

## FROM NATANZ TO VIENNA

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WITH COMPLIMENTS



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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This *AIR* edition looks at the Iran nuclear crisis, which is currently at a major turning point thanks to both multilateral diplomatic talks in Vienna and some largely covert events across the Middle East.

Charlotte Lawson interviews several top experts on the potential relationships and linkages between incidents like the explosion at Iran's Natanz enrichment plant on April 11, and the Vienna talks about a potential return to the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal. In addition, US-based expert Farzin Nadimi looks at the covert Iran-Israel war at sea, while Erielle Davidson and Ari Cicurel examine the implications of the Iran-China Strategic Partnership deal signed in late March.

Also featured this month is Amotz Asa-El's exploration of Israel's seemingly impossible coalition maths in the wake of the March 23 election, while veteran US analyst, diplomat and recent AIJAC guest Elliott Abrams looks at some serious pitfalls potentially associated with a series of Palestinian elections scheduled to begin on May 22.

Finally, don't miss Australian academic Ran Porat's exposé of an Australian arm of Iran's international propaganda apparatus, Oved Lobel on myths and facts about the relationship between Iran and Yemen's Houthis and Miriam Bell on a troubling apparent BDS development in New Zealand.

Let us know what you think of any aspect of this edition at [editorial@aijac.org.au](mailto:editorial@aijac.org.au).

Tzvi Fleischer

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A handout photo made available by the Atomic Energy Organisation (AEOI) of Iran shows centrifuges in the Natanz uranium enrichment facility in central Iran, November 5 2019 (reissued April 12 2021). (Credit: AAP)



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EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN****COLIN RUBENSTEIN**

# JCPOA NOT THE ENDGAME

Indirect talks in Vienna between the United States and Iran aimed at stopping Teheran's ongoing blatant and dangerous violations of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal appear to be setting an alarmingly low bar for sanctions relief. Disturbingly, US officials are now hinting that the Biden Administration won't wait until Iran materially returns to compliance before easing pressure on the regime, as they had previously indicated they would.

Given what is at stake, this should be deeply worrying for the global community, including Australia, as it seeks to keep the world's most dangerous weapons out of the hands of the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism.

In an interview in March, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken had acknowledged that returning to the JCPOA would only be a first step.

"We need to work on an agreement that's longer and stronger than the original one," he said, "And we also need to engage other issues that were not part of the original negotiation that are deeply problematic for us and for other countries around the world: Iran's ballistic missile program, its destabilising actions in country after country."

Blinken deserves credit for conceding some of the obvious flaws in the original JCPOA.

Yet what should be equally obvious is that, without continued sanctions pressure, Iran will have no incentive to make concessions on any of the issues Blinken highlighted. Yet there are reports that the Biden Administration is now prepared to lift non-nuclear sanctions against Iran's central bank, its national oil and tanker companies and key economic sectors including steel, aluminium and others, in exchange for its return to the JCPOA.

By ramping up nuclear activity in recent months, Iranian leaders have been trying to intimidate Western negotiators into rushing into a deal that will once more empower and embolden Iran to continue its destructive course with impunity.

There is abundant evidence that Iran never fully complied with the JCPOA in the first place (see p. 16 for a discussion of this evidence) – which is one of many reasons why the US Trump Administration withdrew from the deal in 2018. Yet even ignoring this inconvenient reality, there is no avoiding the fact that the ease with which Iran has been racing toward the nuclear threshold in recent months, once it decided to do so, is a preview of what awaits the world once the JCPOA's sunset clauses trigger over the next two to nine years, lifting virtually all restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities. Except, by then, Teheran will be able to move much more rapidly, thanks to the intensive research on advanced centrifuges that the JCPOA already allows Iran to undertake.

Meanwhile, outside the US, the international community continues to refuse to re-impose sanctions on Iran in the face of nuclear activity that breaches all of the JCPOA's key clauses. European parties to the JCPOA were even prepared to simply ignore the legal right of the US to invoke the UN Security Council's sanctions snapback provisions in Resolution 2231 last year. The question must be asked – where do the red lines of the parties to the JCPOA regarding Iran's illegal nuclear program actually lie? They clearly aren't anywhere near where the JCPOA's sponsors promised they would be.

**"Where do the red lines of the parties to the JCPOA regarding Iran's illegal nuclear program actually lie? They clearly aren't anywhere near where the JCPOA's sponsors promised they would be"**



As of February, Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium exceeded 15 times the limit allowed to it under the JCPOA, enough material to build several nuclear weapons. That same month, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported Iran had, for the first time, produced uranium metal, a material used to construct the core of a nuclear bomb. Teheran is constantly illegally installing advanced centrifuges which drastically shorten the regime's nuclear breakout time.

And since March, Iran has been restricting the provision of surveillance camera footage of its nuclear facilities to the IAEA, further masking its activities. Finally, on April 16, Iran reportedly began enriching uranium to the unprecedented level of 60%, dangerously close to weapons-grade of 90%.

Iran's increasingly grave nuclear violations escalate week by week and the JCPOA delineates clear consequences in the event of such severe Iranian violations. Yet these have been ignored in favour of the improvised Vienna negotiations that appear set to sweep Iran's violations under the rug, remove sanctions and pretend nothing happened.

Focusing the Vienna talks on merely bringing Iran into compliance with the JCPOA as part of a quid pro quo for sanctions relief would be tragically short-sighted and dangerous. The Biden Administration must address the weaknesses in its own negotiating strategy if it expects to lengthen, strengthen and broaden the agreements with Iran to encompass all of the Islamic Republic's problematic behaviours, while blocking every pathway to a nuclear weapon for the foreseeable future – as it has repeatedly claimed it is seeking to do.

Submitting to Iran's demands to remove all sanctions to coax the Islamic regime back to some degree of ostensible JCPOA compliance may end Teheran's dangerous nuclear dash in the short term, but at the expense of any realistic hope of expanding and strengthening the agreement at a

later stage. It would only increase the likelihood of having no choice but to employ a military option against Iran's nuclear facilities in the future.

Details of the reported act of sabotage at Iran's nuclear enrichment facility at Natanz on April 11 are murky, but it appears to have temporarily curtailed enrichment at that site, fortuitously buying precious time and increased leverage in the Vienna talks. Such an opportunity must not be squandered.

The US should reassess its strategy and insist on strengthening the JCPOA while also addressing other problematic Iranian behaviours here and now, as part of current negotiations. Above all, it must refrain from sacrificing its essential leverage merely to re-establish ostensible compliance with what has always been a grossly inadequate nuclear deal that effectively guarantees a nuclear weapons capable Iran in just a few short years.

AIR

## AIJAC MOURNS THE PASSING OF ISI LEIBLER AO CBE

Isi Leibler was a towering figure in Australian Jewish communal life and will be forever remembered for his contribution to the worldwide campaign for the liberation of Soviet Jewry, advancing ties between Australia and Israel and his pioneering work in Israel-Asia Relations.

Among his many accomplishments was his establishment of the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs, which became part of AIJAC and continues to inform our activities.

After making Aliyah, Isi often generously shared insights on Israel and the Jewish world with visiting Australian parliamentarians, journalists and religious leaders, many of whom were visiting as part of AIJAC's Rambam program.

His passing leaves a void that will be felt for years to come.

*Dr. Colin Rubenstein, AM – Executive Director, AIJAC*

## WORD FOR WORD

"I get the impression, based on consultations with representatives from the parties, that neither candidate has a good chance of being able to form a government. But...the law requires me to select a candidate. According to the court and the law, a prime minister under indictment can continue to serve... This was not an easy decision on a moral and ethical basis.... And I fear for my country. But I am doing what is required of me as President of the State of Israel."

**Israeli President Reuven Rivlin announcing his decision to invite incumbent PM Binyamin Netanyahu to attempt to form a government, despite his corruption indictments (Israel Hayom, April 6).**

"Condemning this despicable move, the Islamic Republic of Iran emphasises the need for the international community and the International Atomic Energy Agency to deal with this nuclear terrorism. Iran reserves the right to take action against the perpetrators."

**Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran Chief Ali Akhbar Salehi following a blast at Iran's Natanz enrichment facility, allegedly perpetrated by Israel (BBC, April 12).**

"We believe that this UN agency for so-called 'refugees' should not exist in its current format. UNRWA schools regularly use materials that incite against Israel and the twisted definition used by the agency to determine who is a 'refugee' only perpetuates the conflict."

**Israeli Ambassador to the US Gilad Erdan in response to the US resuming funding of UNRWA (Middle East Monitor, April 9).**





# SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

## HAPPY AT 73

On this year's Yom Ha'atzmaut – Israel's Independence Day – on April 14, the citizens and supporters of the Jewish state had a lot to celebrate despite the painful and exasperating two-year political deadlock in Jerusalem. For instance:

- Being the first nation in the world to vaccinate its way out of the coronavirus pandemic.
- Being a “start-up nation” whose economy has performed well for two decades and is roaring back after repeated lockdowns.
- At long last being accepted by more and more regional neighbours, with immense economic and tourism opportunities opening up as a result.
- Being on the road to becoming a major energy producer, thanks to offshore gas, with plans to use this resource bonanza both to benefit the country economically and to build new mutually-beneficial ties with neighbours like Jordan and Egypt, as well as new partners in the Mediterranean and Europe.

Yet great as all this undoubtedly is, in my view, the bigger picture of Israel's 73 year success story lies in some numbers illustrating how Israelis feel about their society and what it offers them:

- Israel ranks high in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Life Satisfaction index, 7.2 out of 10, compared to an OECD average of 6.5. This is 11<sup>th</sup> out of all 39 OECD countries, comparable to Australia, which scored 7.3 and finished just ahead of Israel in 10<sup>th</sup> place.
- According to another index, Israel is 12<sup>th</sup> in the UN's 2021 World Happiness Report, based on surveys of people's life satisfaction. Australia was one spot higher at 11<sup>th</sup>.
- Israel ranks high in OECD ratings with respect to health care – fourth out of the 39 countries listed. Israel is just behind Australia, in third place. In addition, Israel is seventh in overall life expectancy, just ahead of Australia in eighth place, and fifth in self-reported health satisfaction, just behind Australia in fourth place.
- While Israel does not rank particularly high globally in primary and secondary education, it does especially well in terms of tertiary education. Israel ranks second among OECD countries (tied with Japan and just after Canada) for the percentage of 25-64 year-olds that have completed tertiary education: 46% compared with an OECD average of 32%.
- Israel ranks consistently high in measures of intergene-

rational mobility – meaning an individual's wellbeing is less dependent on the socioeconomic status of his or her parents. One survey places Israel fifth in the world in such mobility.

The fact that Israel is a pretty good place to live is also reflected in emigration rates – which have been falling rapidly over recent years. According to one study, in 1990, the rate of those leaving Israel was 5.3 people per 1,000. In 2000, it dropped to 4.2 per 1,000. By 2017 it stood at about 1.6 per 1,000, a massive fall in just a couple of decades. This is much lower than Australia, where more than 11 Australians out of a thousand migrated overseas in 2018.

And let's remember, Israel is a tiny and potentially vulnerable country, often under threat, often subject to violence, and requiring the majority of its citizens to serve in the armed forces. There are lots of potential reasons to want to leave if life is not satisfying.

But both through surveys and through their actions, Israelis are clearly saying that Israel is a society which does very well in satisfying the material, cultural and social needs of its citizens.

That is not say there are not huge problems – there are. The current ongoing political stalemate is one giant reminder of some of them.

But the 73 year old project of building a Jewish state is clearly a success on this most important level. Israel is not only thriving economically; it also offers a unique, vibrant culture, serves as a centre for the Jewish people globally, and offers its citizens a society which is a great place to live, overall. That is a source of Israel's strength as a country, but should also be a source of immense pride for anyone who helped in the Zionist project of creating this unique Jewish homeland.

## LOGO NO GO

As readers may be aware, the Palestinians are due to have a parliamentary election on May 22, followed by a presidential election in late July (see Elliott Abrams on p. 23 for more).

But here's something worrying that the NGO Palestinian Media Watch (PMW) noticed about the election campaign: almost all of the main parties running for the Palestinian Legislative Council have logos which erase Israel from existence and replace it with “Palestine”.

Eleven of the 36 party lists registered in the election use maps of “Palestine” replacing all of Israel in their logos, including PA President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party; Hamas; the Future party affiliated with Fatah defector Mohammed Dahlan; the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and numerous independent party lists.

Furthermore, many of the party logos feature symbols of violence – Fatah's logo includes two guns and a grenade, while several other party's logos feature clenched fists.

It seems that peaceful coexistence with Israel is not an





The Fatah, PFLP, Hamas and “Palestine is for Everyone” party logos (left to right)

idea that gets votes in Palestinian politics – and voters are instead drawn to implicit calls for Israel to be replaced with “Palestine”.

This reality in Palestinian political culture goes a long way toward explaining why a two-state peace has been so hard to achieve.

AIR



Clifford Smith

## FUNDING UNRWA HARMS PALESTINIANS

The US Biden Administration’s recent decision to provide US\$150 million (A\$194 million) in funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) repeatedly cites concerns with how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting Palestinians. The message is clear: The best way to end Palestinian suffering and to aid in legitimate aspirations is to fund the agency, which the Trump Administration cruelly ended.

But this message is false. Indeed, funding the agency exacerbates Palestinian suffering. Rather than ending human agony, the agency has served as what amounts to a propaganda ministry, driving the Palestinian war machine that harms average Palestinians.

The agency was founded in the aftermath of Israel’s War of Independence to help deal with all refugees from that conflict, including Jewish refugees from Arab countries. But as virtually all refugees located in Israel, whether Jewish or not, were quickly resettled and granted citizenship, what we now call Palestinian refugees are those not accepted by Arab states as citizens. Instead, they were used as pawns by Arab regimes to sustain the battle against Israel.

While not originally the case, in the 1960s, the agency adopted a unique definition of a refugee that allows refugee status to be passed through subsequent generations, allows a citizen of another state to remain a refugee, and allows people living in the West Bank and Gaza to be considered refugees in their own homes. This makes it the only “refugee” population in the world that has massively increased over time, from about 700,000 in 1950 to about six million today. Coupled with the claim that all Palestinian “refugees” have a “right of return” to all of Israel, this intentionally undermines Israel as a Jewish state.

In other words, the agency evolved into just another

weapon aimed at achieving what could not be accomplished by arms in 1947-49, 1956, 1967, or 1973: namely, the destruction of Israel.

For years, the US Congress has attempted to shed light on this farce by demanding the State Department release a congressionally mandated report that gives the number of refugees under a normal definition. While this number technically remains classified, then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tipped his hat to this truth toward the end of his tenure, pointing out the real number is less than 200,000. While it is probably far less than that, perhaps 30,000, his statement at least acknowledges that people generations removed from the 1947 conflict aren’t meaningfully “refugees”.

The agency’s real job in practice isn’t taking care of refugees but propagandising against Israel’s existence. Anyone who has seen an agency “refugee” camp firsthand, as I have, will immediately notice two things. First, it’s not a “refugee camp” in any normal sense of the word. There are no tents, temporary facilities, or other signs of a recent catastrophe. Instead, it resembles a poor area of most any city, complete with institutions aimed at helping the needy. Second, it features nonstop propaganda aimed at telling Palestinians that the “right of return” to a country that 99.5% of them have never known is their ultimate goal in life, with a few homages to suicide bombers thrown in. These messages are repeated ad nauseam.

But it isn’t limited only to public artwork. The agency’s schools frequently laud violence and demonise Jews, and teachers employed by the agency even praise Adolf Hitler.

These unfortunate realities do not mean that there are no Palestinians in need. Corrupt leadership and the futile, propaganda-spurred efforts to destroy Israel have left many Palestinians far worse off than they ought to be. However, funding the agency is not the right way to help needy Palestinians. The State Department simultaneously announced new funds for Palestinians to be administered through the United States Agency for International Development and not through the agency. While the USAID has its own problems, such as funding extremism, at least it isn’t institutionally dedicated to eliminating Israel.

In other words, the effect of funding the agency is to perpetuate a status quo that leaves Palestinians poor, stateless, oppressed, and dedicated to eliminating Israel rather than building their own polity, economy, society, and culture.

Were the agency to adopt a normal definition of a refugee, not one aimed at ending Israel, and cease funding violent, antisemitic agitprop, it could help alleviate problems. But the agency has rebuffed attempts at change from its foul mission of destruction.

The Biden Administration should reverse course.

AIR



Clifford Smith is director of the Middle East Forum’s Washing-

ton Project. This article originally appeared in the Washington Examiner ([www.washingtonexaminer.com](http://www.washingtonexaminer.com)) © Middle East Forum ([www.meforum.org](http://www.meforum.org)), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

# ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

## ROGUE CELLS

The threat of Islamist terrorism is still very real in Indonesia. While the country's counter-terrorism operations have scored some important successes, they have never been able fully to extinguish the threat, as two recent attacks have illustrated.

On Sunday March 28, two suicide bombers from Jema'ah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), an Indonesian pro-Islamic State (IS) terrorist organisation, detonated pressure cooker IEDs in front of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Cathedral in Makassar, South Sulawesi, a port city of about 1.5 million. The blast, which resulted in the death of the two perpetrators and injured 20 people, happened just after congregants finished celebrating Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo said he strongly condemned "this act of terror."

The two bombers were a newlywed couple and part of a local militant cell linked to another Indonesian couple who blew themselves up at a cathedral in Jolo, southern Philippines in January 2019, leaving 21 worshippers dead and over 100 wounded.

On the following Wednesday, March 31, a 25-year-old female IS sympathiser, Zakiah Aini, was gunned down at Indonesia's National Police Headquarters as she reportedly fired six shots from a gas-operated Airsoft pistol that posed little danger of serious injury.

In a handwritten note later found in her room, Zakiah wrote, "I love you very much, but God loves me more, and this is why I have decided to take this road, as that taken by the Prophet, and in doing so saved me and with God's blessings given you and the family a place in heaven."

Although no clear ties between the National Police Headquarters attack and the Makassar bombing have been established, follow-up attacks after a large JAD attack are not an uncommon phenomenon.

Despite its many cells and sympathisers who are dispersed across multiple Indonesian provinces, JAD attacks are often conducted by one cell independently of others. A 2021 report from the Jakarta-based Institute of Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) noted that JAD has always been more of a "haphazard conglomeration of cells, organisations, and individuals" as opposed to a well-structured

organisation.

JAD first gained notoriety in 2016 for a gun and suicide bomb attack in Jakarta that killed four civilians and four attackers – including one who blew himself up at a Starbucks outlet. It was the first attack claimed by Islamic State in Southeast Asia.

Two years later, a couple and their four children carried out a suicide attack on three churches in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, on May 13, 2018. The attack killed 18 people, including the bombers. The next day, another couple took their three children along in a suicide attack on the Surabaya police headquarters, killing themselves and two of the children.

Another common thread linking the JAD attacks is how important familial and personal bonds are in facilitating them. Evidently, the two suicide bombers in Makassar were a husband and wife who married six months before their suicide operation. This tactic – a suicide bomb led by a husband and wife pair – was similarly used in previous JAD attacks such as the 2018 Surabaya triple church bombing, which was orchestrated to include their children, and the 2019 Jolo Cathedral attack. By using the family as an attack unit, JAD perpetrators are able to minimise online communication, and thus evade detection, while the small-group dynamic tends to reinforce their commitment to the operation.

Following the Makassar attack, the elite counterterror unit Detachment 88 has rounded up at least 31 suspected JAD members in Makassar, West Nusa Tenggara, and East and West Java. One suspect was shot and killed by police after he ignored warning shots and lunged at them during a raid on his house in Makassar.

During the raid in Bekasi, West Java, police found five bombs, four kilograms of bomb-making material and 1.5 kilograms of highly-explosive acetone peroxide (TATP). TATP is now widely used by terrorists because it is prepared from readily available ingredients, including hair bleach and nail polish remover, and can pass undetected through conventional explosive detection scanners.

Police also disclosed that the militants had created a WhatsApp group called "the Battalion of Faith," where members allegedly discussed attack plans.

The recent arrests would likely weaken JAD in Makassar, says Muh Taufiqurrohmah, a senior researcher at the Centre for Radicalism and Deradicalisation Studies (PA-KAR) in Central Java, estimating that the local cell has 60 members. He told *BenarNews* that other cells in the province remain largely intact, warning that "JAD members are committed to fighting the authorities to their death. They prefer to die resisting authorities than to be captured alive."

Even though the scale of the recent attacks is small, JAD's diffuse but close knit cells could still employ their rudimentary technology to increasingly deadly effect.



Miriam Bell

## SUPER FUND MOVE RAISES BDS QUESTIONS

Questions over just how much influence the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement has in New Zealand are being voiced following the NZ Super Fund's recent divestment from five Israeli banks.

In March, the Guardians of New Zealand Superannuation, an autonomous crown entity and manager of the NZ\$50 billion NZ Super Fund, announced it was ending its NZ\$6.5 million investment in the First International Bank of Israel, Israel Discount Bank, Bank Hapoalim, Bank Leumi, and Bank Mizrahi-Tefahot.

The NZ Super Fund said it was doing so on responsible investment grounds as there was “credible evidence” that the banks provide finance for the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

“In our view, based on the information available to us, the companies’ activities are inconsistent with the UN Global Compact, the key benchmark against which the Guardians measures corporate behaviour,” it said.

Predictably, well-known opponents of Israel, like the Palestinian Solidarity Network chaired by anti-Israel advocate John Minto, greeted the news enthusiastically.

Green Party foreign affairs spokesperson Golriz Ghahraman told the *Spinoff* the decision “exemplifies compliance with domestic and international (sic) in terms of investment in Israeli occupied Palestine, which all NZ institutions and companies should be meeting”

However, National Party MP Nicola Willis reportedly said at a select committee meeting that the fund's decision was controversial and “viewed by some groups as potentially aligning New Zealand with an antisemitic movement (i.e.: BDS).”

She also asked if steps were being taken “to ensure consistency in the way [the fund] treats issues relating to human rights abuses.”

Willis’ question echoed concerns expressed by the Israel Institute of New Zealand (IINZ).

IINZ said the NZ Super Fund's move undermined New Zealand's reputation as a fair actor, as it was based on biased UN and NGO reports and meant the fund had “joined the discriminatory BDS campaign.” It was curious that it was only Israeli banks that had been divested from, and not those in China, Turkey, Russia, or Saudi Arabia, IINZ added.

A post on the blog *Shalom.Kiwi* also noted the glaring inconsistency between the treatment of Israel and of actual major abusers of human rights; “If ethical investment was a

driving motivator, it would make sense that the countries engaging in state-sponsored genocide, ethnic cleansing, systematic repression of women, killing of homosexuals, and murder or imprisonment of dissenters would be targeted.”

One of the reports which informed the NZ Super Fund's decision was produced by the organisation Who Profits, a leader in the BDS movement, according to *Shalom.Kiwi*. If so, this raises questions about the extent of the BDS movement's reach into New Zealand.

Over recent years, the BDS movement in New Zealand – while a vocal presence – has “scored” few successes with its campaigns.

The movement's biggest success occurred in 2017 when the internationally renowned singer Lorde cancelled her planned Tel Aviv concert in response to a letter from two Kiwi BDS activists.

Most of its other campaigns have fallen flat. In 2018, it campaigned for the exclusion of an Israeli singer, Victoria Hanna, from the WOMAD festival lineup, and disrupted the annual Doc Edge film festival to try to prevent the screening of Israeli documentaries. On both occasions, organisers refused to bow to its demands.

But last year BDS agitation resulted in the Wellington City Council abandoning its intention to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism. And now the NZ Super Fund's move hints at possibly growing BDS influence.

However, IINZ director Ashley Church said the BDS movement in New Zealand remains small and is made up of various splinter groups run by Minto and his friends.

“BDS has been banned in a number of countries similar to New Zealand so, globally, its influence is dimming. New Zealand is a bit of an outlier there and the fact that any credence is given to BDS here does raise a few questions. But it doesn't have any impact on Government policies or decisions.”

He said the NZ Super Fund's move reminded him of the “Palestine” map fiasco involving Immigration NZ a couple of years ago: “We'll never know but, as with the map scenario, you have to suspect a couple of activists in the organisation might have used this as a platform to project their own worldview... I suspect there would be people in [the fund] regretting the decision but unable to back down on it now.”

Church said he believes the presence of BDS in New Zealand will wane further and most New Zealanders do not support the movement.

A good example of this can be seen in a Wellington meeting of political candidates during last year's election, Church noted. Following a loaded question relating to Israel/Palestine, a succession of candidates from across the political spectrum critiqued the antisemitism inherent in the BDS movement.



# BEHIND THE NEWS

## ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

Two rockets launched from Gaza into Israel on April 16 and 17 caused no damage and prompted retaliatory strikes by the IDF against Hamas targets.

In the West Bank, two car-ramming attacks by Palestinians were thwarted, on March 28 and April 5. The first driver was taken for questioning, while the second was shot and killed. The throwing of rocks, IEDs and Molotov cocktails by Palestinians at Israeli traffic continued to be regular occurrences.

## EXPLOSION SLOWS IRANIAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

As indirect nuclear negotiations between the US and Iran continue, a blast inside Iran's Natanz nuclear facility on April 11 reportedly caused substantial damage to its uranium enrichment capabilities. Informed sources told the media that Israel was behind the blast, which has set back Iran's nuclear progress, possibly by up to nine months. The explosion was reportedly detonated from afar and destroyed both the main and auxiliary power systems of the underground section of the site, thus reportedly causing large numbers of centrifuges to be destroyed.

Teheran responded to the attack by starting to enrich a small amount of uranium to 60% purity – a level significantly closer than previously to the 90% enriched uranium required for a nuclear warhead.

Experts now estimate the “break-out” time needed for Iran to amass enough highly enriched fissile material for a bomb at around three to four months.

## ISRAEL-IRAN ATTACKS CONTINUE

Israel reportedly carried out its first strike in nearly a month on Syrian territory on April 7, hitting Iranian positions near Damascus. Reports said the strikes resulted in the deaths of three Iran-backed militia members, and the destruction of a weapons depot. On April 21, Israeli jets struck targets in the Syrian Golan Heights, and later attacked several Syrian surface-to-air batteries after an errant anti-aircraft missile struck southern Israel.

Iranian tanker ships continue to smuggle oil into Syria in violation of US sanctions, with at least three million barrels reportedly delivered in the first half of April. According to media reports, Israel has attacked at least a dozen Iranian ships in the Red and Mediterranean Seas illicitly carrying weapons and oil to Syria and to terrorists in Lebanon over recent months.

On April 6, the Iranian ship *MV Saviz*, a reconnaissance ship and floating military base, was damaged by limpet mines in the Red Sea off the coast of Djibouti. US media reports claimed Israel was responsible.

On April 13, the Israeli owned commercial cargo ship *Hyperion Ray* was struck off the Emirati coast and slightly damaged, reportedly by an Iranian missile.

## IRAN-CHINA AGREEMENT

On March 27, the Foreign Ministers of China and Iran, Wang Yi and Javad Zarif, signed a 25-year cooperation agreement in a ceremony at the foreign ministry in Teheran, according to Iran's Fars News Agency.

It was part of a two-day visit by Wang that appears to reflect Chinese intentions to play a more influential

role in the Middle East. (For more details on this agreement, see p. 18.)

## NEBULOUS ‘COUP’ ATTEMPT IN JORDAN

At least 18 people were arrested by Jordanian intelligence services in early April over a so-called seditious plot involving King Abdullah II's half-brother Prince Hamzah bin Hussein – who was removed as Crown Prince in 2004 in favour of Abdullah II's eldest son.

While the nature of the plot and its actual participants are unclear, reporting suggests Prince Hamzah and his associates, including Bassem Awadallah, a Jordanian advisor to Saudi Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman, had begun discussing economic and political grievances against King Abdullah with tribal leaders and even sounding them out to switch their allegiance to Prince Hamzah.

Prince Hamzah and the Saudis deny any part in any alleged plot. Awadallah remains in detention despite Saudi entreaties, while Hamzah has publicly pledged allegiance to the King after being placed under house arrest.

## ISRAEL AND GREECE ANNOUNCE DEFENCE AGREEMENT

On April 18, Israel and Greece signed their largest ever defence cooperation agreement, worth around 5.4 billion shekels (A\$2 billion). The deal includes the establishment of a flight training centre for the Hellenic Air Force, to be built and operated for 22 years by the Israeli defence company Elbit Systems.

The training centre will be modelled on the Israeli Air Force's flight academy, and use 10 modified Italian-



made M-346 training aircraft with “unique avionics and embedded training solutions,” according to Elbit.

## SUDAN REPEALS BOYCOTT OF ISRAEL

On April 6, Sudan’s Cabinet voted to repeal a 1958 law that forbade diplomatic and business relations with Israel. The vote followed last year’s signing of a normalisation deal between Israel and Sudan under the Abraham Accords. The decision was ratified by Sudan’s ruling Sovereign Council.

Sudan has also promised Israel that it will overturn a law used to imprison migrants who leave Sudan and then return, which would enable some of the 6,200 Sudanese migrants currently in Israel to go back to Sudan.

## US STATE DEPARTMENT COUNTRY REPORTS

In its annual review of global human rights violations for 2020 published on March 30, the US State Department documented a plethora of abuses routinely committed by Iran.

These include unlawful execution of individuals, including juveniles, without fair trial; the use of torture; arbitrary imprisonment; and severe restrictions on free speech, religious freedom and political participation.

The regime’s abuses extend beyond its own border into Syria, Iraq and Yemen through Teheran’s support of Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad, pro-Iran Iraqi militias, and the Houthis rebels respectively.

The report also detailed significant violations by the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and by Hamas in Gaza. In one example, PA security forces were reported to have arrested, intimidated and tortured Palestinians who participated in a 2019 international conference in Bahrain convened to unveil the economic aspects of the Trump administration’s Middle East peace plan.

## HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATED IN UAE AND BAHRAIN

This year, for the first time, Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, was officially marked in Arab countries.

On the evening of April 7, the Crossroads of Civilisations Museum in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates hosted guests from around the world, including a delegation of Jewish and Arab Israelis, as part of the global Yellow Candle Project remembering the victims of the Shoah.

Bahrain, too, hosted a Yom Hashoah ceremony, with former Israeli diplomat and Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dore Gold as guest of honour.

## COVID NUMBERS

As of April 20, there had been a total of 837,218 coronavirus cases in Israel, up from 828,764 as of March 23, with a total of 6,341 deaths, up from 6,109 – numbers which reflect a continuing sharp decline in cases thanks to Israel’s vaccine program.

5,354,954 Israelis – almost 62% of the population – have now received their first dose of the vaccine, with 4,982,803, or 57.5%, also having received the second.

In the Palestinian ruled areas of the West Bank, there had been 282,270 cases, up from 225,976 on March 23, and 3,047 deaths, up from 2,458. In Gaza, the number of cases surged to 91,086, up from 59,330 cases as of March 21.

## STRANGER THAN FICTION

### THE CHOICE OF SOPHIE

Each year, the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN) annual dinner features a well-known speaker sympathetic to its perspective. This year’s choice, Sophie McNeill, appears to fit the bill.

Prior to being ABC Middle East correspondent, McNeill often participated in pro-Palestinian activism, and the *AIR* regularly critiqued her reporting for its anti-Israel slant.

However, the choice of McNeill so aggrieved members of “Anti-Imperialists for Palestine” (AIFP) that they wrote an open letter vowing not to attend unless APAN chose another speaker. The letter was published by the Centre for Counter-Hegemonic Studies, whose Director, Tim Anderson, is also a leader of AIFP.

While acknowledging McNeill had been “criticised by the extreme Zionist lobby,” the letter condemned her for “ferociously attacking the regional resistance,” meaning Iran and its proxies, including the Syrian Assad regime. Apparently “It is only western apologists

for the multiple US wars” who criticise the “resistance.” She was also condemned for “repeatedly” running the “propaganda of ‘barrel bombs’ and ‘chemical weapons’ in Syria.”

Furthermore, McNeill now works for Human Rights Watch (HRW); “a US corporate propaganda machine which demonises all US foreign policy targets,” and whose “leader Ken Roth is a prominent liberal Zionist (sic).”

In fact, HRW’s founder, Robert Bernstein, publicly condemned the organisation because of its disproportionate focus on Israel under Roth, including tacit support for boycotts and sanctions.

McNeill and Human Rights Watch are accused of targeting China “e.g. the Uyghur scam”, and making “false moral equivalence between Israeli massacres and Palestinian resistance,” among other things.

HRW should be condemned for drawing false equivalence between Palestinian terrorism and Israeli self-defence, but not the way the letter intends.

Anderson, as Ran Porat notes (p. 27), often seems to act as a mouthpiece for Iran’s regime, so it’s unsurprising that it appears exactly one media outlet covered his letter to APAN – Teheran’s state-owned *Press TV*.

## COVER STORY

# OF SABOTAGE AND CENTRIFUGES

## FROM TEHERAN TO NATANZ TO VIENNA

by Charlotte Lawson

Nestled beneath the jagged desert terrain of the Karkas Mountains sits the crown jewel of Iran's nuclear program. The Natanz facility, home to the Islamic Republic's largest known uranium enrichment centre, enjoyed renewed national praise when President Hassan Rouhani visited the site on April 10 to mark the country's 16<sup>th</sup> annual National Nuclear Day. As envoys from the United States, Iran, and mediatory countries prepared for the upcoming week's negotiations in Vienna – aimed at curbing Teheran's atomic ambitions – Rouhani christened an army of advanced IR-6 centrifuges capable of yielding “10 times more product” in celebration of the holiday.

The next day, an explosion of unknown origins brought down the enrichment site's primary and backup electrical grids. Among the blast's casualties were reportedly “several thousand centrifuges” but no civilians.

Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation spokesperson, Behrouz Kamalvandi, initially attributed the loss of power to an “accident,” but later reporting out of Israel and Iran pointed to sabotage by Jerusalem. By Tuesday, several high-profile Iranian officials—including Rouhani, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi—had assigned blame for the “nuclear terrorism” to their “Zionist” rivals in a government-wide call for retaliation.

“A large portion of the enemy's sabotage can be restored, and this train cannot be stopped,” Salehi insisted after the infiltration. Iran's state media adopted a similar narrative, reporting the impact to be minimal and concentrated in the plant's antiquated IR-1 centrifuges.

While the full extent of the damage to Iran's nuclear program remains unknown, Israeli and American intel

leaked to Israel-based outlets and the *New York Times* paints a different picture. The power outage, reports found, resulted from a large explosion 50 metres underground and beneath more than six metres of reinforced concrete. A device was smuggled into the site in advance and detonated remotely, taking out the power supply fuelling chains of centrifuges.

Kamalvandi, speaking from his hospital bed after falling seven metres into a hole caused by the blast, dismissed the incident as a “little explosion” but vowed “revenge on the Zionist regime.” Given the clear and credible attribution to

**“Jerusalem's shadow war with Teheran spans some four decades, with particular attention paid to Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure in recent years”**

Israeli forces in sources close to the horse's mouth, some experts fear the Islamic Republic might be cornered into retaliation in the absence of plausible deniability from Jerusalem. Others point out that in the earliest stages of the Vienna negotiations, such a move would derail Teheran's efforts

to secure desperately needed sanctions relief.

In response to the attack – and in a potentially miscalculated diplomatic tactic ahead of this week's talks – Rouhani announced plans to enrich uranium to 60% purity as leverage over his Western counterparts. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which is responsible for overseeing the country's nuclear program confirmed that Iran has begun to do so at Natanz.

“If the aim was to limit Iran's nuclear capability, I have to say that on the contrary, all the centrifuges that went out of order due to the incident were of the IR-1 type, and they are being replaced with more advanced ones,” Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said on April 12.

But blanket promises to restore the nuclear cache to its former glory may be in vain while unresolved breaches



cripple Iran's security apparatus. "Teheran will respond with rhetorical bluster, but it is likely that it has also initiated a frenzied security review to determine which external actors have obtained this access," Norman Roule, former US national intelligence manager for Iran, told the *Dispatch*. "Unless they can resolve their security concerns, they cannot be sure they will be able to protect their personnel or sensitive facilities from future attacks."

## "TWO MESSAGES"?

The timing by Mossad, Israel's spy agency and the suspected culprit, was no coincidence. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert speculated on April 14 that the explosives were planted at the facility well in advance, "maybe 10 years ago or 15 years ago," before being triggered remotely.



Gun emplacements around the heavily-guarded uranium enrichment plant at Natanz (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

As the US and other vested parties kicked off indirect talks with Iran in an effort to reinstate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—which in its original iteration was vehemently opposed by Israeli leaders—Jerusalem's objective was two-fold. "The first is a message from Israel to the United States and the EU three that: 'We have a vote on the nuclear deal as well and we're not going to sit idly by while an agreement is negotiated in a European capital that directly affects our security,'" Jason Brodsky, a senior analyst at Iran International, told the *Dispatch*. "The second message is of course to the Iranians: 'We're watching you and we're not bound by the nuclear deal.'"

Jerusalem's shadow war with Teheran spans some four decades, with particular attention paid to Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure in recent years. Last June and July, a mysterious string of explosions and fires broke out in and around factories across the country, including Natanz's centrifuge plant. Another strike targeted eastern Teheran's Khojir missile production complex.

In November 2020, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a nuclear scientist and brigadier general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), was killed in a strike widely attributed to the Israelis. The attack was carried out on Iranian soil.

Perhaps the most high-profile of these covert efforts was devised under the Bush Administration and implemented under the Obama Administration, when the US and Israel teamed up to install the Stuxnet worm in the computer system of Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant. The virus permanently destroyed one-fifth of the country's centrifuges. Beginning in 2006, the two countries also coordinated a series of cyberattacks on Natanz known as Operation Olympic Games.

"It is clear that at least one external actor — and likely more — has an extraordinary ability to monitor Iran's most sensitive facilities and personnel," Roule said. "Operations against these targets have involved no civilian casualties and focused on personnel and architecture Iran would use in lethal actions against its neighbours."

General Mohsen Rezaei, former IRGC commander-in-chief and current secretary of Iran's expediency council, tweeted that the attack was indicative of a larger "infiltration phenomenon" and called on the Government to make security improvements. And although the Biden Administration has unequivocally denied involvement or advance knowledge of the operation, Iran typically associates covert action by Israel with its American allies.

"'Those who live in glass houses should not throw stones', says an old English proverb, as a warning to arrogantly ignorant idiots whose provocations bring swift self-destruction," a newspaper backed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei wrote on its front page. "All fingers point towards the archenemies of Iran and the Iranian people, including those trying to dupe the Islamic Republic again by dangling the bait of 'indirect' talks to rejoin the JCPOA."

Implicating the Administration further, at least from the Iranian point-of-view, was US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Jerusalem at the time of the attack. During a joint press conference on April 12 with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Austin steered clear of mentioning Iran altogether while Netanyahu pledged to thwart its rival's "genocidal goal of eliminating Israel" via nuclear weapons.

## "SANCTIONS ON THE TABLE"

The Natanz incident reportedly produced political tumult within Teheran, as some politicians urged foreign ministry leadership to pull out of the Vienna talks altogether. But Zarif said on April 12 that Iran remains unde-

terred in its quest for sanctions relief, insisting that the “desperate act” improved his envoy’s standing and calling on the Biden Administration to “remove all sanctions imposed, re-imposed, or relabeled since the adoption of the JCPOA.”

According to Brodsky, this demand is a “nonstarter,” regardless of the administration. Under the 2015 agreement, the US retains the right to impose sanctions on Iran for a wide array of non-nuclear behaviours – including its domestic human rights abuses, regional sponsorship of terrorism, and extensive ballistic missile program.

Some of the non-nuclear sanctions imposed under the Trump Administration target the same entities promised relief from nuclear sanctions under the deal, which affords Iran space to deem them illegitimate and request their removal as a condition of the negotiations. But it has been the consensus among American officials, dating back to the Obama Administration, that sanctions targeting non-nuclear transgressions are consistent with the text of the agreement.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said as much during his Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in January, when asked by Senator Ted Cruz if it would be in America’s national security interests to lift terrorism sanctions on Iran. “I do not, and I think that there is nothing – as I see it – inconsistent with making sure that we are doing everything possible, including the toughest possible

sanctions to deal with Iranian support for terrorism, its own engagement in that, and the nuclear agreement,” Blinken responded.

“Fast forward a couple of months to Vienna: those sanctions are on the table,” Richard Goldberg, senior adviser at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and former member of the US National Security Council, told the *Dispatch*. “The Biden Administration is making an argument that it is still in our national interests to knowingly give money for terrorism if it gets us strict limits on the nuclear program,” he added, pointing to vague language from State Department spokesperson Ned Price and others as evidence that the US is at least considering Teheran’s steep demand in exchange for a better deal.

## THE JCPOA’S EXPIRATION DATE

That tradeoff might be a compelling one, were its underlying premises true. But the JCPOA has an expiration date of 2030, at which point Iran could be on the precipice of weaponisation given its current enrichment level, undeclared nuclear activities, and aggressive nuclear research – the last of which began well before the Trump Administration’s withdrawal from the agreement in 2018.

On top of that, “parts of the broader architecture surrounding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action have already expired,” Brodsky explained. The conventional weapons embargo under UN Resolution 2231 – a Security Council measure tied to the JCPOA – ended last year.

In a letter to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in May 2020, a bipartisan group of 387 US House of Representatives members called on the Administration to extend the ban past its expiration date in October through “robust diplomacy.” President Trump opted instead to trigger snapback, a provision of Resolution 2231 allowing a participant state to terminate the JCPOA’s sanctions relief in the event of Iranian noncompliance.

When the bid failed to be effective, Trump issued an executive order threatening sanctions on any entities transferring arms – defensive or offensive – to or from the Islamic Republic. Biden has since notified the UN Security Council of the US’s reversed position on snapback, but the executive order stands. Whether the new Administration would enforce it remains to be seen, but there still exists overwhelming congressional consensus that some version of the expired embargo is an urgent necessity.

“Teheran’s aggressive regional activity in recent years argues for a long-term and comprehensive arms embargo against Iran. Iran’s regional actions pose a routine and lethal threat to the men, women, and children of the region, which includes citizens of dozens of countries,” Roule explained. “In this sense, Iran has declared war against the world, to include Americans. However, the international community has done little to punish Iran for a campaign that is unique in modern history.”

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The second component of the UN arms embargo, set to expire in October 2023, bans entities from supplying Iran with the equipment and technology required to develop nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. It also orders Iran to refrain from producing and testing missiles suited to the delivery of nuclear weapons. The United States called for snapback on the grounds that Iran was violating the latter requirement, but the international community diverges in its definitions of “nuclear-capable.” Either way, Teheran’s rapidly expanding arsenal of missiles – nuclear-capable or not – poses a serious threat to surrounding countries.

“Iran’s missile program is the largest and most diverse in the region. The size of this program exceeds Teheran’s defensive requirements and represents a tool of power projections as much as defence. Teheran has also been increasingly bold in its willingness to share this technology with proxies in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and perhaps even Iraq,” Roule said. “No country in history has been so aggressive in its violation of international proliferation norms and laws.”

As the primary targets of Teheran’s multifront proxy war, the US’s Gulf state partners have a vested interest in the outcome at Vienna. But they’ve largely been left out of the negotiating process. While Iran’s missile program isn’t a talking point, for example, sanctions relief and cash reparations that could go directly to funding regional terrorism are. “I think that some of it will end up in the hands of the IRGC or other entities, some of which are labelled terrorists,” then-US Secretary of State John Kerry conceded of the first deal, which Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and others were critical of from the time of its conception.

Their concerns are now compounded by a recent spike in missile and armed drone attacks aimed at Saudi Arabia by Iranian-backed groups, even as its Foreign Ministry extends a ceasefire to Yemen’s Houthis. Days after a barrage of rockets was intercepted over Riyadh in January, Biden temporarily halted arms sales to Saudi Arabia. A couple of weeks later, the State Department revoked the Houthis’ designation as a foreign terrorist organisation.

“In the wake of the international community’s weak response to Iran’s use of proxies to attack regional countries with missiles and drones, one cannot blame regional capitals if they doubt the US and international community will adopt a tough line against Teheran’s regional aggression or missile programs following any new nuclear deal,” Roule said.

Far from deterring the Islamic Republic’s hostilities in the region, the JCPOA “ushered in the most aggressive escalation of Iranian foreign policy in decades,” the American Enterprise Institute’s Danielle Pletka wrote in a recent story for the *Dispatch*.

## LONGER AND STRONGER?

Going into Vienna, the Biden Administration’s first priority is to restore the existing deal before following-on with additional negotiations to make it “stronger and longer” to avoid the repetition of past mistakes. But critics argue that their logic is seriously flawed.

“Once they have sanctions relief, why would they negotiate further?” Brodsky asked. “Number one, I’ve yet to see any evidence that the Administration has a plan as to how that’s going to happen. Number two, why would Iran ever agree to do so in the first place?”

While economic pressure and covert operations alone may not be sufficient to eliminate Iranian proliferation, they certainly up the costs. A May 2019 *Washington Post* report found that under the Trump Administration’s rigid sanctions regime, Iran’s reduced cash flow to Lebanese Hezbollah forced the terrorist organisation to fire or furlough large swaths of its fighters. And domestic anxiety over a contracting economy and surging poverty rate – in part the work of sanctions and in part the work of COVID-19 – squeezes the ayatollahs on their home turf.

Under the “maximum pressure” campaign, Goldberg argues, “there was an egg timer on how long this regime was going to be able to hold out on whatever terms the American Administration put forward. Otherwise it would likely manage its own collapse.”

While the language of “multilateralism” and “diplomacy” is pleasing to Western ears, the United States and allies must remember who’s seated at the other end of the negotiation table. Teheran has long exploited its nuclear program to push for concessions in other arenas, exerting its malign influence across the Middle East and beyond with near-impunity.

To that end, a singular focus on reviving the expiring JCPOA undermines the US’s ability to look beyond the silo of Iran’s nuclear program to create a lasting, bipartisan strategy.

“I think the obsession with this deal among Europeans, and among some in the United States, has really been a detriment to a broader conversation on the Iran challenge,” Brodsky explained.

“The JCPOA is not the end: The end is durable policy for the United States as it relates to Iran. And when I say durable – I mean bipartisan – because as the Trump Administration has shown, you cannot bind the United States to an agreement that lacks the support of the totality of a major political party in this country.”



*Charlotte Lawson is a reporter and Poynter-Koch fellow for the Dispatch, a new US-based digital media company providing reporting and commentary on politics, policy and culture. Reprinted from the Dispatch (thedispatch.com). © the Dispatch, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*





# BIDEN MUST MAKE IRAN COME CLEAN

by Richard Goldberg and Anthony Ruggiero

**P**resident Joe Biden's Iran policy centres on the notion of "compliance for compliance" — if Iran returns to compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the United States will follow suit and lift its sanctions on Iran. But with recent revelations that Teheran has been cheating on the deal from day one, Biden must compel Iran to fully account for all undeclared nuclear activities before easing sanctions. Otherwise, he will irreparably harm the international safeguards regime.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi announced on March 1 that the agency visited three sites in Iran last year and discovered undeclared nuclear material at two of them. The Institute for Science and International Security stated that one of the sites was the location of a pilot uranium conversion facility and the other was used to test components for Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Grossi also reported that for the last 18 months, "Iran has not provided the necessary, full and technically credible explanation" for why the IAEA found nuclear material at an additional site.

The Biden Administration faces an imminent threat to the IAEA's safeguards regime. Iran committed to the non-proliferation principles enshrined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the IAEA safeguards regime. A core element of these commitments is that non-nuclear weapon states, like Iran, commit to not develop nuclear weapons and the IAEA implements a system of safeguards that verify Iran is not using declared facilities to produce nuclear weapons.

When a country conducts nuclear activities at undeclared sites outside the safeguards system, it suggests that the country is attempting to produce materiel or components necessary for a nuclear weapon.

Teheran's repeated attempts to hide its activities are a troublesome sign that we do not yet know the full extent of those activities. If the Biden Administration sweeps this issue away, as the Obama Administration did to preserve the JCPOA, it will have devastating impacts on the IAEA safeguards regime.

A reporter recently asked State Department spokesperson Ned Price a simple question: Does Iran need to declare to the IAEA all its currently undeclared nuclear sites, materials and activities for the regime to be considered "back in compliance" with the JCPOA? Price's response was anything but simple: "...we know that Iran continues to take steps in excess of the JCPOA... So it's precisely why we put this offer on the table, to meet with the Iranians in the context of the P5+1, to try and get back to that point of joint full compliance with the JCPOA... And so the IAEA will be the judge as to whether Iran is or is not in full compliance."

Price's convoluted answer raises several concerns and could signal Biden's willingness to ignore Iran's potential breach of the NPT.

Iran's concealment of a secret nuclear archive — which Teheran likely kept to allow for a quick restart of its nuclear weapons program — and its undeclared nuclear activities occurred before the Iran-US JCPOA standoff.

Thus, Price's statement wrongly frames a US return to the JCPOA as a possible solution.

The Biden Administration must come to terms with this basic truth: The IAEA didn't know that Iran was concealing a nuclear archive, nuclear sites and nuclear materials until Israel's Mossad discovered the archive.

The JCPOA's verification regime failed, much as it did in the early 2000s when foreign sources tipped off the agency to Iran's secret nuclear facilities. An Iran-IAEA deal brokered in March could lead to Iran destroying three months of monitoring data that could further weaken IAEA monitoring.

The United States cannot have confidence in the IAEA's ability to fully verify Iran's activities until and unless the regime fully accounts for its undeclared work.

In 2015, the Obama Administration made a fatal error of allowing the JCPOA to proceed without forcing such a full accounting. The Biden Administration now has an opportunity to correct course.

If the Biden Administration returns to the JCPOA without resolving the problem of Iran's undeclared activities, it would send a dangerous message and green light to Teheran to advance a clandestine nuclear weapons program. North Korea will be taking notes given its own unresolved nuclear activities, and countries eyeing expanded nuclear programs, like Saudi Arabia, may learn the same lesson. A nuclear arms race in the Middle East could follow.

President Biden should deliver a clear message: There will be no sanctions relief for Iran without a full account-



US President Biden needs to recognise that the JCPOA's verification regime has been proven ineffective (Credit: Whitehouse.gov)

ing. There should be no going back to a nuclear deal based on nuclear deception. **AIR**

*Richard Goldberg is a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) and previously served as Director for Countering Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction for the US National Security Council. Anthony Ruggiero is a senior fellow at FDD and previously served in the US Government for more than 19 years. © FDD (fdd.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

## THE IRAN-ISRAEL WAR AT SEA

by Farzin Nadimi

**O**n April 13, explosions rocked the Israeli-owned car-carrier ship *Hyperion Ray* near Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. A week earlier, explosions badly damaged the *Saviz*, a converted cargo ship that Iran permanently moored in the Red Sea to serve as a suspected intelligence collection outpost and floating armoury. Together, the two attacks appear to be the latest ripostes in Iran and Israel's long-running, low-intensity shadow war.

The maritime front of this undeclared conflict has intensified since 2019 due in large part to an increase in Iran's illicit oil smuggling efforts, which are aimed at funding Lebanese Hezbollah, facilitating the foreign operations of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), and propping up Syria's Assad regime.

Of course, Iran had used ships to send weapons and ammunition to groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad long before 2019, with Israel seizing at least four of them between 2002 and 2014.

Yet Teheran's desire to cement its military presence in Syria and its supply lines to Hezbollah led to more systematic illegal shipments of oil products, supplies, and, at times, arms. In response, Israel began a more concerted naval disruption campaign with apparent support from Western allies and, perhaps, Arab Gulf states.

Israel has never publicly accepted responsibility for these attacks against Iranian ships bound for Syria, but media reports and unofficial disclosures have essentially confirmed its role, and Iran's hand in recent attacks against

Israeli ships is clear as well. Both sides seem keen to contain their attacks, but the situation could nonetheless escalate — especially now that de facto military vessels like the *Saviz* are apparently being targeted amid new attacks on other fronts (e.g., the April 11 sabotage operation against Iran's Natanz nuclear facility).

### MARITIME DISRUPTION CAMPAIGN

In November 2019, Iran disclosed that three of its tankers (*Happiness 1*, *Helm*, and *Sabiti*) had been attacked off Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast within a period of six months.

Six additional Iranian vessels may have been targeted in 2020, according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* report. In all, the report noted, "Israel has targeted at least a dozen vessels bound for Syria," most carrying Iranian oil and some carrying weapons and material for Hezbollah's precision missile program.

Similarly, the *New York Times* reported in March that the Israeli Navy's Flotilla-13 commando unit had carried out at least 10 such attacks using mines and other weaponry, primarily in the Red Sea but also in the eastern Mediterranean. Days later, the Israeli news outlet *Haaretz* expanded on these reports, asserting that the "economic warfare" operation included several dozen attacks and had cost Iran billions of dollars.

After the spate of attacks, some Iranian ships began to take the much longer route circumnavigating Africa, causing supply disruptions and fuel rationing in Syria.

The tit-for-tat nature of the incidents has become more obvious in 2021. On February 25, two explosions blew holes in the Israeli-owned car-carrier *MV Helios Ray* as it transited the Gulf of Oman. The Israeli Government blamed Iran for the incident and implied it would respond.



At least 10 vessels illegally smuggling oil or weaponry to Syria have reportedly been attacked (Credit: Shutterstock)

On March 10, the Iranian container vessel *Shahr e Kord* was hit by an "explosive object" as it neared the Syrian port of Latakia, causing a fire onboard and destroying two containers carrying parts for Caterpillar heavy construction equipment.

The apparent Iranian response came on March 25, when the Israeli container ship *Lori* was attacked while under way from Haifa to India in the middle of the Arabian Sea.

Then came the April 6 strike on the *Saviz*, whose strategic location near Eritrea's Dahlak Archipelago had long enabled it to support Yemen's Houthi rebels in their fight against the Saudi-led coalition, among other suspected roles. The *Hyperion Ray* attack off the Emirati coast is the latest known incident.

Additional incidents seem related, many of them involving other countries, target types, or tactics:

- Egypt's October 2018 deflagging and seizure of the *Sea Shark*, an Emirati-owned vessel carrying crude oil from Iran's Kharg Island terminal, presumably to Syria;
- The June 2019 and January 2020 sabotage of Syrian underwater oil pipelines connecting offshore terminals to the Baniyas refinery, with both attacks occurring right before Iranian tankers arrived to offload;
- Britain's July 2019 seizure of the *Grace 1* in Gibraltar, which later delivered its oil to Syria after being released;
- The May 2020 cyberattack on Iran's Bandar Abbas port facility, widely viewed as Israel's response to Iranian cyberattacks on its water system.

In a seemingly calculated effort by both sides to avoid escalation, none of the targeted ships were significantly damaged (though explosions forced at least two vessels to return to Iran). Indeed, some of the attacks showed careful, pinpoint precision, such as the apparent targeted destruction of specific containers onboard the *Shahr e Kord*.

In May 2020, the US Government issued guidance to the maritime industry on how to address illicit shipping and sanctions evasion practices pursued by the IRGC, Hezbollah, and other actors. Within months, the combined effects of international pressure and Israeli military efforts had disrupted Iran's illicit oil smuggling operations so much that the Russian Navy began escorting Iranian vessels in order to maintain supply lines to the Assad regime.

In October, for example, the Iranian tanker *Samah* reportedly turned off its transponder after transiting the Suez Canal and enjoyed the protection of Russian vessels as it crossed the Mediterranean to Syria.

## IMPLICATIONS

Thus far, the maritime conflict between Iran and Israel has remained at a low-intensity grey-zone level below the threshold of declared hostilities, with both sides seeking to avoid escalation that might disrupt their respective shipping lanes and economies. Yet both countries have

substantial special naval warfare capabilities and experience, so neither is likely to settle for anything less than maritime superiority. The pace of their attacks has already increased and can be expected to accelerate further, while also expanding to a larger geographical area and potentially employing additional systems and tactics.

The *Saviz* incident in particular showed the risk of escalation. Despite the vessel's technical classification as a civilian cargo ship, the attack represented the first operation against a de facto military target, which might compel Iran to retaliate in kind against Israeli naval forces. Moreover, the incident occurred less than 160 kilometres from the passing USS *Eisenhower* carrier group, and afterward, Iran made unsubstantiated claims that other countries may have been involved, pointing to the risk of Washington being dragged into a fight.

Ultimately, the extent of the damage to the *Saviz* might require substantial shoreside repairs and possible withdrawal to Iran. If so, Teheran may decide to maintain the station by deploying one of its new, more heavily armed floating sea bases such as the *Shahid Roudaki* (IRGC Navy) or *Makran* (Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, or IRIN). That would mean a substantial, formal Iranian military presence in the Red Sea – a scenario that Israel and other regional powers would find very hard to swallow.

AIR

*Farzin Nadimi is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, specialising in the security and defence affairs of Iran and the Gulf region. © Washington Institute (www.washingtoninstitute.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

## THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHINA-IRAN DEAL

by Erielle Davidson and Ari Cicurel

**O**n March 27, China and Iran announced a 25-year "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," which seeks to increase military, defence, and security cooperation between Iran and China, to the consternation of both countries' adversaries.

The pact does not signal the materialisation of an Iran-China alliance but instead points to a broader Chinese strategy to grow its influence in the Middle East. Ironically, this comes at a time when a bipartisan consensus has emerged in Washington that the United States should reduce its engagement in the Middle East to address the challenge posed by a rising China.

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The Iran-China deal evinces that the Middle East is an important arena for the emerging great-power competition between the US and China. The United States now needs to prevent China from strengthening US adversaries and gaining predatory influence over US partners in the region.

For the Iranians, the timing of the deal could not be more apropos. Teheran is desperate for cash after US sanctions have crippled the country's economy and Teheran hopes the pact with China will cushion the blow from US sanctions. With China as a supposed purchaser of Iranian oil exports for several decades to come, the Biden Administration's efforts to drag Teheran to the negotiating table will prove much harder.

Meanwhile, China is to gain both oil to fuel its rapidly growing economy and a regional partner that shares its interest in curbing the global reach of US power.

The immediate impact of the deal, thus, might be China unintentionally facilitating further Iranian nuclear enrichment by undermining US pressure. But its destabilising effects are unlikely to end there, for China's interest extends across the region.

**“As Beijing deliberately pursues a balance of power in the region to rival Western countries, the onus will fall on the Biden Administration to challenge China's Middle Eastern machinations”**

two hundred million doses of China's Sinopharm vaccine. Meanwhile, Chinese state-owned companies are expanding investments in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

This increasing pattern of Chinese regional engagement, coupled with generous, if not entirely realistic, promises of foreign investment comes at a time when the United States is reducing and “rebalancing” its presence in the Middle East. Traditional US partners, seeing Iran benefit from Chinese largesse and their own ties to Washington cool, might begin to view China as an increasingly attractive alternative.

China's activities in the Middle East present a risk to the United States because China plays the field in a wholly realpolitik fashion – it may support America's enemies (see Iran), or it may court, or attempt to court, US allies (see Israel). Beijing has no allegiances. It seeks



both to strengthen US adversaries and steal its traditional partners.

Washington is not helpless when it comes to containing Chinese influence in the region. The United States needs a deliberate strategy to mitigate China's quest for greater influence in the Middle East, one that seeks to limit Chi-

nese influence among US partners and thwart Chinese efforts to strengthen US adversaries.

Firstly, Washington should work with its partners to limit Beijing's access to critical infrastructure, intellectual property, and technologies among US partners. As our organisation, the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, recently recommended for Israel, this should include both empowering partners to develop robust oversight regimes for foreign direct investment and exports and offering competitive sources of financing for investment-hungry Middle Eastern firms.

Simultaneously, the United States should recognise it cannot block all Chinese regional economic activity and instead should encourage China to invest in building the region's non-critical infrastructure and in tackling shared challenges, like global warming.

In dealing with Chinese attempts to build ties with US adversaries, several “soft” tactics also might limit China's ability to form stable ties with regimes. For example, vis-à-vis Teheran, the United States could launch a combination of cyber, information, and psychological operations centred on revealing privately held internal tensions between the Chinese and Iranian governments, which might include pointing out China's horrific genocide of its Uighur population and the hypocrisy of the Muslim regimes that tolerate it.

On the information side, a plethora of voices have criticised the ambiguity and secretive nature of the negotiating process, and the United States should amplify those voices across various international outlets. A coordinated campaign of this nature would help to undermine the sincerity of the pact and, in turn, the ability of each party to rely on each other in the long term.

As Beijing deliberately pursues a balance of power in the region to rival Western countries, the onus will fall on the Biden Administration to challenge China's Middle Eastern machinations, which range from intervening with America's traditional partners to emboldening US adversaries. The China-Iran deal is just the tip of the iceberg.

AIR

*Erielle Davidson and Ari Cicurel are senior policy analysts at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America's Gunder Center for Defense and Strategy. This article originally published in the National Interest ([www.nationalinterest.org](http://www.nationalinterest.org)). © Jewish Institute for National Security of America ([www.JINSA.org](http://www.JINSA.org)), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

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# Catch-'21

## Israel's seemingly impossible coalition maths

by Amotz Asa-El

Israel emerged from yet another election on March 23 with its two-year political deadlock fully intact.

In fact, the already complex plot thickened further, spotlighting two kingmakers who, despite having nothing to do with each other, might jointly write a new chapter in Israel's political history.

The fourth election in just over two years was as inconclusive as the previous three. The ruling Likud party's result, 30 Knesset seats, is far higher than that of the next largest party, the centrist *Yesh Atid* ("There is a Future"), which won 17. However, Likud and its three religious satellite parties command only 52 of the legislature's 120 seats.

At the same time, the rest of the new Knesset cannot easily produce a coalition either, since its components seem unable to unite around any one agreed candidate for prime minister. Indeed, *Yesh Atid* leader Yair Lapid, the next highest vote getter, enjoys even less parliamentary backing to become PM than Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu.

That is why President Reuven Rivlin asked Netanyahu to attempt to form a coalition on April 5. Israeli law gives Netanyahu 28 days to complete this task – which can then potentially be extended by another 14 days, if necessary, at the president's discretion.

Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, was thus saddled with a task even he has never faced before: attempting to pull sworn antagonists together into a governing coalition, in the brave hope he could somehow keep such a coalition intact despite the forces of repulsion constantly threatening to tear it apart.

The two main antagonists he needs to unite for this bold experiment are the Religious Zionism party, a federation of far-right movements with six seats, and the United Arab List (UAL), an Islamist non-Zionist party with four.

Religious Zionism's head, former transport minister Bezalel Smotrich, has said that under no circumstances will he join a coalition backed by the UAL, which he says includes supporters of Hamas. Even more vociferous in rejecting any cooperation with UAL has been another Religious Zionism lawmaker, Itamar Ben-Gvir, a virulently anti-Palestinian disciple of the late racist extremist Rabbi

Meir Kahane. Ben-Gvir was elected as the sole representative of the far right *Otzma Yehudit* ("Jewish Power") party under the umbrella of Religious Zionism's electoral list as part of a pre-election deal.

Ironically, the Jewish and Muslim conservatism embodied by Religious Zionism and the UAL respectively entail some common denominators – for instance shared opposition to LGBTQ rights.

In addition to this hostile duo, to form a government Netanyahu also needs former defence minister Naftali Bennett and his *Yamina* ("Rightward") party.

Bennett won only seven seats, but unlike all other parties, did not commit himself to any post-election coalition, though he has said he would prefer a purely right-wing government should one be obtainable.

Having thus been handed one reasonable opening for



Netanyahu (left) needs support from Yamina party leader Naftali Bennett (right), but by ditching Netanyahu, Bennett may be able to become PM himself (Credit: Ashernet/ IGPO)

negotiation, Netanyahu met with Bennett, hoping to set aside years of bad blood between himself and a man who was once his chief of staff. Reportedly, Netanyahu offered Bennett the defence ministry, and his party colleague Ayelet Shaked the foreign ministry, a political bonanza for a faction that won barely six percent of the vote this election.

As of this writing, it isn't clear what Netanyahu would offer his prospective Arab partner, UAL leader Mansour Abbas. Pundits suggest Netanyahu will probably try to negotiate an arrangement to have them support the coalition from outside the cabinet, making do with chairmanships of parliamentary committees and assorted budget allocations.

Between them, Bennett and Abbas – one a hi-tech millionaire, former IDF commando, and modern Orthodox Jew, the other an Islamist preacher and Hebrew University-trained dentist – seem best placed to snatch personal victory from a crisis that is otherwise a worrying defeat for everyone, both for the politicians and for the country they purport to lead.

Abbas' victory lies in the taboo he broke.





Until now, Israel's Arab-dominated parties consistently avoided entering into coalition negotiations, arguing that such a move would legitimise Israeli policies toward the Palestinians which they decry. Abbas, 46, broke with this pattern, and ran independently with a promise to look after Israeli Arabs' communal issues, which he said his former colleagues neglected, by being ready to enter fully into the argy-bargy of Israeli coalition politics.

Faced with a choice between this and more traditional Arab parties, 40% of Arab voters opted for Abbas' line. At the same time, Netanyahu's eagerness to harness Abbas as a source of vital political support legitimises similar arrangements with anti-Zionist Arab-dominated parties by all of Israel's mainstream political players.

It now is clear that, one way or another, Israeli Arab parties will soon be part of an Israeli government, if not this time around then in elections to come.

Israeli Arabs make up one-fifth of the population, and while their voter turnout rates have usually been lower than the population average, in recent decades they have voted overwhelmingly for Arab-led parties which rejected collaboration with the Israeli mainstream, and thus effectively remained removed from the centres of political power.

Israeli Arab entry into governing coalitions would be a third major turning point in the evolution of Israel's political system.

The first such transition happened in 1967, when the previously sidelined Menachem Begin – and the right-wing forces that he represented – were first admitted into an Israeli government. The second happened a decade later, when ultra-Orthodox politicians joined Begin's government, despite being ostensibly non-Zionist, subsequently becoming a fixture in Israel's corridors of power. Curiously, the ultra-Orthodox model of political participation to gain communal benefits is what inspired Abbas' move to seek similar arrangements.

Bennett's personal victory is different, as it represents neither an idea nor a community, but an individual – himself.

Raised in an English-speaking home by parents who moved to Israel from San Francisco before he was born, the 49-year-old Bennett is reminiscent of Netanyahu not only in his unaccented English, but also in his eloquence, media skills and impressive record of military service.

Bennett's electoral performance has hardly matched that of his former boss, but current circumstances seem likely to multiply his political power far beyond his party's nominal size.

Bennett's status as kingmaker, though new to him personally, is not unique – coalition governments in many

countries frequently empower small parties with the ability to make or break parliamentary majorities. What is unique about Bennett's current situation is that it may allow him, the leader of a miniscule faction, to nonetheless become prime minister.

Reportedly, this is what Lapid is offering Bennett in return for his rejection of Netanyahu's offers. More specifically,

Bennett and Lapid would rotate the role of PM, with Bennett getting first shot at the premiership.

Still, when it came time to formally present to President Rivlin his prime-ministerial recommendation, Bennett supported neither Netanyahu nor Lapid, but himself. It was a setback for Lapid, as was the failure to win backing from another small right-wing faction, New Hope.

Headed by former education minister Gideon Sa'ar, that six-member faction supported no candidate. Sa'ar and Bennett's refusal to formally back Lapid raised hopes within the Likud that Netanyahu could manage to patch together a coalition, possibly by persuading Sa'ar to support a Netanyahu-led government without taking cabinet seats, or in exchange for a deal to elect Sa'ar to the largely symbolic post of President in June, when Rivlin's seven-year term expires.

Sa'ar has flatly rejected all such ideas, sticking to his election promise not to join a government headed by Netanyahu.

Another bad sign for Netanyahu's effort came on April 19, when the Likud lost a key Knesset vote regarding the Arrangements Committee – which controls the Knesset's agenda until a government is formed. The UAL voted with the bloc opposing Netanyahu to give them a majority on this important committee.

A silent factor in the political equation is the good personal rapport between Bennett, Lapid and Sa'ar, all of whom are from the same generation and have worked well together over the years as ministers and lawmakers.

Some pundits even assume that the three collectively want to see Netanyahu fail to assemble his coalition, and then use Netanyahu's unsuccessful efforts to negotiate the participation of the UAL in a government to legitimise their own inclusion of UAL or other Arab factions in an alternative broad-based coalition.

In such a case, the new government would include, besides Lapid's 17-seat Yesh Atid, Bennett's seven-seat Yamina and Saar's six-seat New Hope, Benny Gantz and his eight-member Blue and White party, with Gantz likely remaining defence minister; former defence minister Avigdor



Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid may seek a deal to rotate the prime ministership with Naftali Bennett, if Netanyahu cannot form government (Source: Twitter)

**“One way or another, Israeli Arab parties will soon be part of an Israeli government, if not this time around then in elections to come”**

Lieberman and his seven-member *Yisrael Beteinu* (“Israel is Our Home”) party, with Lieberman possibly becoming finance minister; Labor and the left wing Meretz party, with seven and six members respectively, and lastly, Abbas’ UAL faction, possibly also with some members of the rival Joint Arab List.

The foreign minister would be Lapid, who would then swap positions with Bennett after a rotation in two years. Saar would likely be justice minister, a pivotal position considering the corruption trial Netanyahu is currently facing, and potential efforts to pass legislation designed to affect Netanyahu’s legal situation.

Another way out of the current mess that has been touted is to make Netanyahu the next president – the one political role in Israel that by law makes its bearer immune from criminal prosecution while in office.

However, Israeli presidents are elected by a secret ballot in the Knesset, and Netanyahu reportedly would want that changed to an open ballot, lest prospective coalition partners secretly fail to vote for him. However, Bennett has said he will oppose any personal legislation along those lines.

Lastly, there is the option that Netanyahu’s own Likud party colleagues will ask him to make way for another leader, having failed to deliver victory four consecutive times. However, the Likud is a party that has never in its long history deposed its leader, so such a prospect seems almost unthinkable.

Then again, until recently, no one in Israel imagined four elections in two years, nor a prime minister appearing in court in the morning, negotiating a new coalition in the evening, and in the interim running the country, as Netanyahu is currently doing. Evidently, there is a first time for everything.

AIR

## THE PERILOUS PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS

by Elliott Abrams

In January of this year, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas did something that had not been done since 2006: scheduled an election. Indeed, he scheduled three: an election on May 22 for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), the parliament for the West Bank that has been in suspension since 2007; an election on July 31 for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority (PA); and an election on August 31 for the Palestinian National Council (PNC), the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s (PLO) own sort-of parliamentary body. Whether any of the three will actually take place remained entirely uncertain as of this writing (in late April 2021).



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

To understand why these elections may not come off, and why it may be better that they do not, requires an excursion into those 2006 elections.

In October 2004 Yasser Arafat died and Mahmoud Abbas (his loyal, long-time aide) was selected his successor as Fatah Party and PLO Chairman by the PLO big-wigs. Abbas did not need a presidential election to become PA president, but he wanted one. He wanted the legitimacy that a reasonably free election victory could bring him personally, and he wanted to show the US and others that post-Arafat, Palestinians were capable of democratic self-rule. That presidential election was held in January 2005 and it was in fact generally regarded as a reasonable effort. People could and did campaign against Abbas, who ran as the candidate of the ruling Fatah Party and got about two-thirds of the votes (not the 90-plus percent we were accustomed to seeing in many elections in Arab lands).

Encouraged, Abbas and other PA and Fatah leaders decided next to hold parliamentary elections – for the PLC. These were initially scheduled for the summer of 2005 but postponed until Jan. 25 2006 due to incompetence and internal divisions within Fatah. In those 2006 elections, Hamas was the victor with 44% of the popular vote versus 41% for Fatah. But because Fatah foolishly ran multiple candidates in some districts, and because Hamas was smart

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enough to run many attractive candidates (often choosing people not for their militancy but for their level of education or civic work), Hamas had a big victory when it came to PLC seats: 74 out of the total 132 seats and a clear majority.

The United States immediately stated that it would not work with a terrorist group, Hamas. And it went further: because the PA had a partly parliamentary system where the prime minister and other ministers reported to the PLC, the United States refused to deal with the prime minister or with any ministry. It continued to deal with President Abbas, who had separate and independent powers, and with other independent players in the Palestinian system – governors of regions, the intelligence services, the judiciary, and the monetary authority.

This awkward and frozen situation lasted until June 2007, when Hamas took full control of Gaza and President Abbas, in the face of this Hamas ‘coup,’ disbanded the PLC and began to rule by decree – as he has now for 14 years.

These events are worth review because history might repeat itself should the parliamentary election come off and be won by Hamas – or even if Hamas makes a strong showing. Because the Palestinian electoral system has been changed to proportional representation, no single party will win the number of seats Hamas got last time. But this also means that even if defeated by Fatah, Hamas (which according to polls in March might win 20-30% of the vote) is likely to have a strong role in governing the PA. Thus, the fundamental problems that presented themselves in 2006 remain: can there be a democratic election in a non-democratic entity like the PA, half run by Hamas and half by Fatah, neither part run democratically? And what are the implications for Palestinian politics, and for Israel, Jordan, and the so-called ‘peace process’ should Hamas win a majority or a strong minority presence?

## TERRORISTS AND ELECTIONS

We should begin with the question of participation in a supposedly peaceful, democratic election by an armed terrorist group. This was a contentious issue in 2006, and the relevant parties united in the international ‘Quartet’ – the

US, EU, Russia, and the United Nations in the person of Secretary General Kofi Annan – fudged the issue. Despite strong urgings to bar Hamas by some Israeli officials, including then-foreign minister Tzipi Livni, and by some US democracy activists concerned about the precedent being set, the US Administration and the whole Quartet did not wish to bar Hamas from running. The decision was in essence to allow Hamas to run but not to participate in governing if it won – unless it agreed to the three Quartet demands. The Quartet spoke on Jan. 30, 2006 – notably, five days *after* the Hamas victory:

The Quartet congratulated the Palestinian people on an electoral process that was free, fair and secure... the Quartet concluded that it was inevitable that future assistance to any new Government would be reviewed by donors against that Government’s commitment to the principles of non-violence, recognition of Israel, and acceptance of previous agreements and obligations ...

Today, in 2021, Hamas has still not agreed to those three demands: commit to non-violence (instead of terror), recognise Israel, and accept previous Israel/PLO agreements (such as the Oslo Accords). While it is not likely that Hamas will win a majority if elections are held on May 22, it will surely win seats and have a place in the PLC. Will the United States, EU, and Russia accept such a role for a terrorist group in the governing of the PA?

In 2006, Russia and some European figures sought to persuade Hamas to make a few gestures, such as employing softer language, that could be used to argue they were beginning to move toward compliance with the Quartet demands. Hamas refused, but perhaps in 2021 Russia or the EU would have lower standards as to what is a sufficient gesture, and perhaps Hamas would be slightly more flexible.

Perhaps – but Hamas is running some convicted terrorists as parliamentary candidates this time around. Nael Barghouti was convicted in 1978 of murdering an Israeli army officer. Jamal Abu al-Hija was convicted of involvement in car bomb attacks that killed 11 and injured scores, and is serving nine life sentences in an Israeli prison. Naed al-Fakhouri was convicted of recruiting suicide bombers. These are not the only examples.

Why might Hamas want these elections to come off? One of its key goals in 2006 and still now in 2021 is to play a legitimised role in Palestinian governance. Perhaps an even larger goal was and is to gain entry into the PLO. The PLO is after all considered by the United Nations to be ‘the sole legitimate voice of the Palestinian people’ and is charged with managing foreign relations for that people – those who live in the West Bank and Gaza or who live in camps in Lebanon or Jordan, and indeed those living anywhere in the world. It is the PLO, not the PA, that has observer status in the United Nations. Arafat kept Hamas – and other groups such as Islamic Jihad – out of the PLO



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PA President Mahmoud Abbas made the decision to call elections – and it will be up to him to decide whether to cancel or postpone them (Credit: Shutterstock)

in order to maintain his and Fatah's control there. These 2021 elections will give Hamas a definite beachhead. For example, all PLC deputies will automatically be deputies in the PNC, the PLO parliamentary body, as well.

That is one reason many observers pray for the election to be called off. From the US, Israeli, or Jordanian point of view, these 2021 elections are a nightmare. For Jordan, still in the throes of Hashemite family clashes, a new Hamas presence in the PLC and more importantly in the West Bank would mean nothing but trouble. The real fear in Amman is that Hamas would increase its influence on Jordanian Islamists, enticing them into tougher anti-Israel and anti-Hashemite stands or even into the use of violence. For Israel, which deals with the PA every day on issues from vaccinations to anti-terrorist cooperation, a Hamas presence in the PA and in the West Bank would similarly make an already extremely difficult *modus vivendi* far harder to maintain. For Washington, the Biden Administration's efforts to rebuild relations with the PA would face an impossible burden if the PA and PLC contain an officially designated terrorist group.

## ABBAS' THINKING

Given all these dangers, why is Abbas going forward? As in 2006, there is a significant legitimacy issue. He has now been ruling by decree for 14 years and the PA establishment in Ramallah, infamous for corruption and inefficiency, is not only viewed dimly by governments around the world but by its own people as well. An election would arguably inject some legitimacy into the system, even given the problems it would also create.

But there is another motivation, one that was entirely absent in 2006: the rapprochement between Israel and many Arab governments. Never before, or certainly never since Arafat backed Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, have Arab capitals been less solicitous of the Palestinian leadership and less supportive of their cause. The election may be a bid by Abbas to win more Euro-

pean and American backing by showing a commitment to democratic forms; he may think it is possible thereby to reinvigorate the moribund 'peace process.' This is a huge miscalculation, because for most officials in Jerusalem and Washington the increased role for Hamas will more than balance the desirability of ending Abbas' rule by decree.

There is another factor related to the election that Abbas may not intend but may reluctantly and realistically accept: it would be an opening stage in the succession struggle that will come when Abbas, now 86 and in mid-dling health, dies. Abbas, copying his mentor Arafat, has never allowed a probable successor in his Fatah, PA, and PLO roles to emerge. But now would-be successors are on the political stage, and if there is an election and the PLC is reopened, its speaker would become acting president of the PA upon Abbas' death.

## THE PARTIES

Thinking and planning for that day has split Fatah in ways that PLC elections did not do in 2006. As of the day candidacies had to be registered, March 31, there were more than 30 tickets running, including one for Hamas and three that emerged from Fatah. One Fatah group is the 'official' list, representing Abbas and the PA/PLO/Fatah establishment. A second represents Mohammed Dahlan, the Gaza-born figure expelled from Fatah in 2011 and living since in the UAE. The third list is in some ways the most interesting and most dangerous for the 'official' ticket and for the rulers in Ramallah. It is led by Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah hero who is serving five life sentences for murder in an Israeli prison, and Nasser al-Kidwa, a nephew of Arafat's and former Palestinian UN envoy and foreign minister. The Barghouti-al-Kidwa parliamentary ticket is headed by Barghouti's wife, standing in for him. Polls have repeatedly shown that if Barghouti were to run for PA president, he would handily defeat both Abbas and the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh. If either this Barghouti list or the Hamas list outpolls Fatah's official group, it will be a devastating embarrassment for Abbas and his cronies.

## WILL THE ELECTIONS HAPPEN?

It is apparent, then, why observers have wondered all year whether Abbas would in the end call the elections off. Does he really want a coalition government with Hamas, should the various Fatah and independent tickets not win a majority of seats? Does he really want a presidential election in July that could force him from office?

There are always excuses for cancellation, ranging from a new COVID outbreak to a refusal by Israel to allow Palestinians in east Jerusalem to vote. As to the latter, there are always acceptable technical fixes if they are wanted – but difficulties in Jerusalem always offer a good excuse to cancel the election if that is the result desired in Ramallah.

But what if the PLC elections are in fact cancelled?

This decision lies solely in Abbas' hands, and it is likely that today he feels trapped by bad choices. While such an outcome avoids the many problems noted here, it deepens the crisis of legitimacy for Abbas, who would still be ruling by decree after 14 years. Cancelling the presidential and PNC elections as well makes that problem even worse, leaving Palestinians with no institutional political life, an 86-year-old president-for-life, and no way to address the Fatah-Hamas split either now or when Abbas dies.

Which is worse, then: that outcome, or a set of elections that legitimise Hamas' role in Palestinian political institutions while it maintains its terrorist activity – competing, as the saying goes, with ballots *and* bullets? The answer is clear for what seems to be the majority of observers in Washington and Jerusalem, and likely in Arab capitals as well.

## CONCLUSION

The fundamental problem remains what it was in 2006. Neither of the two Palestinian entities, the West Bank and Gaza, is democratically governed, and Gaza is governed by a terrorist organisation that has shown no sign of being willing to abandon violence. These elections may come off, but they will have moved the Palestinian people no closer to being governed peacefully by democratic political parties, nor will they have reinvigorated the 'peace process'.

Indeed, if Hamas comes to take an official role in the West Bank and in the PLO, the establishment of a Palestinian state will — for better or for worse — be even less realistic than it appears now.

As in Lebanon due to the role of Hezbollah, Palestinians face what is for now an impossible task: coping with an armed, aggressive terrorist group that seeks to use political mechanisms to enhance its power but will not disarm and submit itself to democratic control.

Elections cannot solve that problem.

AIR

*Elliott Abrams is Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. He was Deputy National Security Advisor to George W. Bush. © Fathom Magazine (www.fathom-journal.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

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# IRAN'S PROPAGANDA ORGANISATION IN AUSTRALIA

by Ran Porat

One of Iran's international propaganda organisations is called the *Al-Tajamu al-Islami Wa-Alarabi Li-daam Khayar al-Muqawama*, or Al-Tajamu for short ("Arab and Islamic Union in Support of the Resistance Option"). Al-Tajamu has ties to terrorist organisations across the Middle East, and what's more is operating in Australia.

A report by Dr. Michael Barak, Senior Researcher at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) in Herzliya, Israel, explains that Al-Tajamu is "A pro-Iranian international platform for leveraging the axis of resistance against the USA, Israel and their allies. The pro-Iranian organisation based in Lebanon has close ties with the Hezbollah movement and Shi'ite militias in Iraq and Yemen as well as with other terrorist organisations such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The organisation has been able to cultivate a global network of religious and secular radical organisations and individuals who share a similar worldview and common interests, led by a struggle against imperialism and Zionism."

This exposé, the first in a two-part series, reveals details about the leaders and activities of Al-Tajamu in Australia.

## AL-TAJAMU AUSTRALIA HEAD HUSSEIN DIRANI

The head of the Australian branch of Al-Tajamu is Sydney resident Haj Hussein Dirani. He also serves as Vice President of the Australian-Iranian Friendship Association (AIFA) and heads the Australian office of the Ahlul-Bait World Assembly — an Iranian-based international Shi'ite organisation dedicated to spreading Iranian regime founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's theological ideas.

Dirani uses every platform available to him to aggressively disseminate official propaganda messages dictated from Teheran. These include antisemitic claims, fervent anti-Israel attacks, conspiracy theories, rejection of Western society and values and praising Iran-affiliated terrorist organisations.

For example, in February, AIFA's Facebook page hosted an antisemitic 'analysis', claiming the story told at the Jewish festival of Purim is propaganda from Israel and "global Zionism", also alleging that the "descendants and survivors of the Jews liberated by Cyrus the Great from Babylon are modern-day Palestinians [...] and the Ashkenazi Jews, of

whom Benjamin Netanyahu is one, are in fact not Jews. They are fake and false, were treacherous, and their ancestors were forcibly converted to Judaism in the seventh century!”

AIFA’s Facebook page also posted a video with former British politician and conspiracy theory fan George Galloway claiming that the West created the Islamic State terrorist organisation.



Al-Tajamu’s logos

As a political analyst for the official Iranian *Mehr* news agency, Dirani engages in antisemitic and hateful rhetoric. On *Mehr* he talks about “global Zionism” and “the Zionist entity that usurped the Arab and Islamic land of Palestine.” Dirani argued on *Mehr* that Washington is run by the “deep state” and that “The Great Satan remains America” and that President Joe Biden “chose ten people in his new administration who are extremist Zionists, their first and last loyalty [is] to the Zionist entity.”

Dirani claimed that Israel was behind the explosion at the Beirut Port in August 2020: “I can say that the Zionist entity carried out an aggressive, pre-emptive offensive operation against Lebanon without bearing responsibility for achieving its major and strategic objectives of preventing or dissuading the resistance from the inevitable response, destroying Lebanon’s vital nerve.”

On his Facebook feed, Dirani shared an article on March 31 by Egyptian extremist Naram Sargon promoting the conspiracy theory that the cargo ship *Ever Given*, which had blocked the Suez Canal in late March, was a “Suicide Ship” that deliberately got itself stuck as part of a mega US-EU evil plot to “assassinate” the canal and promote the use of an imaginary Israeli “Ben Gurion” Canal instead.

Coincidentally, the same article had been published two days earlier on an Australian Arabic language portal, Farah News – notorious for spreading antisemitism and conspiracy theories from Middle Eastern sources.

Expressing support for the Iranian-backed Houthi militia in Yemen, Dirani

published on March 12 a Facebook post with an image displaying Houthi weapons (which are in fact Iranian). Under the image Dirani stated: “Photos showing Yemeni ballistic missiles and drones made with blessed Yemeni hands. Made in Yemen. Horror and terror reached Tel Aviv. As for the princes of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, they put on diapers.”

## ANDERSON AND THE CCHS

Tim Anderson is Al-Tajamu Australia’s General Coordinator. A fervent anti-Israel activist, Anderson was fired from his role as a lecturer at the University of Sydney after superimposing a swastika over an Israeli flag during a lecture. He often seems to act as a mouthpiece for Teheran, and supports Hezbollah, and the Syrian and North Korean regimes.

Anderson is the director of The Centre for Counter Hegemonic Studies (CCHS), formed, its website says, out of “concern that many western academic bodies constrain, censor and marginalise counter-hegemonic or anti-imperial research and discussion, due to their close ties with government and corporate sponsors.”

This outfit is used by Anderson and his colleagues to spread anti-Israeli messages and Iranian propaganda (for example, by republishing posts from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei).

Recently, Anderson repeatedly attacked Melbourne University academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert, who was imprisoned in Iran for two years after she was falsely accused of espionage. Anderson has repeated the Iranian lie that Moore-Gilbert was an Israeli spy, claiming that she assisted in organising “repeated terrorist murders.” Similar accusations against Moore-Gilbert were published on the CCHS website.



From right to left: Al-Tajamu Australia operatives Jay Tharappel and Tim Anderson, Syria’s ambassador to Lebanon Ali Abdul Karim, Al-Tajamu Secretary General in Lebanon Yihya Ghaddar, Al-Tajamu Australia head Hussein Dirani and an unidentified person during a visit to Lebanon in November 2019. (Source: Al-Tajamu website)



## AL-TAJAMU EVENTS: PRAISING TERRORISTS

Events and commemorative meetings are a major avenue for Al-Tajamu's activities in Australia.

Every February for several years now, Al-Tajamu has held a celebration in Sydney for the anniversary of Khomeini's 1979 revolution in Iran. In 2018, Iran's Ambassador to Australia attended the event, along with pro-Hezbollah Australian preacher, Nami Farhat. The Iranian Ambassador again attended the 2020 event, which included praise for the arch-terrorist and commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Al-Quds force,

**"Al-Tajamu's activities in Australia consist in large part of promoting terrorist groups and spreading dangerous lies and conspiracy theories"**

Qassem Soleimani, killed by the US a month earlier.

In his speech at the 2021 event, Dirani described the sanctions on Teheran as "barbaric and evil aggression" and declared that Iran is attacking "the regimes of The White House and Tel Aviv" with "fire, metal and might." The Lebanese-born former mayor of Marrickville, Sam Iskander, praised Soleimani, and called those who side with the US and Israel "shameful". Anderson applauded Iran's support for the "resistance" in Palestine and Lebanon against "the Zionists", alleging that the US was behind Islamic State terrorism in Syria. After words by Assad fan Hanadi Assoud, the evening concluded with special video messages by Bassam Abu Sharif, a senior member of the terrorist organisation the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and from Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, attacking US policy on Iran.

Dirani was a key speaker in the "Anis – Palestine and the resistance" event at a Sydney memorial festival in honour of a Lebanese terrorist, Anis al-Naqqash, who died on Feb. 22 of COVID-19 in Syria. In his eulogy, Dirani applauded the teachings of Naqqash in favour of 'resistance' and the Palestinians. Anderson also participated.

In December 2020, AIFA organised a memorial for Mohsen Fakhrazadeh, chief scientist of Iran's clandestine atomic weapons project, assassinated a few days earlier. The killing of Soleimani along with the head of Shi'ite proxy militias in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was commemorated in another meeting last December, in which Dirani reportedly praised the "virtues of the martyrs and the great impact they left on the jihadist march of the [Islamic] nation."

A first anniversary event commemorating the killing of Soleimani and al-Muhandis was conducted in Jan. 2021 with similar participants. In his speech at this event, Dirani attacked "the evil Zionist entity and the devils of the Gulf."

Anderson was the main speaker in "The Future of Palestine and the Resistance" symposium in December

2019, organised by the Palestine Workers Union. According to a report on the Al-Tajamu website, Anderson spoke of "Israeli arrogance, describing it as apartheid, and [saying] this policy will lead to the end of this regime. He also explained about the failure of the two-state solution due to the US support for the Zionist entity." NSW MP Shao-quett Moselmane and local councillor Sam Iskander were reportedly among those in the audience.

Al-Tajamu's activities in Australia consist in large part of promoting terrorist groups and spreading dangerous lies and conspiracy theories. In essence, they constitute blatant propagandising in Australian public life by a terror-sponsoring foreign country. They must be exposed for what they are.

More on this dangerous organisation will be highlighted in the second part of the series next month.

AIR

*Dr. Ran Porat is an AIJAC Research Associate. He is also a Research Associate at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University, a Research Fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Centre in Herzliya and a Research Associate at the Future Directions International Research Institute, Western Australia.*

## AIJAC ZOOMS ON

by Jamie Hyams

Since our last webinar wrap in the November 2020 *AIR*, AIJAC has hosted 14 more webinars, giving viewers fascinating insights on a range of topical subjects. They are briefly summarised below.

### Greg Sheridan – Oct. 22

Sheridan, the *Australian* newspaper's Foreign Editor, discussed "The 2020 US Election: What is at Stake for the World?" He predicted a Biden win, and said that, while he disliked Donald Trump's manner and behaviour, Trump had done some good things, including in the Middle East. He thought that while Biden could be a "good, centrist, alliance-oriented Democrat" who would move beyond Obama-style Middle Eastern policies, it was more likely that we would get an administration that would reflect the end years of the Obama period, be "tremendously ineffectual", and insist the Palestinians are the key to Middle East peace.

### Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror – Oct. 27

Amidror, a former National Security Advisor to Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu, covered "Israel's Changing Security Environment." He noted that the benefits to Israel of



AIJAC webinar guests (left to right, top to bottom): Yaakov Amidror, Olga Deutsch, Elliott Abrams, Robert Satloff, Mark Dubowitz, Shmuel Rosner, Haviv Rettig Gur, Einat Wilf, Mike Kelly

the Abraham Accords are manifold, in the diplomatic, economic, and security spheres, including in relation to Iran, while Turkey is a “new negative factor”. The eastern Mediterranean has become more important due to gas discoveries and energy partnerships, which will lead to security cooperation, he predicted. He added that the lessening of US involvement in the region would have an impact, while the threat posed by Iran and its proxies would remain.

#### Dr Robert Satloff – Nov. 5

Executive Director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Satloff spoke on “The Aftermath of the US Elections: The Implications for the Middle East and More.” He expected Biden to seek to re-enter the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran, but only if Iran first returned to compliance, and to then try to strengthen and broaden it. He predicted that a Biden Administration would want to firm up and broaden the Abraham Accords between Israel and Arab states, but only to initially try to resume Israeli-Palestinian peace initiatives at a lower level. Satloff noted that Biden differs from Barack Obama on Israel, proudly calling himself a Zionist.

#### Ehud Yaari – Nov. 12

Yaari, Israel’s leading television journalist and public affairs commentator, addressed “The US elections: Views from the Middle East”. He stated that Biden and those likely to form his administration were all good friends who Israel knows well, but the question would be who Biden would choose to carry out his Middle East policy. Yaari said he expected those who favoured building on the momentum of the Abraham Accords, which had forced the Palestinians to alter their tactics, to prevail over those who favoured returning to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Iran, he predicted, would not make it easy for the US to re-en-

ter the JCPOA on its terms.

#### Mark Dubowitz – Nov. 24

Foundation for Defense of Democracies Chief Executive Dubowitz is an Iran expert who talked about “The Biden Administration and the Challenge of a Rogue Iran.” He explained that the “Islamic Republic of Iran... is obviously a strategic threat to the United States, an existential threat to the state of Israel, and a global threat to countries around the world.” He described the JCPOA as fatally flawed, because instead of cutting off all pathways for Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, it has

paved the way for eventual nuclear weapons capabilities thanks to its sunset provisions. He also said he would have liked Trump’s sanctions to have been given more time to work.

#### Olga Deutsch – Dec. 2

Deutsch, Vice President of “NGO Monitor”, spoke on the topic of “Following the Money Trail: An Insight into the Funding of Terrorism and Antisemitism”. She explained how many NGOs active in the Israel-Palestinian area, even the reputable ones, promote BDS and antisemitism, have ties to terror groups or incite violence against Israel, including some whose staff include terrorists. Yet Western governments give them massive funding and the legitimacy to influence policy. She called for governments to better vet the groups they fund.

#### Haviv Rettig Gur – Dec. 8

The topic for Rettig Gur, a senior analyst at the *Times of Israel*, was “Israel’s Looming Elections: Implications at Home and Abroad”. He was very critical of Netanyahu’s refusal to allow the unity government to survive long

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enough for Benny Gantz to become PM as agreed, and doubted that Netanyahu would be able to form a coalition following Israel's then upcoming fourth election, because others would find it hard to trust him. He argued that regardless of the result, the US would stay supportive of Israel, as it needs a stable Middle Eastern ally.

#### **Holly Huffnagle – Dec. 16**

Huffnagle is the American Jewish Committee's US Director for Combating Antisemitism and her topic was "Why Antisemitism is Rising in America". She cited seven factors: economic uncertainty; a lack of confidence in democracy; increased emphasis in society on race and national identity; the fading legacy of the Holocaust; a deepening polarisation between the right and the left over the Israeli/Palestinian conflict; the rise in the use of the internet and social media; and the growing complexity and number of sources of antisemitism. She emphasised the importance of speaking out against all forms of antisemitism, regardless of the source or their overall ideology.

#### **Dr Einat Wilf – Feb. 9**

Author and former Labor Knesset member Wilf discussed "The View from Israel: COVID, Elections and the Biden Administration." She was concerned that the Biden Administration might be on the cusp of repeating the mistakes of previous US administrations by rewarding and enabling Palestinian rejection of Israel. Unconditionally restoring funding to UNRWA, she said, "would be making a conscious, active statement, which is terrible." She urged instead that, if the US is to again fund UNRWA, it should do so as an interim step, while making clear those it serves aren't refugees.

#### **Danielle Pletka – Feb. 17**

A Senior Fellow in foreign and defence policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, Pletka spoke on "Biden, the Middle East and Beyond – Knowns and Unknowns". She was concerned about the new Administration's position on Iran, because many of those instrumental in the Obama Administration's negotiations for the JCPOA nuclear deal now hold senior positions in the Biden State Department. She saw the Administration's early softness towards Iran, and reluctance to phone Netanyahu, as negatives, while the fact that it had not moved to lift Trump's sanctions on Iran and its support for the Abraham Accords and for leaving the US embassy in Jerusalem were described as positives.

#### **Elliott Abrams – March 2**

Former senior Bush Administration White House advisor Abrams covered "Trump to Biden: The Middle East and US Policy". He said Biden had so far responded to Middle East challenges in a middle of the road way. Biden's Iran

policy, he said, is to re-enter the JCPOA nuclear agreement, removing the sanctions once Iran returns to compliance with the deal, and then strengthen it to cover Iran's support for terror and other misdeeds. However, Abrams argued that this is based on a fallacy, because once the sanctions pressure is off, Iran will have no incentive to change its behaviour.

#### **Ehud Yaari – March 17**

Yaari returned to discuss Israel's then upcoming election. He could see no path emerging for a stable governing coalition, and said this reality would open Israel's large political blocs up to extortion by smaller parties. The election, he predicted, would be "all about Bibi", and he felt that Netanyahu was going into election day with momentum. He highlighted as ground-breaking a recent poll which showed 87% of Israeli Arabs wanted their representatives to participate in a coalition rather than "occupy the backbench and scream about the Palestinian cause."

#### **Shmuel Rosner – March 30**

Israeli author, columnist and editor Rosner attempted to answer the question "Israel has voted: What now?". He felt the most likely outcome of the March 23 vote was a fifth election, following the failure to form any governing coalition. The other alternatives he noted were a Netanyahu-led government, made possible either by defectors from parties in the anti-Netanyahu bloc or propped up by the Arab Islamist Ra'am party, or a broad and complicated coalition, whose main message would be "anybody but Bibi." The latter would likely consist of Yesh Atid, New Hope, Blue and White and Labor, with Shas and United Torah Judaism, he said.

#### **Dr Mike Kelly – April 12**

Kelly, a former ALP Federal Government minister and 20-year army veteran, addressed the topic "Assessing the strategic relationship between Australia & Israel: An insider's view". He noted Israel and Australia's common threats from terrorism and from countries such as Iran, China and North Korea. The relationship has benefitted Australia, he said, as Israel has contributed to Australia's defence technically, tactically and strategically – providing important defence systems and material, as well as information and advice on terror threats. He also said Israel has so much to teach a country like Australia in building a new, technology-based economy, and how it became a start-up nation. He further suggested that obsessively negative attitudes toward Israel often stem from antisemitism.

*Recordings of and excerpts from these webinars are available on AIJAC's website, YouTube channel and Facebook page. The series is continuing, so keep an eye out for future instalments.*





## Star-Crossed Diplomacy

### The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel

**Emmanuel Navon**, *Jewish Publication Society*, November 2020, 536 pp. A\$57.25

by James Rudin

Jewish diplomacy began in biblical times, when Abraham negotiated with King Abimelech over possession of precious wells in an arid land. In order to protect their vulnerable communities and ensure Jewish continuity, generations of Jewish leaders have developed effective negotiation strategies in dealing with powerful kings, emperors, sultans, popes, dictators, prime ministers, and presidents.

In his new book *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel*, Emmanuel Navon, a lecturer at Tel Aviv University, begins with the biblical period, including the kingdoms of David and Solomon, and concludes with US President Donald Trump's 2020 "Deal of the Century," intended to settle the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For Navon, a French-born academic, "the star" represents the spiritual faith and destiny of the Jewish people, while "the scepter" symbolises the eternal quest for Jewish national sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

In 508 pages, Navon covers three millennia of diplomatic history. The first 67 pages get us to the rise of the modern Zionist movement in the 19th century. The rest details modern Israel's birth pangs and its intense political, military, and diplomatic struggles to survive as a Jewish state, despite fierce Arab hostility and rejection for most of its existence.

In detailing the extraordinary diplomatic efforts that culminated with the November 1947 United Nations vote on the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states, Navon explains that the historic vote did not "create" the State of Israel because it was non-binding, non-enforceable, only a "recommendation."

The author gives much of the credit for Israeli statehood to Israeli founder David Ben-Gurion, who in Navon's view practised a superb form of Jewish realpolitik by pressing forward for an independent state despite internal and external pressure to delay, postpone, or settle for less than full Jewish sovereignty.

As a former rabbi in Kansas City who knew the Jacobson family, I was pleased that Navon recognised the key diplomatic role played by Eddie Jacobson, who fought alongside Harry S. Truman in WWI and later became the future US president's business partner in a haberdashery shop. Navon writes: "Jacobson played a critical role in convincing Truman to back the partition plan and recognize Israel..."

When Truman initially refused to meet with Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, an upset Jacobson replied, "This isn't like you, Harry." Truman replied, "You baldheaded son-of-a-bitch. You win. I'll see him." On Nov. 19, 1947, just 10 days before the UN

General Assembly vote, Weizmann and Truman met for two hours at the White House. Deeply influenced by Weizmann, Truman made certain the US voted for partition.

Another of Navon's heroes was Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban, who recognised Israel had to "leap-frog" over hostile Arab neighbours and create diplomatic relations with more distant nations, beginning with the Shah's Iran, secular Turkey, and Emperor Haile Selassie's Ethiopia.

Navon provides insights into Israel's diplomatic efforts to strengthen ties with Russia, India, China, Japan, and Latin and South American countries, with varying degrees of success. He also analyses Israel's enduring peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan but completed the book prior to the recent breakthroughs with the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Morocco and Bahrain.

Israel's most intractable diplomatic challenge continues to be a peace deal with the Palestinians. Navon chronicles the negotiations that occurred in the waning days of Bill Clinton's presidency in 2000, when Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak met with Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat for peace talks at Camp David. Arafat shattered any hopes of a successful outcome by rejecting Israel's significant territorial concessions with an emphatic "No!" A furious Clinton called Arafat "a liar who screwed up the whole thing and deceived us."

Navon concludes on a positive note:

"...Israel will continue to thrive by remembering the ultimate lesson of its unique past...striking a never-ending balance between faith and power – between the star and the scepter."



Rabbi James Rudin is Senior Interreligious Adviser at the American Jewish Committee (AJC). He is Distinguished Visiting Professor of Religion and Judaica at Saint Leo University. Reprinted from *Reform Judaism*. org. © ReformJudaism.org, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.





## ESSAY

# Iran and the Houthis

## Allies of convenience or birds of a feather?

by Oved Lobel

The popular framing of Iran's relationship with the Houthis of Yemen is that it is recent, tactical and wholly a reaction to Saudi Arabia's overt intervention in Yemen's evolving conflict.

Iran's alliance with the Houthis, the name of a large tribe that has become synonymous with the Yemeni Shi'ite militia officially called *Ansar Allah* ("Partisans of God"), is simply a low-cost method of bogging down the Saudis, according to most analysts. This alliance lacks the ideological foundations and command-and-control undergirding Iran's relationship with proxies like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the key Shi'ite militias in Iraq, it is argued.

In this narrative, the alliance itself is often blamed on the Saudis, who intervened in Yemen precisely to prevent the Houthis becoming a Yemeni Hezbollah and thereby supposedly made it so, driving the Houthis into Iran's arms out of desperation for a patron.

As for the conventional Houthi origin story, it is said to be an outgrowth of the Zaydi Shi'ite revival movement in Yemen in the 1990s, itself partially a reaction to the government-sanctioned and Saudi-sponsored spread of radical Sunni Salafism into Zaydi territory. The Zaydi, sometimes referred to as "Fiver Shi'ites", are a distinct branch of Shi'ite Islam far



The Houthis have not merely been armed by Iran, but were effectively founded from Teheran (Screenshot: Twitter)

closer to Sunni jurisprudence than to the preponderant "Twelver" Shi'ism governing Iran.

In this telling, because of fundamental ideological differences, the Zaydi would never subordinate themselves to the Supreme Leader of Iran under the framework of *Wilayat al-Faqih* ("Guardianship of the Jurisprudent"), the governing ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran that renders its clerical ruler a supranational sovereign over all Muslims. Rather, this narrative says, the Houthis, as Zaydis, were merely responding to social and economic grievances and threats to their practices and traditions when they began their escalating rebellion against the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2004.

Even now, when the Houthis are clearly waging jihad to conquer Yemen, analysts tend to assert that the group aims to re-establish the brutal, theocratic Zaydi Imamate that periodically "ruled" – insofar as such a word can ever be used in Yemen –

parts of the Arabian Peninsula for a millennium up until 1962. This Imamate, unrelated to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's pan-Islamic conception promulgated following the 1979 Iranian revolution, was predicated on absolute rule of *Sayyids* – descendants of the Prophet Mohammed. It is this, rather than Khomeini's *Wilayat al-Faqih*, which the Houthis are supposedly trying to re-institute.

I recently re-examined these assumptions in a report published by *European Eye on Radicalization* titled "Becoming Ansar Allah: How the Islamic Revolution Conquered Yemen," which collated open-source information on the chronological evolution of the Houthi movement and its connections to Iran. What I found was that, contrary to the narratives presented above, there is strong circumstantial evidence that the rise of the Houthis is a direct outgrowth of Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution and that Iran has cultivated the Houthi family and its associates since that date.

CIA and media reports of active Khomeinists in Yemen during the early 1980s don't mention the names of those involved – during the Cold War, the spread of the Islamic Revolution was not a priority and was overshadowed by Soviet-backed groups. However, these reports clearly refer to Badr al-Din al-Houthi – the patriarch of the family – as well as his sons and associates.

In 1979, Badr al-Din travelled to Iran to visit and congratulate Khomeini. Eventually, he and his sons would settle in Iran, on and off, throughout the 80s and 90s. The first Iranian revolutionary organisation in Yemen was founded in 1982, morphing into the Union of Believing Youth around 1986 with Badr al-Din's intimate involvement. By the late 1980s, Yemenis had begun warning the Government of his activities.

In the early 1990s, the Union of Believing Youth evolved into the Assembly of Believing Youth, with an accompanying political wing, Hizb

al-Haqq, represented by Badr al-Din's son Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi and his loyalist friend Abdullah al-Razami, both of whom later became the leaders of the insurgency that began in 2004. At around the same time, reports began to appear of Lebanese and Iraqi Shi'ites travelling to Yemen and establishing Twelver learning centres.

In 1992, the Assembly of Believing Youth became the Believing Youth, named after an eponymous organisation in Lebanon that evolved into a core component of Hezbollah, through the work of Muhammed Iz-zan and Abdul-Karim Jadban, Houthi associates with deep connections to Hezbollah and the Iranian regime, which in turn guided them through transplanting Hezbollah's evolutionary model to Yemen.

Believing Youth indoctrination centres were established across Zaydi territory, where materials included lectures by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and the group's "spiritual godfather" Mohammed Hussein Fadhlallah. As a consequence, the Houthis and their associates running the Believing Youth were essentially excommunicated by the most prominent Zaydi religious leaders for undermining and warping the faith. A 2005 US diplomatic cable describes the Believing Youth ideology as "homemade' Twelver Shia."

Simultaneously, Hussein al-Houthi and his brother Abdul-Malik, the current leader of the Houthis, settled in Iran's most important religious centre of Qom, where Hussein reportedly grew very close to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and adopted the pan-Islamic ideology of Khomeini, not the Zaydi Imamate, as his primary philosophical and political point of reference.

**H**ussein allegedly began travelling to Syria and Iran during the 1990s looking for support to immediately establish Hezbollah in Yemen, but the Iranians opted for a more gradual evolution.

In 1999, Hussein travelled to Sudan, then the operational base for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its proxies, where he was almost certainly trained and tasked with his mission. Upon his return to Yemen, Hussein orchestrated a schism in the Believing Youth, likely at Iran's behest; his faction came to be known as *Ashab al-Shiar*, or Followers of the Slogan. That slogan is the current Houthi motto, which is an appropriation and expansion of Iran's own: "God is Great! Death to America! Death to Israel! A Curse Upon the Jews! Victory to Islam!"

There is anecdotal evidence that between 2001-2004, Hussein's faction began preparing ammunition depots and fortifications for their planned jihad, having built up a strong insurgent base through social and charitable activities and indoctrination through the Believing Youth "summer camps."

The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and subsequent "War on Terror" saw President Saleh – himself a Zaydi – side with the US. As part of its overall goal to bog down and undermine the US throughout the Middle East, Iran unleashed Hussein's faction of the Believing Youth against the putatively pro-American Saleh, instigating a war that would only end in 2010.

The "Arab Spring" that swept through the region in 2011 and deposed Saleh allowed for the next stage of the Houthis' evolution. Since the name Hezbollah was already taken, the Houthis adopted one of Hezbollah's cover names, "Ansar Allah", and began their jihad to conquer Yemen.

Thousands of IRGC advisers and Iraqi and Lebanese proxies flooded into the country to train and oversee Ansar Allah and its operations, with Iranian support escalating across the board from 2011 through 2020 – including granting the Houthis sophisticated drone and missile capabilities and underground facilities that parallel those of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Iran recently dispatched Hassan Irlu, an IRGC officer with long-

standing ties to the Houthi leadership, to oversee the Ansar Allah project as Iran's "ambassador" to Yemen, although his function in reality is Islamic military governor. Ansar Allah, under Iranian tutelage, has established an almost exact replica of Iran's revolutionary regime organs. More and more statements from Iranian officials and Houthi leaders demonstrate that Ansar Allah has become a full-blown member of Iran's "axis of resistance" – including overt Houthi threats against Israel, as well as Houthi persecution of the Baha'i faith and their long-standing goal of ethnically cleansing Yemen of its few remaining Jews.

Chronologically, Saudi Arabia intervened in response to the Iran-instigated Houthi jihad, not vice versa. As for being a local Zaydi revival movement, the Houthis and their associates were in fact virtually excommunicated by the traditional Zaydi religious leadership for their attempts to instill pan-Islamic and Khomeinist doctrine among Zaydi youth.

There is clear evidence that the Houthis look to Iran's Islamic Revolution and Hezbollah, not the Zaydi Imamate, as their political and ideological model, and that the Houthi family's deep connections with the revolutionary Shi'ite clerics across the Middle East date back to 1979. Since 2011, they have become completely intertwined militarily with Iran's other proxies from Iraq to Lebanon, even reportedly fighting in Syria.

What this means in practice is that, like its progenitors in Iran, Ansar Allah is a supranational revolutionary movement, and its officials have explicitly asserted their goals are pan-Islamic conquest, not just a traditional Zaydi Imamate in Yemen. Unless this fanatical ideology crashes into a much stronger military force, it will continue its expansion.

While the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Yemen must be addressed, this will remain impossible without a peace process that has Ansar Allah's defeat at its core.



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Chartered Accountants



Level 14 440 Collins Street Melbourne  
T: +61 3 9820 6400  
E: hcm@hallchadwickmelb.com.au

**[www.hallchadwickmelb.com.au](http://www.hallchadwickmelb.com.au)**

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# NOTED AND QUOTED

## THE MONTH IN MEDIA

### ON THE FLOOR

On March 31, the *Australian* reported on allegations that the ALP's National Conference denied dissenting voices the right to speak against the introduction into the party platform of language calling on a future Labor Government to recognise a Palestinian state.

The paper quoted former Labor MP Michael Danby accusing the conference of not only “adopt[ing] former UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s plan for ‘unconditional recognition of a Palestinian state but also his Stalinist methods by suppressing debate on the foreign policy motions.’”

Danby was also quoted criticising the adoption of the resolution, saying it “associat[es] Labor with a homophobic, undemocratic, kleptocratic, misogynist Palestinian regime.”

According to the report, Australia Palestine Advocacy Network President George Browning said, “by recognising Palestinian statehood, Labor will encourage both Israeli and Palestinian moderates that are working towards a peaceful end to the conflict.” Given the Palestinian leadership is split between Hamas, which refuses to ever make peace with Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, which has refused to negotiate peace with Israel for several years, this seems like wishful thinking.

### OTHER VOICES

On *ABC Radio National* “Breakfast” (March 31), Labor Leader Anthony Albanese said the party’s position remained unchanged from the policy it took to the 2019 election, despite the platform change. Albanese said “Labor supports a two-state solution,” adding “but... the dispossession of Palestinians can’t continue into the future

and... the international community has to play a role in a peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict”.

Host Fran Kelly did not ask how unilateral recognition of a non-existent Palestinian state would achieve that.

Former ALP president and subsequent Liberal party candidate Warren Mundine told guest host Rita Panahi on the *Sky News* “The Kenny Report” (March 31) that the resolution ignores the advances made by the Abraham Accords in the last 12 months and that Hamas is aligned with the “mullahs of Iran who [are] the biggest exporters of terrorism in the Middle East and globally.”

### LIBERAL DOSES

Appearing on *Sky News* “Credlin” (April 1), former Liberal Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said the resolution was “virtue signalling” for “branches in Western Sydney” and the ALP was not taking into “account” the fact that if Israel did not provide security to the Palestinian Authority, Hamas would take over the West Bank.

In her *Daily Telegraph* column (April 4), Peta Credlin, who served as chief of staff to Tony Abbott while he was prime minister, condemned the ALP resolution, saying that “despite being the only place in the Middle East with robust free speech and full protection of minority rights (including the much persecuted Arab Christians), many zealots in Labor’s ranks view Israel as a ‘rich oppressor’ that deserves routine condemnation in the UN and elsewhere. This is despite one of the truly under-remarked achievements of the Trump era in brokering deals for four Arab nations to formally recognise Israel; something not even

arch-optimists thought they would see a decade ago. It says everything that Labor, here, is more anti-Israel than Arab neighbours, there, doesn’t it?”

On *Sky News* “Bernardi” (April 16), the Institute of Public Affairs’ Gideon Rozner said the Palestinian leadership has rejected opportunities to establish a Palestinian state since the 1930s if it has meant accepting the existence of a Jewish state, too. He also ridiculed the idea that settlements are the reason why there is no peace, pointing out that in 2005, Israel dismantled all 21 settlements in Gaza and instead of using the territory “to build a new land... for their people”, Palestinian terrorist groups fired rockets into Israel.

Elsewhere, the *Spectator Australia* (April 3) described the resolution supporting “Palestinian statehood without guarantees to protect Israel” as “stupendously naive at best or camouflaged anti-Semitism at worst.”

### NO MORE BIDEN TIME ON UNRWA

An *SBS TV* “World News” report (April 8) on the Biden Administration restoring funding that was cut under its predecessor to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) included a statement that Israel “accus[es] UNRWA of antisemitic activity, it believes the agency should be reformed before funding is restored.”

Gilad Erdan, Israel’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations, was quoted saying, “we believe that this UN agency for so-called ‘refugees’ should not exist in its current format. UNRWA is an organisation that engaged in political advocacy and enables incitement to violence.”

An *AFP* report in the *Australian* (April 9) on the renewed funding noted that “Israel argues the education provided by the UN-backed schools includes incitement against the Jewish state” and Erdan wanted funding restored only after “ensuring that certain reforms, including stopping the incitement and removing anti-Semitic content from its educational curriculum, are carried out.”

The report said UNRWA “provides housing, schools and other care to more than six million Palestinian refugees and their descendants.”

The figure of “more than six million” is exaggerated. But more importantly, the report didn’t properly explain how the ability to inherit refu-

gee status for an indefinite number of generations is unique to Palestinians.

Moreover, the majority of the Palestinians on UNRWA’s roll either live under Palestinian self-rule in the West Bank and Gaza or in neighbouring Jordan where they were granted citizenship in the 1950s – which hardly makes them refugees.

Hence, as the story noted, but didn’t elaborate, the Trump Administration did not want to fund UNRWA when it had failed to meet its original mandate to help “permanently resettle” Palestinians.

The story also suggested that previously announced US funding of \$US15 million for COVID assistance to the Palestinians was needed

because “Israel, a leader in vaccinating its own people, has not taken similar initiatives in territories under its occupation.” Under the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the PLO, it is the legal responsibility of the Palestinian Authority to vaccinate Palestinians living under its jurisdiction.

## A FRUITFUL PEACE

Writing in the *Australian* (March 16), former US President Donald Trump’s special Middle East envoy Jared Kushner highlighted some of the extraordinary advances that have followed since the Abraham Accords were signed between the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan and Israel in 2020.



## AND OUT OF IN PARLIAMENT

**Katie Allen** (Lib., Higgins) – March 24 – “Recently, I was delighted to take federal minister for the arts, Paul Fletcher, to the Duldig Studio museum...It was deeply moving to hear the story of Karl and Slawa Duldig, a young, artistic Jewish couple who fled Nazi occupied Vienna before finally establishing a new home for themselves and their young family in Australia.”

Prime Minister **Scott Morrison** (Lib., Cook) Passover message – March 26 – “Passover is an old story – a timeless story – that has inspired generations of Jewish people around the world...”

“From ancient times to the present day, Jewish people have been blessed with a rich identity, a deep understanding of the past, and a fierce commitment to liberty... The late great Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, whose writings mean so much to me, once said: ‘Freedom is the work of a nation, nations need identity, identity needs memory, and memory is encoded in the stories we tell.’

“Passover is an expression of the rich culture, heritage and faith Jewish people cherish – and a festival that offers a great gift to the world. I thank the Jewish community for all you do, and I know your resilience and strength will sustain you into the future. I wish you and your families a happy and joyful Passover – Chag Pesach Sameach!”

Opposition Leader **Anthony Albanese** (ALP, Grayndler) Facebook – March 26 – “To everyone in the Australian Jewish community about to celebrate Passover, let me say: chag Pesach samech!” This message was accompanied by a video of Jewish ALP MP **Josh Burns** introducing Mr. Albanese to matzah.

Prime Minister **Scott Morrison** (Lib., Cook) Israeli Independence Day message – April 15 – “I send my warmest greetings

to all those who celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day.

“Australians take great pride in our recognition of the State of Israel from its inception in 1949. We believe in the nation of Israel. Our bond is steady and enduring – seemingly impervious to the ebbs and flows of time and tide.

“In a world threatened by the creeping stain of extremism, nations that uphold the values of equality and tolerance draw closer together. Israel, governed by the rule of law and infused with a multicultural character, is a beacon of the democracy we prize so highly... Israel has a place in my heart. It is a land of faiths and cultures nurtured for millennia. It deserves a peaceful and prosperous future.

“The Jewish people of Australia have given so much to our nation, individually and as a community. Thank you for your commitment and contribution to our free, open and cohesive multicultural society. Today, we honour Israel’s history and celebrate all that it is, and hopes to be.”

Opposition Leader **Anthony Albanese** (ALP, Grayndler) Israeli Independence Day message – April 15 – “It is with great pleasure I wish the State of Israel and members of our Australian Jewish community a hearty Mazel Tov on the occasion of Yom Ha’atzmaut.

“If anything reminds us of the value of hope, it is Israel’s very existence. When it was first proclaimed in 1948 by David Ben-Gurion, that declaration of independence was nothing less than the triumph of hope, tenacity and resilience over the darkness of the Shoah... While the world has become a different place over the past year, what remains resolutely unchanged is that Israel stands tall as a victory over adversity.

“I will say what I have said before: No matter which party is in power here, Israel will have Australia’s friendship and support. As leader of the Australian Labor Party, I can tell you that you will always have ours.”



Kushner noted that Muslims are visiting Israel “posting pictures of peaceful visits to the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, blowing a hole in the propaganda that the holy site is under attack and Israelis prevent Muslims from praying there. Every time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tweets something positive in Arabic about an Arab leader, it reinforces that Israel is rooting for the success of the Arab world.”

He also noted that the UAE has announced a US\$10 billion fund to invest in Israel.

All this, he said, disproves “the myth that [the Arab-Israeli conflict] could be solved only after Israel and the Palestinians resolved their differences” and if the Biden Administration is “smart”, Oman, Qatar, Mauritania and even Saudi Arabia could be next.

## ONE STUNT SOLUTION

If the *Guardian Australia* supports a two-state solution and the ongoing existence of the State of Israel, as it claims to, continually publishing op-eds arguing for the exact opposite is a strange way to show it.

On Jan. 13, *Guardian Australia* ran an extreme piece by Hagai El-Ad, of the far-left non-government organisation B’Tselem, insisting that in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, “one government rules everyone and everything... working to advance and perpetuate the supremacy of one group of people – Jews... This is apartheid.”

Fast forward to March 19 and the *Guardian Australia* marked upcoming Israeli elections and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas’ announcement that parliamentary elections would be held for the first time in more than 15 years with an op-ed demanding Israel and the territories be replaced with one, presumably Palestinian majority, state.

That op-ed, by Salem Barahmeh, director of the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy, promoted a twisted version of history that accused

Israel of “ma[king] sure” that the Palestinian Authority never evolved into a Palestinian state.

He also lamented the “political repression” in the PA under Abbas and concluded that “This system cannot offer true democracy and as such must be dismantled. A new social contract must be built where every person can practice true self-determination and is free and equal.”

In other words, he argued that because the Palestinian Authority is not a bastion of liberal democracy, rejected three Israeli offers to create a state since 2000, spurned further peace talks in 2010 and 2014 and the Trump peace process, Israel, which is a genuine democracy, must be dismantled so Palestinians who have a “real hunger” to participate in a genuine “democratic process” can do so.

## AMI’S ACCUSATIONS

*ABC Radio National* “Religion & Ethics” (March 24) interviewed Ami Ayalon, former head of Israel’s Shin Bet security service and Olmert Government minister, to discuss his new book *Friendly Fire*, which is highly critical of Israeli government policies on the peace process since the Oslo Accords were signed in the 1990s.

Ayalon explained that he became a dove when he realised that Palestinians are human beings and “what Palestinians really want today, what they are dreaming about is to see the end of occupation.”

Asked if former Palestinian President Yasser Arafat was a partner for peace given the terrorism that occurred under his watch, Ayalon was evasive, saying, “I don’t have a very clear answer.” He acknowledged that after supporting Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in the Iraq war, Arafat was forced to embrace diplomacy and “give up the idea of Greater Palestine... But later during the Second Intifada he supported Palestinian violence again.”

Of course, what he didn’t say was that Arafat’s support for violence immediately followed his rejection of an unprecedented Israeli offer to create a Palestinian state at the Camp David Summit in 2000.

Ayalon also bizarrely seemed to suggest Hamas would not be a threat if a Palestinian state were created.

Ayalon accused Israel of practising apartheid on the West Bank, claiming that “if you are a Jewish settler in Hebron you will get much more drinking water than if you are a Palestinian in the same city. So, this is Apartheid, there is no other way to describe it.”

Ayalon must know that most of Israel’s water comes through a combination of reclamation, recycling and desalination plants, not extraction from aquifers. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority is in charge of 80% of Hebron and administers the city according to its own rules and regulations. This includes a poor water maintenance system that is replicated across areas of the West Bank under its control. To give one example, the UN acknowledged this month that “sewage from the Hebron Governorate runs untreated through populated areas... causing a substantial damage to the aquifer and the health of the residents.”

## A TOTAL WRITE OFF

A bizarre analysis in the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (April 10) implied Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu is the main factor in the derailing of the two-state formula for peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

According to Maher Mughrabi, the *Age*’s features editor, Netanyahu co-opted the support of the racist Israeli far right and “moved the national consensus in Israel further and further to the right.”

Unable to “entirely repudiate” the Oslo peace process, Mughrabi argued that Netanyahu “and his American supporters [have] gradually pushed it into the background, preferring instead the formula ‘peace for peace’;

Israel would fortify its position until both the region's states and the stateless Palestinians accepted its stances on settlement of occupied territory and a final peace as immovable."

Mughrabi conveniently forgot to mention the generous assistance Netanyahu received in executing his moustache-twirling master plan from Palestinian behaviour, which convinced most Israelis a negotiated two-state peace was not available in the short term. In the 1990s, Hamas launched waves of terror attacks when the Oslo peace process started under Labor. Then, Labor PM Ehud Barak's 2000 offer to create a viable Palestinian state in 95% of the West Bank and all of Gaza with a capital in east Jerusalem and shared control over holy sites, was rejected and met with five years of mass organised terrorist violence from both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. And then a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 saw thousands of rockets fired from there into Israel.

## BULLIES IN A CHINA SHOP

*Canberra Times* columnist Steve Evans (April 3) chided the organisers of an "intentionally confrontational" art exhibition at the Australian National University for including pieces that are "offensive to many Jews," amongst other groups and individuals, but giving in to "bullies" and censoring a "a satirical piece" portraying Chinese President Xi Jinping as Winnie the Pooh.

According to Evans, "many Jews might take offense at...a picture of a thug (presumably Israeli) holding a man in a chokehold (presumably Palestinian)," with a caption featuring a quote attributed to the Jewish scientist Albert Einstein; "It would be my greatest sadness to see Zionists do to Palestinian Arabs much of what Nazis did to Jews."

Evans wrote that "it was spoken more than 70 years ago in different times. Today, the comparison of Israel

to the Nazis is recognised as an anti-Semitic meme."

Actually, a Google search of the quote immediately returns the salient fact that there is no evidence Einstein ever said or wrote it. Nonetheless, in recent years this apparently fraudulent quote has frequently appeared as part of misinformation campaigns to delegitimise Israel's right to exist.

## OFF BASE

Following media reports in late March of leaked audio recordings of right wing extremists belonging to a US group called The Base trying to build violent networks in Australia, AIJAC's Naomi Levin called for an update of Australia's 2015 counter-terrorism strategy because it barely mentions "ideologically-inspired terrorism," (*Herald Sun*, April 12).

Levin pointed out, "the existence of these recordings has been known for some months, as have the links between a former One Nation political hopeful and The Base, an international violent extremist network."

Indeed, readers may recall Levin raised the alarm about The Base in the Feb. 2021 *AIR*.

Levin said there is an acute problem in that "the activities of legitimate political actors" are "leading" some "Australians down a path to extremism" using social media platforms, citing One Nation as an example.

Often, these posts are on the "fringe" but "within the realm of acceptable speech." However, "what is not acceptable is the conversation they generate."

Levin recommended counterterrorism strategies must acknowledge "just how quickly people can be radicalised to a point where they are contemplating violence" and warned that if only "one of that crowd...take their fringe views further it poses a grave danger to the safety of Australians."

Meanwhile, in contrast to voices of hate trying to sow the seeds of division, AIJAC's Jeremy Jones travelled

through regional NSW in March to participate in a range of Harmony Week events, and was interviewed by a string of ABC regional radio stations to discuss the success of Australian multiculturalism and the importance of interfaith dialogue as an antidote to hate. Two of his interviews can be heard on AIJAC's website at [www.aijac.org.au](http://www.aijac.org.au).

## FOR THE RECORD

On April 14, Jewish communal news website *J-Wire* correctly reported that former Labor MP Melissa Parke had "withdrawn her defamation case against Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council Executive Director Dr. Colin Rubenstein in a settlement in which Rubenstein issued a statement expressing 'regret' that his comments caused Parke 'distress'."

The *J-Wire* story said Rubenstein's statement did not apologise for "any of the claims Rubenstein made in April 2019 criticising a controversial speech Parke had made to the WA Labor Friends of Palestine on March 4, 2019. Instead, Rubenstein's statement said his criticisms 'were intended to address the accuracy and implications of the statements and claims Ms. Parke had made' and were not directed at Parke 'personally'."

On April 14, the *Australian* website amended an earlier print report published that day by deleting an incorrect claim that Parke had "won a retraction and apology from Dr. Rubenstein."

The updated report correctly stated that Parke "has now negotiated a settlement with Dr Rubenstein," but incorrectly claimed he had "expressed 'regret' for making claims of anti-Semitism."

In fact, Rubenstein's statement had clarified that his "comments...did not intend to convey" Parke was "an anti-semitic" and "without conceding that my comments carried the meanings which Ms. Parke claims", expressed "regret" that "my comments caused her distress."

# MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

## ENRICHED COVERAGE

Both the efforts to negotiate a return to the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran in Vienna and the April 11 explosion that hit Iran's Natanz enrichment facility – and was widely attributed to Israel – were grist for the media mill.

On the ABC, much of the coverage painted Iran as a good faith player wronged by the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) three years ago and Israeli actions designed to hinder its revival.

Sahil Shah of the European Leadership Network told *ABC TV* "The World" (April 6) that the 2015 deal "was created on the premise that we didn't trust Iran and that we needed to verify that Iran would live up to its obligations. Now the party that doesn't have any credibility is the US and by extension unfortunately Europeans who haven't been able to live up to their end of the bargain either."

On *ABC Radio* "Breakfast" (April 7), guest host Hamish MacDonald asked Gary Samore, coordinator for arms control and weapons of mass destruction under US President Barack Obama whether, if the US broke the deal, it should not make the first move by lifting sanctions?

Samore said both sides would act simultaneously but predicted there would be "no progress...in the next couple of years" on issues outside the deal.

Commenting on the Natanz incident on *ABC Radio* "PM" (April 13), US-based Professor Mehrzad Boroujerdi warned US and European governments that "if they allow Israel to sort of call the shots... whatever gets signed is not really going to mean much at the end of the day."

Boroujerdi also said "the US is sort of backtrack- ing on the earlier claims that it was going to discuss not just the nuclear stuff but the missiles and Iran's regional activities."

Iran as innocent victim was in full force in *ABC TV* "The World"'s report (April 16) on the Natanz incident.

The Lowy Institute's Roger Shanahan said, "Iran has always said that it's not looking to enrich uranium to weapons-grade and it doesn't want to be a nuclear weapons-capable power. It's believed that Iran has, in the past, undertaken research with developing nuclear weapons possibly in mind, but intelligence agencies largely agree that that program was ceased around 2003."

Yet the Iranian nuclear archive stolen by Israel in 2018

proves conclusively the program largely remained intact and continued under the radar after 2003.

On the same segment, former Australian diplomat Richard Broinowski said Iran has an incentive to "go nuclear... they're surrounded by nuclear countries. Like Pakistan. By India. By China. By Russia. By the US Fifth

or Sixth Fleet in the Persian Gulf. And by Israel... the more they're provoked by Israel and by the United States, the more the voices who want that capacity are coming forward. If it did, it would be disastrous.

Saudi Arabia, no doubt, would go nuclear. I think probably the Emirates might, as well."

Surely, all the more reason to ensure a more comprehensive nuclear deal covering missiles and Iran's past nuclear research, without sunset clauses.

The *Australian's* report (April 13) correctly noted Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu's concern that the JCPOA "imposes only a temporary cap on Iran's nuclear capability and allows Tehran to develop nuclear weapons in the future."

*SBS TV* "World News" (April 17) newsreader Anton Enus injected a much-needed dose of reality, noting that "despite insisting it has no intention of producing nuclear weapons, Iran regularly threatens to annihilate Israel."

An earlier *SBS TV* "World News" report (April 12) didn't question Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi's widely derided comment that Iran had informed the International Atomic Energy Agency it will increase uranium enrichment to 60% because it "needs to produce certain radioisotopes needed for certain medical treatments."

Araghchi's boss Iranian President Hassan Rouhani made it clear the Natanz attack was the real reason Iran increased uranium enrichment to 60%.

On *Sky News* "The Bolt Report" (April 13), AIJAC's Jamie Hyams pointed out that a nuclear armed Iran is an "existential threat" to Israel and that Iranian nuclear scientists like Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, killed by Israel in 2020, were also generally senior officials in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – the "main terrorist sponsoring arm of the Iranian regime." Hyams explained that the existing "fatally flawed" nuclear deal merely delays Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, has a weak inspections regime and doesn't cover Iran's "malign" activities in the region, including hostage-taking against innocent people like Australian academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert.



# THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

## RIGHTS AND THE FAR RIGHT

On my first day at university, I was given a bag containing some literature designed to assist new and returning students.

As well as some maps and guides to facilities and the like, it included instructions on how to behave if challenged in any way by police.

It had an outline of your rights if arrested for possessing contraband substances, what you needed to say or do if arrested in protest activities, how to support (legally and with an eye to public relations) friends who found themselves in trouble, and what to say if caught stealing (shoplifting). Some legalese was added to the effect that the publishers of the document were not actually endorsing breaking any laws.

Various civil liberties organisations (including at least one which supported the “civil liberty” of “Holocaust denial”) have regularly published handbooks which have gone in to more detail as to your rights.

Recent media revelations that neo-Nazis were circulating similar guidelines on the internet should not have surprised anyone.

The templates were there for the taking and the added extras, such as telling followers not to bring weapons to gatherings which may be infiltrated, may have been designed as internet jokes for the extremists and as bait to hook journalists looking for a story. But the activity was undoubtedly sinister, as the manual represents a step towards sophistication not seen for some time in such groups.

The media reports raised the issue of how well equipped our legal system is to protect us from neo-Nazi thugs, a subject which should regularly be reviewed.

It is not all that long ago that far-right racist organisations were advising members on how to use a degree of ambiguity in what amounted to calls for violence towards, or even murder of, refugees, given the laws they sought to skirt left a great deal of latitude.

When these groups distributed grossly antisemitic and other racist material, their response was that, if Australia's

values were offended against, then our laws would have made this clear. They asserted that the absence of clear prohibitions was a licence for hatred.

Once various states and territories, and the Federal Government, introduced racial vilification and racial hatred legislation, victims of racism were given legal recourse and law enforcement was granted some authority to act.

The introduction of legislation was not only about the law, but also about an understanding that vilification and harassment motivated by racism were abhorrent to our society's values.

The manual the media exposed advised on how to minimise the chances of being identified when committing acts which are illegal, although not necessarily of a type which could be

considered harassment.

Far-right extremists are of considerable and growing concern for our security agencies.

Although a huge chunk of their counter-terrorism work is taken up with the challenges of Islamist-rationalised activity, close to 40% of their cases regarded as being of most imminent concern involve racist and other far-right extremists.

As with the Islamist-rationalised groups, one of the major challenges is blocking the entry to Australia of groups which are based overseas but have potential recruits – and more significantly targets – in Australia.

The small far-right wing organisations in Australia have often tried to imitate or emulate the more successful (in terms of spreading harm) racist groups from other parts of the world.

Generally, due to the lack of skill and ability of Australians attracted to far-right extremism, they have failed dismally to develop any followings or chalk up any successes, but that does not make the current challenge any less serious.

Proscribing racist extremist terrorist organisations which have no significant presence in Australia would be a good thing even if its primary purpose was to affirm the abhorrence of our society towards them.

Unfortunately, it is also necessary due to the genuine threat they pose.



Recent media reports suggest the Australian far right may be getting more sophisticated (Credit: Shutterstock)



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