of the weary Israeli electorate.

Meanwhile, there are numerous other important takeaways from this election campaign.

Firstly, the disappointing turnout among Israel's Arab voters should not overshadow some genuinely encouraging signals coming from this sector. Most Zionist parties included Arab Israelis high on their electoral list, while Arab party politicians openly discussed the prospect of working with an Israeli government, rather than reflexively opposing them, as in the past. As Tzvi Fleischer notes in this month's Scribblings column, Arab voters today appear to be overwhelmingly in favour of Arab political parties either joining the next Israeli government or supporting one from the outside "in order to achieve benefits for the Arab community."

The result is the small Arab Ra'am party, which does have a worryingly Islamist outlook, looks to be in a position to potentially play kingmaker, post-election.

Already guaranteed equality under the law since Israel's founding, Israel's minorities are increasingly asking their leaders to enhance their political and socio-economic engagement with the Jewish majority, and the entire country stands to benefit.

On the other hand, the relative electoral success of the controversial Religious Zionist party, projected to receive six seats, is troubling. RZ is an amalgam of three smaller parties, two of which – *Otzma Yehudit* and *Noam* – frankly should be beyond the political pale. *Otzma Yehudit* consists of the disciples of the late racist extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane, while *Noam* promotes anti-LGBTQ views.

The possibility that representatives of these parties could now find their way into

positions of influence in a potential government is anathema to most Israelis and virtually all friends of Israel.

Finally, this election was understandably centred on the coronavirus pandemic; Israel's mixed performance in handling this crisis last year; and Israel's world-leading vaccination campaign to bring it under control this year.

Netanyahu rightly sought political credit for working tirelessly to secure supplies to make the vaccination success story possible. However, it should not be forgotten that much of the credit for Israel's

stunning vaccine success must also go to Israel's robust, modern, hi-tech health care system that ensured that the lifesaving shots were administered to the populace efficiently and that data on the vaccine's effects could be collected in real time for scientific study to benefit the world.

The big picture is that, while the Israeli political system has been suffering from dysfunction, the country's core institutions in the economic, social, health, education and defence spheres have risen to the occasion.

Israel's defence agencies have overcome the challenge of operating without an annual budget and maintained vigilance against an array of threats, particularly from Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza and, of course, never taken an eye off Iran's dangerous and illegal nuclear program.

Israel's improving relations with the Arab world have continued apace despite ongoing political uncertainty,

demonstrating that the ties transcend simple politics.

As the Emirate's former Foreign Minister Anwar Gargash recently tweeted, "from the UAE's perspective, the purpose of the Abrahamic Accords is to provide a robust strategic foundation to foster peace and prosperity with the State of Israel and in the wider region," independent of the composition of the Israeli Government.

Meanwhile, after being on track to be the world's first fully vaccinated country, the "start-up nation" is also poised to spearhead a global economic revival and apply its knack for innovation to health and medi-tech, COVID-safe commerce and other pursuits that will meet the needs of a post-pandemic world.

Israel is much more than the 120 representatives it voted into office on March 23, or the prime minister that these individuals will ultimately select. These are simply part of a larger enterprise and broad-based social contract in which every Israeli, whatever their multiethnic and multicultural background, is a stakeholder.

Over the past year, in particular, those bonds have been tested, and sometimes strained, through lockdowns, protests, and accusations and recriminations between different sectors. Regardless of what happens in the political sphere over the coming few months – a Netanyahu-led government, a different government, or even yet another election campaign – Israel will doubtless not only muddle through but manage to thrive.

AIR

WORD FOR WORD

"My thanks to the citizens of Israel! You have given the Likud and the Right a massive win under my leadership... It is clear that a clear majority of Israeli citizens are right-wing, and they want a strong and stable right-wing government that will preserve Israel's economy, Israel's security and the Land of Israel... Love you!"

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu after polls closed on March 23 (Twitter, March 24).

"As things stand, there will not be a government with the Kah-anists... and homophobes... we'll wait for the results but we'll do everything to create a sane government in Israel."

Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid on election night (Times of Israel, March 23).

"We chose to fight, and we will continue to struggle for our values and remain part of the national leadership."

Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz after exit polls showed his Blue and White party outperformed expectations (Times of Israel, March 23).

"Ra'am's approach is to not rule out anyone who doesn't rule us out. If a ruling party makes contact, Ra'am will hold the process appropriately and respectfully."

Mansour Abbas, head of the Islamist Ra'am party, which appears positioned to play a "kingmaker" role after the Israeli election (Times of Israel, March 25).

"Regarding the #JCPOA, Iran is in no rush. We are very patient... If they implement the policy Iran has announced, we will return to our commitments. If they don't, things will continue the way they are going today."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal (Twitter, March 21).

"The United States firmly opposes and is deeply disappointed by this decision. The ICC has no jurisdiction over this matter. Israel is not a party to the ICC and has not consented to the Court's jurisdiction... The Palestinians do not qualify as a sovereign state and therefore, are not qualified to obtain membership as a state in, participate as a state in, or delegate jurisdiction to the ICC."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the International Criminal Court's (ICC) decision to open an investigation into Israeli actions in the "State of Palestine" (US State Department, March 3).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Ayman Odeh, head of Israel's Joint List party – a coalition of three parties whose voters are overwhelmingly Israeli Arabs – is neither a big fan of Zionism nor a defender of Israeli government policies. The leader of the communist *Hadash* faction of the Joint List, Odeh says he doesn't "accept the Zionist idea." He says the "Arab Palestinian in Israel" suffers "from systematic and systemic discrimination," but is also a "part of a people which is under occupation" since 1967. He is extremely critical of recent Netanyahu-led governments and has called Binyamin Netanyahu "a dangerous psychopath who knows no boundaries."

But he had this to say in an Israeli TV interview during the recent campaign:

When I look at the Rambam Hospital [in Haifa] I see that 31% of the doctors are Arabs.

In the Rothschild Hospital, there are 15 departments, eight of them are headed by Arabs.

When I look at the Technion [Israel's prestigious technology university] I see that 23% of the male students are Arabs. 35% of the female students are Arabs.

When I look at the University of Haifa I see that 46% of the students are Arabs.

In high tech, in the last five years alone, there's an increase of... 1300% in participation of Arabs.

Do you understand? Do you understand what is happening? We are a successful population! Successful!

Odeh is right: Israeli Arabs are increasingly successful and integrated into the Israeli mainstream, putting paid to those ridiculous claims about supposed "Israeli Apartheid".

Indeed, regular readers of this column will note that I have cited many of the same statistics here.

Moreover, the burgeoning success of the Israeli Arab minority has happened largely under the various Netanyahu-led governments in power since 2009.

As I have also documented in this column, several government policies under various Netanyahu-led governments certainly contributed to that record of success.

This is not to say Odeh's anger at Netanyahu is completely unjustified – Netanyahu has repeatedly used rhetoric that is very unhelpful to Arab-Jewish coexistence and integration. But as Odeh's statistics show, integration is proceeding apace

anyway – and it is likely to have a profound effect on Israeli politics, and the role Israeli Arabs can play in it.

This is illustrated by a poll of Israeli Arabs conducted in early March by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation at the Moshe Dayan Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University. It found that a stunning 87% of Israeli Arab voters would be in favour of Arab political parties either joining the next Israeli government, or supporting one from the outside, after the upcoming election, "in order to achieve benefits for the Arab community."

This is a big jump from previous surveys – and flies in the face of the traditional behaviour of predominantly Arab

political parties in Israel. In the past, they have generally concentrated on stridently campaigning for Palestinian nationalist goals – such as the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza – and ruled out joining any Israeli government (in the 1990s, Arab-majority parties did for a time provide outside support for the Rabin Government).

The survey found that 46% of the respondents say that, in order to achieve benefits for the Arab community, an Arab party should be ready to join any governing coalition that emerges after the elections, and another 18% say they should only join

a government led by the Centre-Left. Around 21% of the respondents favoured an Arab party offering to support the government from outside in exchange for benefits.

Only 13% of respondents supported the traditional stance of the Arab parties of mostly refusing to join or support any Israeli government.

Another takeaway from the poll is that Israeli Arabs clearly want their political representatives to focus primarily on bread and butter issues.

A solid majority of those surveyed (58%) said the most important priority for Israeli Arab politicians should be implementation of a government plan to combat violence in Arab communities – where there is a serious problem with criminal gangs.

So most Israeli Arabs today want their political representatives to focus on getting concrete benefits for Arab citizens by being ready to enter the argy-bargy of Israeli coalition politics. This shift is almost certainly a product of the educational, economic and social success of the Israeli Arab minority that Odeh identified.


Non-Arab Israeli politicians are recognising the shift. Several Zionist parties have been appealing for Arab votes in the current election campaign – and Netanyahu has been foremost among them, campaigning extensively in Arab



Ayman Odeh (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

areas, despite his past ugly rhetoric regarding Arab voters. The Adeneuer poll suggests this may have worked – it found Netanyahu's Likud could have picked up perhaps 1.5 Knesset seats from Arab voters.

Meanwhile, Israeli Arab politicians are also starting to respond to these shifting views among their constituents. The Joint Arab List split, with the Islamist party Ra'am running on its own this election because its leader, Mansour Abbas, has made it clear he might be willing to make a political deal with Netanyahu for concrete benefits. The other Joint List factions reject this, but have been suggesting they could join a centre-left government without Netanyahu.

So, Odeh is right – the Israeli Arab community is successful. And what's even better, their growing success is an indication of Israel's overall success as a society. It is, of course, an imperfect one in numerous ways, but the improving integration and success of the large Arab minority is a sign of Israel's solid foundations in the present, and potential for an even better future. 

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

Eyal Zisser

A PANDEMIC “LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS”

In late February, the Arab press highlighted two stories about Israel and the fight against the coronavirus. One of the stories was about the vaccines Israel purchased from Russia for the people of Syria, while the other story focused on figures published by Israel's Health Ministry, whereby Israel's successful vaccination campaign, for Jews and Arabs alike, has led to a dramatic drop in the morbidity rate.

Not every Arab media outlet was rejoicing. Outlets in Iran, Lebanon and Syria, along with the Qatari satellite network *Al Jazeera*, chose to ignore this news painting Israel in a positive light. In the information age, however, stories can't be blocked and regardless, the majority of other Arab outlets, official and unofficial, such as those in the Gulf states, chose to run the items, even prominently.

Incidentally, a google search in Arabic for the word “coronavirus” points to the dominance of Israeli websites in Arabic, such as those belonging to the Israeli Health Ministry or Israel's national health funds, and the figures they provide readers about the virus, the dangers it poses and the vaccines. This is an example of the light Israel is presently shining across the Middle East.


This is somewhat evocative of days past, before the internet age and even before television came into our lives, when listeners across the Arab world would eagerly tune into the *Voice of Israel* in Arabic, for the popular show in

those days, “Doctor Behind the Microphone”. This featured Israeli doctors who would answer questions from listeners throughout the Arab world.

Thus, as Arab propaganda at the time called for Israel's annihilation and the Jews to be thrown into the sea, Israel's answer to the waves of hostility and hatred was to broadcast medical advice that even saved lives on occasion.

Decades have passed since then, but it appears the reality in the Middle East hasn't changed all that much. The majority of people living in Iran, Syria, and even Lebanon can only dream about the advanced medical care Israelis receive. Their rulers, however, prefer nuclear missiles instead of public health and vaccines. Case in point: Iranian cleric Naser Shirazi decreed at the outset of the pandemic that if Israel develops a vaccine for the virus, it must be rejected.

Israel hasn't developed a vaccine for the virus, although it plans to build vaccine manufacturing plants that, beyond its own citizens, could also provide for its neighbours. In the meantime, however, it is granting a humanitarian gesture, even if via a Russian middleman, to the people of Syria. Humanitarian gestures of this sort are a matter of routine for Israel and, sadly, are a drop in the ocean in light of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Yet, although not enough to alter the reality in the country, they do help improve Israel's image in the Arab world.

As always, Israel's strength isn't just a matter of its military and scientific might, but also its righteousness, specifically in terms of its humanitarian gestures toward its neighbours. 

Prof. Eyal Zisser is a lecturer in the Middle East History Department at Tel Aviv University. © Israel Hayom (www.israelhayom.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

NAMING RIGHTS

Can one faith claim exclusive usage rights over their term for the Divine Being, enforceable by law? This is still an unsettled question in Malaysia, where sensitivities in the Malay Muslim majority continue to create needless disputes that chafe against the founding principles of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious federation.

The latest flare-up on this question began with a ruling on March 10 in the Kuala Lumpur High Court that ended a decades-long ban on Malaysian Christians using the word “Allah” to refer to God, as well as three other Arabic words, in educational publications.

High Court Justice Nor Bee Ariffin ruled that the 1986 Home Ministry directive barring the use of “Allah,” “Baitul-



The Kuala Lumpur High Court (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

lah” (house of God), “Kaabah” (holiest shrine) and “solat” (prayer) by Christian publications was unconstitutional because it restricted religious freedom. It was also illegal and irrational, Justice Nor Bee said.

The word “Allah” was long ago adopted into the Bahasa Malay language, and has been used for more than 400 years by Malay-speaking Christians in the country, especially those living in Sabah and Sarawak.

Yet, in the past few decades, many conservative Malaysian Muslims have claimed that non-Muslim Malays could use words like Allah to “confuse” and even convert Muslims to another religion. Recent years have seen huge demonstrations by Muslims who carried banners with slogans such as “Allah is just for Muslims.”

The High Court ruling was regarding a judicial review application filed by Jill Ireland Lawrence Bill, a Sarawak Christian, 13 years ago. The authorities had seized eight religious CDs, with Malay titles that included the word “Allah,” from Jill Ireland in May 2008 when she returned from an overseas trip. Ireland filed the judicial review application to challenge the seizure and to seek a declaration on her constitutional right to use the word “Allah” in Christian publications.

In 2014, the High Court held that the seizure was wrong but did not decide on the constitutional issues raised. A year later, the Court of Appeal ordered the Home Ministry to return the CDs to Ireland, but told the High Court to hear the case with regard to its constitutional aspects. The subsequent verdict found that Jill Ireland was guaranteed protection from religious discrimination.

Reaction against the ruling was immediate.

PEMBELA, an umbrella group representing Muslim NGOs, issued a strongly-worded statement expressing “shock and disappointment” with the High Court’s ruling, which, they said, had “great implications” for Muslims. “This decision gives room for abuse” of the word “Allah,” said the statement. “It will open wide the door for apostasy and pluralist thought.”

Muafakat Nasional, a group that consists of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) – Malaysia’s oldest party and a partner in the ruling coalition – and the conservative Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS), expressed “serious concern” at the High Court decision, and demanded the Government lodge an appeal.

In response, James Masing, Deputy Chief Minister of Malaysia’s Sarawak state where Christians are the majority, called the appeal demand “ridiculous.”

“I believe the judge had considered all aspects of religious and cultural sensitivity when making the judgment,” Masing said in a statement. “Thus, it is a most ridiculous demand by any political party or religious group in a multi-religious country like Malaysia.”

Yet, within a week, the Government did indeed lodge an appeal against the ruling. The submission said that the Government, along with Home Minister Hamzah Zainuddin, decided to appeal because they were “not satisfied” with the ruling by the Kuala Lumpur High Court.

This development was welcomed by Muafakat Nasional, saying, “this appeal is in line with the wishes of the country’s majority Muslim community” and that, “multiracial and multireligious harmony must be preserved without giving any room to issues that could jeopardise or disrupt the existing stability.” The unspoken presumption is that Malay Muslims will decide the terms of such “stability”.

Some pushback has come from federal and state parliamentarians from Sabah and Sarawak from 10 different parties of opposing political alignments, 54 of whom have issued a statement asking the Federal Government to discontinue its appeal against the High Court’s decision.

“We call upon all political parties to not exploit the High Court’s decision for narrow political mileage... Muslims in Sabah and Sarawak are supportive of and never feel threatened by their Christian siblings, cousins and friends praying to Allah, the one God in all Abrahamic faiths,” the lawmakers said in the statement.

So the dispute over word usage hangs in the balance once again – a political football due to the present Government’s dependence upon support from its Malay base, PAS and UMNO. The bigger question is whether the legal system will affirm that the fundamental condition of the 1963 union of Malaya, Sarawak and Sabah as equal partners – freedom of religion – still holds.

AIR



Douglas Davis

COURTROOM DRAMA

Four European states – Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Austria – broke cover last month to publicly declare that they would oppose a planned investigation of Israeli activities in the Palestinian territories by the International Criminal Court (ICC). The four Europeans are in mostly good company among the international dissenters, with the United States, Canada, Australia, Brazil and Uganda. More are expected to announce their opposition.

Israel's Attorney-General, Avichai Mandelblit, expressed Israel's reaction to the court's decision: "According to the Oslo Accords, there is no State of Palestine, it doesn't have the jurisdiction to judge Israelis. This is an unfortunate and mistaken decision." Mandelblit added: "This court was established to investigate atrocities... Israel does not commit atrocities; we have laws of war, we have a glorious judiciary of world renown."

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas spoke for most European dissenters when he expressed opposition to the court's decision, noting that: "Our legal view on jurisdiction of the ICC... remains unchanged. The court has no jurisdiction, because of the absence of the element of Palestinian statehood required by international law."

Canadian Foreign Minister Marc Garneau noted that, "the creation of a Palestinian state can only be achieved through direct negotiations between the parties. Until such negotiations succeed, Canada's longstanding position remains that it does not recognize a Palestinian state and therefore does not recognize its accession to the ICC."

Meanwhile, US Vice President Kamala Harris reaffirmed her country's opposition to an ICC investigation. In a telephone call with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, she expressed opposition to the ICC's attempts to exercise its jurisdiction over Israelis. She also emphasised Washington's "unwavering commitment to Israel's security."

ICC judges angered Israel last month when they declared that the court's jurisdiction extended to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, potentially clearing the way for the prosecutor to open an investigation into Israeli military actions and the construction of settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Netanyahu dubbed the decision a "perversion of justice". It was, he added, "the epitome of antisemitism and hypocrisy."

Similarly, Israel's President Reuven Rivlin called the decision to investigate Israel "scandalous... we will not accept claims against the exercise of our right and our obligation to defend our citizens."

At the same time, the Palestinian Authority praised the court's decision to investigate Israel, saying that it would be ready to provide "any assistance required... to realise justice for the Palestinian people."

The Palestinians in Ramallah might have rejoiced at the news that the ICC was planning to investigate supposed

Israeli war crimes, but they are likely to find, as they have found in the past, that such nugatory and declarative ICC decisions will not advance their cause by a single iota.

The undergraduate style of political chicanery, which is the hallmark of the ICC, is also the operating principle of its erstwhile sibling, the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Since its inception in 2006, the UNHRC has adopted resolutions condemning countries on 171 occasions – 90 of which targeted Israel. The terror-supporting, human rights abusing regime in Teheran has received a mere 10, while such states as China, Russia, Pakistan and Zimbabwe have received none.



The International Criminal Court appears determined to take on non-member states defending themselves from terrorism (Credit: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas)

The ICC decision to go after Israel again comes on the eve of the retirement of the court's Chief Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda. In a statement, she declared that "any investigation undertaken by the office will be conducted independently, impartially and objectively, without fear or favour."

Bensouda faced criticism from an independent investigation last year over her leadership of the ICC, including allegations of bullying and sexual harassment amongst staff under her watch. Some have speculated that, by pursuing Israel, she might be trying to avoid scrutiny of her own role. According to one source, Bensouda "appears to be taking these inappropriate steps on her way out of the door in an effort to distract from her mismanagement of the ICC and, perhaps, to attempt to insulate herself from legal jeopardy by appealing to anti-US sentiments."

In any case, Bensouda appears to be going beyond the ICC's mandate to pursue both the United States and Israel, non-members of the ICC, for how they defended themselves against terrorism.

While Israel and several world powers – the United States, Russia, China and India – are not members of the ICC, any decisions by the court could make life difficult for officials and military leaders. The ICC does not put states on trial, but it can target political and military officials with international arrest warrants while they are travelling abroad.

Europeans are most strongly attached to the ICC, and there is likely to be a serious lobbying campaign to persuade Europe as a whole to recognise Palestine as a national state capable of securing the investigation, prosecution and indictment of Israel at the ICC.

On the other hand, the most effective way to counter the ICC's illegal action may be to persuade European powers which oppose the move to simply defund the Court.

BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

The first rocket to have been fired from Gaza into Israel since Jan. 19 landed in an open field near Beersheva on March 23, Israel's election day, shortly after PM Binyamin Netanyahu visited the city.

There were several attempted terrorist stabbings in the West Bank, including on Feb. 22 and 24, and two on March 8.

ISRAELI STRIKES IN SYRIA

Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria have allegedly continued, with strikes reported around Damascus on Feb. 28 and another on March 17.

Iran was blamed for an attack on an Israeli-owned cargo ship, the *Helios Ray*, in the Gulf of Oman on Feb. 25, which caused severe damage but no casualties. A report in the *Wall Street Journal* in March alleged that since late 2019, Israel itself had attacked at least a dozen Iranian tankers delivering oil to Syria.

PALESTINIAN PRISONER CHIEF ADMITS MASSIVE TERROR STIPENDS

On March 4, PLO Commissioner for Prisoners' Affairs Qadri Abu Bakr confirmed to the *Times of Israel* that the PLO spent "around NIS 50 million [~A\$20 million] per month," or approximately NIS 600 million (A\$240 million) in total in 2020, on payments to Palestinians imprisoned by Israel for security offences and their families. This practice is condemned by Israeli officials as a "pay-for-slay" scheme, and strongly opposed by the Australian, US and other governments.

HAMAS INTERNAL ELECTIONS

In mid-March, Hamas' internal elections surprisingly saw the current Hamas leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, needing four rounds to secure a win in the Gaza district. Sinwar faced strong opposition from Nizar Awadullah, who is considered close to Iran and an ally of Sinwar's internal opponents in Hamas, Khaled Mashaal and Ismail Haniyeh.

In addition, Jamila al-Shanti became the first woman to be nominated to Hamas' political bureau, the organisation's top decision-making body.

IRAN ALLEGEDLY HIDING NUCLEAR PARTS

Western intelligence sources alleged on March 23 that Iran is hiding key components used in its clandestine nuclear weapons project from UN inspectors.

According to the intelligence officials, centrifuge components, including parts, pumps and materials such as carbon fibre, have been concealed in 75 containers in various locations across Iran. Satellite images show the containers being moved between different sites belonging to the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran.

The officials also claimed that some of the components stored in the containers were illegally procured after the 2015 nuclear deal – a direct breach of that agreement.

IRANIAN ENRICHED URANIUM UPDATE

Iran continues to escalate its breaches of the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported in March

that Iran had started feeding uranium hexafluoride into a cascade of advanced IR-4 centrifuges at the Natanz underground plant. The Iranians are also planning to install additional advanced centrifuge models. Both of these actions represent violations of the nuclear deal.

A February IAEA report confirmed that Iran has amassed 14 times the JCPOA limit on enriched uranium, almost enough to construct three warheads – including uranium enriched to 20% purity, a level which brings Iran much closer to 90% military grade purity.

ISRAEL OIL SPILL

Israeli and oil industry investigations revealed that an oil spill responsible for contaminating the shores of Israel, the Gaza Strip and Lebanon emanated from a leaking Libyan tanker, the *Emerald*, which was smuggling crude oil from Iran to Syria in contravention of international sanctions.

In mid-February, beaches on the Mediterranean coast from the Sinai Peninsula to southern Lebanon were polluted by tar, and large numbers of marine animals killed, as a result of the leak of an estimated 1,000 tons of petroleum. It is considered Israel's worst ecological disaster.

JERUSALEM HOSTS KOSOVO EMBASSY, CZECH DIPLOMATIC OFFICE

On March 14, Kosovo became the first European, and also the first Muslim-majority, country to establish an embassy in Jerusalem. The opening followed Kosovo's establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel in February.

Meanwhile, on March 11, Czech

Prime Minister Andrej Babis attended the opening of his country's diplomatic office in Jerusalem, supplementing its embassy in Tel Aviv. The opening marked a step towards the hope expressed by Czech President Miloš Zeman in 2018 of relocating the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

ISRAEL-UAE JOINT INVESTMENT FUND

The Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu announced the establishment of a joint US\$10 billion fund aimed at boosting strategic sectors, including energy, manufacturing, water, space, health care and agri-tech. The fund will be financed from both the government and private sector and build on the Abraham Accords between the two countries.

Most of the funds will reportedly be invested in infrastructure projects, including a deep-water port in Eilat and a railway via Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Haifa port.

POWERFUL CONNECTIONS

On March 8, Israel's Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz signed a memorandum of understanding with his Greek and Cypriot counterparts to start construction of the world's longest undersea power cable. This cable will link Israel's electricity grid with that of Cyprus and Greece, and greatly improve energy security for Israel and Cyprus. Both these countries remain largely dependent on fuel imports for power production, leaving them vulnerable to supply cuts and shortages.

COVID-19 NUMBERS

By March 7, statistics showed that Israel was registering 71% fewer COVID deaths and 45% fewer serious illnesses than at the peak of the epidemic in January. As of March 23, there had been a total of 828,764

coronavirus cases in Israel, up from 754,998 on Feb. 22, with a total of 6,109 deaths, up from 5,596.

As of March 21, more than five million Israelis – 57% of the population – had received their first dose of a coronavirus vaccine, and 4.5 million, or 50.4%, had also received the second dose.

In the Palestinian ruled areas of the West Bank, there had been 225,976 cases, up from 173,635 on Feb. 22, and 2,458 deaths, up from 1,976. In Gaza, there had been a total of 59,330 cases as of March 21, up from 54,460 as of Feb. 21.

VACCINES FOR THE POLITICALLY CONNECTED

After long delays, on March 21 the Palestinian Authority (PA) began its coronavirus vaccination campaign. PA President Mahmoud Abbas received a shot on March 20.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

FLAGGING ONE'S INTENTIONS

Normally, when there is a demonstration against foreign interference in a country, it is because the demonstrators believe that a foreign power or powers are obtaining too much influence in their country. They want it to stop, arguing their country should be governed solely for the benefit of its own citizens.

In the tragic reality of Lebanon today, however, things are done a little differently.

Lebanon has become a basket case – economically bankrupt, with a level of corruption making resuscitation of the economy well-nigh impossible. Hoping to overcome these seemingly insurmountable problems, Lebanon's Maronite Christian Patriarch, Bechara al-Rahi, has proposed that the UN sponsor an international conference to resolve the economic crisis and address the political dysfunction underlying it.

The Patriarch's idea is strongly op-

This campaign commenced following the arrival in Israel of 61,000 vaccines earmarked for the Palestinians, from COVAX – the international vaccine-sharing mechanism backed by the World Health Organisation. Around 40,000 of the COVAX doses reached Ramallah on March 17, while the rest were sent to the Gaza Strip.

The PA said that hundreds of thousands of further vaccine doses are expected soon from various sources.

However, the PA has come under fire for nepotism and corruption in its vaccine campaign, after admitting it diverted some COVID-19 vaccination doses meant for medical workers to VIPs, including the Palestinian national football team, Government ministers, presidential guards and members of the PLO Executive Committee.

Meanwhile, Israel has vaccinated some 105,000 Palestinians who work in Israel.

posed by Hezbollah and its allies, which dominate the government and control many parts of Lebanon's economy. Hezbollah is an Iranian proxy which is basically running a 'state within a state' in Lebanon for the benefit of its masters in Teheran – including by amassing tens of thousands of rockets and missiles aimed at Israel to be fired when Iran deems it strategically advantageous. In such a war, of course, the Lebanese people would suffer greatly.

So imagine the irony when on Feb. 28, Hezbollah operatives held a loud demonstration against "foreign interference" in Lebanon. And if an Iranian proxy demonstrating against "foreign interference" isn't enough evidence of a lack of self-awareness, along with Hezbollah flags, the demonstrators flew Iranian flags as well.

This perhaps underlines graphically what has been obvious for a while – Hezbollah doesn't see Lebanon as separate to Iran, but as a subsidiary of it.

So on the bright side, perhaps that demonstration did serve the people of Lebanon – by blatantly flagging the terror group's true loyalties and intentions.

COVER STORY

ELECTORAL
DÉJÀ VU

POST-BALLOT BLUES

by Amotz Asa-El

On March 23, Israelis went to the polls for the fourth time in two years only to vindicate King Solomon's insight that "there is nothing new under the sun" because "only that shall happen which has happened."

The bottom line of what has happened is that, after yet another election, Binyamin Netanyahu will likely continue dominating Israeli politics as he has over the past dozen years, yet will also have to use all his considerable political skills to establish anything like a stable government.

As Israel's 24th legislature prepares to assemble, it will again be split down the middle. Netanyahu's potential governing coalition is very close to 50% of the Knesset, but short of a majority.

However, the anti-Netanyahu bloc remains in no position to form a government, since the election's potential kingmaker, the *Yamina* ("Rightwards") party, will not back a government whose majority depends on anti-Zionist Arab lawmakers. That constraint places the one clear bottom line on the early results – a coalition of disparate anti-Netanyahu parties looks very unlikely.

The key reason for this is the precipitous decline of two parties' electoral fortunes – former defence minister Naftali Bennett's *Yamina*, and former education minister Gideon Sa'ar's *New Hope*. Each of these parties at one point looked like getting more than 15% of the vote in opinion polls, providing a potential 30% base for an anti-Netanyahu coalition. Yet, on election day, the two ended up with just over 10% of the vote, combined.

The cause of both parties' nosedive is the same: the pandemic.



The expected distribution of seats in Israel's new Knesset

In an inversion of the pandemic politics that tilted American swing voters against Donald Trump, Netanyahu's pandemic record appears to have satisfied a critical mass of the electorate.

True, Netanyahu did lose votes compared to the election in March 2020, sliding from 36 seats in the outgoing Knesset to 30. The difference, nearly a fifth of his previous following, appears to have mostly migrated to Sa'ar.

Meanwhile, Bennett's predicted following is only one seat higher than the six seats he won last year.

Both candidates attacked Netanyahu's pandemic record, charging that it was chaotic, over-centralised, and expensive – fueling a NIS160 billion (A\$64 billion) budget deficit, equal to 11.7% of the GDP, through extended unemployment benefits as well as compensation packages to businesses suffering under the lockdowns.

Initially, this criticism seemed effective, but then came the coronavirus vaccinations.

Success now fell into Netanyahu's lap three times.

Medically, the vaccines proved effective quickly, resulting in plunging infection rates and the gradual, but steady, removal of lockdowns. Logistically, Israel managed to vaccinate 5.14 million people within 10 weeks, more than half the population, and the number keeps rising. And politically, Netanyahu is seen, even by his opponents, as the



The coronavirus pandemic was a central issue for many Israeli voters when they went to the polls (Credit: Roman Yanushevsky/Shutterstock)

one who led the vaccination drive – personally calling the CEOs of vaccine manufacturers and personally negotiating agreements with them that landed the vaccines in Israel early and in massive quantities.

Whatever the political outcome of this election, this was the central issue from the viewpoint of many voters, and certainly the decisive factor behind Netanyahu's personal achievement in recovering from dismal-looking polling last year.

In addition, Netanyahu arrived at this election with dramatic diplomatic breakthroughs in his pocket, having obtained normalisation agreements last year with four Arab and Muslim countries – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, with the help of Trump Administration mediation.

Though none of these countries borders Israel, their combined size and weight are such that Israelis feel the historic regional siege under which the nation has lived since its creation has been broken.

Beyond the specific value of these deals, Netanyahu's supporters felt that none of his opponents enjoys the kind of international status he was able to deploy in making these unexpected breakthroughs happen.

Such concerns about national and international status especially affected Netanyahu's main challenger on the left – leader of the opposition and former finance minister Yair Lapid, who heads the centrist Yesh Atid ("There is a Future") party.

Lapid won some 15% of the vote, a respectable achievement by any yardstick, and more than twice the predicted following of his estranged ally Defence Minister Benny Gantz and his Blue and White faction.

Lapid and Gantz parted ways a year ago, when the latter decided to join Netanyahu's Government, arguing that the pandemic demanded setting aside political divisions,

even those driven by Netanyahu's indictments on charges of fraud, bribery and breach of trust.

Last year the pair's combined ticket garnered 33 seats. Now, they have retained between them 25 of those seats. The balance seems to have migrated both right and left – namely, to Bennett and Sa'ar and to Labor and Meretz, the pair of left-wing parties which surprised pundits by winning seven and six seats respectively.

The big loser on the left was the Joint List.

One component of this federation of primarily Arab-supported parties split away. Ra'am, or the United Arab List, ran on a separate ticket and gained four seats, giving it a potential "kingmaker" role. Having also suffered from low voter turnout among Israeli Arabs, the Joint List plunged from 15 to six seats.

The governing coalition Netanyahu hopes to cobble together would be based on his two ultra-Orthodox allies, Shas and United Torah Judaism, which maintained their representation of a combined 16 Knesset seats, plus former transport minister Bezalet Smotrich's Religious Zionism party's six seats and Bennett's seven seats.

Asked how Likud hopes to govern with less than 60 of the Knesset's 120 seats, Settlements Minister Tzahi Hanegbi said he hoped Gantz would end up in the coalition. Some pundits also suggested that some in Sa'ar's faction – all former Likud members – might defect and return to the Likud fold under Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, some factions might merge. One such potential pair is Lapid and Gantz. Another such duo are Bennett and Sa'ar, both ideological nationalists who seem to be in agreement on pretty much everything except on who should succeed Netanyahu as leader of the Israeli Right.

Sa'ar himself has become a *persona non-grata* in Likud, since his challenge to Netanyahu – unlike Bennett's – has been sweeping. Sa'ar has derided Netanyahu for his insistence on retaining his post despite his indictments, and accusing him of nurturing an autocracy and a personality cult. Bennett has been critical, but has made his criticisms much more about policy and administration, rather than personality.

Also *persona non-grata* with Netanyahu and the Likud is former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman, whose *Yisrael Beiteinu* ("Israel our Home") has apparently retained its seven seats. Lieberman is marked for having refused to join a Netanyahu-led coalition two years ago, thus triggering the subsequent continuum of three inconclusive elections since then.

At the same time, Netanyahu knows full well that a narrow coalition, besides being vulnerable in parliamentary votes, will also be held hostage by several right-wing

radicals. The most notable of these is Religious Zionism's Itamar Ben-Gvir, a follower of the late racist extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane who demands drastic reforms to the Israeli judiciary, and his colleague Avi Maoz, who is virulently anti-LGBTQI.

Netanyahu also knows that he will almost certainly not be able to find a majority for legislation that would affect his personal legal situation, such as a law that would delay his corruption trial until he leaves office. Bennett will oppose such an idea – even though, like much of the Israeli right, he is critical of what is depicted as the liberal bias and activist interventionism of Israel's High Court.

Israel will therefore have to wait – certainly for some weeks and possibly for months – to see whether Netanyahu can use his personal victory to create a stable coalition against the odds. It would be a feat he has accomplished in the past, but never from a starting point as unfavourable as this one appears likely to be.

The alternative would almost certainly be a fifth election within hardly two years, perhaps in October. This would be a prospect that would further puzzle the rest of the world – making many wonder how it is that a country that knew how to build the start-up nation and how to be the first in the world to vaccinate its way out of a global pandemic, doesn't know how to build a stable government.

AIR

HOW TO VOTE IN A COVID WARD

by Nathan Jeffay

In hospital pyjamas and with oxygen tubes running into his nose, 80-year-old David Nidan shuffled to the ballot box on the morning of Tuesday, March 23.

Eytan, the official managing the polling station, kindly helped the patient to keep his balance. He was wearing a hazmat suit to protect him from the SARS-CoV-2 virus that has kept Nidan in the hospital for the last two weeks.

In an election shaped by the COVID-19 crisis, from campaign talking points to social distancing rules at every polling station, it was the most literal manifestation of politics in a time of pandemic: a polling station in a virus ward.

A regular Israeli polling station caters to 600 people. The one where Nidan voted, at Hillel Yaffe Medical Centre in Hadera, is open for hours to serve just 11 potential voters.

For most of the patients who voted in such stations – around 700 were eligible in total – the journey down the corridor was the farthest they have ventured from bed since hospitalisation.

Some election officials have even gone mobile for the sake of those who can't move and taken ballot boxes to bedsides.

As patients cast votes at hospitals' COVID ward stations, home-based virus patients headed to 409 special polling places, while quarantined people have been taking advantage of 342 stations especially designated for them.

From the virus section at Hillel Yaffe, Nidan spoke to the *Times of Israel* through an intercom that connects his ward to the control room.

He said: "It feels good to be voting," and revealed that he was backing Likud.

Soon after kippa-wearing Nidan moved away from the ballot box, an Arab woman in a hijab arrived to cast her vote.

In the ward's control room, the nurses who monitor patients sat alongside election officials: one employee of the Central Elections Committee and two party activists who oversee proceedings, as per Israeli election protocol.

They have a more complex process to check than at regular polling stations. Each voter is given two envelopes. In one, which has no information to identify them, they place a piece of paper that shows their choice of party.

This goes inside an envelope with their identity card number, which is discarded before votes are counted, but is necessary to verify that a ballot hasn't also been cast in their name at their regular polling station.

When voters arrive, the envelopes are passed through an airlock into the virus ward.

The inspectors, Ofra Mines and Rahamim Michael, sat at a table surrounded by the cookies and snacks that are traditionally provided for those checking polling procedures, along with large bottles of hand sanitiser. When they woke up a few hours earlier and reported for duty, neither of them had any idea they had been assigned to a COVID-19 station.

"I was worried," said Mines, a 62-year-old Likudnik. "At first I thought I'd actually need to go inside the coronavirus ward, and that concerned me, but it still feels strange sitting here, behind the glass."

She reported a mix of emotions: joy at seeing people vote and sadness at seeing the harsh reality of a coronavirus ward. "I'm happy to see everyone, including sick people, being given the chance to vote, but it's hard to see life on the ward," she said.

One of the nurses, Ahmed Abuhaja, also said he was happy to see patients voting, but reported that there was no election buzz or discussion on the ward. Asked if patients had been talking politics, he said: "Not at all; people here just want to get better and get home."

AIR

Nathan Jeffay is the *Times of Israel's* health and science correspondent. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

THE COMPONENTS OF A COALITION

If Israel is to have a new government, a coalition of at least 61 Knesset seats will have to be assembled from the 13 parties that were elected to the Knesset following the March 23 election. Here is the AIR's guide to those parties, who they say they will and won't sit in coalition with, and their pre-election pitches to voters.



| Party | Orientation | Leader | Estimated seats | Previous Knesset | Coalition-building stance | Pre-Election pitch |
|-----------------------|----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|------------------|---|---|
| LIKUD | Centre-right | Binyamin Netanyahu | 30 | 36 | Ruled out coalition with Joint List | <p>Likud chairman Binyamin Netanyahu: "This is a choice between a stable right-wing government or a dysfunctional rotation government under Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid who will only take Israel back..."</p> <p>"I have already seen Israel through two economic crises. I am ready to do it again if you elect me. I ask you to put your faith in me so that I can complete the great tasks I am working on: boosting the economy, maintaining security, halting Iran once and for all, and bringing in four additional historic peace agreements that will change the future of Israel." <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i></p> |
| YESH ATID | Centrist | Yair Lapid | 17 | 13 | Refuses to enter a coalition with Netanyahu | <p>Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid: "We will form a government that will work for the public – an honest, national-liberal government, one whose members are not implicated in criminal cases, free of radical forces, and focused on health, the middle class, and real solutions to real problems. A government that will restore the public's trust because it will tell the public the truth and because it will show it that it is working hard for it out of a sense of mission..." <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i></p> |
| SHAS | Ultra-Orthodox | Arye Deri | 9 | 7 | Promised to only join a Netanyahu-led government | <p>Shas chairman Arye Deri: "Will Israel maintain a Jewish character that preserves Jewish values, Shabbat, tradition, kosher, and state conversion, or will it turn into a state of all its citizens – devoid of the character of Judaism, Shabbat and tradition?..."</p> <p>A vote for Shas is a 100% vote for a government headed by Netanyahu. Therefore, those who seek to see Netanyahu as prime minister and at the same time embrace Judaism, tradition, the Jewish character of the state, and the protection of the weak... should vote for Shas." <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i></p> |
| BLUE AND WHITE | Centrist | Benny Gantz | 8 | 12 | Refuses to enter a Netanyahu-led government, open to all other arrangements | <p>Blue and White chairman Benny Gantz: "I am a soldier of the State of Israel. I heeded the call and joined an emergency national unity government with Netanyahu. I did that because Israel was at war and I am first and foremost its soldier... I have paid a heavy political and personal price but we wrestled half of the government away from Netanyahu and became the gatekeepers of Israeli democracy, security, and economy..."</p> <p>"I vow to push for the formation of a government led by honest people... to safeguard our home from the inside, as well as against external threats." <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i></p> |
| YAMINA | Right-wing | Naftali Bennett | 7 | 3 | Promised not to join a government led by Yair Lapid or one that depends on the support of anti-Zionist parties | <p>Yamina chairman Naftali Bennett: "These elections are about a vote for the Right or for a fifth election rife with division, hatred, boycotts and terrible chaos that will tear our people apart..."</p> <p>Cynical politicians are racing toward social polarisation and a fifth election...</p> <p>"Have you lost sight of our people? Don't you care anymore about the millions of students drained from a year of distance learning? About the residents of the Negev terrorised by Bedouin crime? About the thousands of business owners who have been left with nothing? About the 500,000 unemployed...? Our problem is callous politicians who only care about themselves." <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i></p> |



| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|----|--|--|
| UNITED TORAH JUDAISM | Ultra-Orthodox | Moshe Gafni | 7 | 7 | Strongly prefers a Netanyahu-led government, but does not exclude other arrangements | United Torah Judaism leader Moshe Gafni: “We are fighting against the rule of the High Court of Justice and the violation of Jewish tradition. We are fighting for the weak, the periphery, the needy, the sick and the elderly. We are keeping the Jewish embers burning in this country. With your help, we will be able to keep Israel as a Jewish state with real values – the everlasting values of Judaism.” <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i> |
| YISRAEL BEITENU | Secular, right-wing | Avigdor Lieberman | 7 | 7 | Refuses to enter a government with either Netanyahu or Arab parties | Yisrael Beitenu chairman Avigdor Lieberman: “I am [speaking for] the only truly disadvantaged minority in Israel, the 44% of the citizens who define themselves as secular. The secular public... civil marriage and civil divorce, wants public transportation and opening businesses on Saturday... if the previous elections were about yes or no Bibi, today the choice is either ultra-Orthodox or non-ultra-Orthodox.” <i>Source: maariv.co.il, March 21</i> |
| LABOR | Centre-left | Merav Michaeli | 7 | 2 | Refuses to join a Netanyahu-led government, or be in coalition with Likud or the Religious Zionist party | Labor chairperson Merav Michaeli: “I vow to carry on with the vision of Yitzhak Rabin, along with the rejuvenated Labor slate... a convergence of the old and the new, people who faithfully represent Rabin’s vision and now champion the truly important causes: diplomacy, social-economic issues, protecting the judiciary, and changing the ties between religion and state.” <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i> |
| JOINT LIST | Union of communist and Arab parties | Ayman Odeh | 6 | 15 | Promised not to support a Netanyahu-led or Likud-led government, or sit in coalition with Religious Zionist party | Joint List chairman Ayman Odeh: “The equation is clear, when the Joint List gets more than 10 seats Netanyahu will not succeed in forming a far-right government... The Joint List is the only list that won’t support Netanyahu and won’t compromise our people’s goal by overthrowing this racist who deals with our people with hostility and belittling.” <i>Source: Facebook, March 21</i> |
| RELI-GIOUS ZIONIST | Right-wing, national-religious | Bezael Smotrich | 6 | 2 | Expected to support a Netanyahu government, refuses to enter government with either Meretz or Joint List | Religious Zionist chairman Bezael Smotrich: “Only a vote for the Religious Zionist Party can ensure that a real right-wing government is installed. The political map is clear: without the Religious Zionist party the Left will again take centre stage and Israel’s future character will be called into question.” <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i> |
| NEW HOPE | Right-wing | Gideon Sa’ar | 6 | 0 | Won’t join a coalition with Netanyahu | New Hope chairman Gideon Sa’ar: “As long as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu remains in office, Israel will be unable to emerge from the political, social, and economic instability that plagues it. A change is essential... “What Israel needs today is a leader with experience, skills, judgment, and responsibility. It needs a leader with a profound understanding of the various policy issues and the ways in which the government and the Knesset work. No less important, Israel needs a leader who will unite it, connect the parts of our society and place the good of the public above all else.” <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i> |
| MERETZ | Secular, left-wing | Nitzan Horowitz | 6 | 4 | Refuses to join a Netanyahu-led government, or work with Likud or Religious Zionist party | Meretz chairman Nitzan Horowitz: “Only Meretz will be able to prevent Netanyahu from forming a government, and only Meretz will allow for the formation of a new government... Meretz proudly champions the fight for human and civil rights. We advocate equality, freedom and peace... Being a leftist in Israel nowadays is not easy. But think of the Knesset... without Meretz and without the Left’s voice. That is a horrifying thought even for those who are not left-wing voters.” <i>Source: Israel Hayom, March 21</i> |
| RA’AM | Arab Islamist | Mansour Abbas | 4 | 4 | Possibly willing to support a Netanyahu-led government under certain conditions, open to all other options | Chairman Mansour Abbas via party spokesperson: “Ra’am is an Arab voice [in the Knesset ... which is] clear and traditional. We would work for real change. The elections are a choice between Ra’am and the Joint List. The elections are about an important question [relevant] to all the members of our society, which is: Do we want to be negative to each other or to people in general, or do we want to [treat] all [Arabs] as brothers or the sons of our own skin?” <i>Source: Facebook, March 22</i> |

FOUR CAMPAIGN BACKFIRES

by Herb Keinon

The Israeli election campaign that mercifully came to a close on March 23 was unremarkable.

There were no issues truly debated, other than whether Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is a saint or a scoundrel. There was no excitement. There was little fire.

There was coronavirus, which dominated everything – but it just forced the various campaigns to recalibrate their message.

Instead of Likud saying that Netanyahu was uniquely positioned to advance Israel diplomatically – “a league above the rest” – they said he was uniquely positioned to procure the coronavirus vaccine.

And instead of the anti-Netanyahu forces saying that Netanyahu’s thirst for a coalition to give him immunity from his corruption trial was colouring his decisions on issues of war and peace, they were saying that his personal considerations and legal woes were colouring his decisions regarding dealing with COVID-19.

But there were certain moments in the campaigns – certain steps or advertising campaigns – that were meant to evoke one response, but very well may have elicited the opposite.

Here’s a look at four of election campaign 2021’s boomerang moments.

Former security heads call on Gantz to withdraw from race



Feeling vindicated: Blue and White head Benny Gantz (Credit: Gil Cohen Magen/Shutterstock)

The first three weeks of February were very bad for Benny Gantz and his Blue and White Party. In six of 19 major polls taken in the first 20 days of the month, the Blue and White Party – which won 33 seats in the previous election – was not

passing the 3.25% electoral threshold needed to get into the Knesset. Gantz, holding the title of alternate prime minister, seemed to be rapidly losing elevation.

And then, on February 21, a group of 130 former officers and security heads – led by former prime minister and defence minister Ehud Barak, former Mossad head Danny Yatom and former chief of staff Dan Halutz, took out a full-page advertisement in the country’s newspapers calling on Gantz to step down.

“Benny, enough,” they declared, saying that if he did not drop out of the race, then the votes for his party would

go to waste as it was unlikely to make it past the electoral threshold. Gantz, incensed by the advertisement, said those who signed it “shot him in the back.”

But rather than accusing those who signed the letter of abandoning him and shooting him in the back, Gantz should have sent them a bouquet of flowers. Because in every major poll since that letter, Gantz passed the electoral threshold, polling consecutively at between four to five seats and ended up finishing with eight.

What happened? Barak and fellow security experts have written open letters in the past, including in support of the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and in favour of the Iranian nuclear deal. Barak has also warned that Netanyahu was leading Israel into a diplomatic tsunami. Reality, in each of those cases, turned out significantly different. One senior political journalist wrote that if the list of officers that signed that letter said X, then Y would probably happen. It has proven true this time. Once they called on Gantz to stop, Blue and White’s numbers started to rise.

Lieberman’s anti-haredi campaign

Avigdor Lieberman’s *Yisrael Beiteinu* Party has had a fascinating trajectory. It entered the Knesset in 1999 with four seats, seen as a niche party representing Russian-speaking immigrants.

Benefiting from the huge influx of immigrants in the 1990s, the party grew to 11 seats in 2006 and 15 in 2009, with Lieberman at one time talking of himself as a future prime minister.

But then the party’s political fortunes began to fade, dropping to only six seats in the 2015 elections and five seats in the April 2019 election.

It is then that Lieberman – known until that time primarily for his far-right anti-Arab rhetoric and positions – shifted gears to stridently anti-ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) rhetoric. With his natural voting base – elderly Russian immigrants – dying out, and the new generation of Russian speakers no longer in need of an immigrant party, he badly needed a new niche. He found it in the segment of the population angry and frustrated over haredi control over religious life in the country, the refusal of the ultra-Orthodox to be conscripted *en masse* into the army and perceived “religious coercion”.

Lieberman targeted the anti-haredi vote and it worked, with his party winning eight seats in the September 2019 election, though it then dropped to seven last year.

And then coronavirus hit, and latent anti-haredi feelings burst forth with a passion as segments of the ultra-Orthodox population openly flouted the COVID-19 regulations.



Apparent opportunity backfired: Avigdor Lieberman of *Yisrael Beiteinu* (Credit: David Cohen/Shutterstock)

The atmosphere was perfect for an anti-haredi campaign, and Lieberman went at it full force, culminating in his comment in mid-March that Netanyahu and the ultra Orthodox should be carted out in a wheelbarrow to the trash heap.

Interestingly, however, this campaign did not help Lieberman's party that much at the ballot box. He won only seven seats, no better than he did the last time around.

Yet while Lieberman's anti-haredi campaign did not give him a significant lift in the polls, it very well may have boosted his nemesis: the ultra-Orthodox parties. With many ultra-Orthodox voters angry at the community's political leadership for its behaviour during the crisis, and with talk that some in this generally very disciplined voting bloc were likely to either stay home or vote for the ultra-conservative Religious Zionist party, Lieberman's attacks likely incentivised more ultra-Orthodox Israelis to come out and vote.

Lieberman's attacks – aimed at burying the haredi parties – may actually have ended up strengthening them.

Weekly protests against Netanyahu

A crowd of tens of thousands of people – organisers put the number at 50,000, while the police estimated about half of that – gathered yet again on March 20, the Saturday night before the election, around the corner from the Prime Minister's residence on Balfour Road in Jerusalem.

For 39 consecutive weeks – regardless of the weather, or the country's coronavirus rate of infection – an alliance of groups with names like "Crime Minister" and the "Black Flags" have been demonstrating in front of the Prime Minister's office and at various other intersections around the country – declaring Netanyahu corrupt, demanding that he resign, and claiming to be the true guardians of Israeli democracy.

These demonstrations over the last months provided powerful optics and created an atmosphere that one can argue contributed to the eventual collapse of the Government. It is not immediately clear, however, what effect these protests – especially the large one on March 20 – had on the voters.

Those attending the protests who agree with the message that Netanyahu is a crook who must be removed at all cost are highly motivated to go out and vote, and will surely do so.

Paradoxically however, they may also have motivated apathetic Likud voters who might otherwise have decided to stay home on election day – except that they were put off by the cacophony of the protests and voted, if only to demonstrate that a prime minister is removed at the ballot box, not by weekly protests.

Netanyahu's hunt for a diplomatic coup

It's not enough for Netanyahu to have projected himself over the years as master of diplomacy, he wants the Israeli people to feel it, taste it and internalise it.

That explains why the US recognition of the Golan Heights took place two weeks before the first election in this cycle in April 2019, why he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi days before the second election in September 2019, and why he went to Washington to receive then-president Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century" just before the election last March.

But this year, without Trump able to give him diplomatic gifts, and with Putin not delivering something sufficiently dramatic, Netanyahu sought a high-profile visit to the United Arab Emirates in the waning days of the campaign.


Such a visit would have highlighted the Abraham Accords – Israel's freshly minted agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – which to Likud's chagrin have not made a significant dent in this campaign. Had coronavirus not monopolised the country's bandwidth over the last year, these accords – and Netanyahu's role in securing them – would likely have played a more prominent role in this election.

So Netanyahu tried to go to the UAE. The effort backfired, however, as Jordan would not let his plane fly over on March 11; and the Emiratis subsequently made it known that they were not interested in meddling in the Israeli campaign; and that hosting some kind of summit between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, Netanyahu and senior US government officials would constitute such meddling.

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As a result, no visit took place. Instead, some of the shine was taken off Netanyahu's image as "Mr. Diplomacy". Netanyahu procured COVID-19 vaccines, and that should have been enough for the campaign. But instead, the campaign reached for more. As a Talmudic dictum goes, "Try to grab too much, and you will end up with nothing." 

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

A NEW ROLE FOR ARAB PARTIES IN ISRAEL?

by Ariel Ben Solomon

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's effort to gain Israeli Arab votes by emphasising his practical policy towards them of aiding with issues that concern them appeared to gain some traction in the election campaign. He was seen in the media sitting with Bedouin sipping tea, visiting the Bedouin city of Rahat in the Negev and playing soccer on the beach with Arab children – all to court a new swath of voters.

Mansour Abbas, the head of the United Arab List Party (UAL, also known by its Hebrew acronym, Ra'am) – the political branch of the southern branch of the Islamic Movement – broke off from the Arab Joint List of parties after angering them by seeking to improve ties with Netanyahu and the Government.

Arik Rudnitzky of the Israel Democracy Institute and Tel Aviv University's Moshe Dayan Centre told *JNS* that "it appears that many in the Arab public do not believe that the Knesset can further their interests."

"But they do believe that the government is the real power-broker," he said.

Against the backdrop of the social and economic crisis following the coronavirus pandemic in the past year and increasing bloodshed due to rising criminal incidents in the Arab sector, "quite a significant portion of the Arab voters will support Netanyahu, hoping that he will take care of their burning needs."

An in-depth analysis of a survey carried out by the Konrad Adenauer Program for Jewish-Arab Cooperation at the Moshe Dayan Centre reveals that those Israeli Arabs who intended to vote for Likud paid less attention to the party's ideology and political platform than those who intend to vote for the Joint List.

"In other words, the 'Likud Arab voter' is not necessarily identified with Zionist ideology, but rather, is interested in getting results here and now," explained Rudnitzky.

Surprisingly, according to the survey, the most qualified candidate for prime minister in the Arab sector is Netanyahu (24.9%), followed by Ahmad Tibi of the Ta'al faction of the Joint List (14.3%), and then Joint List chair Ayman Odeh, who heads the Hadash faction of that party. It also found that half of the Arab voters (46%) support an Arab party's participation in any government after the elections.

In the end, the Joint List – made up of the Communist Hadash, nationalist Balad and Tibi's Ta'al Party – received six Knesset seats while Abbas' Ra'am squeaked into the Knesset with four seats.

'A deeper reason at play for the breakup'

Shaheen Sarsour, veteran Arab political observer and a former adviser to various Arab Knesset members, told *JNS* that the Joint List did not want the UAL to remain part of it, even though Abbas preferred to stay inside the Arab block.

"This was due to several factors – the major one being the other parties in the Joint List were angry at Abbas for his outreach to Netanyahu," he said. "I think there is a deeper reason at play as well for the breakup, which is that it became a war of egos between Abbas, Odeh and the popular politician Ahmad Tibi."


"Odeh and Tibi were probably unhappy seeing Abbas in the spotlight and gaining all of the attention for his warming to Netanyahu," continued Sarsour.

The UAL, as part of the Islamic Movement, has an extensive social network and was able to utilise it for political gain, similar to other Muslim Brotherhood groups.

According to Sarsour, the position that Abbas took was: "We are fed up with always being angry and attacking the government. We want to influence the government on issues that affect the Arab public like violence and the lack of housing in the Arab sector."

It is probably unlikely that Mansour Abbas will join a Netanyahu government – not only because, pre-election, Netanyahu himself has dismissed the idea but also because his right-wing coalition partner, the Religious Zionist party and the Yamina party, might refuse to sit in such a government.

Moreover, despite the cordial relations between Abbas and Netanyahu, Ra'am is part of the Islamic Movement that seeks to Islamise Israeli Arabs and, in the long term, to transform Israel into an Islamic state. So any partnership could only go so far.

Still, in the post-election coalition negotiations, Abbas looks set to play a kingmaker role by either joining the anti-Netanyahu block or not. 

Ariel Ben Solomon is the Deputy Online Editor at JNS.org, and the former Middle East Correspondent for the Jerusalem Post. © Jewish News Syndicate (JNS.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.





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 A photograph of a man and a woman in business attire standing in a modern office, looking out a large window at a city skyline. The man is holding a document and they appear to be in a professional discussion.

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The Thin Red Line

Biden versus Iranian nuclear blackmail

by John Hannah

Iran's recent rebuff of US President Joe Biden's offer to commence talks on getting both Washington and Teheran back into compliance with the Iran nuclear deal has, at least temporarily, thrown a spanner into Biden's strategy for quickly reversing Iran's relentless march away from the restrictions of the 2015 agreement – formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

While efforts to get Iran to the negotiating table will no doubt continue in the coming weeks, it's long past time for the United States to start thinking seriously about what it will do to contain Iran's expanding nuclear program in the meantime. How long is the United States prepared to simply stand by and watch as Iran continues, month after month, to ratchet up its nuclear activities, inching ever closer to some kind of threshold nuclear weapons capability?

In response to the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA and reimposition of draconian sanctions, Iran has been engaged since the summer of 2019 in a steady, sustained campaign to violate the JCPOA's constraints. Taken individually, each breach can appear incremental and not overly concerning. But taken together, cumulatively, they paint an increasingly alarming picture.

As detailed in a recent report by the Institute for Science and International Security, Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium (below 5% concentration of uranium-235) is now 14 times greater than the JCPOA's limits. If further enriched closer to 90% purity, that might already be enough for up to three nuclear bombs. Iran's breakout estimate – defined as the time required to enrich enough weapons-grade uranium for its first nuclear device – has dropped from one year under the JCPOA to potentially as low as 2.7 months today.

For more than a year, Iran has been enriching uranium to 4.5%, breaching the nuclear deal's limits of 3.67%. But beginning in early January, it took a qualitative leap forward by resuming enrichment to 20% at Fordow – a

facility built deep inside a mountain that Iran kept hidden from the world until it was exposed by the United States in 2009, and where the JCPOA had banned all enrichment until 2030. As a technical matter, enriching uranium to 20% represents 90% of the work required to produce weapons-grade material.

Iran is also significantly increasing its enrichment capacity. For months, it has been conducting research and development on up to nine different models of advanced centrifuges and in numbers that far exceed the JCPOA's limits – gaining new knowledge and expertise that no return to the JCPOA can now reverse.

Perhaps more worryingly, Iran has recently begun to deploy hundreds of these advanced centrifuges in cascades at its two main enrichment facilities, Natanz and Fordow. Some are already operational. These second and third-generation centrifuges are anywhere from three to seven times more efficient than the older models permitted under the JCPOA, allowing them to produce far

larger quantities of enriched uranium in a much shorter timeframe. Once their installation is complete, Iran's enrichment capacity will be almost three times larger than the JCPOA cap.

Another hugely provocative step recently taken by Iran, again in flagrant violation of the JCPOA, was its decision to begin producing uranium metal – one of whose uses can be forming the core of a nuclear

weapon. The United Kingdom, France, and Germany, the JCPOA's European participants known as the EU-3, said they were “deeply concerned” since the move had “no credible civilian use” and carried “potentially grave military implications.”

Also of profound concern was steps Iran took in February to drastically curtail inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). A far more acute crisis was averted only when Rafael Grossi, the agency's Director-General, rushed to Teheran to negotiate a last-minute understanding that, at least temporarily, averted a situation that in his words “would not have been reversible or recoverable” in terms of non-proliferation, and where the IAEA “would basically be flying blind without any idea what would be taking place in terms of enrichment activities.”

Grossi said that the arrangement gave the IAEA “the minimum that it needs” to conduct necessary verification and monitoring activities, but only for a period of up to three months and only if, in the interim, the United



The Biden Administration cannot afford to allow Iran to continue ratcheting up its nuclear activities while it waits for Iran to return to the JCPOA nuclear deal (Credit: Shutterstock)

States grants large-scale sanctions relief to Iran. If that doesn't happen, Grossi acknowledged, Iran is threatening to destroy critical monitoring data being gathered through technical means on its nuclear activities, rather than providing the information to inspectors.

The IAEA is also in a significant conflict with Iran over several sites that were once linked to Iran's secret nuclear weapons program. In violation of Iran's obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), none of the sites were ever declared to the IAEA. All of them have subsequently been razed and sanitised as part of a massive concealment effort. Much information about the sites only became known as the result of an archive of nuclear weapons documentation that Israeli intelligence miraculously spirited out of Teheran in 2018.

After much Iranian stonewalling, the IAEA gained access to four of the sites over the course of 2019 and 2020 and found evidence of man-made uranium particles at three of them. Pressed to explain why, Iran's answers to the IAEA have so far ranged from "not technically credible" to unresponsive. The bottom line: in addition to the alarming expansion in Iran's declared nuclear program, there is now strong reason to suspect that Iran is concealing from the world undeclared nuclear material once linked to its clandestine nuclear weapons effort.

Put it all together and it's clear that the situation is getting very dangerous. And there's a strong chance that it will get worse still.

For its part, the Biden Administration hoped it would be able to stem the brewing crisis by rapidly negotiating a return to the JCPOA. That clearly hasn't happened. But even if a negotiation gets going, it's increasingly clear that it will likely be a much more complicated, messy, and drawn-out process than many JCPOA supporters anticipated. So, the question emerges: What does the United States do while waiting for a return to the JCPOA? How much further is it prepared to let the Iranians go in pushing the nuclear envelope?

Of course, it should be underscored that the vast majority of Iran's JCPOA violations occurred during Donald Trump's final 19 months in office, including the move

to 20% enrichment. Trump threatened upon abandoning the JCPOA in 2018 that Iran "would face very severe consequences" if it responded by restarting its nuclear program. But when Iran actually called his bluff repeatedly, Trump did little about it. The only tool in his kit bag was unilateral sanctions and when a barrage of designations unprecedented in US history – around 1,000 Iranian entities were ultimately targeted during Trump's single term – did nothing to slow the methodical growth of Iran's enrichment efforts, the Administration had no answer, no plan B.

For its part, Israel had a far more serious approach to the alarming uptick in Iran's nuclear activities. Not only did its intelligence services pilfer the nuclear archive, but they allegedly were also the hand behind the audacious destruction last July of an above-ground factory for the mass assembly of advanced centrifuges, as well as the assassination of the scientific mastermind behind Iran's nuclear weapons program in November. But all to very uncertain effect. Indeed, Iran is now rapidly building a new centrifuge factory, this time deep inside a mountain, while the assassination triggered Iran's parliament to pass a law that actually accelerated the regime's JCPOA violations.

One approach for limiting Iran's further nuclear expansion that the United States has yet to consider, but needs to start, is setting some clear red lines that, if crossed, would trigger a far more punishing response against Iranian interests. Last June, I suggested that those lines might be drawn at Iran starting to enrich again to 20% or significantly curtailing IAEA inspections. Obviously, no such messages were delivered and seven months later, Iran has blown through each of those thresholds with impunity.

Of course, there's no way to prove that Iran wouldn't have done so even if the red lines had been established. But as I noted in my article, there is strong precedent for suspecting that the regime might take such limits quite seriously. Though heavily derided at the time, in a 2012 speech at the United Nations, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu literally drew a red line on a cartoon bomb and left no doubt that if Iran accumulated a stockpile of 20% uranium sufficient for one nuclear bomb, Israel would act against the Iranian program. What few people remember is that the Iranians thereupon scrupulously ensured that their stockpile remained under the threshold needed for a bomb's worth of material. It was almost certainly an instance of successful deterrence that deserves far greater study by US policymakers than it has received.

The risks associated with red lines, as with most deterrent threats, are well known. In the first instance, if crossed, they need to be enforced, requiring the United States to undertake difficult actions, often involving the

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use of force that no president is eager to commit to in advance.

If not enforced, and exposed as nothing but an empty bluff, the impact on American credibility with adversaries far and wide could be damaging.

For evidence, just see President Barack Obama's red line regarding the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons in 2013. There's also the dilemma that once a red line is communicated, it could be interpreted as giving an adversary licence to engage in all sorts of dangerous provocations just short of the threshold.

“One approach for limiting Iran's further nuclear expansion that the United States has yet to consider, but needs to start, is setting some clear red lines”

All these factors and others would need to be carefully assessed by the Biden Administration and

weighed against the rising risk of Iran continuing on its present trajectory of pressing its program forward without any sense of outside constraints whatsoever – short of actually dashing to build a nuclear weapon.

Ideally, a red line strategy would be pursued with key allies in Europe and Israel. As JCPOA participants in good standing, the EU-3 wield the potentially powerful card of unilaterally invoking the deal's snapback provisions, which would return the full weight of UN resolutions, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation crashing down on the Iranian regime's head.

With Europe's *bête noire*, Donald Trump, now gone, and with a Biden team working in tandem with London, Paris, and Berlin to restore the JCPOA, the EU-3 might well be willing to finally unsheathe their snapback sword in the interest of a targeted red line strategy meant to deter the next major leaps forward in Iran's nuclear advancement—whether that be accumulating a bomb's worth of 20% uranium, moving to 60% enrichment, destroying critical information gathered through remote IAEA monitoring systems, or the industrial production of uranium metal.


It's certainly a conversation that the Administration should urgently be exploring with the EU-3, and would put some much-needed teeth behind an existing approach that is currently in danger of devolving into little more than endless hand-wringing over the danger of each new Iranian violation, pleading with the regime to return to JCPOA compliance, and offering a growing list of concessions and payoffs to entice Iran back.

Israel, of course, is the only other country along with the United States that can put forward a credible kinetic component, whether overt or covert, as part of a red line strategy. Indeed, in light of Israel's stunning record of success in conducting direct action operations against

Iran's nuclear program, the Iranians may well take an Israeli red line more seriously than one coming from the United States alone. Far better, of course, if it were to come from both. The Biden Administration has convened a new strategic dialogue with Israel to try to develop a common approach, especially with respect to the Administration's strategy on reviving the JCPOA. Those discussions have begun none too soon and the pros and cons of a possible red line strategy and how it could most effectively be implemented should be a central focus.

Biden and his advisors seem all in on an effort to get Iran back into compliance with the JCPOA. But as they work to do so, they readily acknowledge that, day by day, Iran's nuclear advancements are becoming more and more dangerous.

The Trump Administration, to its great discredit, never developed a serious answer to this growing threat when its plan A – forcing Iran to scale back its nuclear escalation through maximum economic pressure – failed to deliver. The question now is whether the Biden Administration can do better.

Can it develop a diplomatic strategy for constraining Iran's accelerating nuclear clock even as it seeks to revive negotiations – one that doesn't just involve outright capitulation to Iran's demands and the surrender of all US negotiating leverage and credibility? If the Administration is serious about the challenge, the issue of red lines should urgently rise to the top of its agenda. 

John Hannah served in three US administrations, including as national security advisor to former Vice President Dick Cheney. He is an advisor to the JINSA Gemunder Centre for Defence and Strategy. © The National Interest (www.nationalinterest.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

BIDEN'S IRAN POLICY NEEDS MORE STICKS

by David Pollock

There is good news and bad news regarding the Biden Administration's policy toward Iran so far. The good news is that, as promised, this team – unlike the Obama one that most of them were previously part of – seems focused almost as much on Iran's non-nuclear activities as on its nuclear ones. The bad news, however, is their actual policy toward those non-nuclear challenges is mostly carrots, and very few sticks. The result, no doubt unwittingly, is that the US is emboldening and empowering Iran on the Mideast regional level, rather than containing it.

To be fair, let us first consider the sticks against Iran's regional threats that the Biden team have employed to date. They carried out one retaliatory strike against an Iran-backed militia in Syria, after its lethal attack against American targets across the border in Erbil, Iraq; and they have upped US anti-missile defences in Saudi Arabia in the face of continuing attacks by the Iran-backed Houthis (and probably others) across that border. The other actions taken against Iran and its local allies have been almost purely rhetorical or symbolic: sanctioning a few individuals; overflying a few B-52s; or just threatening to take real action at some unspecified future date.

Now for the carrots. The Biden Administration has removed Yemen's Houthis from the official list of designated Foreign Terrorist Organisations, with no conditions or concessions in return. It has supported the first formal visit to Teheran by the UN Special Envoy on Yemen, to discuss the fate of that country behind the back of its own internationally-recognised Government. Similarly, the Administration has also formally proposed to include Iran in an international conference on the future of Afghanistan, over the head of the supposedly US-allied Afghan Government.

One cannot help but wonder who's next on this list. How about inviting Iran to discuss the future of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, thereby legitimising its militias in all three countries? Why not allow the terrorist Hamas movement, Iran's potential Palestinian proxy against Israel, to run in a West Bank/Gaza election scheduled for May 22? This approach has all the hallmarks of the "inclusive" or "comprehensive" regional negotiations or conflict-management tactics that some of Biden's key mid-level policymakers have long advocated before, in or out of government.

To be fair again, there may be times when such an approach could be useful. In the case of Iran specifically, there was a very brief window almost two decades ago, in 2001-03, when a US diplomatic outreach to Teheran did prove helpful, in Afghanistan and to a lesser extent in Iraq. Today, however, there is no sign that Iran is prepared to contribute constructively, or even to reduce its destructive



To their credit, Biden's team is focussing on Iran's non-nuclear activities, but not with the right diplomatic tools (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

meddling, in any of these regional conflict arenas.

Nevertheless, the Biden Administration is perceived, rhetoric aside, to be passively relaxing sanctions against Iran. One relevant mid-level official claims that "the President" will not make any "substantial" or "unilateral" moves to ease sanctions against Iran. But it doesn't take an expert to drive billions of dollars through the loopholes in those carefully crafted words.

Finally, to be fair one more time, it is admittedly easier to criticise a weak policy than to come up with a stronger one. So here is a modest proposal: instead of proffering free carrots to the regime in Teheran, the US should adopt a clear transactional stance, one that effectively combines the nuclear and non-nuclear files. If, for example, Iran can convince the Houthis and other militias to stop their missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia, then and only then will Washington offer Teheran any sanctions relief whatsoever – regardless of whatever concessions Iran may be willing to offer on its ongoing violations of the 2015 nuclear deal, the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). To be sure, this short-term strategy may eventually require some refinements. But it is a necessary first step.

This adjustment to current US policy would have several virtues. It would offer Iran a realistic path to compromise, but not a free ride. It would reassure US allies – Arabs, Israelis, and even some Europeans – that the US is again a reliable partner. And it would help fulfil the promises that the Biden team has made: to take those allies more seriously; to deal with Iran's non-nuclear as well as its nuclear threats; and to address, as they never tire of repeating, the regional realities of today, rather than the aspirations of a previous political era.

AIR

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and director of Project Fikra. This article was originally published on the Newslooks website. © Washington Institute (www.washingtoninstitute.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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FORMER HOSTAGES UNITE TO CONFRONT IRAN

by Naomi Levin

Australians are more aware than ever of the brutality of the Iranian regime after details emerged recently of Kylie Moore-Gilbert's inhumane ordeal in Iranian prisons.

As this awareness grows, there is reason to hope that international powers may be persuaded to refuse to support nuclear deal renegotiations unless Iran stops imprisoning foreigners on the flimsiest of charges.

In 2018, Melbourne-based, Middle East studies academic Moore-Gilbert travelled to Iran to attend an academic conference. At the airport, as she prepared to board her plane back to Australia after the conference, she was arrested by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Iranian militia answerable only to the Supreme Leader.

Moore-Gilbert faced a kangaroo court and was sentenced to 10 years in prison for supposedly being a spy.

A complicated diplomatic swap saw her returned to Australia after more than 800 days in prison – seven months of which were spent in solitary confinement in Ward 2A of Evin Prison, the notorious and brutal home of Iranian political prisoners controlled by the IRGC. In exchange for her freedom, Thailand released three men accused of offences related to the attempted bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok.

Since her return to Australia, Moore-Gilbert has taken to social media to share snippets of her experience in Iran, as well as to draw attention to the plight of her fellow foreign prisoners who remain unjustly incarcerated by a brutal regime.

"2A is not designed for prolonged habitation, its very purpose is to break prisoners psychologically for interrogation," she wrote on Twitter.

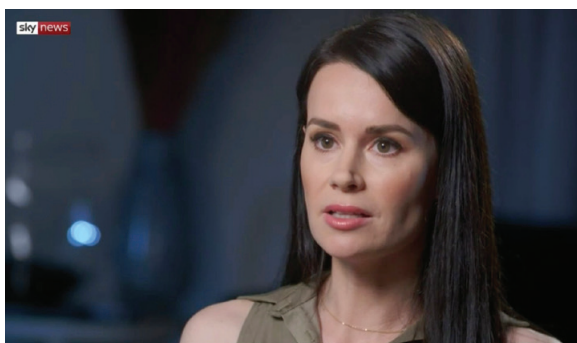
Speaking from her own experience, Moore-Gilbert wrote that prisoners are filmed 24-hours a day, even when using the bathroom. No pillows, mattresses, chairs or tables are provided to prisoners and when they leave their cells, they are blindfolded. Medical treatment is dispensed as a "reward" for cooperation and all COVID-19 protocols are ignored.

Moore-Gilbert also sat down for an extended *Sky TV* interview in mid-March. During that interview she called Evin Prison "a black hole, essentially a black site. It is outside the scope or control of any other organisation other than the RGs [IRGC]."

The limited amount we now know of Moore-Gilbert's story provides fascinating insights into the cruel nature of the Iranian regime. It is a regime that its silver-tongued Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, admits wants to force Western nations to make prisoner swaps.

As of late March 2021, there are more than a dozen foreigners who have been confirmed as being held in Iranian prisons.

The foreigners in prison include Britons Anooche Ashoori and Mehran Raoof, Swede Ahmadreza Djalali, German Nahid Taghavi, Austrians Kamran Ghaderi and Masud Mossaheb and Americans Morad Tahbaz, Emad Sharghi, Baquer Namazi and Siamak Namazi.



Kylie Moore-Gilbert's horrific account of Iran's prisons helps remind the world of the other Westerners still held there (Sky News screenshot)

French citizen Fariba Adelkhah remains in custody serving a six-year sentence that the French Government has "utterly condemned". One year ago, France secured the release of her partner, French academic Roland Marchal, in a prisoner swap for an Iranian man accused of trying to smuggle goods into Iran in violation of sanctions. A third French citizen, tourist Benjamin Briere, was charged with espionage this month for taking a photo in the Iranian desert.

Meanwhile, British mother and charity worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe completed her sentence in March, but rather than being allowed to return to the United Kingdom to be reunited with her family, she was immediately charged with additional, falsified charges and continues to await her fate in Iran.

With Marchal, Moore-Gilbert, and others, Iran has been willing to negotiate their release – at a high price. However, those negotiations have been less fruitful with respect to dual nationals, because Teheran refuses to recognise dual citizenship. According to some reports, Iran completely denies dual nationals access to consular assistance. This causes terrible grief for their families, most of whom have extremely limited opportunities to communicate with their loved one.

Hostage diplomacy – the practice of states arresting individuals solely to be used to extract concessions from other states – is a growing issue of international concern.

In February, the Canadian Government led the launch of a global initiative condemning the arbitrary arrest of foreign nationals by regimes in order to exercise leverage over foreign governments. The declaration was signed by

59 countries, including Australia, but did not single out any one country. It followed high profile detention of foreign nationals by Iran, China and, most recently, Myanmar.

Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne has highlighted Australia's opposition to foreign hostage taking and emphasised that "Australia will hold countries to account for their international commitments and the obligation to comply with international laws and practices."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has called the practice a "serious issue", adding "this will not be tolerated by the international community."

Moore-Gilbert is also trying to encourage such international efforts through a new international advocacy group, Hostage Aid Worldwide. She told the global launch of the new group that international coordination along the lines of the Canadian initiative (though she did not refer to it explicitly) is needed to stop such hostage diplomacy:

"We call on governments to take action to disrupt the hostage taking business model. A coordinated effort is needed, both in terms of strengthening international legal mechanisms and in information and best practice sharing between western states."

Hostage Aid Worldwide's board includes Barry Rosen, Nizar Zakka and Wang Xiyue, each of whom spent a significant amount of time in Iranian detention.

At its launch, Hostage Aid Worldwide held a panel discussion on hostage taking and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the JCPOA. This agreement, while still technically in place, is in tatters with the United States withdrawing and reimposing harsh financial sanctions in 2018, and Iran continually escalating its material breaches of the deal since 2019.

US President Joe Biden has made clear that his country will return to the deal if Iran first returns to compliance with all JCPOA commitments. However, in addition to its ongoing and increasing breaches of its JCPOA obligations,

recent reports reveal that Iran continues to hide key components of its nuclear weapons program from UN inspectors, contrary to international law.

It is the view of Hostage Aid Worldwide, as well as Moore-Gilbert and many other former foreign prisoners, that a pre-condition for any further nuclear negotiations should be an end to Iran's hostage taking.

Rosen, one of 52 Americans detained in the US Embassy in Teheran in 1979 for more than 14 months, is among those who support this view.

"It is the view of Hostage Aid Worldwide, as well as Moore-Gilbert and many other former foreign prisoners, that a pre-condition for any further nuclear negotiations should be an end to Iran's hostage taking"

"I absolutely agree that hostages need to be freed before [JCPOA] negotiations, but given the fact that Iranians don't accept anything in terms of international law, we need to have a dual track," Rosen said.

"What we need is not to accept an agreement until there is some sort of acceptable agreement on both sides about hostages. That means Iran should be releasing all hostages and not taking any hostages in the future."

Wang, a Chinese-born American scholar who was imprisoned in Iran for nearly four years despite being given permission by Iranian authorities to undertake research in the country, is a staunch opponent of any concessions being given to the Ayatollahs and their Islamic revolutionary regime.

Wang advocates strongly that the Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" policies of harsh sanctions on Iran need to be given more time to work.

The JCPOA is "directly responsible for Iran's hostage taking spree," Wang said.

The idea behind the JCPOA was for Iran to become a law-abiding member of the international community after freezing parts of its nuclear program. However, many experts, Wang included, argue the terms of the JCPOA were ineffective in persuading the Iranian regime to change its behaviour.

"[Former US President Barack] Obama's misplaced goodwill toward Iran really exacerbated Iran's bad behaviour," Wang said.

"Now the Biden Administration is talking about a return to the JCPOA, I think it is critical to make American hostages, and for that matter, all foreign hostages in Iran, part of the negotiations."

Speaking to *The Atlantic* magazine, Wang said he had once naively believed the JCPOA would work. "If I could go back, I would slap myself," he said.

"They [the Iranian Ayatollahs] don't want to be our friends. They don't want to reconcile ... They say it clearly, they want us as an enemy because that is the reason for their existence."

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THE PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS – ACCORDING TO AN IDF EXPERT

by Yoav Limor

In November 2020, many months after cutting off all ties with Israel, with the prospect of Israeli sovereignty being declared in parts of Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] taken off the table, the Palestinian Authority agreed to renew security and defence cooperation. The formal announcement came after lengthy behind-the-scenes discussions. The person behind those discussions, even while ties were severed between Jerusalem and Ramallah, was the head of Co-ordination for Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), Major General Kamil Abu Rukun.

Abu Rukun is slated to finish a stormy three-year term as head of COGAT in April. For 42 years he has been following every twist and turn of Palestinian politics, and it's doubtful that anyone else in Israel is as familiar with the situation as he is.

"I've been here since the attempt to transition to a civil administration following the Camp David accords, the attempt to find an alternative to the PLO through village organisations, and after that, the First Intifada, the peace agreements, the Second Intifada, and everything after that. But the last few years have been more complicated and problematic than anything I remember from the past," Abu Rukun says.

Yoav Limor: Why?

Gen. Kamil Abu Rukun: "Because matters have become more complicated. The separation between the Gaza Strip and Judea and Samaria; the PA cutting off ties with Israel and the US, and of course, COVID. All these only increased the distress and problems that already existed there."

The COVID-19 pandemic piggybacked on the constant crisis in the Gaza Strip. Currently, there is 45% unemployment in Gaza, but the situation has improved by some measures. Electricity is available for an average of 12 hours a day, 16 in some areas – a dramatic improvement from when Gaza averaged only four hours of electricity per day. Abu Rukun was a key partner in the process that led to this development. He put together an agreement that stipulated that US\$8 million of the aid money provided by the Government of Qatar to Gaza each month would go directly to pay Israeli energy companies that supply diesel fuel to run Gaza's power plant.



Maj. General Kamil Abu Rukun (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

YL: What is the COVID situation in Gaza like?

KAR: *"To everyone's surprise, the situation there is fantastic. There are almost no fatalities, and there is very little spread."*

Abu Rukun explains that this is the case because the authorities in Gaza enforced regulations stringently. The Rafah border crossing, which was closed for months, recently reopened, but anyone who came through was required to quarantine.

KAR: *"Gaza isn't Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]. In Judea and Samaria, the Palestinians behave like people do in Israel – they walk around, come and go, have parties. In Gaza, there is strict discipline, so they have a very low COVID rate."*

AN UPRISING IN GAZA? NO CHANCE

In recent weeks, Gaza held another round of Hamas

party elections which resulted in Yahya Sinwar beating Nizar Awadallah in a close race.

KAR: *"The old guard united against the existing system and put up a fight. I'm just reminding you that Awadallah was behind the Gilad Shalit incident [the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier in 2006],"* Abu Rukun says.

YL: Which of them would have been better for Israel?

KAR: *"Neither. They're a terrorist organisation, and that's how they should be treated. It's imprinted on their brains."*

Abu Rukun thinks there is no chance that the people of Gaza will rise up and revolt in an Arab Spring-like movement:

KAR: *"A year and a half ago, there was an attempt to challenge them [Hamas], and Hamas really gave it to them. Hamas is very powerful, and people don't dare stick their necks out. I don't think it will happen."*

For now, the main challenge he foresees is the Palestinian Authority (PA) elections.

KAR: *"Hamas really wants these elections, so they're going along with things that they could have insisted on having their own way, like legal oversight, because their goal is to get into Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]. They'll cooperate with anything that can lead them there."*

Abu Rukun says the current expectation is that Hamas will win some 40% of the vote, with 60% going to Fatah. He notes that the results of the 2006 election, which Hamas won, defied expectations and thinks that *"there could be a surprise this time, too."*

Such a surprise, he explains, would not occur because of popular support for Hamas, but because of the alienation the Palestinian public feels from the PA, and because of internal rifts in Fatah and Hamas' well-oiled party machine.

KAR: *"They [Hamas] don't have a majority among the population, but they are very well-organised and they have a goal,"* he says.



YL: And Abbas doesn't understand that?

KAR: "Abbas is 86, and he doesn't want to be remembered as the one who split the Palestinians and lost the Gaza Strip. He is busy with his legacy. He also wants to keep all the factions in the Palestinian political system, and apparently curry favour with the new US Administration, which supports democratic processes. Other than that, he's a little detached. It reminds me of what happened to [former Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak before the Arab Spring."

YL: But the population in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] wants to live in freedom, not under a radical Islamist regime like in Gaza.

KAR: "That's true, but most people are busy with their day-to-day lives. I assume that most of them don't really believe that Hamas would take over. They're busy with themselves."

YL: If Hamas wins the elections, what should Israel do?

"We're preparing for every scenario, including the possibility of a rise in terrorism. I remind you that even when the PA cut ties with us last year, we continued to function and provided solutions."

Abu Rukun says that Israel is not intervening in the internal Palestinian matter, but he does not envision a situation in which Israel would continue to abide by agreements made with the PA if it were under the leadership of Hamas.

KAR: "If that happens, automatically there would be no ... security coordination, so we would have to ask ourselves what the agreements were still worth."

YL: Who do you expect will succeed Abbas as PA leader?

KAR: "I am betting on Nasser al-Kidwa [Yasser Arafat's nephew, who represented the Palestinians in the UN and was the PA's former foreign minister]."

'THE PALESTINIANS ARE LIKE US'

Abu Rukun, 62, is a member of Israel's Druze minority and lives in Ussafiya in northern Israel. He has three children and three grandchildren ("one of them named Kamil, after me.") April will be the third time he leaves the IDF, and he hasn't yet decided what he will do next.

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He enjoys very good relations with the top PA brass.

KAR: "When Naftali Bennett was defence minister, he told me they loved me. I said that was right, and that I used it for the sake of Israel's security interests."

He tells his staff that their job is to prevent a humanitarian crisis among the Palestinians, "Because it would reach us."

According to Abu Rukun, the Palestinians — after an initial angry response — accepted the Abraham Accords and are now expecting the normalisation deals to result in increased aid. But anyone who thinks that the Palestinians will demonstrate flexibility and become willing to make political concessions, he says, is wrong.

KAR: "Unfortunately, they are losing time. Soon it won't be possible to do anything," he says.

YL: Is it solvable? Is there willingness?

KAR: "Where, with us or with them?"

YL: You handle them.

KAR: "Yes. I think that they really want to make progress."

YL: Their actions don't indicate that. Look at how they went to the International Criminal Court at The Hague.

KAR: "They did that because of the impasse, and because they wanted to shake up the system and exert some influence. I have no doubt that our military is the most moral in the world, and if The Hague has any questions about it, they should look into what [Syrian President Bashar] Assad did or what they're doing in Iran, and then get back to us."

YL: What does the average Israeli reading this interview not know about the Palestinians?

KAR: "They are an educated people similar to us. It's not Jordan or Egypt. We live close to one another, work with each other. The Palestinians aren't the devil. Most of them are good people, who just want to live. The young generation wants to be left alone. They want rights. They want to live like any other young people in the west. They want economic security."

YL: You're basically saying that what the Abraham Accords didn't do, economics will.

KAR: "If I were a Palestinian, I probably wouldn't say that because they have national aspirations, but the economy is definitely the major thing. In 2030, three million people will be living in the Gaza Strip. We need to think two steps ahead. The economy leads to stable security, and our job is to give the political echelon the flexibility and the freedom to work. I think that there is an opportunity right now to move toward bigger things with the Palestinians."

AIR

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Military Campuses

Not in Kansas Anymore: Academic Freedom in Palestinian Universities

Cary Nelson, *Academic Engagement Network*, 2021, 184 pp., A\$43.25

by Jonathan Marks

It's hard to sell an assault on academic freedom to academics. The American Association of University Professors, hardly a hotbed of pro-Israel sentiment, opposes efforts to boycott Israeli universities for threatening the free exchange of ideas. How, then, can anti-Israel scholar-activists persuade uncommitted colleagues to cancel exchange



An-Najah University (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

programs with Israel, to skip conferences there, and to shun teaching or research activities tied to Israeli universities? They must make Israel out to be an academic-freedom supervillain.

Because Israeli universities are quite free, the boycott crew targets Israel's activities in the West Bank and Gaza. As the pro-boycott resolution adopted by the American Studies Association in 2013 puts it, "there is no effective or substantive academic

freedom for Palestinian students and scholars under conditions of Israeli occupation." When Americans hear of a raid on, say, An-Najah National University in the West Bank, we, lacking experience of Palestinian universities, imagine soldiers raiding an American campus and are horrified. But that's a mistake, and Cary Nelson's *Not in Kansas Anymore* corrects it.

It isn't a mistake, Nelson suggests, to be horrified. Palestinian higher education has shown its ability to "provide graduates qualified to fill many necessary medical, technical, administrative, commercial, and service positions." Individually and collectively, Palestinians depend on higher education, and the intrusion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into campuses has caused great harm.

The mistake is, instead, to see only the brochure-worthy work of an An-Najah, and to squeeze one's eyes shut against work best described as repulsive.

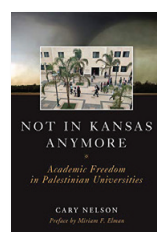
Consider the September 2001 exhibit, mounted in An-Najah's cafeteria, celebrating the prior month's terrorist attack on Jerusalem's Sbarro pizzeria. That attack killed 15 Israeli civilians, including seven children,

and wounded over 100 more. The exhibit, sponsored by "students supporting Hamas" and serving, Nelson plausibly asserts, as an "indirect recruiting activity," included "shattered furniture splattered with fake blood and human body parts." The Sbarro attack was among several bombings organised by Qeis Adwan, who had graduated from An-Najah just months before, with his career in Hamas's military wing already under way. His story is one episode in An-Najah's "history of terrorist connections."

A distinguished advocate for academic freedom and a leading opponent of the academic wing of the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, Nelson here expands on the treatment of Palestinian universities in his 2019 book, *Israel Denial*. *Not in Kansas Anymore* meanders through profiles of individual Palestinians, to sketches of the history of Palestinian higher education and the Palestinian student movement, to studies of select universities, to treatments of issues that cut across them, such as politicised curricula.

What unites them, however, is their contribution to Nelson's convincing main argument: that Palestinian universities are "fundamentally different kinds of institutions" from their European and American counterparts. More specifically, Nelson for the first time pulls together evidence, scattered in news accounts, academic journals, memoirs, and monographs, of "a culture of campus and campus-related violence that has been sustained for 40 years." He draws as well on numerous interviews he conducted, including interviews of Palestinian academics, from 2014 to 2019.

Although Palestinian universities were first established after 1967, under Israeli rule, some Palestinian commentators see them as having been, from the first, centres of resistance to Israeli power. Palestinian politics is "ineluctably associated with Palestinian education." In Palestinian



politics, students, even before there were Palestinian universities, wielded disproportionate influence. Nelson draws on, among others, the Israeli scholar Ido Zerkovitz, who explains that leaders in the General Union of Palestinian Students (GUPS), founded in 1959, “infiltrated the West Bank” after the Six-Day War to “establish underground military cells for the on-going struggle against Israel.” GUPS inspired the student movement that later arose in Palestinian universities.

Nelson argues that the politicisation of Palestinian universities advanced during the first Intifada, which began in 1987. When they are not performing for gullible audiences, “all Palestinian higher education stakeholders [are] proud to claim universities as the core of the uprising.” At least since the Second Intifada, which began in 2000, “entering students have received competing glossy brochures and indoctrination kits” from different political factions, the Hamas-affiliated Islamic Bloc among them. Names and photographs of a faction’s martyrs, including suicide bombers, are sometimes part of the sell. The Islamic University of Gaza, not merely politicised, but “militarised,” may be “the brain trust and engine room of Hamas,” as the journalist Thanassis Cambanis has put it. But even in the West Bank, at An-Najah and Birzeit University, there is “no fixed line between valid political expression and terrorist recruitment.” They are not only academic institutions but also “recruitment enterprises,” for “paramilitary groups” and sometimes “terrorist cells.”

Nelson, a progressive who thinks Israel has much to answer for, doesn’t believe that this security threat justifies every raid, arrest, restriction, or closing. But he has no patience for colleagues who pretend to be unaware that “allying with a Hamas cell is not the same as joining a chapter of College Democrats or College Republicans.”

The best contribution of *Not in Kansas Anymore* is its extensive discussion of how faction fighting, particularly between Hamas and Fatah-associated student groups, impinges on academic freedom at Palestinian universities. Nelson begins his book with a story that Sari Nusseibeh tells. Nusseibeh, who would later gain an international reputation as president of Al Quds University, was, in 1987, teaching philosophy at Birzeit. After a class, he was accosted by “five kaffiah wearing attackers” who set upon him with “fists, clubs, a broken bottle, and penknives.” He escaped with a broken arm and minor wounds and later learned that all of his attackers were Birzeit students, including two he



Palestinian professor Mohammed Dajani at Auschwitz

knew well. The “crime” Nusseibeh had committed, which made him a “traitor,” was holding “several meetings with Israelis to discuss possible peace proposals.” The go-ahead of Yasser Arafat’s staff for these meetings didn’t protect Nusseibeh from a militant faction of Fatah, on whose behalf the students had acted. The university issued a tepid statement and did nothing.

That’s an old but not isolated incident. As one senior faculty member interviewed by Nelson puts it: “Faculty members are afraid to speak their minds because they will be branded as traitors. Fatah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad all have students available to harass and intimidate faculty who are so named. And sometimes their lives are put in danger.” It wasn’t that long ago, in 2014, that a professor at Al Quds, Mohammed Dajani, “denounced as a traitor and collaborator by students and others,” was thrown out of the

faculty union, faced death threats, and ultimately resigned his position. His offence was taking a group of students to visit Auschwitz. Early the following year, Dajani’s car was set on fire in front of his house.

Nelson gives perhaps too much credence to Dajani’s claim that this case of vehicle arson was really an assassination attempt gone wrong. But story after story – a department head is assassinated over a disputed presidential search; a lecturer is thrown from the third floor of a building during a campus clash between “Muslim Brotherhood and pro-PLO” students; a student Fatah supporter is attacked and tortured, apparently by men from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – suggests an “atmosphere of physical threat and intimidation.” This is more than a cancel culture, and its menace is pervasive in a way that Israel’s episodic campus intrusions are not.

Nelson concludes that “most of the trouble in Palestinian universities has little to do with Israel.” That’s a great deal more than the BDS movement, with eyes only for Israeli vices, will allow. *Not in Kansas Anymore* is intended not to convince them but to help others resist their unethical distortions.

Even those who have closely followed the debate about Israel on campus have much to learn from this book. It is a polemic – indeed it is published by the Academic Engagement Network, which opposes efforts to delegitimise Israel – but it is not propaganda. Nelson is right that “Debates about academic freedom for Palestinian students and faculty are conducted in fundamental and corrupting ignorance.” One can get pretty far, therefore, just by telling the truth. AIR

Jonathan Marks, Professor and Chair of Politics at Ursinus College, is the author of Let’s Be Reasonable: A Conservative Case for Liberal Education. © Commentary Magazine (www.commentary-magazine.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



Ten Years of Savagery

Syria's demise and Israel's response

by Lazar Berman

The lasting images from the decade of 2011-2020 may well be those of gruesome, almost incomprehensible violence, beamed into Western homes as a macabre spectacle.

Ten years ago, in March 2011, protesters in Syria's cities took to the streets to demand government reforms and civil rights. The demonstrations quickly turned into a full-blown armed uprising against the Bashar al-Assad regime.

In the years that followed, scenes of shocking, unforgiving brutality became almost rote. But what arguably most powerfully captured the attention of the West was a series of videos by the radical Sunni Islamic State (IS) organisation showing grisly executions by beheading, burning and drowning.

IS spread its expertly produced clips through social media, reaching around the world, enhancing its recruitment efforts while dominating news cycles in the West.

Many of IS's targets in Syria were journalists or aid workers from Western countries, and the scenes of staged but very real cruelty and gore beamed into Western homes – turning a faraway war into a local threat.

The images of savagery reached Israelis' screens as well, but they had another means of witnessing the unfolding disaster in Syria. One could



A scene from Israel's efforts to provide medical care for Syrians along the Golan border (Credit: Shutterstock)

simply drive up one of the many volcanic mounds on the Golan Heights and look east. Plumes of smoke drifted skyward and the clap of not-too-distant explosions reverberated from the Syrian side of the plateau as jihadists, regime forces, and foreign militaries battled each other along Israel's north-eastern border.

For Israel, nothing about the war was far away, and even as the country resisted getting sucked into the Syrian quicksand, it eventually found it had no choice but to navigate around the war's multitudinous facets and its reshaping of the region.

"Israel didn't grasp the consequences of the chaotic environment in Syria... Israel didn't grasp in an appropriate manner the extent of the Iranian influence in Syria," said Carmit Valensi, who has co-authored a new book on the war with Itamar Rabinovich, a former Israeli

ambassador to the US.

A decade into the conflict, Israel can point to significant successes in its policies managing a brutal conflict being waged on its borders. But as the war appears to wind down, threats for Israel still loom, even as attention turns to where Syria, and the region, go from here.

A REQUIEM FOR WHAT?

Syrian Requiem: The Civil War and Its Aftermath, makes a bold claim in its very title. It rests on the idea that something fundamentally Syrian has slid into memory, never to return. "Syria has been transformed beyond recognition," said Valensi, head of the Syrian research program at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

"Syria as we know it – Syria of the last 30 years that was constructed by Hafez Assad as a strong, coherent state, a very important regional actor, and to some extent even an international actor – doesn't exist now," concurred Rabinovich, who in the past was chief Israeli negotiator with Syria.

The country is in ruins from a decade of civil war that killed a half million people, displaced half the population and wiped out the economy. Foreign troops – Russian, Iranian, Turkish – control significant parts of the country. Semi-autonomous Kurds hold another 20% of Syrian territory.

Syria has disappeared in other ways as well. Once an important Arab cultural centre for plays, literature, and movies, Damascus is now denuded of its leading artists, who have fled their troubled homeland for Europe and beyond.

The image of Syria that occupied such an important place in the minds of Israeli leaders is also gone. Since Israel's founding, Syria had been one of its most serious threats. It played a central role in most of Israel's major conflicts and continued to fight Israel even after Jordan and Egypt understood they could not defeat the Jewish state militarily.

Syria also held the potential to solve Israel's security challenges, at least in the minds of decision-makers in Jerusalem. In the 1980s and 1990s, as Israeli forces battled Palestinian and then Hezbollah terrorists – and occasionally Syrian troops – in southern Lebanon, Israel looked to Syria as the key to achieving quiet on its northern border. In many ways, the IDF was playing defence with the expectation that the politicians would eventually sign a peace deal with Syria, under whose terms then-Syrian President Hafez Assad would see to it that Hezbollah disarmed.

Syria is gone, but what remains? And what kind of neighbour will Israel face moving forward?

AN ARENA FOR CONFLICT

In his 1965 work *The Struggle for Syria*, British author Patrick Seale portrayed Syria as a weak state that unwillingly served as an arena for regional and global conflicts, though he may have overstated the case.

According to Rabinovich, "Syria under Hafez Assad was a powerful regional actor. It controlled Lebanon. It meddled in Palestinian politics, in Jordanian politics, it projected into the Arabian Peninsula. It was courted by both Moscow and Washington. It was very successful in that regard."

Still the Assad regime had feet of clay, resting on the support of the minority Alawite community.

Like his father, Bashar Assad elevated family members to insulate his power – a younger, more modern generation, but one seen by many Syrians as more rapacious in amassing wealth.

The Assad family's gravest chal-

lenge came with the Arab Spring uprisings that swept the region, reaching Syria in March 2011. His response to the initially peaceful protests was to unleash security forces to snuff them out. Instead, protests grew, turning into an armed insurgency backed by Turkey, the US and Gulf Arab nations. His military fragmented.

With his army nearing collapse, Assad opened his territory to Russia's and Iran's militaries and their proxies. Cities were pulverised. He was accused of using chemical weapons against his own people and killing or jailing opponents *en masse*. Millions fled to neighbouring countries, Europe or beyond.

Today, Syria does match Seale's description, as Iran, Turkey, Russia, Israel, the US, and affiliated militias jockey for position there.

The collapse of the Syrian state was not only a problem for Syrians. Its effects reverberated beyond its borders. Millions of Syrians fled the country, creating a refugee crisis in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and further afield. In Europe, a bitter debate over elemental issues like Europe's identity, the nation-state, and human rights broke out as Syrian refugees streamed in. The violence threatened to spill over into Jordan and Israel, and leading outlets – the *New York Times*, *BBC*, the *New Yorker* – asked whether the Syrian civil war marked the end of the Middle East created by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, which divided the region into separate states.

Israel, though, wanted no part of it.

"The policy adopted and announced by the Netanyahu government kept Israel on the sidelines of the Syrian conflict," write Rabinovich and Valensi, "with three important exceptions: Israel would be prepared to offer discreet humanitarian help; it would fire back in the event of firing or shelling into its territory; and it would interdict (without taking credit or responsibility) in order to prevent the transfer of sophisticated weapon systems to Hezbollah, or the fall of weapons of mass destruction (chemical or biological) into terrorist hands."

As for the Assad regime, Israel deemed it preferable to stick with the devil they knew – the phrase prime minister Ariel Sharon used in 2005 to convince George W. Bush not to push for regime change in Syria.

The Syrian border had been Israel's quietest since 1973, and should the regime fall, Israeli leaders reasoned, it would be replaced with Sunni jihadists who would be far more aggressive.

As the Syrian war ground on, that view began to change.

"I think in the last few years Israel started to realise that it wasn't that accurate to assume that Bashar Assad is a better option for us," said Rabinovich. "First of all, from a strategic point of view, Israel today acknowledges the fact that Bashar is the one to allow the Iranian entrenchment in Syria. And as long as it's up to him, he will not do anything in order to remove the Iranian presence."

Though Israel had been striking targets in Syria throughout the conflict – including a January 2015 strike on a convoy near Quneitra that killed an Iranian general and senior Hezbollah commanders – in 2016 it stepped up operations against Iranian assets in Syria.

"The collapse of the Syrian state was not only a problem for Syrians. Its effects reverberated beyond its borders"

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The attacks were part of Israel's so-called "campaign between the wars," a strategy designed to damage Iranian efforts to supply precision weapons to proxies and establish itself on Israel's borders, albeit without allowing tensions to snowball into open war.

Israel's attacks were "too little, too late," lamented Valensi. Iran was already deeply established in Syria, playing a leading role in its culture, religious affairs, economy and military.

By the end of 2016, the war had reached its turning point. Regime forces captured Aleppo, Syria's largest city, and it became clear that Assad, and his Iranian guests, were there to stay.

Assad's survival meant that Israel had to prepare for a revived regime with firm Russian and Iranian backing, which sought to open a front against Israel on the Golan Heights.

ENTRENCH WARFARE

The US also initially sought to stay out of the conflict, though Washington's bumbling approach to Assad's use of chemical weapons ended up bolstering Assad, Valensi argues.

In August 2012, then US President Barack Obama declared, "We have been very clear to the Assad regime that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilised. That would change my calculus."

The threat appeared to be working until August 2013, when regime forces attacked the rebel-held suburbs of Damascus with chemical weapons.

After making the case publicly and to Congress for a military strike, Obama backed off, and instead accepted Syrian acquiescence to a US-Russian deal meant to have Assad hand over his chemical weapons stockpile.

"I think it was one of the most crucial American decisions with regards to the Syrian conflict," said Valensi. "It had a tremendous impact on the course of events in the next

few years. I think that when Obama decided to ignore his own red lines and refrain from penalising Assad for the massive use of chemical weapons on civilians, that was one of the most important turning points of the Syrian crisis. That eventually paved the way for Russian military intervention, and even more, inflicted a deadly blow on the Syrian opposition."



Over the past decade, the world has grown used to shocking images coming out of Syria (Credit: Shutterstock)

It took IS gains in Syria and Iraq for the US to get involved. Washington intervened in 2014 with airstrikes on Syrian soil as the head of a global coalition against the jihadists.

A year later, Moscow waded in on Assad's side in a move that would turn the tide of the war. Russia, which has an important naval base in Syria, began its direct military involvement in September 2015, when it deployed air and ground assets to the country to prevent the regime's collapse. The move followed a visit to Moscow by former IRGC-Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, who reportedly offered Iranian boots on the ground, along with allied Iraqi and Lebanese fighters, to partner with Russian air power.

"Putin was seeking to demonstrate Russian capabilities, and its status as a global military actor and a regional mediator," explained Rabinovich.

The Russia-Iran relationship, though effective in saving Assad, became strained with time.

"Moscow became increasingly uneasy with Iran's aggressive campaign to embed itself militarily in Syria in 2017 and 2018," they write. "This campaign mitigated Russia's effort to

obtain stability in Syria and provoked Israeli countermeasures. Russia tolerated Israel's military campaign against the construction of an Iranian military infrastructure in Syria but grew increasingly uneasy with it as well." Russia forced Iran to pull many of its troops and proxies back from the Israeli border.

There were also clashes between pro-Iranian and pro-Russian militias in Syria. As reconstruction ramps up, Iran and Russia are in competition over economic agreements with the Syrian regime.

"Once Assad had won the main military conflict, Russian reliance on Iranian boots on the ground definitely declined," said Valensi. "Moscow became increasingly uneasy with the Iranian plan and vision to entrench itself in Syria, and Russia is basically seeking to stabilise the situation. And here Iran became more of a burden than an asset in Russia's perspective."

Israel under Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has managed to navigate the war by remaining in the US's corner while also finding common ground to maintain a working relationship with Russia, despite several tense periods, the authors argue.

But those challenges will only grow as a new Syria emerges, including an army that is reconstituted with Russian and Iranian help.

For now, Assad is not interested in a direct conflict with Israel. Jerusalem's concern, the authors argue, should be in maintaining military freedom of action to prevent Iranian entrenchment and transfer of weapons.

"The only leverage Israel has is through the US or Russia," said Rabinovich. "We should definitely acknowledge our limited ability to shape the political situation in Syria."

AIR

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



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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

JAB! JAB!

The accusation that Israel has a legal and moral duty to vaccinate five million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza remained a regular theme in media reports.

A news brief in the *Australian Financial Review* (Feb. 27) noted Israel won't vaccinate Palestinians en masse who live under the Palestinian Authority's jurisdiction "arguing they are responsible for their healthcare system."

An *Age/Sydney Morning Herald* report (Feb. 23) on Israel sharing vaccines with other countries stated that "Israel has argued that under interim peace agreements it is not responsible for vaccinating them. Israel's vaccination campaign has included its own Arab population."

An SBS online report (March 1) from *AAP* noted that "the PA has not publicly asked for Israel's help with a mass vaccination campaign" and that "Hamas is seen as unlikely to publicly collaborate with Israel on any vaccination effort." Former Israeli diplomat Alan Baker was quoted explaining that under the Oslo Accords the PA "was responsible 'for health and medical issues.'"

An item from *Saturday Paper* columnist Jonathan Pearlman (Feb. 27) claimed Israel as an occupier state should vaccinate Palestinians, and included Gaza under this legal umbrella. Israel withdrew completely from Gaza in 2005. Although Israel maintains a blockade of the Strip, Hamas' leaders have admitted many times Gaza is not occupied.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

It took over two months to happen, but the ABC finally reported Israel's reason for not vaccinating Palestinians in Gaza or under Palestinian self-rule.

An online report (March 1) stated that "Israel says that under interim peace accords of the 1990s it has no such responsibility" and that "Israel has immunised its own Arab population, including Palestinians who live in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem."

On March 12, *ABC TV's* "The World" was the first flagship program to broadcast Israel's side, noting that "Israel says that under the interim peace accord from the 1990s it is not obligated to vaccinate West Bank occupants."

The report also said, "the Palestinian Authority has faced criticism for giving jabs to VIPs such as the national football team and ministers rather than medical workers."

More problematic was host Yvonne Yong's introductory remarks that "Israel... has faced criticism over its lack of assistance to the Palestinian people." That would be "alleged lack of assistance."

IT'S A BIT RICH

In the *Guardian Australia* (March 18), Pakistani writer Fatima Bhutto denounced Israel as one of the "rich countries" that has secured vaccines at the expense of poorer nations.

According to Bhutto, "Israel... leading the world in vaccine rollout, is pointedly, purposefully, not vaccinating the Palestinian people it occupies. When asked about it, the Israeli health minister sniffed that Israel had no legal obligation to vaccinate Palestinians. What then were the obligations of the Palestinians, he asked, to look after dolphins in the Mediterranean? It is a statement too stupid – too cruel – to answer. Yes, you have an obligation to the people you occupy; yes, you have an obligation to 'the sea'... A virus, for some, is manna. Let the Palestinians die."

Bhutto put a completely unfair spin on what Israeli Health Minister Yuli Edelstein told the BBC when asked why Israel was not vaccinating all the Palestinians. He explained that under the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority is responsible for the health needs of the Palestinians it governs.

In that context, Edelstein said, "If it is the responsibility of the Israeli Health Minister to take care of the Palestinians what exactly is the responsibility of the Palestinian Health Minister? To take care of the dolphins in the Mediterranean?"

He also explained that Israel does supply vaccines when requested to by the Palestinian Authority.

PFIZER PRIZE

A *Bloomberg* article in the *Australian Financial Review* (March 12) revealed why Israel was able to secure large scale quantities of the Pfizer vaccine to the chagrin of some other countries.

The story said, "[Israeli PM Benjamin] Netanyahu had offered to pay roughly \$US30 (\$39) a dose, about 50 per cent more than the US government... He also agreed to share countrywide data on the vaccine, a two-dose product based on an experimental platform called messenger RNA, or mRNA. It's being used almost exclusively in Israel, in what amounts to a large-scale effectiveness study. By February 22, Israel had given first doses to 47 per cent of its 9 million people, making it the world leader... Israel will provide data that will transform the world's understanding of how to end the pandemic."

The article said Pfizer defended its agreement with Israel by noting it "didn't affect doses going elsewhere."

PAPAL BULL

Media coverage of Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq highlighted the precipitous decline in its Christian population due to persecution, but largely failed to report on the near total absence of Jews there due to their expulsion.

ABC TV "7pm News" (Vic) (March 6) introduced its report with the statement that "it was an important visit for the country's shrinking Christian population" and new ABC Middle East correspondent Tom Joyner saying, bizarrely, that Iraq is "known as the cradle of Christianity."

On *SBS TV* "World News" (March 6), Nick Wells' report was more ac-

curate, saying that "[Pope Francis] will visit the ancient city of Ur, birthplace of the Prophet Abraham, who's revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews alike. A fitting backdrop for his message of healing and interfaith unity."

A *Reuters* report (March 6) correctly noted that "In 1947, a year before Israel's birth, Iraq's Jewish community numbered around 150,000. Now their numbers are in single figures. A local Church official said Jews were contacted and invited [to the papal visit] but the situation for them was 'complicated' particularly as they have no structured community.

However, in similar past events in predominantly Muslim countries, a senior

foreign Jewish figure has attended."

For reasons unknown, this report, which appears to have been published online by regional newspapers and the *Canberra Times*, is no longer accessible.

CANYOU DIG IT?

A trove of ancient Jewish texts and other priceless material found in a cave in the Judean Desert in undisputed Israeli territory clearly was not newsworthy enough in itself for some correspondents – who felt the need to introduce gratuitous commentary that had no connection to the story.

A particularly egregious *Guardian Australia* report (March 18) claimed



IN PARLIAMENT

Senator **Anne Urquhart** (ALP, Tas.) – March 16 – "It is my hope that Israel will understand that it has a clear obligation to send vaccines to the Palestinian Authority. Differential access is morally and legally unacceptable under international law. So, today I urge Israel to donate to the Palestinians the extra doses it has ordered but does not need... I urge Israel to work with Palestinian authorities to ensure the vaccination of the Palestinian population with the same determination, resources and expertise that they've demonstrated to the world with the Israeli population."

Chris Hayes (ALP, Fowler) – March 16 – "I take this opportunity to raise some pressing issues of human rights facing our global community at the moment. First, I draw attention to the House of the ongoing plight of Mr Mohammed El Halabi, former director of World Vision Australia, who worked in Gaza and on the West Bank. Mr El Halabi was arrested in 2016 by Israeli authorities on the allegation of funnelling \$50 million of World Vision money to the terrorist group Hamas."

Julian Leeser (Lib., Berowra) – Feb. 24 – "Let me remind the House of some disturbing examples that have occurred in university campuses in recent years. In 2015 Colonel Richard Kemp was shouted down by students and a professor at the University of Sydney when he tried to speak about the ethical dilemmas of military tactics and dealing with non-state armed troops. He previously publicly defended the actions of the Israel Defense Forces, and yet for 20 minutes he was unable to speak. The protesters fought with security, who tried to have them removed. One of the protesters was a director of the University of Sydney's own Department of Peace and Conflict Studies."

Katie Allen (Lib., Higgins) – Standing Committee on Industry, Innovation, Science and Resources – Feb. 24 – "Which country

would you think does science start-ups well? Israel comes to mind for me, and Singapore is possibly the other one."

Mike Freeland (ALP, Macarthur) – March 22 – "As someone who is Jewish, I really do understand the terrible difficulties that are placed in front of the Uighur people. It does have echoes of Germany in the 1930s... We as individuals elected to public office in a strong and vibrant democracy have a responsibility to stand against human rights violations wherever they occur, particularly now to the Uighur people in China."

Tim Wilson (Lib., Goldstein) – March 22 – "Representing the third largest Jewish community in Australia, in Goldstein, I am very familiar with the ongoing memory and legacy of the Holocaust. We need to remember that in remembering genocides it is part of the journey of stopping them into the future."

Julian Leeser (Lib., Berowra) – March 22 – "As a Jewish Australian I'm particularly proud... that Jewish leaders around the world have called out the persecution of Uighurs. [Chief Rabbi of the Commonwealth] Rabbi Mirvis called for the urgent, independent and unfettered investigation into what's happening."

Bridget Archer (Lib., Bass) – March 17 – "On 2 March, members and friends of the Jewish community converged on Australia's oldest synagogue, in Hobart, for the announcement of the establishment of a Holocaust Education and Interpretation Centre. As Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said on the day, the centre has been established so that future generations can say, 'Never again'."

Senator **Jordon Steele-John** (Greens, WA) – Media Release criticising former defence minister Christopher Pyne for having business relations with Israeli defence manufacturer Elbit – March 17 – "Elbit is a company that markets their weaponry as being 'field tested' by the Israeli Defence Force, a reference to the extensive use of Elbit Systems equipment in Palestine where they have profited from the ongoing occupation and oppression of Palestinian people."

that “sections of the dig took place in the occupied West Bank, a part of the Palestinian territories, a common Israeli practice that has led to controversy. The [Israel Antiquities Authority] coordinated with the defence ministry, which runs the occupation. Israel captured the West Bank from Jordanian forces in the 1967 war. International law bans the removal of cultural property from occupied territory. The original Dead Sea scrolls, a collection of Jewish texts, were also found in desert caves in the West Bank. However, they were discovered by nomadic Bedouin shepherds in the 1940s and 1950s.”

None of this was relevant to the story.

Moreover, the main collection of Dead Sea scrolls was discovered in 1946 and 1947, during the British Mandate in Palestine, before there was any “West Bank” – the name used by Jordan to refer to the territory it illegally captured in the 1948 war.

The issue of the archaeological material’s provenance was also poorly handled in the *Australian’s* AFP sourced report (March 18), which included a sentence that “Israel has been accused of politicising the discovery of ancient Jewish artefacts to justify territorial claims in the West Bank.”

Except, in this instance, the finds were made inside Israel.

An *AP* report on Nine News’ website (March 17) also stated that “sections of the dig took place in the occupied West Bank.”

Reports of the discoveries were run in Nine Newspapers, ABC online, *ABC TV* “The World” and *SBS TV* “The World” that same day and were free from politics.

I SPY?

An exclusive *Sky News* interview (March 9) with Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert detailed the absurd lengths to which Iran went to falsely convict her on spying charges.

Dr Moore-Gilbert said, “there’s

no evidence of me being a spy for any country...even the [Iranian] Revolutionary Guards couldn’t figure out which country I was supposedly spying for. I was eventually charged with being an Israeli spy because that was the easier thing. You know any mention of Israel in Iran. You know Israel is the little Satan...for the Revolutionary Guards in particular. That was just the easiest country they could try to link me to but even a few months before my release, so mid-2020, they were floating a theory that I was an MI6 agent... this was well after I’d been convicted and tried of being an Israeli agent.”

She said Iran also accused her of being an Australian spy and “for a while I was also accused of being a Bahraini spy because of my research on Bahrain. So, they really had no idea.”

The Revolutionary Guards also tried to convince her to lure her Israeli-born husband to Iran, which “would be a PR coup”, she said.

CRUEL CONVICTIONS

In the *Australian* (March 11), AI-JAC’s Naomi Levin expanded on Iran’s cruel policy of convicting visiting Westerners on bogus spying charges as one part of the regime’s wider abuse of human rights.

Iran is “pretty blatant about the practice”, Levin said, citing American hostage Wang Xiyue, who said “his Iranian interrogator openly told him that they knew he had committed no crime and he was being held solely to exchange for US-held Iranian prisoners and the release of frozen Iranian assets.”

Levin pointed out that “Iran executes more people than any other country in the world, excepting perhaps China.”

Those targeted to be murdered are wide and varied, including “political dissidents condemned by clerical courts that offer defendants no real rights”, and an estimated figure of between “4,000 and 6,000 LGBTI

people” killed “for crimes related to their sexual orientation between 1979 and 2008.”

Levin said the world is not powerless, citing Australia’s decision to join “58 other countries in signing on to a Canadian-led declaration condemning the arbitrary arrest of foreign nationals by regimes to exercise leverage over a foreign government.”

SIMON SAYS

On the tenth anniversary of the Syrian civil war, *Guardian Australia* columnist Simon Tisdall marked out Israel (March 8) as one of the regional states that “prioritises selfish, short-term interests” *vis-à-vis* that country.

According to Tisdall, “Israel worries about the build-up of Iranian Revolutionary Guard and pro-Tehran armed forces in Syria and Lebanon. It has launched hundreds of air strikes on Iran-linked targets there, and has urged the US to do likewise in reply to rocket and drone attacks in Iraq, the Gulf and Yemen. For Israel and Iran, Syria has become a forward battle zone in a multi-front struggle. Its people’s well-being is not their concern. Its chronic weakness suits both.”

In fact, the “Iran-linked targets” Israel has hit include missile factories and convoys of game-changing missiles headed for Hezbollah in Lebanon to target Israel, as well as military installations on the Jewish state’s northern border. As for the accusation Israel is not “concerned” with Syrians’ well-being, during the civil war, Israel treated thousands of wounded Syrians and quietly provided aid to the millions of Syrians who fled to Jordan.

PROVOCATION PREVARICATION

In the *Australian Financial Review* (March 1), Sydney University academic James Curran repeated questionable claims that the Morrison Government’s 2018 decision to consider moving Australia’s embassy in Israel

from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem “needlessly” provoked Jakarta.

Curran called the Government’s proposal “ham-fisted” and criticised it for “follow[ing] the Trump administration’s provocative decision” to move the US embassy.

Curran said, “Morrison ultimately decided against the move, but the damage in Indonesia had been done. The largest Muslim majority country in the world, which has long expressed its support for the Palestinian cause, saw Australia blindly following America and siding with Israel.”

He suggested that “the move threatened to derail the signing of a free trade agreement between the two countries.”

But as “Noted and Quoted” readers will know, the overwhelming negative response was solely in Australia by Australian commentators who insisted the idea was insulting to Indonesia. The purported furious media and political reaction in Indonesia was actually very muted and limited, while the free trade agreement was of greater benefit to Indonesia than Australia, and went ahead without a hitch.

PLATFORM SHOED

A report in the *Australian* (March 5) that pro-Palestinian ALP members were angry because the party’s latest policy document had omitted a 2018 resolution calling on a future Labor government to recognise a Palestinian state led to a round of media reports speculating on whether the party was abandoning support for Israel.

But on *Sky News* “Kenny Report” (March 5), AIJAC’s Colin Rubenstein said if the platform only called for immediate recognition of a Palestinian state it would be problematic but the full ALP position “supports a two-state outcome” reached through “agree[ment] by the parties.”

He said the problem with the concept of unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state is that it doesn’t “help encourage negotiations on the Pales-

tinian side but... impedes them and undermines the [two-state] outcome which the ALP seems to want.”

The real problem, he said, is that Palestinian leaders have rejected “three serious offers for a state alongside Israel” and “unilateral recognition of a supposed state of Palestine without any obligations on the Palestinian side just rewards that continuing intransigence and refusal to negotiate.”

He also noted that the ALP conference in 2018 left it up to a future Labor Government to decide when to implement any “recommendation, including that one.”

Rubenstein also said the Abraham Accords – the normalisation agreements signed by Bahrain, UAE, Morocco and Sudan recognising Israel – “had opened up new avenues for peace making” in the Middle East since the ALP national conference passed its resolution on unilateral recognition in 2018.

DON’T VISIT “CUCKOO LAND”

Other analyses of the issue included an *Australian* editorial (March 8) which agreed with former federal Labor MP Michael Danby’s comments that “those seeking to put the Palestinian issue in the party platform ahead of China’s persecution of Tibetans, Uighurs, Hongkongers and Taiwan are ‘in cuckoo land’.”

The editorial also listed how the non-existent State of Palestine fails to satisfy the criteria of what constitutes statehood stipulated by the 1933 Montevideo Convention for the Rights and Duties of States.

The paper cited approvingly a point made by Dave Sharma – Liberal MP and Australia’s former ambassador to Israel – that including a pro-Palestine statement in the ALP platform would be “the wrong call because it pre-empted a negotiated two-state solution, which has always been the policy of Australia” and would co-opt the party into the “brazen Palestinian strategy to

achieve recognition through the back door rather than through negotiations with Israel over a two-state solution.”

On the *Australian*’s website (March 19), commentator Gerard Henderson’s Media Watchdog column criticised *ABC TV*’s “Insiders” for becoming “insular... in recent times”, citing, amongst other things, its lack of coverage of “Labor’s policy on Israel and the Palestinian Authority.”

SHIFTING SANDS

ABC Radio National “Late Night Live” (Feb. 24) looked at the Trump Administration’s decision to recognise Morocco’s annexation of Western Sahara as a reward for normalising relations with Israel in December 2020.

Academic Dr Randi Irwin claimed that “recognition of Israel... [has] seen protests within Morocco that are against the Moroccan Government’s recognition of Israel’s occupation in Palestine and now I think there’s some domestic tension there that’s happening.”

In fact, Moroccan opposition has been restricted to leftists and Islamists. Most Moroccans know that the two countries have enjoyed semi-official relations dating back to the 1950s and accept normalisation as a pragmatic decision and an acceptable price to pay for recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan territory.

Moreover, Morocco stressed its support for the goal of creating a Palestinian state, so Irwin was incorrect in implying that the Moroccan Government has recognis[ed] “Israel’s occupation in Palestine.”

Kamal Fadel, from the Polisario Front in Australia – an Algerian and Iranian supported revolutionary group which seeks independence for Western Sahara – understandably criticised Trump’s decision, made “in his last days as a lame duck President,” as “unprecedented and dangerous”, arguing it would give a “green light to any authoritarian regime or any despot to go and grab territory by force.”

Allon Lee

JOE'S TWIN DILEMMAS

Significant media coverage was devoted to the Biden Administration's twin Middle Eastern foreign policy dilemmas – how to reset relations with Iran to end the nuclear standoff and how best to sanction Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) for allegedly ordering the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

Veteran US official Elliott Abrams told *Australian* foreign editor Greg Sheridan (Feb. 27) that the Biden Administration understands that the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), must be “longer and stronger”, include extended “sunset clauses”, and cover “issues like missiles and Iran’s regional misconduct.”

Abrams cautioned that a strategy of Iran coming “back into compliance” and the US then “lift[ing] all economic sanctions” will “destroy...all American leverage,” and make it unlikely that “Iran will negotiate and accept additional limits.”

Abrams said “the only logical conclusion” to draw from Iran’s current enrichment levels of 20% is that it constitutes part of “a nuclear weapons program,” because “we have seen how countries behave which want nuclear energy but aren’t after nuclear weapons. It’s not like this... You don’t need to enrich uranium at all for nuclear energy; you can import and export as much of it as you need.”

The *Australian* (March 1) warned the Biden Administration not to “overlook the importance of Saudi Arabia as a Western ally, especially in confronting Iran’s nuclear ambitions”, even while seeking to hold the Saudi Crown Prince responsible for the Khashoggi murder.

The paper said, “nothing excuses what was done to Mr Khashoggi” but the Administration must “expand relationships Mr Trump developed with pro-Western allies, including Saudi Arabia.”

Undermining those ties “as a sop to the far left of the Democrats” would “play into Iran’s hands and create problems for Israel” and get in the way of “developing closer ties between the Arab world and Israel,” the paper warned.

An *Observer* editorial in the *Guardian Australia* (March 1) said Britain’s failure to penalise MBS, was “shabby... realpolitik”. Yet, in discussing that “realpolitik,” the editorial echoed the *Australian*, saying that “Saudi Arabia is an important western ally. Its cooperation is needed if Iran’s destabilising regional activities and nuclear programme

are to be curbed. Hopes that Riyadh will follow the UAE and Bahrain in normalising ties with Israel are a factor, too. Saudi Arabia remains a key energy producer. And the crown prince, 35, is likely to lead the country for decades to come.”

Earlier, on Feb. 25, the *Guardian Australia* attacked former US President Donald Trump for creating a “credibility gap” by leaving the JCPOA. But the paper sensibly concluded that future JCPOA negotiations need to be on a “more for more” basis to “resolve outstanding issues regarding missiles and regional relations... The Trump years have shown that a narrow deal like the JCPOA cannot be stable in the current environment.”

The publication predicted that concluding a new agreement will be difficult because President Biden has a “huge agenda and limited political capital,” while Iran’s parliament is hostile to compromise and upcoming elections in June will “likely... see hardliners more hostile to the US” elected.

The *Guardian Australia* failed to note that the political makeup of Iran’s parliament is largely under the control of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who has veto power over which candidates are allowed to run for office.

In the *Australian Financial Review* (March 5), Harvard academic Meghan O’Sullivan dismissed accusations that oil motivated the Biden Administration’s decision to not sanction MBS personally, pointing out that “the US imported exactly zero barrels of Saudi oil in the last week of 2020.”

Like others, O’Sullivan opined that “The US can only fully succeed in its efforts to counter Iran, combat terrorism, build on the wave of normalisations with Israel by Arab states, and address the horrific humanitarian situation in Yemen if it has the co-operation of the Saudis. The US learnt the hard way in Iraq after the 2003 invasion that shaping dynamics in the Middle East in the face of Saudi indifference or, worse, opposition, is incredibly hard.”

On *ABC TV* “The World” (March 2), University of Birmingham Professor Scott Lucas predicted President Biden won’t return to Obama era policies, saying “the Middle East[s]... changed in four years. With Iran... the Biden Administration will want to talk about... Iran’s missiles. They want... a firmer agreement. When it comes to Saudi Arabia, it’s going to be ‘you don’t have privileged access to us unless you play by the rules’.”

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

WHEN ANTI-RACISM ISN'T

I had been really looking forward to the travel and the adventure. It was an honour to be selected to represent a major international organisation at an inter-governmental conference. Unfortunately, my trip did not go ahead.

While this is the experience of many people during the past 12 months, the trip I am referring to was scheduled to take place 20 years ago, in 2001.

I had been asked to represent the World Jewish Congress at a forum as part of the process leading up to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, scheduled for later that year in Durban, South Africa.

The Asian regional meeting was due to take place in Iran, after a change of venue.

First, some national governments, including Australia, were disinvited, due to a quirk in the UN system.

Then some legitimately credentialed representatives of international non-government organisations, including me, were warned that it was not safe for us to make that trip. To this day I have not had the opportunity to visit that country – known for its fascinating historical and cultural sites, interesting and welcoming people and a government contemptuous of human rights.

That regional meeting in Iran was the source of a number of the resolutions which undermined any claim the UN World Conference Against Racism may have had to being “anti-racist”.

It is to Australia's credit that our government was the one which most clearly opposed the UN's NGO and Governmental Conferences' politicisation and distortion of “anti-racism” – as this worthy term was twisted into a weapon for bullying and exacerbating, rather than ameliorating, political tensions.

Future columns will deal in more depth with the infamous Durban World Conference Against Racism, and its dismal failure in attempting to address a very real issue which affects so much of our planet's population.

Fast-forwarding to today, there is concern, even fear,

that one result of the COVID-19 pandemic will be a resurgence of the political extremism which includes racism in its armoury.

The difficult economic conditions faced by many, the failures of all too many governments to reassure their constituents that they knew how to protect them, and appeals to crude scapegoating and racist nationalisms, together are producing toxic trends.

In addition, online media has provided tools for conspiracy theorists, political manipulators and extremist recruiters to exploit the crisis to both spread messages and incite changes in behaviour.

The good news is that, in Australia, there are people willing to devote time, energy and resources to combatting racism in many ways.

At the recommendation of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the first far-right wing, racist organisation has been listed as a terrorist organisation by Australia, with further recommendations likely if any additional groups can be shown to reach a particular threshold of behaviour.

Various online platforms are showing more responsibility with respect to confronting their role in the distribution of racist material, governments are increasing their anti-racist messaging and, just as importantly, there is action at the local level.

On a recent tour through regional New South Wales and Victoria, I encountered not just concern at the spread and adoption of conspiracy theories and racist scapegoating, but a genuine desire to not allow the problem to grow and, instead, to drive racism back into the sewers from which it emerged.

Media, civic authorities and religious leaders are talking openly about racism, discussing ways of addressing the problem and promoting counter-visions for Australia.

I met religious leaders trying to make sure inter-religious understanding was not a casualty of a change in priorities forced on them by the pandemic; journalists asking questions about what type of country we want to be in the future; as well as interfaith councils, both reinvigorated and highly motivated, once again able to operate after months in forced, socially distanced, hibernation.

The genuine anti-racism of ordinary Australians stands in stark contrast to the UN's disingenuous pronouncements.

It is an unfortunate reality that their efforts are so vital, now more than ever.



Claiming to be anti-racist does not make it so (Credit: Shutterstock)



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