

END OF A POLITICAL EXPERIMENT



The fall of Israel's diverse coalition
Government and its aftermath

AIDING AND ABETTING

The verdict in the case of the former
World Vision Gaza head accused of
diverting funds to HamasPAGE 23

HUMAN WRONGS

The UN's broken
system for monitoring
human rights ...PAGE 19

LOOKING EAST

Israel's burgeoning
diplomatic options
in AsiaPAGE 30

AFTER ABBAS

Has a successor
emerged to the ageing
Palestinian Authority
President?PAGE 21

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This edition of the *AIR* looks at the collapse of Israel's "coalition of change" Government, led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, and what might happen next in Israeli politics.

A backgrounder from BICOM explains exactly what happened, the implications and the likely next steps, while Michael Horovitz looks at what the polls predict about the new elections that now appear all but certain. Meanwhile, a look at the position of former PM Binyamin Netanyahu in the current political uncertainty comes from Dov Lieber and Yardena Schwartz, and we also offer a profile of Yair Lapid, who looks set to become interim Prime Minister. Finally, Lahav Harkov analyses how the current political uncertainty in Israel is likely to affect Jerusalem's complex and evolving strategy for dealing with the Iranian threat.

Also featured this month is a detailed examination of the UN's broken human rights system, penned by Charlotte Lawson. Plus, Daniel Samet reviews Israel's diplomatic and economic opportunities in Asia – especially the alternatives to potentially problematic ties with China.

Finally, don't miss Yoni Ben Menachem on the intensifying internal Palestinian struggle to succeed ageing Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, and Amotz Asa-El on the significance of the passing of Israeli literary legend A.B. Yehoshua.

As always, please give us your feedback on any aspect of this edition at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

CONTENTS

FEATURE STORIES

ANATOMY OF A DISSOLUTION

BICOM

In an effort to keep their commitment to an alternating premiership ... Lapid will be Prime Minister of the transitional government, while Bennett will serve as Alternate Prime Minister PAGE 12

NETANYAHU'S LAST SHOT?

DOV LIEBER & YARDENA SCHWARTZ PAGE 13

WHO IS YAIR LAPID?

AIJAC STAFF PAGE 14

YET ANOTHER DEADLOCKED ELECTION?

MICHAEL HOROVITZ PAGE 15

ELECTIONS AND ISRAEL'S IRAN STRATEGY

LAHAV HARKOV PAGE 16

HUMAN WRONGS

The UN's broken human rights system explained
CHARLOTTE LAWSON PAGE 19

DOES ABBAS FINALLY HAVE A SUCCESSOR?

YONI BEN MENACHEM PAGE 21

HALABI/WORLD VISION CASE: THE VERDICT

NGO MONITOR PAGE 23

CONSPIRACIES & ANTISEMITIC TROPES

RAN PORAT PAGE 26

BIBLIO FILE: ISRAEL'S LAST LITERARY LION

AMOTZ ASA-EL PAGE 28

ESSAY: ISRAEL LOOKS EAST

Better Asian opportunities exist than China
DANIEL SAMET PAGE 30



ON THE COVER

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, left, speaks during a joint statement with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, at the Knesset, Israel's parliament, in Jerusalem, June 20, 2022. (Image: AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)



REGULAR COLUMNS

FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN PAGE 4

WORD FOR WORD PAGE 5

SCRIBBLINGS

TZVI FLEISCHER PAGE 6

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

ANNE BAYEFSKY PAGE 7

ASIA WATCH

MICHAEL SHANNON PAGE 8

AIR NEW ZEALAND

MIRIAM BELL PAGE 9

BEHIND THE NEWS PAGE 10

STRANGER THAN FICTION PAGE 11

NOTED AND QUOTED PAGE 35

IN PARLIAMENT PAGE 36


MEDIA MICROSCOPE

ALLON LEE PAGE 39

THE LAST WORD

JEREMY JONES PAGE 40

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EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN****COLIN RUBENSTEIN**

THE LEGACY OF AN EXPERIMENT

On June 20, a year and one week after it was sworn in, Israel's 36th government ended with a press conference. Embattled Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, by now the head of a broken and divided *Yamina* ("Rightwards") party, announced that he would be stepping down as PM. He further announced that his coalition partner and current Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, the chairman of the *Yesh Atid* ("There is a future") party, would become Israel's interim PM until an election is held.

Opposition Leader Binyamin Netanyahu was trying to avert this outcome by attempting to build an alternative majority to support his own leadership without an election but, at press time, he looked unlikely to succeed.

In any case, many Israeli analysts and politicians are now referring to the outgoing eight-party ruling coalition as an "experiment" which failed.

However, despite the Government's short lifespan, there is a case to be made that this political experiment achieved some positive and important outcomes.

The experiment was principally about Israeli identity. The eight different parties in the coalition stood for ideologies covering the entire political spectrum from left to right. They represented at least three of the four major "tribes" of Israeli society, as identified by then President Reuven Rivlin in a famous 2015 speech: secular, national-religious and Arab (the fourth "tribe", the ultra-orthodox, did not join this Government).

Particularly ground-breaking was the inclusion in the Government of the Islamist Ra'am party. Much has been said about the decision of leader Mansour Abbas to boldly go where no Arab party leader had gone before, and be the first to join an Israeli government. The ongoing implications of this move should not be underestimated.

It legitimised full Israeli-Arab political participation in governance – after all, Abbas was also courted by the right-wing Likud after the last election. It proved yet again that Arab Israelis, who constitute 20% of Israel's citizens, have the potential to be an important and integral part of the Jewish state, without endangering either Israel's identity or security. Finally, it offered a model for mutually respectful and beneficial relationships between the state and the Israeli Arab sector of society, including serious, joint efforts to tackle the major problems afflicting that sector, such as crime and inadequate infrastructure investment.

The outgoing Government can also point to other important practical achievements. After almost two years of political paralysis, and four election campaigns in 24 months all ending in deadlock, the Bennett-Lapid Government was able to govern reasonably effectively for that year, including passing a budget in November 2021 – the first in almost four years – and keeping the economy on an even keel.

Following the path laid down by previous PM Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel continued to be at the forefront of the fight against coronavirus, becoming the first country to administer COVID-19 boosters.

In foreign policy, the Government continued the momentum created by the former PM and extended the 2020 Abraham Accords with a series of significant new agreements and meetings with the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan. Ties with the US Biden Administration improved, and the long shadow of Iran's terror and sprint to-

ward nuclear weapons led to closer strategic cooperation with the US and important regional allies, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia.

A final point often missed by analysts is that this Government's rise and fall in fact provides evidence for the strength and vibrancy of Israel's democracy.

While there has been criticism of the divisive behaviour and illiberal rhetoric of some actors in the Israeli political system, including Netanyahu's verbal attacks on the media and law enforcement, overall, Israel's unique democratic system represents the diversity of a highly complex society well – admittedly at the cost of some worrying political instability. Furthermore, democratic transitions are routine, constitutional, and never contested. Israel has never experienced anything like the Jan. 6 Capitol invasion crisis in the US, or former US President Donald Trump's ongoing claims that his supposed victory in the 2020 election was stolen from him.

Thus, it is thoroughly ironic when Israel's enemies gloat over its supposed political weakness, as Hamas spokesperson Fawzi Barhoum recently did, declaring that "The collapse of the Bennett government is a testament to the fragility and weakness of the Zionist entity." The last elections held in the Palestinian Authority (PA) were in 2006, and they resulted in a bloody Hamas takeover of Gaza. Since then, internal rivalry has only intensified.

What Barhoum cannot comprehend is that, by making sure state leaders can be replaced in an orderly and legitimate fashion, Israel's well-functioning democracy limits

corruption, nepotism, civil strife and abuse of power – problems which severely plague both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas-run Gaza.

Obviously, sustained political continuity is also important, so there is every reason to hope that the upcoming election – if that is what indeed eventuates – leads to a long overdue period of stable majority government.

This would allow the next Israeli government to devote more sustained effort and attention to tackling Israel's multiple serious challenges, including: numerous necessary domestic reforms; the ongoing threats from Iranian proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza; confronting and containing Iran's dangerous and illegal nuclear program; pushing back against ugly and discriminatory demonisation of the Jewish state by both the broken UN system and increasingly ideological NGOs; preserving the possibility of resuming negotiations towards a two-state outcome if the Palestinians decide to reverse course and come to the table; and further developing the almost limitless economic, cultural and political potential of the Abraham Accords.

But while hoping for a period of stable governance, there is also good reason to anticipate that Israel's next government will also preserve some of the breakthrough achievements of its predecessor, in terms of inclusive cross-party comity, an enhanced place for the Arab minority in Israeli governance, and a focus on shared goals and interests rather than differences.



WORD FOR WORD

"[Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and I] decided to work together to dissolve the Knesset and set an agreed date for elections... We did our utmost to preserve this government. Believe me, no stone was left unturned – for the good of our beautiful country and for you, the citizens of Israel."

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett announces the dissolution of his coalition Government and new elections (*Times of Israel*, June 20).

"It is clear to everyone that this government, the biggest failure in the history of Israel, is at the end of its road... [I will establish] a broad, strong, and stable national government... that would bring back national pride."

Israeli Opposition Leader Binyamin Netanyahu responding to the collapse of the Government (*Haaretz*, June 20).

"With H.H Prince Turki Faisal al Saud. Looking forward to President Biden's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia. At Baku Forum

of @NizamiGanjaviIC."

Former deputy prime minister Tzipi Livni meets with Saudi Prince Turki Faisal Al Saud in Azerbaijan (Twitter, June 19).

"I call on all Israelis in Turkey to obey the instructions of the security forces... Israel is working to thwart Iranian attempts to carry out an attack, and is preparing to respond forcefully to any attack on Israeli citizens – anywhere."

Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz warning of a major threat to Israelis in Turkey (*Times of Israel*, June 18).

"[The] activities [of the International Atomic Energy Agency – IAEA] have been seriously affected by Iran's decision to stop the implementation of its nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA [2015 nuclear deal], ... Iran has not provided explanations that are technically credible in relation to the Agency's findings at three undeclared locations in Iran... Unless and until Iran provides technically credible explanations... the Agency cannot confirm the correctness and completeness of Iran's declarations under its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement."

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi (IAEA, June 8).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

A REFUGEE CONSENSUS?

Last month, the *AIR* published an article by Israeli scholars Roie Yellinek and Assaf Malach detailing how, historically, Arab states often paid lip service to Palestinian demands while in fact acting against Palestinian interests to serve their own ulterior motives.

Following up on their work, here is what a well-known Zionist writer wrote recently about how the Arab states exploited and abused the Palestinian refugees in the wake of the 1948 war:

Palestinians... have received probably more emotional and political support from others than any refugee community in modern times. While such support has often involved considerable financial help, it has also generally been more loud political noise than anything substantive...

This illusion of 'return' has served some Arab regimes' interests by giving them a powerful excuse to avoid integrating Palestinian refugees as citizens... These regimes feared that these refugees-cum-citizens would alter their demographics and threaten their ruling order. Consequently, the excuse given was that since the Palestinians would eventually return to Palestine, giving them citizenship would technically undermine their 'right of return' and hence they should be denied citizenship. Palestinian leaders actively colluded in perpetuating this tragedy.

Oh wait, that wasn't a Zionist writer at all. That was Ali Shihabi, a Saudi columnist who also serves as an advisor to Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman (MbS), writing in *Al Arabiya* on June 8.

Shihabi is indeed no Zionist – he also talks of Israel's establishment as "Jewish settler colonialism". But he does go a long way toward admitting that the Palestinian refugee problem has been maintained and exacerbated for more than 70-plus years by Arab policy, and that the supposed goal or "right" of Palestinians to return to ancestral homes in Israel is simply a pipe dream. He instead proposes that Jordan take over the Palestinian populations of the West Bank and Gaza and provide them citizenship and a better life as part of a peace deal. He believes Palestinians, who "have grown up under Israeli occupation or in refugee camps with minimal education, training, and work opportunities," can be persuaded to accept this because:

They will realise, once this idea is explained to them, that a futile struggle to regain their ancestral land should not be their priority anymore. The issue for them and their children going forward needs to be the ability to live a productive, fulfilling life once they are no longer stateless.

The whole article is striking because it demonstrates that while Israelis and the leaders of the conservative Sunni monarchies of the Arab world still disagree about a great deal, they are coming remarkably close to a shared consensus about what should happen in the future with regard to the Palestinians.

This once unthinkable pragmatic change among Arab leaders provides real hope that the flourishing relationships being created by the Abraham Accords can eventually lead to the unblocking of the long-stuck Israeli-Palestinian peace process – with backing, mediation and support from conservative Arab states.

SHIREEN ABU AKLEH'S COLLEAGUES IN TRAGEDY

We still do not know the exact sequence of events that led to the tragic shooting death of Palestinian Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh on May 11, during a firefight between IDF forces and local Palestinian gunmen in Jenin. Yet what is striking is how central her death has become to all pro-Palestinian campaigns against Israel.

Virtually every single article, blog, social media post or demonstration I see arguing a pro-Palestinian position references her death as a central plank of the case against Israel, whether advocating for Australia to recognise "Palestine"; calling for boycotts of a film festival featuring an Israeli documentary; insisting "Anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism" while advocating Israel be destroyed; or absurdly arguing that Israel should be regarded as an "Apartheid state".

I genuinely do not understand this phenomenon. Whatever the true circumstances, Abu Akleh's death provides no actual evidence or argument for any of these claims. Also, while Abu Akleh was a minor celebrity among Palestinians and other viewers of Al Jazeera in Arabic prior to her death, I find it difficult to believe that many Australians or other Westerners had ever heard of her before May 11. So why has her death become so iconic?

Abu Akleh's death should of course be properly mourned and the circumstances thoroughly investigated – while the sacrifice she made by constantly putting herself in harm's way by running into combat zones to do journalism deserves to be honoured and appreciated.

But on this last point, she is hardly alone – she has literally thousands of journalistic colleagues who similarly paid the ultimate price for doing their jobs. A report by the International Federation of Journalists published last year found that 2,658 journalists had been killed trying to do their jobs in the years between 1990 and 2020, including 339 killed in Iraq, 178 in Mexico, 160 in the Philippines, 138 in Pakistan and 116 in India.

Alternative numbers come from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), which has compiled a database of 1,449 journalists killed between 1992 and 2022. Chill-

ingly, that database is being expanded all the time. For instance, since Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine in late February, CPJ lists no fewer than 12 journalists killed in that arena.

Incidentally, the CPJ database lists a total of 19 journalists killed since 1992 in Israel and the Palestinian territories in various circumstances, including Abu Akleh – too many, but also not high by the standard of global combat zones.

So, as I said, what happened to Shireen Abu Akleh was horrific, it needs to be investigated and she deserves to be remembered and honoured. But this also applies to the thousands of journalist colleagues who, like her, paid the ultimate price for trying to do their jobs – and whose names and faces are so rarely recalled.

AIR



Anne Bayefsky

A UN COMMISSION'S WAR ON ISRAEL

The United Nations has declared an existential war on the state of Israel. Last year, the UN Human Rights Council contrived a unique “Commission of Inquiry” after Israel responded to another round of Hamas rocket attacks. The Inquiry has just issued its first report. Now emanating from the UN’s top human-rights body is a brazen attempt to resurrect the old 1975 lie that a Jewish state is a racist state. The report’s allegation that discrimination by Jews against non-Jews lies at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict is actually at the core of modern antisemitism.

The “Commission of Inquiry” is chaired by Navi Pillay, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. Zealously anti-Israel during her tenure, Pillay publicly slandered Israel with the apartheid label long before the so-called “inquiry” even began.

There are other tell-tale signs that the fix was in. Early on, the “inquiry” issued a call for submissions and the identification of victims. For the first time in UN history, such a call was answered by the delivery of more than 5 million unique submissions and individual names of Jewish victims of Arab incitement to Jew-hatred and violence. They emanated from a network of non-governmental organisations (which I facilitated), and their transmission was carefully logged. But the report says “the Commission has received several thousand written submissions” and featured a tiny subset of select Israel-bashing “stakeholders”.

Pillay’s report claims (1) the root cause of conflict is the “perpetual occupation” – that is, it’s Israel’s fault; (2) discrimination by Jews – as she defines Jewish self-determination from the start – drives the violence; and (3) the solution lies in prosecuting the criminals and eliciting

third-party responses (economic boycotts) from states and private actors.

This misinformation operation is outrageous: The report finds no Palestinian terrorist, no Palestinian terrorist organisations and no Palestinian terrorism. The UN inquisitors merely speculated that the actions of Gaza’s “de facto authorities” and anonymous “Palestinian-armed groups” *could* “spread terror among the civilian population in Israel.” As for Hamas, it was only named definitively as engaging in the “exercise of government-like functions.”

The submissions that the “inquiry” ignored, however, testify to a different story.

Our submissions documented the unrelenting violent attacks on Jews from before Israel’s independence in May 1948 until today. The goal: eliminating Jews from the river to the sea.

The “inquiry” touted that it would “adopt a victim-centred approach in all of its work.” So, we submitted the identities of 4,220 Israeli and other civilians remorselessly struck down in the various campaigns to eradicate the modern Jewish state.

The UN “inquiry” claimed it was looking for “systematic discrimination.” So, we submitted the details of 598,000 Jewish refugees and victims of Arab persecution in Middle Eastern and North African nations over the past 75 years – a partial list of the more than 800,000 who constitute, together with their descendants, the majority of Israel’s current Jewish population.

The inquisitors claimed they were seeking “overall patterns, policies, historical legacies and structural inequalities that affect the enjoyment of human rights.” So, we gave them another 46,862 submissions containing weekly situation reports, video and photographic evidence, legal documents and analysis.

They had rock-solid evidence that: the Palestinian Penal Code forbids Palestinians from selling land to Jews on pain of “life imprisonment with hard labour;” Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas refers to Jews as “filth” to be shunned; the Hamas Covenant openly commits those running Gaza to genocide; the PA pays bounties for the killing of Jews; the PA and Hamas maintain a system of antisemitic indoctrination in schools, training camps, official media and public affairs of all kinds; PA leaders publicly avow Jews will not be permitted to live in a Palestinian state.

But the report repeatedly claims Jews discriminate against non-Jews and could not muster a single example of the reverse.

Throughout the report, the standard of “proof” is United Nations say-so, regurgitations of the same UN system of entrenched anti-Israel prejudice and unfairness. In fact, Pillay relies heavily on prior UN hatchet jobs that she herself had a key role in advancing as High Commissioner.

Although this charade is obviously tainted and flawed, indifference to it would be a grave mistake. The “inquiry” has no end date and is being financed in perpetuity. There



are now two reports on the UN schedule annually, a perpetual drumbeat of modern antisemitism – the delegitimation of the Jewish state. AIR

Dr. Anne Bayefsky is the director of the Touro Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust, and President of Human Rights Voices. © Jewish News Syndicate (www.jns.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

STAYING THE COURSE?

The path towards self-government for Muslims in the southern Philippines is lined with potholes and potential roadblocks. These include militant holdouts – Islamic State-aligned jihadist groups – but also doubts about political leadership at the highest level, namely the incoming administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the fruit of the 2014 peace agreement between the Philippines government and former rebel group the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), is still in its infant stages, all the while trying to avoid the failings of the previous experiment in self-governance – the now-defunct Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) of 1989-2019 – sunk by corruption and mismanagement.

The interim Bangsamoro parliament formally opened its fourth regular session on June 14 with the aim of legislating the four remaining priority codes mandated in the Bangsamoro Organic Law, the region's charter. Since early 2020, it has faced the major challenge of passing a swath of laws to govern everything from tax collection to civil administration, while establishing a parliamentary system of government. Furthermore, its leaders had no legislative experience and faced major disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When it became clear that the interim legislative body could not pass all the laws required for an elected government to take over in May 2022, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) – headed by MILF leaders – successfully lobbied President Duterte to delay parliamentary elections from 2022 to 2025.

The delay carried clear risks in a region plagued by separatist violence for decades. The crucial process of decommissioning MILF rebels and their weapons is not yet complete, and Islamist jihadi groups remain a threat, despite being largely confined to operating in remote marshlands and outlying islands – at least for now.

It was envisioned that the entire 40,000-strong contingent of the MILF's Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF) would be demobilised and turn in their weapons

by mid-2022. By March 2020, the first two phases were complete, but the pace then slowed to a trickle when COVID-19 arrived. Demobilised fighters received initial cash handouts, but wider welfare support programs have yet to be fully delivered.

Of course, not all combatants in Mindanao are intent on giving up their arms. Radical groups which splintered from the MILF and its precursor, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), are still active.

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) broke away from the MILF in 2008 over the peace negotiations with Manila, but its influence is fading, with members split over a past pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State. The Philippines military claims there are just a few hundred BIFF rebels remaining and has pledged an intensified campaign.

In recent weeks, at least seven BIFF fighters laid down their arms and surrendered to military authorities. “We were convinced by how our former comrades who surrendered earlier are now living normal and happy lives,” said one. As of mid-June, the military has listed 132 former BIFF rebels who have surrendered, encouraged by a reconciliation program aimed at improving their communities.

Meanwhile, on the outer edges of the BARMM in northern Lanao and the Sulu islands, other militants continue in smaller numbers in the Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf. Although notionally aligned to the Islamic State, these groups have been unable to carry out anything beyond low-scale attacks in recent years, nor have they been able to derail the government-MILF peace process.

The military scored a major win just weeks ago when two notorious Abu Sayyaf lieutenants voluntarily surrendered at the military headquarters in Sulu. Almujafer Yadah and Ben Quirino are believed to be implicated in kidnappings and beheadings of tourists and captured soldiers over more than 20 years.

The reason for the surrender? “Because they were always on the run, have no place to hide, [were] exhausted and often experienced starvation,” said army spokesperson Lt. Col. Alaric de los Santos. “They also revealed that they no longer have the support of the community and were asked to stay away.”

The outstanding question is the path incoming president Marcos will take, because his campaign – based upon airbrushed nostalgia for the era of his father – revealed little about his intentions. Initial scepticism about the 2014 peace deal gave way to lukewarm support, then vociferous opposition when it was politically advantageous for the then Senator Marcos.

We will know soon enough if Marcos appoints military hardliners or plays hardball with the MILF, which made the understandable if ill-advised decision to support Marcos' election opponent, Leni Robredo. Marcos' large winning margin means he owes no favours to the South and its still fragile peace deal. AIR



Miriam Bell

FIGHTING BACK

Fervent anti-Israel rhetoric and propaganda have been hitting the headlines in New Zealand of late, and pro-Israel advocates are saying there is a need to step up the fight against them.

In mid-May, plans for “Nakba Day” commemorations in Wellington were dealt a blow by the city’s Mayor, Andy Foster. Originally, activists planned to light up a council-owned convention centre in the colours of the Palestinian flag.

Advice from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade prompted Foster to cancel the projection. This led to a “guerrilla projection” on the outside of the national museum, Te Papa, unsuccessful requests to meet Foster and a lot of sympathetic media coverage.

Then in June, the annual Doc Edge documentary film festival attracted the ire of Palestinian advocacy groups, who responded with a vocal boycott campaign by the Palestinian Solidarity Network (chaired by veteran anti-Israel activist John Minto) and the Palestinians in the Aotearoa Co-ordinating Committee.

It was not the first time the Academy Award-qualifying Doc Edge festival, which usually features several Israeli or Jewish-themed films, had been targeted. Back in 2018, the screening of a Ben-Gurion documentary resulted in Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement threats and the disruption of screenings by activists armed with fake bombs.

On this occasion, it is claimed the boycott calls were due to the festival having the Israeli Embassy as one of its sponsors. But the activists focused their anger on the film that the Embassy was sponsoring, *Dead Sea Guardians*, about the efforts of a Palestinian, an Israeli and a Jordanian to save the Dead Sea.

Indigenous Coalition for Israel director Dr Sheree Trotter, who spearheaded a counter-campaign of support for the festival, said the film had been shown in many Arabic and European countries and it was only in New Zealand that a boycott had been called for.

“The ridiculous part about this is that the film promotes a message of co-operation and working together, accepting each other’s narratives and creating a new narrative, for the collaborative goal of saving the Dead Sea from drying out.”

None of this mattered to BDS activists, who did not care about the subject and were simply opposed to the festival receiving some funding from the Israeli Embassy, she said.

“Instead, they use intimidation techniques to pressure

filmmakers to pull out of the festival, flooding in-boxes and social media platforms, publishing email addresses and encouraging others to bombard them.”

Trotter said she thinks the general public largely sees these activists as extremists, but the media gives them a free pass by providing them with uncritical publicity and publishing their propaganda without also providing a balanced or fair picture.

“In this way, many of the propaganda talking points get absorbed by the general populace, who may not have a strong view one way or another,” she said.

Zionist Federation of New Zealand President Rob Berg agreed the issue was that the pro-Palestinian lobby, which was actually a small group of vocal people who shouted loudly, seemed to be getting more media coverage, and that some in the press were making sweeping, judgemental statements in support of the lobby’s claims.

This was compounded by a growing media tendency to turn to a small, fringe group called Alternative Jewish Voices (AJV) for comment, he said.

“AJV is very unrepresentative of the wider Jewish community. Their sole identity as Jews seems to be the hate for Israel and Zionism, so this feeds into the increasingly widespread views of the political left. But AJV’s stance fits the anti-Israel narrative of certain publications.”

While most of the New Zealand public is not too interested in what is happening in Israel *vis-à-vis* the Palestinians, this year BDS activists felt more empowered, he said.

That was due to the false apartheid claims being touted by organisations such as Amnesty International, which for many decades had shown they suffer from institutional antisemitism. And the empowerment was evident in the protests about the Doc Edge festival and Wellington projection issue.

Berg and Trotter said their campaign to get people to support the festival had not been as successful as hoped, although reluctance around attending events due to COVID, along with memories of the 2018 bomb hoax, might also have contributed to the limited results.

They both argued there were additional actions supporters of Israel could, and should, take to better address the situation.

Berg said it was critical for people to actively counter the anti-Israel narrative. They could do this by writing to editors, engaging with people one on one, keeping updated on the situation in Israel, and writing letters of support to the management teams of organisations such as the Doc Edge Festival.

And Trotter says while the Palestinian lobby has few supporters in reality, those supporters have a lot of passion, commitment and determination to achieve their goals. “If Israel supporters had the same level of commitment, we could achieve a lot more,” she said.



BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

A rocket was fired from Gaza towards Ashkelon on June 17, prompting IDF retaliatory strikes against Hamas.

On June 1, a Palestinian woman approached IDF soldiers near Hebron with a knife and was shot and killed, while a second alleged stabbing attempt was thwarted on June 2 in Jerusalem.

Israeli counterterrorism raids continued throughout the West Bank, particularly Jenin, rounding up dozens of suspects and illegal weapons. Several Palestinian assailants were killed in clashes.

Outside Israel, Iranian operatives have reportedly been attempting to attack Israelis across the world, particularly in Istanbul, where, in early June, agents were allegedly lying in wait at a hotel to kidnap or kill an Israeli couple who were instead whisked out of the country by Israeli security forces. Israel has warned all Israelis in Istanbul to leave. Similar warnings from Israel have reportedly prompted Thailand to go on high alert over the danger of Iranian agents.

WORLD VISION HEAD HALABI CONVICTED

On June 15, the Beersheva District Court convicted Mohammad el-Halabi, former head of Gazan operations for the international charity World Vision, on more than a dozen counts, including belonging to a terrorist group (Hamas) and transferring millions of dollars in humanitarian aid funding to that group (For more on the verdict, see p. 23).

Halabi has already served six years in prison since his arrest in 2016 and will be sentenced in July. He has

indicated he intends to appeal against his conviction.

MYSTERIOUS DEATHS IN IRAN SUGGEST ISRAELI POLICY CHANGE

The assassination of high-ranking Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officer Col. Hassan Khodaei outside his Teheran home on May 22 has been seen by some analysts as evidence of an escalation in Israel's strategy toward Iran.

This was followed on May 31 by the death from alleged poisoning of Ayoub Entezari, an aerospace engineer reportedly involved in Iran's missile and drone program.

According to Western intelligence sources, Khodaei was likely killed by Israeli agents even though he is not connected to the Iranian nuclear program, but rather engaged in planning terrorist attacks against Israelis and Jews around the world. Israel's previous operations on Iranian soil had primarily targeted individuals involved in Teheran's nuclear program.

Analysts believe the apparent new Israeli policy reflects an assessment in Jerusalem that the Iranian nuclear program can't be isolated from Teheran's broader strategy for regional domination – a view long championed by outgoing PM Naftali Bennett.

ALLEGED ISRAELI STRIKES SHUT DAMASCUS AIRPORT

On June 10, Israeli airstrikes against Damascus Airport are alleged to have damaged runways and shut down the airport for around 21 days, thus blocking Iranian weapon shipments that were occurring via commercial flights landing at the airport before being sent to the Lebanese ter-

ror group Hezbollah. Analysts suggest the likely Israeli intent was to signal to the Syrian regime that if it does not stop this smuggling then the airport would be shut down for longer.

Israel's campaign against Iranian arms smuggling via Syria to Hezbollah has seen it launch hundreds of strikes in Syria over the past decade.

IAEA REBUKES IRAN



IAEA head Rafael Grossi at the IAEA Board of Governors meeting in Vienna (Image: Dean Calma/Flickr)

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors strongly criticised Iran in a June 8 resolution, initiated by the US and the Europeans, and supported by Australia, which demanded Teheran immediately "cooperate fully" with the IAEA's investigation into its illicit nuclear activities. The resolution expressed "deep concern" over man-made uranium particles detected in three undeclared Iranian locations, and about the whereabouts of equipment and materials previously stored at these sites.

Teheran reacted to this rebuke by disconnecting 27 IAEA surveillance cameras installed in Iran's nuclear-related facilities following the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). IAEA head Rafael Grossi warned that Iran's actions could be "a fatal blow" to efforts to revive the JCPOA, as the agency will soon no longer be able to fulfill its monitoring duties in Iran.

IRAN BREAKOUT TIME NEAR ZERO

The latest IAEA data indicate Iran's nuclear "breakout time" is now nearly zero, according to a report by experts from the US-based Institute for Science and International Security. This means that Teheran is just a few weeks away from accumulating enough highly-enriched uranium for at least one nuclear warhead, and three months from enough fissile material for four such weapons, whenever the regime decides to take that step.

Also in June, evidence made public by Israel from Iran's secret nuclear archive – taken from Teheran by Israeli agents in 2018 – indicated that Teheran stole or had access to secret internal IAEA documents, giving it inside information regarding the IAEA efforts to uncover and monitor Iran's efforts to build nuclear weapons.

BIDEN MIDEAST VISIT EXPECTED TO IMPROVE ISRAEL-SAUDI TIES

US President Joe Biden has announced his first visit to the Middle East as president, set for July 13-16. The visit, which will begin in Israel, continue to the West Bank, and end in Saudi Arabia, aims largely at contending with the growing Iranian threat to the region. The President will meet with Israeli political and security leaders to discuss the country's security and "its increasing integration into the greater region." Israeli officials also believe that, during his visit, Biden will announce a regional security agreement that includes Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as Egypt, Jordan and Abraham Accords signatories the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.

ISRAELI-LEBANESE CONTROVERSY OVER OFFSHORE GAS

On June 5, the British-Greek company Energean, which owns the rights to explore the Karish-Tanin gas fields

off Israel's northern Mediterranean coast, placed a floating gas extraction platform 75 km northwest of Haifa. In response, Lebanese officials claimed the rig violated "Lebanon's maritime sovereignty and invaded its maritime resources," while Hassan Nasrallah, head of the Iranian-backed Lebanese terror group Hezbollah, threatened to attack the rig if any drilling takes place.

However, Israeli officials insist the rig is not in an area considered controversial – something confirmed by satellite photos. Lebanon and Israel have been negotiating a maritime border dispute with US mediation since 2011, but Lebanon recently extended its earlier claim to 860 sq. km of seabed that had previously been acknowledged as on the Israeli side of the boundary to an even larger area of around 1,400 sq. km.

Amos Hochstein, the Biden Administration's liaison to Israel and Lebanon during these negotiations, said he remains committed to negotiating an agreement on the boundary.

Lebanese negotiators reportedly told Hochstein on June 14 that they were prepared to relinquish claims to the Karish-Tanin field in return for full control over another disputed field.

ISRAEL, EGYPT AND EU SIGN LANDMARK GAS DEAL

On June 15, Israel signed a historic gas deal with Egypt and the European Union that will help the EU bloc reduce its dependence on Russian energy. The deal will see Israel ship its offshore natural gas to the EU for the first time, via Egypt, where it will be liquified and then exported. In 2021, the EU imported about 40% of its gas from Russia but has faced challenges with supply since it imposed sweeping sanctions against Moscow.

Israeli Energy Minister Karine Elharrar said of the deal: "This is a tremendous moment in which little Israel becomes a significant player in the global energy market."



STRANGER THAN FICTION

GASLIGHTING

Whenever Israel (or some other country) manages to assassinate an Iranian regime operative, usually a key figure in Teheran's nuclear program or ongoing terror proxy campaign against Israel, it is a matter of acute embarrassment to the regime. Compounding the discomfiture has been Iran's failure to successfully strike back against Israelis. The Iranians have been reduced to inventing triumphs, often falsely claiming to have arrested or killed Mossad spies, claims eagerly repeated by Iran's compliant media.

So it was that on June 9, an unexplained drone attack in Erbil, northern Iraq, was reported by various Iranian media outlets to have killed a senior Mossad agent by the name of Asa Flots.

It was immediately obvious to Hebrew-speakers that the outlets were the victims of a prank – Asa Flots is a Hebrew

joke name meaning "made a fart".

Israeli social media users had a field day. Asa Flots was memorialised as having been "silent but deadly" and with the phrase, "Like a waft in the wind, you were gone too soon."

It appears that a joke tweet pretending to reveal the "real name" of the Mossad agent supposedly killed as Asa Flots was picked up by the IntelSky Twitter account, and then spread through various Iranian media outlets.

Meanwhile, Iran's spy agencies have also exhibited additional difficulties differentiating between fact and fiction. Moshe Zonder, creator of the hit Israeli TV spy drama "Tehran", revealed on Israeli radio in late May that it had been discovered that a recently exposed Iranian spy, who had recruited four Jewish women of Iranian descent, sent one of them to audition for a role on the show. Zonder said she didn't pass the audition.

Maybe the Iranians were seeking ideas to help make their fictitious victories over the Mossad more convincing?

COVER STORY

END OF A POLITICAL
EXPERIMENT

ANATOMY OF A DISSOLUTION

BICOM

On June 20, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid announced that they would bring a vote to disperse the Knesset, Israel's parliament, leading to new elections later this year – likely on October 25.

In an effort to keep their commitment to an alternating premiership under the coalition agreement, Lapid will be appointed the Prime Minister of the transitional government, while Bennett will serve as Alternate Prime Minister with responsibility for the Iran portfolio.

At the press conference, Bennett gave an impassioned speech, noting “We moved to a culture of ‘us’... we believed we could put differences aside and work together for a greater cause.”

He laid out his Government's achievements: “We stabilised the economy, we oversaw the wave of COVID without one day of lockdown, we brought back the unemployed, the country returned too, the campaign against Iran continued, we prevented the renewing of the JCPOA without burning our relationship with the US. On the southern border we've seen the quietest year in decades, we restored deterrence and stopped the suitcases of money for Hamas and their remilitarisation. We did not allow Hamas to dictate the events in Jerusalem... we restored national pride. We also dealt with the murderous wave of terror by sending the Shin Bet and police to work day and night to stop the terrorists.”

Lapid praised Bennett for “putting the country before his personal interest.” He called Bennett “a vital Israeli leader, innovative and brave.”

Lapid added: “What we need to do today is go back to the concept of Israeli unity, not to let dark forces tear us apart from within. We must remind ourselves that we love one another, love our country, and that only together will we prevail.”



Outgoing PM Naftali Bennett with some of the key players in his politically diverse cabinet (Image: Flickr)

Lapid also said that irrespective of the upcoming elections, the challenges Israel faces as a country could not wait. “We must address the cost of living, we must wage the battle against Iran, Hamas and Hezbollah and stand up against the forces that are threatening to turn Israel into a non-democratic country.”

BACKGROUND TO THE BREAKUP

The ruling eight-party coalition formally lost its narrow 61-59 majority in April when Idit Silman, the coalition chairperson and a member of Bennett's own *Yamina* (“rightward”) party, left the coalition.

There were further warning signs in May after the Government needed a compromise with the opposition over legislation to award academic scholarships to IDF combat veterans – highlighting the Government's inability to pass security-related laws independently.

The coalition's fault lines were also exposed when two of its members, Ghaida Rinawie Zoabi of the Meretz party

and Mazen Ghanaïm of the Ra'am party, voted against a bill to extend Israeli civil law to the West Bank.

On Friday, June 17, Bennett was told by Attorney-General Gali Baharav-Miara that the West Bank civil law bill could not be bypassed or extended beyond its June 30 deadline without a Knesset vote.

This law has been extended every five years since 1967, but the opposition Likud party was not willing to give the Government any backing, even for a law it has traditionally supported.

Justice Minister Gideon Saar of the right-wing New Hope party had earlier warned that this legislation would be a test of the coalition's ability to govern.

By dissolving the Knesset, the law will be automatically extended until three months into the next government's term.

YAMINA'S DISINTEGRATION

Bennett's own Yamina party – which had seven seats after the last election – has disintegrated. Already, soon after the Government was sworn in a year ago, one rebel MK, Amichai Chikli, defected.

Then followed Silman, who together with her family had faced heavy pressure from right-wing activists to quit the coalition.

The latest Yamina rebel, Nir Orbach, had issued an ultimatum for Bennett to pass the West Bank law, and also faced heavy pressure to join opposition ranks.

Now that the Government's end appears imminent, sources in Likud said Orbach will not receive a reserved slot on the Likud list at the upcoming election because of his hesitation, but Idit Silman will.

REACTION FROM THE OPPOSITION

Leader of the Opposition Binyamin Netanyahu took credit for the Government's downfall and called it the "worst government in the history of the State of Israel".

He vowed he would form the next government and that it would be "nationalist and wide".

Netanyahu said that the Likud was ready for elections and was confident in its ability to win, but he did not rule out the possibility of forming an alternative government in the current Knesset in order to prevent holding early elections.

There is still some chance that Netanyahu could succeed in forming an alternate government within the current Knesset. This would happen if right-wing members of the coalition, from New Hope and Yamina, switch sides and join Netanyahu's right-wing bloc, giving it at least 61 seats.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the last week of June, the Knesset is expected to vote to dissolve itself and Lapid will take over as interim prime

minister (unless Netanyahu succeeds in creating an alternate coalition).

Next month US President Joe Biden will visit Israel and is likely to be received by interim Prime Minister Lapid.

During August the Likud and Labor parties will hold their internal party primaries.

Sept. 8 appears the likely deadline for parties to submit their candidate lists.

The anticipated Oct. 25 election will be Israel's fifth election in three and a half years.

AIR

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NETANYAHU'S LAST SHOT?

Dov Lieber and Yardena Schwartz

The imminent collapse of Israel's shaky ruling coalition gives Binyamin Netanyahu his fifth chance in three years to form a stable government. It could be his last shot, political observers said.

Netanyahu, 73-years-old, is in a strong position as Israel's politics continue a rightward shift and his allied parties grow, analysts said. After a year as Opposition Leader, Israelis have seen what a government looks like without Netanyahu at the top for the first time in over a decade, and polls show many didn't like what they saw.

Even Netanyahu's ongoing trial on corruption charges appears to be going better, as prosecutors struggle to prove the most serious allegation against him, bribery, which he denies. Judges in the case recently denied prosecutors' request to amend the indictment on the charge.

Polls show that Netanyahu is still Israel's most popular politician, though he remains divisive. In almost every poll,



Opposition Leader Binyamin Netanyahu: Not ruling out efforts to form a government without going to new elections (Image: Shutterstock)



he and his allied parties fall short of a majority of seats in Israel's 120-member parliament, known as the Knesset.

"Compared to previous elections, Bibi is in a better starting point now," said Aviv Bushinsky, a former adviser to Netanyahu, using a common nickname for the former prime minister. "If he fails this time to reach a majority, his allies may no longer side with him."

Uri Maklev, a lawmaker from the ultraorthodox United Torah Judaism party, a Netanyahu ally, underscored that point, telling Israel's *Army Radio* that his party could consider Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz as prime minister if Netanyahu fails to get a majority.

"I think that Netanyahu won't be able to form a government," he said in an interview with *Army Radio* on Tuesday morning. "We have never, not for a moment, ruled out Benny Gantz. I think that we will strive for that."

The outgoing Government is unique in Israeli political history, with centre, right and left factions teaming up with an Arab Islamist party in an anti-Netanyahu coalition that removed the former prime minister from power last year for the first time since 2009.

As Opposition Leader, Netanyahu cast the Government as beholden to Islamists and other Arab parties, at times calling it a "Muslim Brotherhood government." The

WHO IS YAIR LAPID, ISRAEL'S LIKELY NEW INTERIM PM?

AIJAC staff

Yair Lapid, the chairman of the *Yesh Atid* ("there is a future") party, will take over as interim Israeli Prime Minister from Naftali Bennett if the Knesset votes to dissolve itself in the final weeks of June as expected.

This is in keeping with the provisions of the coalition agreements signed last year that created the now outgoing eight-party government. Under these agreements, Lapid was originally slated to take over as PM from Bennett in August 2023, and serve as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and "Alternate Prime Minister" – with the right to veto any government decision – until then. However, the agreement also contained a clause stating that in the event of Government collapse caused by the withdrawal of support from within one of the parties in Bennett's "bloc", as happened in this case, Lapid is to become interim PM pending fresh elections.

Lapid's political career dates back to 2012, when he founded *Yesh Atid* with a secularist and centrist "clean government" platform. It quickly became the second biggest party in Israel's Knesset in its first election in 2013, winning 19 seats. From 2013 to 2014, *Yesh Atid* joined a coalition government led by the Likud, with Lapid serving as Finance Minister under Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu then fired Lapid for alleged disloyalty in December 2014, precipitating new elections in March 2015. *Yesh Atid* declined to 11 seats and went into opposition.

In the elections held in April 2019, September 2019 and March 2020, *Yesh Atid* ran as part of a coalition of parties calling itself "Blue and White", dedicated to replacing Netanyahu, who was by then under indictment on corruption charges. Lapid agreed to be second-in-command to former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz in Blue and White, with an agreement that

the two would rotate the prime ministership should they win government. Blue and White won more than 33 seats in each of those elections, and effectively held the Likud to a draw in all of them. In May 2020, Gantz reached a deal to create a "national emergency government" with Netanyahu to deal with the COVID crisis. However, Lapid rejected this deal and split Blue and White, taking 17 of Blue and White's 33 Knesset members into opposition and becoming Opposition Leader.

In the March 2021 election that followed the collapse of the Netanyahu-Gantz "emergency government", *Yesh Atid* won 17 seats, again making it the second largest party in the Knesset. Lapid was given a mandate to try to form a government by then Israeli President Rivlin after Netanyahu failed to do so, and was the key player in negotiating the coalition arrangements that brought about the formation of the current Government.

His tenure as Foreign Minister over the past year has seen him gain a greater international profile. He has also achieved significant success in expanding Israeli ties with the UAE, Morocco, Bahrain, Egypt and Jordan in the wake of the 2020 Abraham Accords through a series of agreements and meetings. These culminated in the unprecedented Negev Summit in March, which saw Israel hosting the foreign ministers of the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Egypt, as well as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

Lapid was born in Israel in 1963 and is married with three children. He comes from a family with a history in journalism and politics. His father Yosef "Tommy" Lapid was an influential Israeli journalist-turned-politician who headed the secularist Shinui party. He held a seat in the Knesset from 1999-2006, serving as Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Minister from 2003-2004.

Before beginning his political career, Yair Lapid was one of Israel's best-known TV journalists and the author of several books, including both novels and non-fiction.

In 2013, *TIME Magazine* ranked him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.



Yair Lapid: TV journalist-turned-politician, now likely to become interim PM (Image: Shutterstock)

Government's leaders say the coalition was inclusive of all parts of Israeli society, including Arab citizens who make up around 20% of the population.

In a theme expected to play out over the election, Netanyahu on Monday night attacked Gideon Saar, a lawmaker in the anti-Netanyahu coalition who was once the former prime minister's ally. Saar has vowed to do all he can to prevent Netanyahu from returning to power.

"He cancels me out but sits with the Muslim Brotherhood that supports terror," Netanyahu said of Saar.

In turn, Saar and other opponents of Netanyahu are attacking him for allying with the party of far-right religious politician Itamar Ben-Gvir. Ben Gvir's hard-line views against Arabs, including expelling those he would consider not loyal to the state and supporting the use of maximum military force against Palestinians, have helped him quickly become one of Israel's most popular right-wing politicians.

On June 21, Saar told Israel's *Ynet News* that "the government of Bibi and Ben-Gvir will bring a certain end to the rule of law and be captive to extremism of any kind."

Netanyahu was the first Israeli leader to negotiate with the Islamist party to help establish a government, but his more hard-line allies refused to rely on an Arab party.

In the past four elections, Netanyahu ran as the prime minister. This time, the prime minister will be Yair Lapid, the centrist news anchor turned politician who serves as foreign minister in the outgoing Government. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett held to an agreement forged a year ago to let Lapid take power if the Government fell.

Lapid is the clear top challenger to Netanyahu. Once vulnerable to Netanyahu's attacks for being unqualified and inexperienced when he entered politics, Lapid now has nearly a decade of political experience.

But Lapid has no clear path to a majority coalition either. Polls show Netanyahu's Likud party would win between 34 and 36 seats in the Knesset, while Lapid's Yesh Atid party gets about 20 seats.

Ultimately, analysts say, the election will become another referendum on Netanyahu. He first rose to power in 1996, serving three years as prime minister, and then staged a political comeback in 2009. He has served longer in office as prime minister than any other Israeli politician.

But over that time, Netanyahu has burned personal relationships with the heads of most centrist, left-wing or right-wing parties now opposed to him. His critics from across the political spectrum say the former prime minister had used his position for personal interests and that he seeks power to either evade or defend the criminal allegations against him.

Netanyahu says he wants to return to power to improve the economy, secure the country and continue to expand Israel's widening circle of allies in the region. He has said

the abuse-of-power allegations are untrue and the investigations politically motivated.

"People admire him. They call him the magician," said Prof. Gideon Rahat, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank funded by educational institutions, family foundations and corporations. "He isn't a magician when it comes to establishing a government and building coalitions."

AIR

Dov Lieber is a Wall Street Journal correspondent covering Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Yarden Schwartz is an award-winning freelance journalist and Emmy-nominated producer based in Tel Aviv. © Wall Street Journal (www.wsj.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

POLLS SUGGEST YET ANOTHER DEADLOCKED ELECTION

Michael Horovitz

As Israel braces for its fifth election since 2019, three separate TV polls that aired on June 21 showed that the two rival political blocs remain deadlocked, as they were in the previous four elections. However, all the polls showed the bloc of parties loyal to Opposition Leader Binyamin Netanyahu faring significantly better than it did in the 2021 elections.

The polls predicted that neither the current coalition nor Netanyahu's right-religious bloc would receive a majority of 61 seats in the 120-member Knesset, assuming there are no changes in the constellation of parties and alliances in the coming months.

The surveys were aired a day after Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid announced that they would move to dissolve the Knesset, as multiple defections from parties in the ruling coalition rendered it unable to govern.

The *Kan* public broadcaster predicted Netanyahu's bloc would win 60 of the Knesset's 120 seats, while the coalition parties would receive 54 if an election were held today.

Channel 12 news predicted a 59 to 56 split, while *Channel 13* news predicted 59 to 55. The remainder of the seats would go to the majority Arab Joint List, which doesn't support either bloc.

In the March 2021 elections, Netanyahu's bloc – Likud (30), Shas (8), United Torah Judaism (7) and Religious Zionism – mustered only 52 seats in total.



Tuesday's polls all showed Likud as the top vote-getter, garnering 35-36 seats, compared to 20-22 seats for Lapid's *Yesh Atid* ("There is a Future"), the next highest vote-getter.

Channel 12's poll found the parties would win seats as follows: Likud, 35; Yesh Atid, 20; Blue and White, 9; Religious Zionism, 9; Shas, 8; United Torah Judaism, 7; Labor, 6; Joint List, 5; *Yisrael Beytenu* ("Israel our Home", 5; Ra'am, 4; *Yamina* ("Rightward"), 4; Meretz, 4; New Hope, 4.

Channel 13's poll gave Likud, 35; Yesh Atid, 22; Religious Zionism, 9; Shas, 8; United Torah Judaism, 7; Blue and White, 7; Joint List, 6; Labor, 5; *Yisrael Beytenu*, 5; Ra'am, 4; *Yamina*, 4; Meretz, 4; New Hope, 4.

And the *Kan* poll scored the parties like this: Likud, 36; Yesh Atid, 21; Blue and White, 9; Religious Zionism, 9; Shas, 8; United Torah Judaism, 7; Labor, 6; Joint List, 6; *Yamina*, 5; *Yisrael Beytenu*, 5; New Hope, 4, Ra'am 4. It showed Meretz falling below the Knesset threshold.

Such poll findings might prompt parties near the bottom of the tally to consider forming alliances in order to avoid falling below the electoral threshold of 3.25%.

Two of the polls found that most respondents prefer to go to elections rather than see an alternative government formed by Netanyahu in the current Knesset.

The *Channel 12* poll found that 57% of respondents prefer elections to the 32% of those who want an alternative government with Netanyahu at the helm, while a poll aired by *Kan* found that 46% of respondents prefer the current course, while 37% support the establishment of a new government under the opposition leader.

According to *Kan*, 48% of respondents believe the opposition leader should be PM, while 31% answered they prefer Lapid.

Channel 12 found that Netanyahu was the preferred leader for prime minister when polled against Bennett, Lapid, and Defence Minister Gantz. 47% of respondents believed he was more suited to the job, while 23% supported Bennett, and 31% supported Lapid. Against Gantz, 46% of respondents supported Netanyahu as prime minister, while 26% preferred the Defence Minister.

The poll also ran a scenario of Bennett and Justice Minister Gideon Sa'ar running together on a joint electoral list, which found it would only make a difference of 1 seat, with Likud receiving 34 seats and a *Yamina* and New Hope partnership receiving 13.

If *Yamina* ran together with Yesh Atid, their list would receive 26 seats according to *Channel 12* news, but New Hope would not pass the electoral threshold, thus awarding the Netanyahu bloc 60 seats.

Elections will likely be held toward the end of October, after the conclusion of the Jewish High Holidays.

AIR

WILL ELECTIONS AFFECT ISRAEL'S IRAN STRATEGY?

Lahav Harkov

The dissolution of the Knesset comes at a key time in Israel's battle to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons – a time at which continuity, or a lack thereof, could impact the outcome.

Outgoing Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, now set to become interim Prime Minister, have pointed to recent events on the Iran nuclear front as successes.

In February, when it seemed as though an Iran deal was around the corner, Bennett, Defence Minister Benny Gantz and Lapid started to become more vocal in speaking out against the negotiations to return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), setting their sights on Iran's demand that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) be removed from the US State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list.

At the time, a senior Israeli official said they weren't bringing up the issue as a "poison pill" for the Iran Deal, but it became one anyway. The war in Ukraine and distrust of Russia derailed Iran talks, and with Iran insisting that the IRGC be delisted in addition to a restoration of the JCPOA, they never got back on track. In late April, US President Joe Biden told Bennett that the US would keep the IRGC on the FTO list. About a month later word had leaked to the press.

With the Iran deal seemingly less likely than ever, Iran started suffering the consequences of a lack of diplomatic process.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors voted to censure the Islamic Republic in early June for refusing to provide answers about uranium traces found at undeclared sites. This was the forum's first rebuke of Iran in two years, though there had been repeated IAEA reports on its nuclear subterfuge.

Plus, the US began enforcing sanctions on Iran that it had mostly ignored for the past year because they were not compatible with the JCPOA.

HOW DID BENNETT'S STRATEGY DIFFER FROM BIBI'S?

All of this happened while Bennett decided to take a different track from his predecessor, Binyamin Netanyahu. In the early months of 2021, Netanyahu, his ministers and staff refused to discuss anything to do with Iran talks with their counterparts in Washington.



Bennett with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken: Bennett's policy has been to actively engage with the US Administration on Iran (Image: Flickr)

Bennett, however, decided to engage with the Biden Administration even though he opposed a return to the Iran Deal, and Washington was transparent with Jerusalem on related matters – as far as we know – to Jerusalem's satisfaction.

Now, Bennett and co. sought to convince their partners in the West to pursue two simultaneous paths.

In the short term, Jerusalem wants the IAEA condemnation to be the start of a process that will bring the Iranian nuclear file to the UN Security Council, ideally to “snap back” sanctions, a step to try to use diplomacy to stop Iran from enriching uranium, which would go together with the growing regional partnership against the Iranian threat in case military action is needed.

When it comes to the “regional defence architecture”, as the Government calls it, the Negev Summit between Israel and four Arab countries in March was only the beginning; notably, Gantz's comments on the matter in the Knesset were on the front page of the Saudi paper *Arab News* on June 21.

In the longer term, Bennett supports an Iran deal, but one that is lacking the JCPOA's weaknesses. In other words, it would be a deal that is built to last forever, without the “sunset clauses” gradually lifting restrictions on Iran's nuclear program. In theory, Iran would be enticed to join the deal by the lifting of economic sanctions and deterred from leaving it by the threat of them snapping back.

It's hard to say how far Bennett, Lapid and Gantz have gotten in convincing others of this path. Lapid said that the UK agrees with Israel, but the UK embassy said returning to the JCPOA is still a priority.

WILL LAPID'S STRATEGY CHANGE THINGS ONCE MORE?

If Lapid becomes prime minister, as he and Bennett plan, Bennett will have the non-job of “alternate prime minister”, which is somewhat like a minister without portfolio, except that they agreed that he would still be in

charge of Iran policy. This would ensure continuity.

At the same time, it seems unlikely that someone who is not prime minister can really be in charge of such a major part of national security. If Lapid plays a major role on the Iran portfolio, some level of continuity could be expected, because the current policy was formulated in a government in which he and Bennett held the reins together.

However, Lapid generally has a less confrontational approach to the US and has said yes – or at least maybe – to things that Bennett had to roll back, such as a Palestinian consulate in Jerusalem. As prime minister of an interim government, he won't be as beholden to the other elements of his coalition as Bennett was.

If Netanyahu somehow pulls together an alternative coalition in time to avert new elections, or returns to the premiership after this election, the diplomatic approach to the Iran nuclear issue may be entirely different. Though there are no longer any Iran talks to speak of for him to rail against, Netanyahu has generally been much more aggressive in his tone on the topic and more willing to anger leaders of countries involved in the talks. The close talks between Washington and Jerusalem on the matter could come to an end or be less frequent.

At the same time, Netanyahu would be likely to keep up the partnerships with moderate Arab states threatened by Iran, which built upon his governments' secret cooperation with these states and the Abraham Accords.

The fact that there is such political turmoil at such a pivotal time for Iran-related diplomacy will likely be a challenge for Israel. Bennett accused Netanyahu of not giving the matter enough attention during the four election campaigns held between early 2019 and March 2021. Let's hope that Lapid and Bennett are able to give this matter of importance to Israel's national security the time it needs, even while campaigning.

AIR

Lahav Harkov is the Senior Contributing Editor and Diplomatic Correspondent for the Jerusalem Post. © Jerusalem Post (www.jpost.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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Human Wrongs

The UN's broken Human Rights system

Charlotte Lawson

Less than three decades after the United Nations revoked its infamous “Zionism is racism” declaration, an Arab-led group of 18 nations became the first UN agency to accuse Israel of promoting an apartheid system within its borders in 2017. During an ensuing debate before the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC), member states of the “Economic and Social Commission for West Asia” – a Middle East-based organisation from which Israel had been excluded – accused the Jewish state of “theft of land”, “violence and terrorism”, “ethnic cleansing”, and “crimes against humanity”.

Then Hillel Neuer, an international lawyer and Executive Director of the group UN Watch, took the floor to pose a deceptively simple question to the countries leveling the charges: “Where are your Jews?”

“Israel’s 1.5 million Arabs, whatever challenges they face, enjoy full rights to vote and to be elected in the Knesset, they work as doctors and lawyers, they serve on the Supreme Court... How many Jews live in your countries?” Neuer asked before the chamber. “Algeria had 140,000 Jews. Algeria, where are your Jews? Egypt used to have 75,000 Jews. Where are your Jews? Syria, you had tens of thousands of Jews. Where are your Jews? Iraq, you had over 135,000 Jews. Where are your Jews?”

The answer to Neuer’s question, of course, was that the once flourishing Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa had been driven from their homelands in waves in the years since Israel’s fight for independence. But his speech was met with silence from the chamber.

“You could feel that it was sort of an historic moment at the UN,” Neuer said in an interview with *The Dispatch*. “I think everyone in the room, even those not favourably inclined toward Israel, recognised that an uncomfortable truth had been expressed that no one had an answer for.”

It wasn’t the first time, nor would it be the last, that the organisation appointed to defend a universal respect for humanity failed to reckon with its systematic discrimination against the Middle East’s lone democracy. The increas-



High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet: Under fire for an allegedly soft and protective stance toward China (Image: UN Photo/ Violaine Martin/ Flickr)

ing prevalence of dictatorships among the HRC’s ranks and the lack of political will among its democracies to address them further call into question the body’s legitimacy.

More than five years after his viral speech, Neuer’s willingness to say what many prefer to go unspoken remains as relevant as ever. On June 7, a report led by Navi Pillay – a long-time fomenter of anti-Israel sentiment – placed sole blame for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Israeli officials. The probe’s findings were presented to the 50th session of the HRC on June 13.

Since the body’s inception, Israel has been the only country singled out for regularly scheduled debates under Agenda Item 7, which seeks to address “human rights violations and implications of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and other occupied Arab territories.” Over the last seven years alone, Israel has been the subject of 125 condemnatory resolutions by the HRC. The next most frequent transgressor in the eyes of the council, Russia, was the subject of 18 such resolutions during the same timeframe. China hasn’t been the subject of any,



Hillel Neuer of UN Watch takes on Human Rights Council hypocrisy (Image: UN Watch/ Flickr)

despite a long-promised investigation by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) into its abuses of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

For almost a year, the High Commissioner – former Chilean President Michelle Bachelet – has stalled the release of the probe’s findings. And her recent visit to China last month has been denounced by diplomats and activists from across the globe as little more than a photo opportunity for the high-ranking Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials with whom she met.

During a two-day stint in Xinjiang, Bachelet didn’t visit any of the region’s infamous “re-education centres” in which an estimated 2 million Uyghurs and Muslim minori-

ties have been detained. Locals were reportedly warned by CCP officials against speaking freely with the High Commissioner.

But in a press conference at the visit's conclusion, Bachelet glossed over the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang, adopting the Chinese regime's own euphemisms – “counterterrorism and deradicalisation” – to describe its systematic oppression of the Uyghur population. She praised China for its “tremendous achievements” in poverty alleviation, gifting the communist regime a desperately needed propaganda victory.

“Her statement gave a green light to the Chinese Government to continue the repression of the Uyghurs,” Dolkun Isa, President of the World Uyghur Congress, told *The Dispatch*. “She has destroyed her credibility. Not only her credibility, but she has also destroyed the UN human rights system's credibility.”

The US Biden Administration – along with US lawmakers, human rights organisations, and activists worldwide – reportedly warned the UN against approving the trip, correctly anticipating that it would rubber stamp the Chinese Government's human rights record.

In defence of the trip, Bachelet stressed that it wasn't investigative, but rather “an opportunity to hold direct discussions” with Chinese officials. Yet her office ostensibly delayed the Xinjiang report's publication once again to include “interactions and observations from the visit” – a discrepancy Bachelet has yet to fully address. The High Commissioner's office did not respond to *The Dispatch's* request for comment.

Bachelet's controversial trip and refusal to release findings on Xinjiang came as no surprise to Emma Reilly, a former UN human rights officer and whistleblower. Reilly was fired from her position last year after exposing the OHCHR's preferential treatment of the Chinese Government. “When she was president of Chile, she was the regional representative for the Belt and Road Initiative,” Reilly told *The Dispatch*, referring to China's plan to extend its influence with infrastructure projects in developing economies worldwide. “Is it any great shock that she has said absolutely nothing about the Uyghur genocide?”

In 2013, Reilly learned that the office had been disclosing the names of Chinese dissidents to Beijing, endangering their lives and those of their families. But when she began to report her discovery up the ranks of the UN, she encountered indifference and eventually retaliation: “I went all the way up to the High Commissioner of Human Rights at that time, and was basically told the same thing

by everybody – that it was a political decision, that certain exceptions had to be made for China, and that I was somehow naive to not understand this.”

A witness statement from another whistleblower, Miranda Brown, even recounted a meeting with UN Secretary-General António Guterres. According to the testimony provided to *The Dispatch*, Guterres claimed he was “powerless to control the OHCHR leadership (past and current) and other senior UN officials involved in addressing our situation.”

“When a whistleblower comes forward – whether it's me about complicity in genocide, Miranda Brown about child sex abuse – we are vilified and fired. Member states do not engage with whistleblowers, they only engage with the organisations that whistleblowers are reporting,” Reilly explained. “There's a lot of perverse incentives on everyone's part to just never say anything, keep the system running, and never actually look at what it's become or whether it's fulfilling its mandate or not.”

Isa, the World Uyghur Congress President, was among the dissidents whose names were handed over to the Chinese Government. China has since made sure he and his family pay the price for his activism. In 2018, his mother died while detained in a re-education camp on the vague charge of “religious extremism”. His father died the same year under unknown circumstances, which Isa himself didn't discover until 2020. Chinese authorities sentenced Isa's young brother,

Hushtar, to life in prison in 2021.

Although Isa currently lives in exile, he has also fallen prey to Chinese Government attempts to silence him from afar. In 2017, Isa was forcibly removed from the UN headquarters in New York while attending its Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. “On day three of the conference, when I was on a coffee break, I was kicked out of the UN headquarters without any explanation,” he said.

“I was a victim of the Chinese government trying to manipulate the UN system,” he told *The Dispatch*. “My case is not unique.”

Many say China's membership in the HRC undermines the body's legitimacy. But it isn't just China. According to UN Watch, 66% of the council's member states are non-democratic countries, including Pakistan, Cuba, and Eritrea. American presidents have long criticised the HRC's low barrier to entry and consistent discrimination against Israel, but, in 2018 the US became the first country to give up its seat on the council.



UNHRC Whistleblowers: Emma Reilly (top) and Miranda Brown (Images: Twitter, YouTube screenshot)

The Trump Administration's move was denounced by many in the West, who argued that the best way to reform the council was from within. But others praised it as a long overdue step in denying the HRC the prestige that comes from US membership. According to former officials with the US Mission to the UN (USUN), Washington didn't take lightly the decision to leave.

"If people were committed to change and making the Human Rights Council something that could stand the test of time based on its membership and its items and its focus, then we were happy to stay in," one former USUN official told *The Dispatch*. "But otherwise there was no point

"There seems to be no quick fix for the organisation plagued by a lack of transparency, anti-Israel discrimination, and Chinese government influence

in the United States being a part of that. We don't need it to advance human rights, so why lend our name to a body that is fundamentally backwards?"

Last October, US President Joe Biden announced that the US would re-join the HRC to provide a "constructive voice" and urge the body to "live up to its mandate." But critics argue that the Biden team hasn't done enough to push for reform.

"The Biden Administration should not have re-joined the council without seeking reform, and we haven't really gotten much from this administration about what reforms they want and how they're going to implement them," a former adviser to the USUN told *The Dispatch*. "It's easy to say they want to get rid of Agenda Item 7 and improve membership, but to actually do that involves a lot of leg-work and I haven't seen them come up with a plan to make that happen."

To Neuer, the problem lies not in the White House's decision to re-join the HRC, but in its unwillingness to speak out forcefully against its many defects in the months since.

"To have one powerful dissenting voice speaking the truth in a room where so many lies are told, and where most democracies and European countries are cowardly and too often go along to get along would serve an important purpose for humanity and for history," he said. "Regrettably, the Biden Administration too often is either silent in the face of abuses or, even worse, acts as a cheerleader in many of its publications and statements regarding the council."

There seems to be no quick fix for the organisation plagued by a lack of transparency, anti-Israel discrimination, and Chinese government influence. Some propose scaling back American funding. Others would like to see Washington withdraw for good. Isa, for his part, argued that the US and allies must summon the political will to

present a united front against the body's authoritarian forces.

"Democratic countries must speak with the same voice," Isa said. "Authoritarian countries speak with one voice, led by China."

AIR

Charlotte Lawson is a reporter and Poynter-Koch fellow for The Dispatch, a 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.

DOES MAHMOUD ABBAS FINALLY HAVE A SUCCESSOR?

Yoni Ben Menachem

Israeli and US officials are watching Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas' affairs with concern. Senior Fatah officials report that something is happening to the 86-year-old Abbas. He has slowed his activity and cut back his meetings, participating only in the important ones while leaving the others to his confidant, senior PLO official Hussein al-Sheikh.

On June 11, Abbas hosted a US delegation headed by Barbara Leaf, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, who came to lay the groundwork for US President Joe Biden's possible visit to the region. To Leaf, Abbas threatened to suspend ties and security coordination with Israel again. In addition, he demanded that the US Administration re-open the consulate in Jerusalem and the PLO office in Washington and delist the PLO as a terror organisation.

Al-Sheikh, currently the leading candidate to succeed



The struggle to succeed 86-year old PA President Mahmoud Abbas is consuming Palestinian politics (Image: Shutterstock)

Abbas until (or if) elections are held in the territories, is gradually assuming Abbas' duties.

In early June, al-Sheikh, assuming the role held by the late Saeb Erekat, met with foreign consuls and US envoy Hady Amr, with whom he discussed the Palestinian Authority's demands of the US Administration.

After Abbas' June 11 meeting with the US delegation led by Barbara Leaf, al-Sheikh held a detailed discussion with the group. According to the Wafa news agency, the Palestinian official conveyed a gamut of demands:

I stressed the necessity of reopening the U.S (sic) consulate in East Jerusalem and removing the PLO from the lists of terrorism in accordance with the unfair congressional laws against the Palestinian people, and talked about the economic aspects and the need to resume assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA), as well as unilateral measures that would undermine the two-state solution and peace opportunities, especially in light of the global financial crisis, especially the financial crisis in the PA due to the occupation's withholding of our money from taxes owed to us.

PLUGGING THE LEAKS

A leak to the BBC's Arabic channel around the same time, alleging that Abbas had hastily been taken to hospital and had transferred some of his powers to al-Sheikh, was no coincidence.

Senior Fatah officials say this fake news was aimed at undermining the close ties between Abbas and his trusted ally al-Sheikh. The report was staunchly denied by the PA, and the BBC channel had to delete it from its website.

Hussein al-Sheikh, for his part, is not resting on his laurels. Since Abbas authorised him in early June to assume the role of Secretary-General of the PLO Executive Committee, he has been acting energetically on several fronts to bolster his status as Abbas' possible successor.

Al-Sheikh is doing all he can to remain the most prominent candidate to succeed Abbas as PA and Fatah Chairman. Senior Fatah officials say it was he who deferred the Eighth Fatah Conference to an unknown date, seeking to prevent the election of senior Fatah officials to key positions that would enable them to challenge him in the succession battle.

Al-Sheikh's main rival is Fatah Secretary-General Jibril Rajoub, who seeks the post of the organisation's deputy chairman in place of Mahmoud al-Aloul.

The Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar* reported on June 6 that sharp disagreements between senior members of the Fatah Central Committee had begun to imperil the movement's future. Most of the Fatah top brass oppose al-Sheikh as their future leader.

Other senior Fatah figures expressed chagrin over Abbas' handling of the movement's affairs and the performance of Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh's Government.

There is intense anger over Abbas' designation of al-Sheikh as Executive Committee Secretary-General without



Hussein el-Sheikh: Abbas's right-hand man and well-positioned to succeed him, despite a poor public image (Image: Twitter)

a process of internal elections, as the PLO by-laws require.

Senior Fatah officials say this damages the movement's popularity and caused its defeat in the internal elections for several West Bank institutions, most notably the Student Council of Bir Zeit University.

Al-Sheikh's reputation in the Palestinian street has been hit hard in recent years by reports in Palestinian social media and Israeli media charging him with corruption and sexual harassment.

THE SUCCESSION BATTLE INTENSIFIES

Senior Fatah officials are competing to succeed Abbas. Most prominent among them is Deputy Chairman Mahmoud al-Aloul, the oldest aspirant and part of the organisation's founding generation. Also in the running is Secretary-General Rajoub. Both men would like to see a quick convening of the Eighth Fatah Conference, which, they believe, would further empower them in the succession battle.

In light of these power struggles, however, al-Sheikh convinced Abbas to postpone the conference to an unspecified later date.

Al-Sheikh has been working for months to improve his ties with the Egyptian and Jordanian leaders and win their support in the succession battle. A very seasoned Palestinian politician, he is known by many as the "fox of Fatah".

Recently al-Sheikh met with Egyptian and Jordanian officials and accompanied Abbas' visit to Egypt and Jordan.

Sources close to al-Sheikh say that before his PLO Executive Committee appointment, Abbas consulted with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah about the possibility of al-Sheikh replacing Saeb Erekat. The latter, who died of COVID-19, had been the Executive Committee's Secretary-General and head of the negotiating team with Israel.

When the two Arab leaders did not express opposition, Abbas began transferring some of Erekat's powers to al-Sheikh.

Another rival to al-Sheikh for the Fatah leadership is Marwan Barghouti, who is serving five life sentences in Israel for the murder of Israelis. Barghouti regards himself as Abbas' natural successor, and in Palestinian public opinion surveys, he is out in front as the next PA chairman.

Fatah sources claim, however, that Israel promised al-Sheikh that after Abbas' death, Barghouti would not be freed from prison, thereby clearing the path for al-Sheikh to take control of Fatah.

The Israeli defence establishment fears that Barghouti, who was a leader of the Second Intifada, would reignite armed struggle against Israel.

Al-Sheikh, in any case, faces a huge challenge and is racing against time to shore up his status before Abbas leaves the political stage. Al-Sheikh is getting help from his political ally General Majid Freij, who is leading an effort to oust Prime Minister Shtayyeh and thereby boost al-Sheikh's influence.

Abbas supports al-Sheikh, who has become his protégé. In his role as head of civil affairs, al-Sheikh is in charge of the tax revenues that Israel transfers to the Palestinian Authority each month, entry permits to Israel, and VIP certificates for senior PA officials – affording him great power within the PLO and the PA and ways to buy political loyalty.

However, al-Sheikh does not enjoy great support in the divided Fatah movement. Once Abbas leaves the political arena, al-Sheikh will face a serious problem because the PA Chairman has been the source of his power.

In Gaza, al-Sheikh is seen as responsible for the sanctions on the Strip, and all the factions oppose his becoming Abbas' successor as PA chief.

Abbas' choice of al-Sheikh as Erekat's temporary replacement came as a surprise to the Fatah movement. In the next stage, he intends to promote Freij to membership of the Fatah Central Committee.

The tripartite axis of Abbas, Hussein al-Sheikh, and Majid Freij is currently leading the Palestinian Authority, to the consternation of other Fatah officials such as Jibril Rajoub and Mahmoud al-Aloul, each of whom sees himself as Abbas' successor.

In any case, a senior Fatah official believes that if Abbas is incapacitated or dies, the one who will temporarily replace him will be the former speaker of the Palestinian National Council, Rawhi Fattouh, and that it will be for a period of 60 days until the presidential elections.

Although Hussein al-Sheikh will be able to run in those elections, his chances of winning are now poor in light of his blemished reputation in the Palestinian street.

AIR

Yoni Ben Menachem, a veteran Arab affairs and diplomatic commentator for Israel Radio and Television, is a senior Middle East analyst for the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs (JCPA). He served as Director General and Chief Editor of the Israel Broadcasting Authority. © JCPA (www.jcpa.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

THE VERDICT IN THE EL-HALABI/WORLD VISION CASE

NGO Monitor

On June 15, 2022, Mohammad el-Halabi was convicted in the Beersheva District Court of diverting funds and materials to Hamas for terror purposes. At the time of his arrest in 2016, el-Halabi was the head of World Vision – an international, church-based aid organisation – in Gaza.

Beyond the accusations levelled against el-Halabi, the verdict highlights World Vision's failure to properly supervise its operations in Hamas-controlled areas and protect its humanitarian aid from abuse. The judges criticised the NGO for its belief that internal processes could adequately identify embezzlement of the type that was proven to be perpetrated by el-Halabi – confirming NGO Monitor's analysis from 2015 that World Vision was susceptible to aid diversion due to its willingness to negotiate and coordinate with armed groups.

Below are key points and quotes from a summary of the verdict that was released to the public. The summary consists of 23 pages; the classified verdict is 254 pages.

El-Halabi was convicted of:

- Contact with a foreign agent
- Membership in a terror organisation: "The defendant took an active and significant part in the activities of Hamas and assisted Hamas over the years in a variety of ways, including transferring money and equipment that he knew would be used to fund terrorism and assist terrorists, as detailed in the indictment. The defendant even participated in military actions such as marking exit points for tunnel openings on the Israeli side of the Erez Crossing..."
- Illegal use of property for terror purposes
- Providing information to the enemy
- Illegal military training
- Possession of weapons and ammunition.

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El-Halabi was not convicted of aiding an enemy during wartime. (Israel's Attorney-General recommends not applying this law to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza.)

PROOF FROM A WORLD VISION WHISTLEBLOWER

In 2015, a Gaza-based accountant for World Vision informed his employers that he suspected el-Halabi of diverting funds to assist Hamas. He was fired and subsequently interrogated by Hamas. Damningly, el-Halabi had a copy of the interrogation on his personal computer.

- "...the complaint of Mohammed Mehdi, a WV (World Vision) accountant during the period relevant for the indictment, [who] alleged to the organisation, *inter alia*, that the defendant used the organisation's money to assist Hamas. Mohammed Mehdi described the operative mechanisms that the defendant used, which were consistent with the operative mechanisms that were detailed by the defendant in his indictment."
- "Furthermore, the circumstances of Mohammed Mehdi's firing from the WV (World Vision) organisation, his interrogation by Hamas and the discovery of his interrogation on the defendant's personal computer that was seized by the Shabak [Israel's internal security agency] also constitute a significant evidential addition to the defendant's confession."

JUDGES' ANALYSIS OF TESTIMONY FROM WORLD VISION EMPLOYEES

- "They are apparently trapped in a preconceived notion that does not accord with the circumstances in the region, that their professionalism will absolutely and always prevent any fraud or abuse of faith... The Court does not give practical or operational advice in this field. However, given the circumstances, it appears that effective oversight should be based on the opposite assumption, that fraud and abuse can occur, particularly in a region controlled by a cruel regime, in the form of a terrorist organisation that nearly has a state, whose resources – including economic resources – are *inter alia*, taken advantage of through trickery, threats, and force, for terrorist activity, including from organisations like World Vision."

tage of through trickery, threats, and force, for terrorist activity, including from organisations like World Vision."

- "We cannot accept the defence's central argument that due to the allegedly tight oversight at World Vision, there could not be fraud, deception, and transfer of funds to Hamas, as is ascribed to the defendant."
- "All the more so when a significant portion of the organisation's oversight mechanisms rely on internal oversight of local Gaza committees, and on employees who are residents of Gaza and, one way or another, are under Hamas' authority. From the testimony of the defence witnesses, it emerges that the main oversight mechanism is located outside of Gaza and largely operates by 'remote control,' by reviewing documents received from elements in Gaza. In practice, all of the defendant's activities were based on, *inter alia*, taking advantage of the distance [from oversight bodies] and the remote-control oversight and the possibility to manipulate figures with the assistance of internal elements in Gaza, and presenting a false narrative to the organisation's oversight mechanisms that trust him and his judgment, and greatly respect him."
- "With respect to the claims of defence witnesses, according to which it would have been impossible for the defendant to circumvent the organisation's monitoring and oversight mechanisms, the organisation has significant interest not to recognise and to deny this possibility. While we certainly believe that the organisation is staunchly opposed to the possibility that its funds will be transferred to terrorist organisations, as its mission is humanitarian aid – recognition of the potential for diversion of funds to a terrorist organisation would place a heavy cloud over the organisation's activities, and would pose a risk to its operations. There is substantial interest [to reject this possibility] that, naturally, appears to be part of the rationale behind the testimony of defence witnesses... Review of the evidence paints a different picture than that presented by the defence witnesses. The defendant ran the organisation in Gaza and it appears he had broad and substantial authority in the organisation and was involved in all matters."

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JUDGES' ASSESSMENT OF EL-HALABI'S CREDIBILITY

- "In our estimation, the defendant is intelligent, dispassionate, and measured. His testimony made a very poor impression. His account changed over the course of his testimony in accordance with the questions he was asked, and in order to justify his lies, the defendant repeatedly tripped himself up with his answers. The defendant made contradictory and illogical statements in an attempt to explain away his detailed confession and the information he provided that indicated involvement in Hamas, and the explanations he provided regarding



Mohammad el-Halabi prior to his arrest (Image: Twitter)

his method for deceiving World Vision and providing funds to Hamas.”

- “During the defendant’s testimony, we commented on several occasions that he was avoiding answering the Prosecutor’s questions, and was repeating his general account [of the events] irrespective of the questions that were asked. Our overall assessment is that his court testimony is unreliable and that all of his efforts were directed towards convincing the Court that his confession was false.”

THE ALLEGATIONS IN THE INDICTMENT

1. Hamas recruitment (1st and 12th counts of the indictment)

- According to the indictment, in 2004 or 2005, Hamas directed el-Halabi to join World Vision in order to exploit it to advance the needs and interests of the terrorist organisation. This took place after el-Halabi had already joined a Hamas military unit.
- Around 2014, el-Halabi allegedly attempted to recruit a senior Save the Children employee in Gaza, Dr. Walid Musa, into Hamas. This was intended to provide Hamas with intelligence, such as “the identities of individuals appointed by the United States to sensitive positions in international organisations in the Gaza Strip,” as well as “the identities of the participants in security courses of these international organisations.”

2. Terror tunnels and military installations (2nd and 3rd counts)

- The indictment describes how el-Halabi diverted World Vision aid materials to Hamas for the purpose of constructing and improving its terror tunnels. For this purpose, he is alleged to have provided the group with “hundreds or thousands” of tons of iron, plastic tubing for improving communications and electrical infrastructure in the tunnels, and digging implements.
- He is also charged with abusing World Vision funds and materials for the construction and improvement of other Hamas military installations. (3rd count).

3. Diverting World Vision funds (5th count)

- The charge sheet claims that el-Halabi diverted millions of dollars of aid intended for “humanitarian needs,

agriculture, education, and psychological support,” to Hamas.

4. Intelligence gathering at the Erez Crossing (8th and 13th counts)

- The prosecution accused el-Halabi of helping a Hamas military official identify and mark key points near the Erez Crossing. He allegedly did so knowing that these would be used for Hamas “military activity,” such as determining where to locate exits for Hamas terror tunnels in Israeli territory.
- Additionally, in 2010, el-Halabi was approached by a Hamas military official, who requested that he provide him with intelligence about the security arrangements at the Erez Crossing.

5. Procurement of arms and diving equipment for Hamas (10th and 11th counts)

- El-Halabi allegedly provided \$20,000-\$30,000 to Hamas members for purchasing weapons. This took place during 2010-2013.
- El-Halabi is also accused of providing \$3,000-\$5,000 on two occasions to two Hamas members (one of whom was Halabi’s brother) for the procurement of oxygen tanks and wetsuits for Hamas’ naval commando unit, which expressed satisfaction with the quality of the diving tanks.

6. Diverting humanitarian materials to Hamas members (6th count)

- El-Halabi is accused of ensuring that “the majority” of World Vision-funded packages of “food and hygiene products, blankets, etc.,” were “regularly provided” to members of Hamas military units, including during periods of armed conflict with Israel.

7. Hiring Hamas members (7th count)

- During el-Halabi’s tenure at World Vision, he hired Hamas members to work for the aid agency, based on a list provided to him by a “senior” Hamas military official.
- He is also charged with allowing Hamas members to collect a World Vision salary, despite not actually working for the organisation.
- El-Halabi allowed Hamas military members to collect “unemployment” stipends from World Vision, at the same time that they were actively involved in Hamas military activity, including surveilling the Israel-Gaza border and guard duty.

8. Manipulating the tender process (4th count)

- El-Halabi is charged with awarding a large majority of tenders for World Vision projects to two local companies, Arkuma and Elatar. The prosecution claims that these companies were favourites of Halabi because of their willingness to overcharge World Vision and provide the leftover funds to el-Halabi, which he then delivered to Hamas members.

9. Participation in military training (9th count)

- El-Halabi is accused of participating in Hamas training



activities, including weapons use, in around 2014.

10. Contributions to Hamas-linked institutions (14th count).

- In 2015, el-Halabi provided 300 shekels a month to charities run by Hamas members Muhammad Tatari and Ashraf Bazari.
- During 2015-2016, he made contributions of hundreds of shekels to a Hamas-run mosque.

AIR

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CONSPIRACY THEORIES, ANTISEMITIC TROPES AND HALF-TRUTHS

Ran Porat

Recent events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict again resulted in anti-Israel hate content, often with antisemitic overtones, being published in Arabic in Australian media outlets. This time I will be focusing on the *Australasian Muslim Times* (AMUST), a community newspaper which took an active role in this ugly wave.

ISRAEL “ESSENTIAL” FOR CHRISTIAN SUPREMACY

One event triggering the latest attacks against Israel in the press was the tragic death of Al Jazeera reporter Shireen Abu Akleh during clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants in Jenin on May 11.

At the time of writing, it was still unclear who was responsible for Abu Akleh’s death. The Palestinian Authority refuses to hand over the bullet that killed the journalist to Israel to determine who shot her – an IDF soldier or a Palestinian gunman. Instead, the PA accused Israel of intentionally killing her. Without proof, and even before the PA reached any conclusion on the matter, many were

quick to not only pin the blame on Israel, but to even call it a premeditated, deliberate murder intended to shut up pro-Palestinian journalists who criticise Israel.

The May 2022 edition of *AMUST* repeated this narrative, running several articles and an editorial accusing Israel of intentionally assassinating Abu Akleh to silence her criticisms of the Jewish state.

Soon after Abu Akleh’s death, *AMUST*’s Mohamed Ainullah cried foul, suggesting that there is an “Outcry over media downplaying of killing of journalist by Israel” (May 13). Providing no evidence for his claim, Ainullah opens his piece by stating that “There has been an uproar in social media over the downplaying of the deliberate killing of the Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by an Israeli sniper.” He later lambasts US officials because they “failed to mention Israel by name as the perpetrator of the deadly incident in spite of eye witness reports and video evidence.”

Similarly, in “Why will Israel get away with the murder of Shireen”, published in *AMUST* on May 20, Dr Aslam Abdullah claims without offering any evidence whatsoever that an Israeli soldier “had the specific orders to target her. The Zionist government had already written the plot.”

Abdullah rejects Israel’s right to exist, blaming its existence solely on Jewish religious beliefs. “The inhabitants of the Zionist entity,” he posits, “base its claim on Palestine on a mythical, biblical notion that the God of Israel gave the so-called holy ground to his chosen one. When they regard God as their main backer, they can justify everything. The apartheid state has justified every act of brutality as an act of God.”

The UN 1947 partition resolution, an international legal decision confirming Israel’s legal right to exist (and which also called for the creation of an Arab state) is described by Abdullah as “forcibly imposed by primarily Christian nations in 1947.”

“Israel is a brutal, ruthless killing force without regard for human life and dignity, and its majority regard Palestinians as cockroaches deserving annihilation. The state thrives on the backing of European Christian nations, the United States, and other white settlements like Canada and Australia,” says Abdullah.

His explanation for this support is that “Israel and its existence are essential for the supremacy of Christians. The US Christian charities have donated billions to Israel to develop illegal settlements on the Palestinian land, hoping to create a biblically mandated country for the return of Israel.”

“ZIONIST MEDIA CONTROL”

The May 2022 Australian Federal election resulted in the victory of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), which can be considered potentially more friendly to the Palestinian cause than its Coalition predecessor. Specifically, in 2021, the ALP adopted a policy in its party platform calling for a future ALP government to “recognise Palestine as a state.”

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Elated by the ALP taking government, mathematician Prof. Shahjahan Khan's article "Australia's recognition of Palestine: Long overdue," published in *AMUST* on May 30, addresses this ALP platform point.

"If Australia genuinely believes in 'two-state' solutions, why has the Government recognised only one state?" he asks. "Why the Australian Government has been turning blind eyes on the ongoing occupation, continuing land grabbing?" Repeating the Palestinian version of events, Kahn also lists "the brutal murder of Palestinian Christians (remember Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh) and Muslims struggling to protect their land and identity."

Khan then introduces the classic antisemitic trope about Jewish control of world media and politics: "In spite of Zionist media control and undue influence on western political institutions, 138 countries have already recognised the State of Palestine including European countries. Unfortunately, Australia is a laggard." (Not really. While many Soviet bloc and third world nations have recognised "Palestine" since the Cold War, the only Western democracy to recognise "Palestine" is Sweden.)

In his concluding sentence, Khan calls on the Australian Government to "play an important role to ensure that Palestinians have a right to self-defend and deny all occupation and apartheid rules imposed on them by the foreign illegal settlers." One suspects that, to Khan, all Israelis are "foreign illegal settlers".

CALLING FOR THE RELEASE OF A TERRORIST

Also in the May edition, *AMUST* published a call to release Palestinian Ahmad Manasra, currently in an Israeli jail.

Manasra was arrested on Oct. 12, 2015, when he was 13, after he and his 17-year-old cousin attempted to murder Jews in Pisgat Ze'ev. The two stabbed several Jews with a knife, badly wounding one. His cousin was shot and died, while Manasra was injured and arrested.

In a false propaganda campaign, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas claimed that Manasra had been executed by Israel. In response Israel published pictures of him being treated in hospital.

During his interrogation, Manasra said that he and his cousin went to stab Jews because of their belief in the popular Palestinian fabrication that Israel violates Muslim rights on Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Yet, all these facts were irrelevant for the author of one *AMUST* article, Sydneysider Sukoon Quteifan. According to her, Manasra was simply "arrested by the Israeli occupation authorities as a child when he was no more than 13,"

as if he had been sent to prison for no reason and the stabbings never happened.

Ignoring Manasra's terror attack, which was caught on film and never denied by Manasra, Quteifan says that Manasra's only "fault [leading to his jailing] is that he was born a Palestinian in an occupied country."

THE 'AL-AQSA IN DANGER' LIE AGAIN

Responding to tensions and clashes at Jerusalem's Temple Mount during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan (April), *AMUST* Editor in Chief Zia Ahmad claimed (April 22) that "Israeli forces desecrate Al-Aqsa Mosque restricting Muslim worship."

Rehashing the libel that 'Al-Aqsa is in danger', Ahmad falsely tells readers that "Palestinian Muslims are continuously being brutally attacked inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque while praying during Ramadan with hundreds injured and arrested by the Israeli occupation forces."

According to Ahmad, "Regular videos have appeared showing dozens of Israeli police brutally hitting old men, women and children and firing stun grenades on worshippers inside the mosque continuously now for over a week. The Haram al Sharif compound is forcibly evacuated of Muslim worshippers during Ramadan several times in a day with groups of Jewish visitors in their religious clothing allowed in, protected by Israeli armed forces."

What really took place in Jerusalem during that time were riots and processions, with Palestinians carrying the

flag of the terrorist organisation Hamas and shouting slogans calling for the killing of Jews. Within the Temple Mount itself, Muslim youth were hurling stones and fireworks, corrupting and desecrating their own holy site, for example by playing soccer inside the mosque and stockpiling rocks and other weapons. The Israeli police arrested rioters and protected Jews visiting the compound – which does not require Muslims to evacuate the Mount – while making sure the Jewish visitors did not breach the status quo by praying on the Temple Mount (though Orthodox Jews are of course allowed to wear their traditional clothing, which Ahmad seems to feel is terribly offensive.)

AMUST doesn't seem very interested in providing its readers with accurate and complete reporting – or even basic fairness and context – when it comes to Israel.

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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 and a Research Fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Reichman University in Herzliya.



Graphic advocating for convicted juvenile terrorist Ahmad Manasra – without mentioning his undisputed crimes – by Sydney-based writer Sukoon Quteifan



THE BIBLIO FILE

Israel's last literary lion

The passing of A.B. Yehoshua

Amotz Asa El

The sun was approaching the Mediterranean horizon when hundreds gathered at the foot of Mount Carmel on June 15 to pay their last respects to the legendary Israeli novelist A.B. Yehoshua.

One of Israel's most prolific, provocative and best-known writers, Yehoshua died on June 14 at 85 after a two-year battle with cancer. Even during this period, Yehoshua still published two books, the last works in a 30-volume corpus of novels, novellas, plays, essay collections and two children's books.

As would befit a final leave-taking for a writer who had been a pillar of the public arena since the 1970s, the crowd included scores of novelists, poets, scholars and literary critics, and was led by former Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, Yehoshua's close friend and political adversary of some 70 years.

Translated into 28 languages, and the winner of numerous awards, Yehoshua's writing always tackled universally intelligible themes, like a teenager's discovery of her mother's infidelity (*The Lover*, 1977); a young doctor's attraction to his boss' wife (*Open Heart*, 1997); tensions between Christian and Muslim civilisations (*A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, 1999); incest (*Mr. Mani*, 1993); and ageing, loss and dementia (*The Tunnel*, 2020).

At the same time, his stories' settings, heroes, language and undertones were quintessentially Israeli, as was their frequently didactic subtext.

Thus, for instance, in *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, Yehoshua indirectly tackled relations between Israeli Jews from European and Middle Eastern backgrounds by traveling to an era when Christendom was underdeveloped and the Muslim world was advanced. It was Yehoshua's way of telling Israel's European elite that its currently dominant position is circumstantial and temporary.

Similarly, in *A Late Divorce* (1982), Yehoshua tackled the prickly issue of *Yerida*, Israeli emigration from Israel, through the character of Yehuda Kaminka. Kaminka abandons his wife, kids and country for an American lover. A slimy individual, Kaminka attempts to steal back a letter in which he forfeited his house from his hospitalised ex-wife, thus personifying the generic anti-patriot who actively chooses a rootless life in foreign realms.

Some of Yehoshua's Israeli themes were more atmospheric than ideological, but still captured the Israeli zeitgeist.

In *Open Heart*, for instance, he followed surgeon Benjamin Rubin's arrival in India to bring home his hospital director's gravely ill daughter. While there, Rubin is transfixed

by India's magic, as has happened to thousands of Israeli backpackers for whom post-military-service adventure trips have become a rite of passage.

Even so, the ideological subtext in Yehoshua's writing is pervasive and thinly veiled.

Most notably, in Yehoshua's first novel *The Lover* (1977), an Arab teenager who works in a garage becomes secretly involved with the daughter of the Jewish owner. Besides this plot's literary novelty, it also sought to humanise the Arab "other", in line with the land-for-peace ideas that Yehoshua was preaching at the time.

Such literary choices reflected the opinionated novelist who had strong views about current affairs, both in Israel and abroad, and for whom political activism was a natural corollary to literature.

Public issues that burned in Yehoshua's heart were the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel's social tensions and the Jewish people's relationship with its land. His most acclaimed novel, *Mr. Mani*, ranged across 1982 Israel, Nazi Greece and British Palestine to Hapsburg Poland and Ottoman Greece, and viewed all Yehoshua's favourite political themes through the lens of a dynasty that, like his own forebears, had centuries of history in Jewish Greece.

Yehoshua's quest for Israeli-Palestinian peace led him to endorse a succession of Israeli political parties of the left, including Labor, Meretz and, back in the 1970s, Sheli, one of the first parties to demand the establishment of a Palestinian state. This stance sometimes made him controversial in Israel, though it does not seem to have affected his book sales.

Even more contentiously, Yehoshua provoked many diaspora Jews with his claim that a fully Jewish life was possible only in Israel, a charge he levelled repeatedly in public lectures, and also backed with a theory of psycho-history presented in a famous essay titled "Exile as a Neurotic Solution."

Yehoshua's tough version of Zionism, rejecting the validity of diaspora life, was fashionable in Israel's early decades, but has since become uncommon, reflecting the growing demographic confidence of Israelis and their realisation that Jewish life in today's Diaspora is quite different from what it was in the past.



The late A.B. Yehoshua: Renowned novelist and political provocateur (Image: Wikipedia)

However, with Yehoshua's passing, Israel lost not only a particularly provocative and brilliant author, but the very phenomenon of the politically active literary lion.

Israeli novelists and poets have often been politically focussed, vocal and influential since the state's establishment.

Poet and playwright Natan Alterman (1910-1970) had a weekly column in Labor's (long defunct) daily *Davar*, which the entire political class, along with the rest of the Israeli elite and much of the middle class, read every Friday. Alterman was identified with the Labor establishment and was a personal friend of David Ben-Gurion.

His contemporary, novelist Yizhar Smilanski (1916-2006) actually served as a lawmaker in David Ben-Gurion's faction while penning his magnum opus, *Days of Ziklag* (1958), a depiction of 1948's warriors in the Negev Desert, widely considered a foundational work about the first Israelis.

Across the aisle in the Knesset's first years sat poet Uri Zvi Greenberg, who represented Menachem Begin's Herut party and was one of the greatest poets of the Zionist revival.

Later, following the 1967 Six Day War, Israel's poets and novelists largely sparked and dominated the debate over the war's territorial outcome.

Three months after that war, in which Israel gained control over the Sinai Desert, West Bank, Gaza and Golan Heights, a group of writers led by Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon, Alterman and Greenberg – joined by eight other prominent writers – dominated a petition that called on the government to retain the newly conquered lands.

The opposite view was much less popular in those heady days, but it was also voiced by writers, first and foremost by Amos Oz (1940-2018), who penned a famous article calling on Israel to announce that, in return for peace, it would return the territories to Arab rule. Oz, 27 at the time but already a best-selling writer widely recognised as having great literary promise, was soon joined by his close friend Yehoshua, then 31.

The political balance among the literary class changed in subsequent years, as those who espoused annexing the territories passed away and some, most notably poet Haim Guri (1923-2018) moved from the right to the left (yet the right still had its fair share of literati, most notably novelist Moshe Shamir, songstress Naomi Shemer, who penned the iconic "Jerusalem of Gold", and satirist Ephraim Kishon).

Whatever their belief system, the literati mattered, took sides and provoked debate and controversy. In 1988, during the First Intifada, Oz, Yehoshua, poet Pinchas Sadeh and historian Amos Eilon published a letter in the *New York Times* in which they called on American Jewry to publicly intervene in Israel's internal debate concerning the Palestinian problem, arguing that by keeping silent they were effectively taking sides.

That was then.

Today, Israel's writers mostly shun the political fray. Yes, there still

is David Grossman, who now succeeds Yehoshua as the doyen of Israeli novelists, and like him has been an outspoken land-for-peace advocate since penning "The Yellow Wind", a 1987 essay that, a few months before the outbreak of the First Intifada, warned of an approaching Palestinian explosion.

However, the rest of Israel's best-known writers maintain a low political profile. Popular writers like Eshkol Nevo, Etgar Keret, Zeruya Shalev and Nir Baram make no political statements, join no political parties and don't endorse political candidates. Even Meir Shalev, who voices left-wing views in his weekend column in *Yediot Aharonot*, shuns political activism and his novels avoid Israel's political dilemmas.

The reasons for the literati's retreat from politics are unclear. It may reflect the declining interest of many Israelis in politics. It may be about literature's global crisis in an era where the printed word struggles to compete with online temptations. Or it may be a product of disillusionment with failed political gospels like land for peace.

Yehoshua himself, incidentally, eventually lost faith in the "land for peace" formula. At age 82, after half-a-century of preaching that idea, he wrote that the two-state solution had become impractical, due to both nations' sweeping claims to the land they dispute and demographic developments that made an Israeli retreat all but impossible.

Yehoshua's new proposal was that Israel and the Palestinians jointly form a bicameral federation.

There was a time when such an ideological rethinking by a major literary figure would be a big story, but that was last century. Though the new plan didn't pass unnoticed, it was largely ignored. Times, evidently, really have changed.

And as for the plan's details and prospects, as Yehoshua himself would say, that's a story for another day.



ESSAY

Israel looks East

Better Asian opportunities exist than China

Daniel J. Samet

For ages, Jews looked east in search of Zion. Now that they have Zion, they are looking east ever still. Israeli leadership now views Asia, with its expanding markets and increasing global influence, as a crucial foreign-policy interest. While Israel has long prioritised ties with the Western world, for the past few years, the Jewish state has sought out a range of partners in the Pacific. As Israel's then-Minister of Economy Naftali Bennett simply stated in 2015, "we're moving to the East."

The move is eminently defensible on its face. To treat Asia, which will account for more than 50% of global GDP by 2040, as anything other than a land of potential geopolitical and economic opportunity would be foolish. The more Israel trades with Asian countries, the more it will prosper.

What Bennett, now Israel's Prime Minister, did not foresee was the full spectrum of challenges and hiccups that might slow Israel's Asian pivot. The greatest and most lamentable of these is the justifiable American concern over Sino-Israeli ties. As Arthur Herman wrote in *Mosaic*, the problem is "whether and how [Israel's] relationship with China could become a dependency." Such a circumstance "would impose on Israeli national security a new kind of vulnerability, one very different from the challenges it has faced successfully in the past."

When it comes to Israel's dalliance with China, suffice it to say that Thomas Sowell's quip that there are no solutions – only trade-offs – is as true as ever.

Getting a better trade-off will depend on how successfully Israel woos Asian countries other than China, whose depredations abroad and human-rights violations at home ultimately make it a wanting partner. In the summer of 2021, Jerusalem took a commendable step forward on the moral front in supporting a measure at the United Nations Human Rights Council calling on China to let outside observers into Xinjiang, where it is reported that more than 1 million Uyghurs have been detained, abused, and worse. But a few months later, allegedly under pressure from the Chinese, it did not sign on to a joint statement that said much the same.

A country that embodies the sentiment "never again" should not stay silent as Beijing carries out a genocide against untold numbers of Uyghurs. Surely there are other folks in the neighbourhood with whom Israel can do business without compromising its morals.

The main contenders here are India, Japan, and South Korea. Despite their many differences, these three countries are democracies with dynamic economies, and they, too, would benefit from deeper ties with the Jewish state. What's more, they

are three of the most important players in the world's most important region.

Casting its lot with these nations, as opposed to China, is a far better bet for Israel.

Asia was once something of an afterthought in Israel's foreign policy. For decades, Israel focused on nearby countries. Notwithstanding its relationship with Washington, Jerusalem sought partners closer to home. Europe, with its enduring economic and political clout, figured prominently in the minds of Israeli strategists, as did nearby states such as Turkey and pre-revolutionary Iran. Complementing this Mediterranean-oriented approach was engagement with sub-Saharan African countries such as Ethiopia.

To be sure, the Jewish state did not try to make enemies outside Europe and the Middle East. It even had notable ties to countries such as Australia, Burma, and the Philippines. On the whole, however, the region just was too far afield and not consequential enough to demand the attention and resources of a small, developing country with a glut of challenges in its own neighbourhood.

Jerusalem today has become much less provincial. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Israel today maintains official ties with 160 countries and has 107 diplomatic missions. Besides the countries mentioned above, Israel today has diplomatic missions in Vietnam, New Zealand, and Singapore, to name a few.

India, according to the United Nations, will become the world's most populous country by 2027. And it has become a cornerstone of Israel's regional strategy. The two countries may seem like natural partners. Both are multi-ethnic democracies surrounded by majority-Muslim nations. But the current warm relations between Israel and India are a relatively recent development.

When India was itself a newly independent state, it voted against the 1947 UN Partition Plan. Na-



India has historically had a distant relationship with Israel, but this has changed dramatically in recent years, as evidenced by the close relationship between former Israeli PM Netanyahu and Indian PM Modi (Image: Isranet)

tionalist hero Jawaharlal Nehru had clamoured for the partition of India into a majority-Hindu state and a majority-Muslim one but did not support the partition of Palestine. Why not? Nehru threw in his lot with the Arab bloc for reasons of realpolitik. Irrespective of its never-ending feud with Pakistan, New Delhi wanted good relations with the Muslim world. For many of these countries, being friendly to Israel was beyond the pale. Indian politicians also feared that embracing Israel might put off their Muslim compatriots at the ballot box.

Although Nehru recognised Israel in 1950, India kept the Jewish state at arm's length throughout the Cold War. Much of this had to do with the prevailing dynamic of superpower politics. India was one of the leading voices in the Non-Aligned Movement, a group of countries formally allied with neither the United States nor the Soviet Union but that often sided with the anti-Israel Soviet sphere. Among the Non-Aligned Movement's members were relatively new nations such as Egypt and Indonesia that viewed the world as one anti-colonial struggle in which Israel was another imperialistic oppressor. India hewed to this line.

The end of the Cold War, however, brought an end to that arrangement. Not only did the two countries open

mutual embassies in 1992, but official high-level contacts between the two nations began to increase. Israeli President Ezer Weizman visited India in 1997, while Prime Minister Ariel Sharon followed suit in 2003. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi notably met Binyamin Netanyahu in New York City in 2014 before coming to Israel three years later. Modi, who called his trip "ground-breaking," became the first Indian prime minister to visit the Jewish state. Netanyahu returned the favour the following year. Both heads of government acted like pals on Twitter, where Modi called Netanyahu his "dear friend," and Netanyahu similarly referred to his "great friend" Modi. As prime minister, Bennett has kept up the chumminess, letting Modi know that he was "the most popular person in Israel" during the UN climate summit in November 2021. There is surely the will on both sides to keep expanding ties.

One way to do so lies in the security realm. Israel has been as keen to sell India weapons as India has been to buy them. From 2016 to 2020, when India accounted for 9.5% of arms imports worldwide, Israel was the country's third-largest weapons supplier. Israel's defence industry has been hard at work providing India with reconnaissance equipment, small arms, and munitions, as well as missile-defence systems. Further consolidation of the defence relationship came at a joint working group meeting in Tel Aviv in October 2021, where the two countries agreed to design a ten-year road map to strengthen defence cooperation.

Both Israel and India are democracies threatened by radical Islamic terrorism. Beyond weapons sales, intelligence-sharing has proliferated among the two countries in recent years. Although it would be premature to call their defence cooperation an alliance, New Delhi and Jerusalem have made significant strides in this area.

The same is true of economic relations. Bilateral trade between the two nations reached nearly US\$3.4 billion in 2020, the most recent year for which such data are available. India has become Israel's third largest trading partner in Asia and its seventh largest worldwide. Gems and chemicals make up the lion's share of bilateral trade, augmented by a surge in the exchange of consumer goods such as high-tech wares and communications systems.

At a joint appearance in Israel last year, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar disclosed that their two countries would undertake free-trade talks in hopes of concluding a pact by mid-2022. During his remarks, Lapid hailed India as "a very important ally."

This is not to say that Israel-India relations are without challenges. For one, doing business in India is not easy. Even given the size of its economy, would-be investors in India may be deterred by the country's seemingly endless red tape. To alleviate these concerns, Modi's Government has pared back the regulatory state and is actively courting Israeli investment.

One worrying obstacle to deeper cooperation is India's connection to Iran. The two countries have often had amicable relations over the past few decades, and since Ebrahim Raisi became Iran's President in 2021, New Delhi has made a concerted effort to get into his good graces.

But don't count on either the Iran factor or the Indian bureaucracy slowing down Israel-India cooperation. The benefits still outweigh the drawbacks: Each side can delicately pursue its respective interests without imperilling the other's. If Netanyahu's line that India and Israel are "a marriage made in heaven" proves true, then New Delhi and Jerusalem will have come far since the founding of the Jewish state.

But what should give promoters

of the relationship the most pause is Modi himself. Under his leadership, India is less democratic than it was just a few years ago. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in addition to championing legitimate Hindu nationalist concerns, has derided Muslims as a threat to Indian unity and passed discriminatory laws against them. Elsewhere, Modi has been gung-ho to crack down on operations by NGOs and the free press. Freedom House, whose yearly Freedom in the World Report measures democratic development, has downgraded India from “Free” to “Partly Free”. Shouldn’t those who protest Israel’s dealings with China also protest its dealings with India?

The questions are worth wrestling with. But let’s dispel any sort of moral equivalence between totalitarian China and democratic India. No one in the former has the right to vote. The latter has universal suffrage. China represses ethnic and religious minorities on a massive scale. India is home to more than 2,000 ethnic groups that, despite democratic backsliding under the BJP, enjoy a degree of pluralism unthinkable in China. Doing business with New Delhi is not the same as doing business with Beijing.

Japan is a different story altogether. As regards Israel-Japan ties, the moral questions are scarcely there. Now far removed from its imperial past, the Land of the Rising Sun is today a vibrant democracy and an upstanding neighbour. Japan does not prey upon countries nearby. Nor does it curb the rights of its own citizens.

Relations between Israel and Japan date back to 1952, shortly after the Allies handed back sovereignty to Tokyo and the Jewish state won its independence. Unlike non-aligned India, Japan became a treaty ally of the United States following World War II and pursued a foreign policy that was largely congruous with Washington’s – except when it came to Israel.

Tokyo kept its distance from Israel for decades. A much-reduced strategic player on the world stage, Japan saw the Middle East through the lens of energy, not geopolitics. By the 1970s, its economy (then the second largest in the world) had grown exceptionally reliant on imported oil. Israel could not offer Japan anything in that regard, but other countries in the region could. Once Arab states in OPEC imposed an oil embargo against the United States and its allies following the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Tokyo sided with the Arab world in public pronouncements. It stopped short of boycotting Israel, but commercial ties suffered nonetheless.

It was only in the 21st century that relations thawed. The changing strategic outlook in the Middle East and elsewhere made Tokyo see the utility in cosying up to Jerusalem. No longer



Then Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu with his Japanese counterpart, Shinzo Abe, during a breakthrough visit to Japan in 2014 (Image: Isranet)

did dependence on Arab oil mean shunning the Israelis. Tokyo reckoned that Arab petrostates would no longer go to the mat for the Palestinians in defiance of Israel, whose growing economic power the Japanese wanted to engage. Japan shed its qualms about bettering relations.

Growing person-to-person contacts reflect this new environment. In 2014, Netanyahu made an official visit to Japan during which he met with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Emperor Akihito. The following year, Abe made a visit to Israel – the first by a Japanese prime minister since 2006.

Economic ties are front and centre. Tokyo and Jerusalem have floated

the idea of a free-trade agreement for years, though talks have yet to yield anything concrete. Bilateral trade is still relatively modest. Investment, however, has already seen significant progress. In 2020, Japanese companies invested a record US\$1.1 billion in Israel, up 20% from 2019, and 11.1% of foreign investment in the Israeli high-tech sector comes from Japan.

Commercial interests explain why both countries want to do business with each other. Japan is home to a population of more than 120 million, it has the world’s third-largest economy, and it has leading industries in automobiles, semiconductors, and electronic goods, among others. In some ways, Israel is a scaled-down Japan: Both countries are democratic and have high-income market economies with an industrious, highly educated workforce. A nation as innovative as Japan would seem a natural friend for the “start-up nation”.

Defence ties between the two are currently negligible. That could soon change. In 2019, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation at the Japanese Ministry of Defence. “We have brought Israel-Japan relations to an all-time high,” Netanyahu said after the ceremony.

That remark must have had more to do with relations in general, not defence relations in particular. Japan’s overriding security challenges come down to China. Israel’s do not. As far as terrorism is concerned, Japan is in much less danger than Israel and plays a much smaller role in the Middle East’s security landscape. Absent a convergence of strategic interests, Israel and Japan may believe that there’s little reason to cooperate significantly on defence.

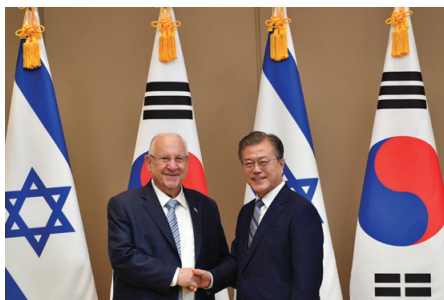
This might be a missed opportunity. Israel and Japan have a shared interest in blunting North Korea’s nuclear technology. North Korea poses a clear and present danger to Japan, which, after South Korea,

is the country most threatened by Pyongyang's aggression. It also poses a threat to Israel. North Korea has been an active patron of Iran's and Syria's nuclear-weapons programs. Israel may not be in the crosshairs of a North Korean nuclear strike, but the possibility of Kim Jong Un and company helping hostile states or non-state actors get the bomb is a serious concern of Israeli defence planners.

Israel might be reluctant to sell advanced weaponry to Japan, however, for fear of antagonising China and jeopardising cooperation with that country. But intelligence-sharing is another matter. A 2018 cyber-security-cooperation pact signed by Israel and Japan lays the groundwork for exchanging much more sensitive information. If and when threats evolve, this architecture could expand to cover issues outside the Korean Peninsula.

There is, also, another, more familiar problem. Like India, Japan is close to Iran. Tokyo has historically relied on Teheran to supply much of the oil powering its economy. Iran has pressed Japan to defy US sanctions on Iranian oil exports, including during a visit by Abe in 2019. Before the Trump Administration reimposed those sanctions in 2018, Japanese imports of Iranian oil had bounced back, though far below their pre-sanctions high. Israeli national-security officials will be justifiably cautious about sharing intelligence with Japan. But Iran cannot arrest the broader growth of Israel-Japan relations.

South Korea also has a troubled history with Israel. In 1962, Israel and South Korea established official diplomatic relations. This came after years of informal ones, when the Jewish state supported South Korea and US-allied forces during the Korean War. This was the start of significant relations between the two countries. But like Japan, South Korea voiced support for the Arab states throughout the 1970s. Un-



Then Israeli President Reuven Rivlin visiting South Korea – a key partner for Israel in east Asia – in 2019 (Image: Isranet)

der Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan, ostensible budgetary limitations led Israel to close its South Korean embassy in 1978, which proved a geopolitical misstep. Economic ties ground to a standstill in the wake of the decision, and the embassy would not reopen for another 14 years.


After a long stasis, ties have become markedly better. In May 2021, Seoul and Jerusalem signed a free-trade agreement, making South Korea the first Asian country to do so with the Jewish state. The agreement should increase bilateral trade, which totalled roughly US\$2.4 billion in 2020. It will pay dividends in terms of the South Korea-Israel relationship while showing other countries that Israel can strike a deal with one of the world's richest countries.

Economics is not the only thing drawing Israel and South Korea together. South Korea is a stable democracy in an increasingly unstable corner of the globe. Eager to defend itself against the regime in Pyongyang, Seoul has purchased Israeli weapons in the past few years. Notable sales include the Oren Yarok radar system

and the Harpy UAVs, the latter being the same drones Israel tried to sell to China before US lobbying killed the deal. Prior to purchasing trainer aircraft from Italy in 2012, Israel considered opting for South Korean T-50s instead.

Efforts at joint weapons development have also gotten off the ground. An agreement between Israeli and South Korean aerospace firms signed in October 2021 paves the way for cooperation on drone technology. Relatedly, following proposals to acquire the Iron Dome from Israel, South Korea recently moved to build a system modelled on it.

A good foreign policy looks to the future, not just the present and past. Israel's handling of its relationships with India, Japan, and South Korea may be a harbinger of even more breakthroughs in the region. Jerusalem has pushed to normalise ties with Indonesia and Malaysia, albeit to no avail quite yet. A bigger Israeli presence in Asia might give Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur all the more reason to start anew with Jerusalem.

"East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," reads a famous Rudyard Kipling poem. What's happening in the Middle East and the Far East suggests otherwise. 

Daniel J. Samet is a Ph.D. student in History at the University of Texas at Austin and a Krauthammer Fellow with the Tikvah Fund. © Commentary Magazine (www.commentarymagazine.com) reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

POLL POSITION

The decision by Israeli PM Naftali Bennett to pull the plug on his faltering one-year-old “coalition of change” Government by calling for early elections and stepping down as PM in favour of Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid came as a surprise to the Australian media.

On *ABC News Radio* (June 21), AI-JAC research associate Dr Ran Porat explained that ultimately the coalition collapsed because “the only thing that actually connected them is the will, or the desire to make sure that [former Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu] doesn’t regain power.”

Dr Porat said he thought the Government would receive a “pass” mark from mainstream Israelis.

Profiling likely new Israeli PM Lapid, he said of the former television journalist that “Lapid’s greatest achievement as of now is that he was able to build trust coalitions with other politicians... and prov[e]... that somebody else can be prime minister other than Netanyahu.”

Politically, he noted, Lapid is a centrist who is left-leaning on civil rights but he is more to the right when it “comes to negotiations with the Palestinians,” adding that “he might appeal to a wider audience, and he has proven himself to be a good politician, which Bennett actually did not.”

Later that day on *News Radio*, AI-JAC senior policy analyst Ahron Shapiro said the outgoing Government had a number of significant achievements, including passing a budget for the first time in many years, but this failed to translate into votes, especially from Bennett’s own right wing voter base.

“A lot of people weren’t happy with [the Government] because it was counterintuitive to their political views,” given that it included par-

ties from the far left and the right and even an Arab Islamist party, led by a prime minister, Naftali Bennett, “who had a party that was minuscule,” Shapiro said.

On *ABC Radio National* “Drive” (June 21), *Times of Israel* reporter Carrie Keller-Lynn said the coalition managed to agree on 80% of issues but, “ultimately... [the] security [issue] raised its head... We had riots in the south of Israel, among Israel’s Bedouin community. It definitely intensified around April with Ramadan. We had clashes on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount... it really only intensified as some legislation came out that also touched security issues.”

PROFOUNDLY WRONG

Interviewed by *ABC TV News24* (June 21), former Middle East correspondent John Lyons, who has written two highly critical and extremely flawed books on Israel, seemed genuinely ignorant of contemporary Israeli politics as he predicted that the forthcoming election will be a “battle between the far right.”

Lyons asserted that “there’s no centrist candidate,” and said, “this is between Naftali Bennett, who is very far right wing and Benjamin Netanyahu, who is also very far right wing”

Except the primary contest is actually likely to be between Netanyahu and centrist interim Israeli PM Yair Lapid who heads *Yesh Atid* (“There is a future”), the second largest party in the Knesset, with the most seats in the current ruling coalition (17 seats).

By contrast, Bennett’s Yamina party today has only four loyal MKs and risks not passing the electoral threshold when elections are held. Moreover, reports say Bennett is considering taking a break from politics

this election.

Asked to explain why Israel has gone to the polls so many times in the past three years, Lyons asserted that it was because Israel has “a very fragile coalition system” and “an inherently unstable system.”

Actually, the most critical reason for the political stalemate over the past three years has been the refusal of a number of political parties to support Netanyahu as prime minister whilst he was under indictment on corruption charges.

Should Netanyahu win the forthcoming elections, Lyons predicted, “he would think the time has come... to simply unilaterally annex the West Bank and make it part of Israel, which would be the death of a Palestinian state.”

It is very unlikely Netanyahu will annex any part of the West Bank because one of the conditions of the Abraham Accords, which he regards as a key personal achievement, was not doing so. Moreover, the current US Administration staunchly objects to such a move. But even if he did, it would not include all of the West Bank as Lyons implies, but only those areas that were allotted to Israel under the Trump peace plan. This would mean a future Palestinian state could still be established which would include all of Gaza and more than 60% of the West Bank.

Earlier, in the *Spectator Australia* (June 11), Israeli journalist Anshel Pfeffer wrote of the excitement felt by Knesset members belonging to Netanyahu’s Likud party at the prospect that the Bennett Government would fall. Pfeffer quoted one, who is “normally mild-mannered”, saying Netanyahu’s “coming back and it’s all the left-wing’s fault for demonising him. If it wasn’t for them, the right-wing would have found a different

leader by now. But the left made him into an icon and much more dangerous.” Except that it was parties on the right who campaigned loudest against joining a coalition government with Netanyahu as prime minister while he was under indictment.

MORE CAPITAL CRIMES

On May 26, *SBS TV* “News in Arabic” reported on the first visit to Israel in 15 years by a Turkish foreign minister and said it “turns the page” in relations between Ankara and Tel Aviv.

Jerusalem is Israel’s capital, not Tel Aviv, and has been since 1949 – and this is recognised by the Australian

government. It was evident from the footage shown in the report that Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid was greeting his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in Jerusalem.

The program’s June 1 report on Israel signing a free trade agreement with the UAE, which it noted was Israel’s first with an Arab state, also implied Tel Aviv is Israel’s capital.

Meanwhile, a *Wall Street Journal* report in the *Australian* (May 31) on a controversial “Flag march” by nationalist Israeli Jews into the Old City to celebrate the unification of Jerusalem in the 1967 war noted that the day “marks when Israel reclaimed East Jerusalem from Jordan in 1967.”

The report also managed to get correct the sequence of events for the war between Hamas and Israel in 2021, noting that “Gaza ruler Hamas fired a volley of rockets at Jerusalem during the annual march, sparking a deadly 11-day war.”

O JERUSALEM

Given former PM Scott Morrison’s 2018 recognition of west Jerusalem as Israel’s capital has been falsely cited many times since as having caused great damage to Australia’s relations with Jakarta, it was surprising no commentators mentioned it during new PM Anthony Albanese’s



IN PARLIAMENT

The following four speeches are from the many from all sides supporting the Summary Offences Amendment (Nazi Symbol Prohibition) Bill in the Victorian Parliament:

Attorney-General **Jaclyn Symes** MLC (ALP, Northern Victoria) – June 21 – “We know that [the Nazi hate symbol, the Hakenkreuz] is a symbol of antisemitism, hate and division. The message it sends is incredibly harmful and damaging to our whole community and in particular our Jewish community. This type of harm is completely unacceptable in a society that is proudly democratic, diverse, multicultural and multifaith.”

Shadow Attorney-General **Michael O’Brien** (Lib., Malvern) – June 7 – “...we must always be aware and on our guard about those who would seek to downplay or, worse still, to perpetuate or to talk up or to act in relation to this most evil of ideologies—the Nazi ideology.”

Minister for Multicultural Affairs **Ros Spence** (ALP, Yuroke) – June 7 – “We must do everything that we can to eradicate these attitudes, because as long as we turn a blind eye to these casual displays of racism and antisemitism there will always be the potential for dangerous and hate-filled scenarios to unfold.”

Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs **Craig Ondarchie** MLC (Lib., Northern Metropolitan) – June 21 – “...unfortunately there are people in this state who use this symbol to effect emotional pain or torment on people of the Jewish faith.”

Meanwhile, in NSW, **Gabrielle Upton** (Lib., Vaucluse), speaking on behalf of NSW Attorney-General Mark Speakman, announced on June 21 – “The Government is pleased to introduce the Crimes Amendment (Prohibition on Display of Nazi Symbols) Bill 2022.”

The following eight speeches were in the NSW Legislative Council on June 22:

Scott Farlow (Lib.) – “I move: (1) That this House notes that: ... (c) Yom Ha’atzmaut commemorates the Israeli Declaration of Independence on 15 May 1948 and is a day of celebration for the people of Israel and marks renewal in the Jewish State as the birthplace of the Jewish people.”

Abigail Boyd (Greens) – “For 74 years, Israel has worked to dispossess and oppress the Palestinian people, who are indigenous to the lands that they have been, and continue to be, driven out of by the settler colonialist State of Israel.”

Shadow Treasurer **Daniel Mookhey** (ALP) – “It is extraordinary and unlikely that a tiny country like Israel has gone on to become such an economic powerhouse.”

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Arts and Regional Youth **Ben Franklin** (Lib.) – “I support the State of Israel and its right to be recognised as a free and democratic nation.”

Anthony D’Adam (ALP) – “The date 15 May 1948... is also the Nakba, literally ‘The Catastrophe’ for Palestinian people... if one understands the history of the creation of the State of Israel, it was founded through terrorist action.”

Mark Latham (One Nation) – “[Israel’s] great achievements should be celebrated and recognised by this House.”

Chris Rath (Lib.) – “The connection that the Jewish people have to Israel, being their physical and cultural birthplace, is incapable of being severed.”

Minister for Metropolitan Roads and Women’s Safety **Natalie Ward** (Lib.) – “It is paramount that this special culture and the fundamental right of the State of Israel to exist is protected. It is a place of great humanity.”

South Australian MLC **Sarah Game** (One Nation) – June 15 – “I rise to introduce my amendment bill on Nazi symbol prohibition to the Summary Offences Act 1953.”

Sarah Game MLC (One Nation) – June 1 – “I move: That this council— 1. Endorses and adopts the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism together with its contemporary examples...”

visit to Indonesia.

In a sensible analysis of Albanese's trip, the *Australian* (June 7) Foreign Editor Greg Sheridan observed that "there is less anti-Western sentiment in Indonesia than in most Muslim countries, but it is still substantial. Most Indonesians think little at all about Australia."

Also writing in the *Australian* (June 15), US analyst Walter Russell Mead presented a nuanced picture of Indonesia at odds with how Australian commentators depicted the country. Mead noted that "the Indonesian brand of Islam is notably tolerant," and Yahya Cholil Staquf, current General Secretary of "Nahdlatul Ulama, at up to 90 million members the largest Islamic association in the world... has visited Jerusalem and publicly attacked anti-Semitism."

FREQUENT FLYERS

On *Sky News* "Outsiders" (June 5), visiting AIJAC fellow Ehud Yaari expounded on the developments between Israel and Sunni Arab states since the Abraham Accords were signed in August 2020.

According to Yaari, "We are in a process of expanding the Abraham Accords. The question is the pace and who will make the leap... Saudi Arabia... has been accelerating... contacts on all levels. Not just security cooperation, intelligence exchanges vis-a-vis Iran but also business. We're talking about a big volume of trade. Unofficial, not declared. Dozens and

dozens of Israeli businessmen... are allowed into Saudi Arabia quietly with their Israeli passport. In fact, Saudi Arabia has turned itself, very, very quietly... into a third silent party of the Israel-Egyptian peace treaty of 1979... which generally passes unnoticed by international media."

Yaari said Arab states have realised that "they cannot allow the Palestinians to have a veto power over their relations with Israel. That they will no longer be enslaved to whatever is the slogan of the day in the Palestinian Authority... if you go to Dubai airport or Abu Dhabi Airport, you will... sometimes... hear more Hebrew than Arabic."

Meanwhile, *SBS TV*'s "World News" and "News in Arabic" (June 16) covered the historic signing ceremony in Cairo for a landmark deal whereby Egypt will liquefy Israeli natural gas which will then be exported to the EU.

SHIFTING SANDS

A long *Wall Street Journal* article in the *Australian* (June 18) pointed out policy continuity between the Trump and Biden Administrations in seeking to deepen ties between Israel and Sunni Arab states in the wake of the 2020 Abraham Accords. The article said, "growing ties between Israel and Arab states, including the assessment that the nations share a common enemy in Iran, had altered the landscape."

Meanwhile, a report from *SBS TV* "News in Arabic" (June 10) on US President Joe Biden's upcoming trip

to Saudi Arabia, Israel and the West Bank said the Administration had "announced the reopening of the lines of communication with the Palestinian Authority, which were cancelled by the Administration of former President Donald Trump." In fact, it was the Palestinian Authority who initiated a boycott on contact with the White House.

WAR STORIES

Although the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War is still 16 months away, there was no shortage of references to the historic event.

In the *Australian Financial Review* (June 17), *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens argued for greater US military help for Ukraine, saying, "Now is the moment for Joe Biden to tell his national security team what Richard Nixon told his when Israel was reeling from its losses in the Yom Kippur War: After asking what weapons Jerusalem was asking for, the 37th president ordered his staff to 'double it,' adding, 'Now get the hell out of here and get the job done.'"

Writing about the impact rising gas and oil prices are having on the inflation rate, *Age/Sydney Morning Herald* columnist George Megalogenis (June 18), said, "the Arab oil embargo, which quadrupled prices following Egypt and Syria's war with Israel in October 1973, is the event that made a global recession inevitable in 1974-75. But the inflation dragon had been stirred beforehand by the debts the US ran up



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to fight its war of choice in Vietnam.”

THE ICKE FACTOR

In the *Age/Sydney Morning Herald* (June 4), a review commended author Alice Walker’s *Journals* while noting, but not identifying, some of the “very crazy things” she has said.

In fact, Walker has praised the notorious British antisemitic conspiracy theorist David Icke for being “brave enough to ask the questions others fear to ask.” She has extolled his book *And the Truth Will Set You Free*, which draws extensively on the notorious anti-Jewish forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, calling it “a curious person’s dream come true.” Icke campaigns for Holocaust denial to be taught in schools, and his conspiracy theories include claims that shape-shifting Jewish lizard people secretly rule the world.

Then there’s Walker’s own dubious writings, such as the poem “To Study the Talmud” which includes the following lines: “Are [non-Jews] meant to be slaves of Jews, and not only that, but to enjoy it?... Must even the best of the [non-Jews be] killed?”

JUDGEMENT ON A VERDICT

The ABC gave sympathetic coverage to former World Vision Gaza head Mohammad el-Halabi, who, after a six-year legal saga, was found guilty by an Israeli court of transferring millions of dollars to Hamas.

On June 16, ABC Middle East correspondent Allyson Horn filed a number of radio and TV reports on the verdict that included very little detail of what the prosecution alleged. Former World Vision Australia CEO Tim Costello was interviewed on *ABC TV News24*, and heard on ABC Radio, disparaging the verdict.

In the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (June 17), Costello and former regional director for World Vision International in the Middle East Conny Lenneberg called Halabi an “innocent man”.

They said the verdict marked “the demise of the rule of law in Israeli courts,” and claimed, “one of the judges, in the early days of this drawn-out trial, told el-Halabi Mohammad [sic] in open court: ‘This case is not about innocence. You know how these cases go.’ And that is the way 99 per cent of Palestinians who go before Israel military courts are convicted.”

Halabi was tried in a civilian, not military, court and the conviction rates for Palestinians in military courts is not extraordinary. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research data shows that from 2012-16 the average conviction rate for all offences was 89% and as high as 94% for illicit drugs. In Japan, the criminal justice system has a conviction rate that exceeds 99%.

Moreover, Costello and Lenneberg appear to have misquoted Israeli Arab Judge Nasser Abu Taha’s reported words to Halabi in 2017.

According to then ABC Middle East correspondent Sophie McNeill, urging Halabi to accept a plea bargain, Taha told “Halabi that in a security case like this, he does not have much hope of being found not guilty” and quoted the judge saying, “You’ve read the numbers and the statistics... You know how these issues are handled.”

The pair also falsely claimed that “the verdict was reached despite no substantial evidence being presented” by the prosecution, yet the published portions of the verdict, as excerpted in this *AIR* edition on p. 23, prove otherwise.

INSUFFICIENT DILIGENCE

Discussing the verdict on *Sky News* “Bolt Report” (June 16), NGO Monitor’s Professor Gerald Steinberg said NGOs like World Vision fail to carry out due diligence on how aid money is spent in Gaza, which is run by the Islamist terror group Hamas.

According to Professor Steinberg, officials go to Gaza and are shown projects and take it on trust that the aid dollars are well spent.

He countered Tim Costello’s claim in the media that World Vision only gave US\$23 million to Gaza, far short of the US\$50 million the prosecution alleged Halabi transferred, saying, “World Vision’s own documents say that there was over \$100 million that were transferred to the branch of World Vision operating in the West Bank, Gaza and in Israel. So, in fact, Mr. Costello is even contradicting his own institution’s documentation.”

Steinberg said Halabi “was shown to have been present, including in specific Hamas military installations” and the verdict “talks about the way in which... Halabi took World Vision funds and transferred that in order to buy materials that were used for making... terror tunnels from which the rockets were sent, from which the whole Hamas terror operation is controlled.”

He questioned both World Vision’s and the Australian Government’s investigations that found no evidence of wrong-doing, noting that “the audits were not made available,” and pointing out that neither Australia nor Germany has resumed funding for World Vision projects since 2016.

CONSEQUENCES

The *Age* (May 27) reported on the decision by Melbourne University’s Student Union to rescind an antisemitic and extreme motion that called for the University to boycott links with Israel and implicitly rejected Israel’s right to exist in any borders.

The rescission motion was passed after the threat of legal action by post-graduate law student Justin Riazaty, who argued that the Student Union had acted outside of its purpose and violated the *Associations Incorporation Reform Act 2012* and the *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001*.

The article quoted Riazaty, who is not Jewish, saying “although the union has now rescinded the anti-Semitic motion, it really speaks volumes that it was only achieved following threats and legal action.”

MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

MAKING A STATEMENT

The significance of the Albanese Government's decision to release its own statement, rather than co-sign a US-sponsored letter backed by 21 other nations condemning the first report from the UN Human Rights Council's new permanent Commission of Inquiry into Israel, was hotly debated.

The *Australian* (June 16) was unimpressed with the Government's decision, given the suspicions that the UNHRC has an agenda "designed to undermine the very existence of Israel as a national state for the Jewish people." The editorial cautioned the Government against recognising Palestine as a state, saying, "there can be no such state without borders and negotiations, but the Palestinians refuse to come to the table."

In a news report in the same edition, Foreign Minister Penny Wong was quoted explaining that the Government had "taken the opportunity to elaborate on our approach to the Middle East peace process" by issuing its own statement, while Opposition Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Simon Birmingham was quoted accusing Labor of "creat[ing] unnecessary ambiguity around Australia's position."

AIJAC's Colin Rubenstein was also quoted, saying the Government had "refused to accept the morally indefensible position" that only Israel deserved to be a permanent agenda item.

In an *Australian* (June 17) op-ed, AIJAC's Ahron Shapiro quoted the Government's statement, as delivered by Australia's UN Ambassador in Geneva Amanda Gorely, that "we do not support the proposition that Israel is the only country that is a permanent item on the HRC agenda, which is why... we retain our fundamental concerns about the nature of the commission of inquiry."

Shapiro said the UNHRC is a "convenient refuge for countries with some of the worst human rights records" who then use Israel as a "lightning rod" to "shield themselves from scrutiny."

He noted that the report "mentions Israel 157 times and Hamas just three" and also that, since its founding, the UNHRC has condemned Israel 99 times, "Syria (39), North Korea (15), Iran (12), Eritrea (11), Sudan (one), Venezuela (two) and Russia (three)."

In the *Australian* (June 13), Executive Council of Australian Jewry co-CEO Alex Ryvchin outlined the causal link between Palestinian terrorism against Israeli civilians and official incitement, including the generous financial

rewards Palestinian leaders shower on terrorists and their families. He cited Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar's call in late April for Palestinians to use rifles, knives, axes or cleavers against Israelis and listed the string of fatal terrorist attacks that followed.

"Shapiro said the UNHRC is a 'convenient refuge for countries with some of the worst human rights records' who then use Israel as a 'lightning rod'"

Condemning NGOs, university student unions and those pledging solidarity with Palestinians who refuse to hold accountable Palestinian leaders who oversee this "criminality",

Ryvchin urged the Albanese Government to see the Palestinian leadership "not as it wishes it to be but as it is."

The *Guardian Australia* (June 14) quoted former Labor foreign minister Gareth Evans welcoming the Government's decision not to sign the US letter, saying, "I think it's an excellent start for the new government to give a very clear message that it's going to adopt a decent, principled and balanced approach to Middle East issues, which is long overdue." The *Guardian* also quoted Sophie McNeill, former ABC Middle East correspondent and now a researcher at Human Rights Watch, saying she was "pleased that Australia didn't sign the US statement because it undermines an important process to investigate serious human rights concerns." (It appears both these comments were made prior to Australia releasing our own statement.)

On *Sky News* "Credlin" (June 15), former federal Labor MP Michael Danby argued it "would have been better if we voted with Canada and the United States and so many other countries to condemn the report outright."

Danby contrasted the report's condemnation of Israel with the reluctance of the head of the UN Human Rights Council Michelle Bachelet to criticise China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang province during her recent visit there. China, he said, stands accused of "degrading treatment, forced sterilisation, state kidnapping of children, forced labour" in Xinjiang province and that should be the Council's focus, "not endless resolutions... on a tiny little state in the Middle East, the only democracy."

Ahead of the UNHRC report controversy, veteran Israeli analyst Ehud Yaari told *Sky News* "Outsiders" (June 5), "there is work to be done" on Israel's relationship with the ALP but "generally I think that the atmosphere of friendship and cooperation will survive the change of government here." Yaari said he doesn't foresee the Government "recognis[ing] a non-existent Palestinian state," given the Biden Administration opposes such a move.

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

TWO FORUMS AND A PUBLIC HEARING

How can interfaith dialogue respond to ideologically motivated extremism?

I was recently asked this precise question at two forums, as well as at a parliamentary inquiry.

The first of the forums was the National Social Cohesion and Inclusion Conference organised by the Australian Baha'i community.

This gathering of representatives from a wide variety of Australian religious, ethnic and cultural organisations convened to "explore the various settings, approaches and methods which help to foster greater social cohesion and inclusion in Australia."

While the atmosphere was overwhelmingly positive, the shadow of recent challenges to social cohesion was ever present.

The stresses of COVID-19 and government public health responses and the palpable increase in racism and other abuse in the online space (and the physical one) were a backdrop to the discussion.

In a round-table session, I was asked about the challenges of racist and antisemitic extremism. It was in this context that interfaith dialogue entered the conversation.

One challenge in a field with contested ideas is to identify and promote role models – to portray success in producing desired change as something which comes from reaching out and working together, rather than from scapegoating, excluding or promoting racial division.

A few days later, I was asked, together with Dr Colin Rubenstein, to speak on behalf of AIJAC at a public hearing of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Extremism.

We covered a good deal of ground, including the online ecosystem which radicalises and sometimes directs recruits to be part of a racist war on social cohesion; the activities of religious as well as racist extremists; and the utility of strategies to keep the community as safe as possible.

We noted that far-right and extremist activity is far from a recent phenomenon in Australia but that online media has reshaped its operation and potential impact; that

conspiracy theories (very often antisemitic) are at the heart of the worldview of most extremists; and that anti-terror and anti-

racism laws have a part to play.

Many of the questions we received related to the role of education in enabling people to see racism for the destructive philosophy which it is.

The premise for this is the proposition, outlined in our submission, that the fortunately few genuinely evil people need to have their behaviour addressed through punitive measures, while different techniques are required to deal with well-meaning individuals who are confused and misled.

We noted that tailored programs are required, as there will be vast differences in what motivates and sustains

extremist beliefs, and that visual portrayals of leaders and popular cultural figures of different backgrounds behaving as friends and cooperating for the good of society is powerful imagery.

The second forum, organised by Macquarie University and the Affinity Intercultural Organisation, was on "Faith, Social Cohesion and Community Resilience."

This combined the themes of the conference organised by the Baha'i Community and the Victorian Inquiry, with a good mix of academics, media, government representatives and community activists taking part.

Academics from Australia and abroad, together with a number of leading religious figures, put their minds to considering how supporters of social cohesion can win the contest of ideas.

The panel on which I spoke was titled "Empowering Religious Leaders and Communities: What is the Role of Faith in Building Social Cohesion?"

All panellists had positive stories to tell, noting changes in our society as well as in the hearts and minds of some individuals who had originally been hostile to a positive model of social cohesion.

One keynote speaker, Prof. Greg Barton, emphasised that to detach followers from extremist leaders, a compelling alternative narrative was needed.

To this end, the theme of my panel was how interreligious cooperation and its success in Australia constitutes such a narrative.

The challenge for all of us is packaging the promotion of this reality in a way which does not simply inform, but inspires.



There is no simple solution to racist violence, but interfaith cooperation can be part of the answer (Image: Shutterstock)



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