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EDITOR'S NOTE

This month's *AIR* cover story looks at the dramatic intervention by Israeli President Itzhak (Isaac) Herzog into Israel's intense political dispute over controversial judicial reforms being pushed by the new Netanyahu-led Government.

Amotz Asa-El looks at how the fraught debate over the proposed reforms had been developing prior to Herzog's public intervention on Feb. 12 and where things might go in its aftermath. Meanwhile, top Israeli political analyst Haviv Rettig Gur puts into broader context Herzog's apparent efforts to expand and redefine the role of Israel's largely ceremonial presidency, both with respect to the judicial reforms and other aspects of Israeli public policy.

Also featured this month is an analysis of the growing signs of US-Israel convergence on how to deal with Iran's rapidly advancing nuclear program, written by security reporter Yaakov Lappin. Plus, US writer Sol Stern offers a detailed look at the historical roots of the Palestinian narrative about the *Nakba* ("disaster") they say they suffered in 1948.

Finally, don't miss Yoni Ben Menachem's explanation of the growing phenomenon of young Palestinian teens engaging in terrorism, Daniel Rakov on Israel's ongoing dilemmas with respect to the Russia-Ukraine war and Jeremy Jones' explanation of the burgeoning phenomenon known as "anti-Jewism".

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

Tzvi Fleischer

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Israel's President Isaac Herzog addresses the nation on live TV on Feb. 12 about the crisis surrounding the proposed judicial reforms. (Image: YouTube screenshot)



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EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN****COLIN RUBENSTEIN****WRITERS' WRONGS**

The way organisers of the partly taxpayer-funded Adelaide Writers' Week have been defending extremist invitees, such as Palestinian author Susan Abulhawa – in spite of her record of vile hate speech against Jews and Israelis – represents a teachable moment.

It offers a prime example of the way antisemitism is excused and even defended in “woke” progressive culture, as long as it is conflated with criticism of Israel – especially if the offender is Palestinian.

Abulhawa, who is being flown in to participate in three sessions during the event in early March, has form. She keeps a picture above her desk of Palestinian terrorist Dalal Mughrabi – one of the perpetrators of the infamous 1978 Coastal Road Massacre, which saw the slaughter of 38 Israeli civilians – and has made social media posts both calling Israelis “worse than Nazis” and asserting that “It’s possible to be Jewish and a Nazi at the same time. It’s called Israel,” while implying all Israelis are legitimate targets for violence.

Let us not forget that Israel is home to approximately half of the world’s Jewish population. One reason such Nazi analogies, no matter how ludicrous, are deployed in relation to Israel, is because they are particularly hurtful to Jews – who lost almost half their worldwide population to Nazism. This is why the widely accepted International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism views equating Israelis with Nazis as, *prima facie*, raising questions about antisemitic motives.

When pressed in an interview with *Radio Adelaide* to defend the decision to invite Abulhawa – who also backs Russia in its war against what she calls a “depraved Zionist”-led Ukraine – Writers’ Week Director Louise Adler said, “our business is to operate not a safe space, but an open space in which ideas that might be confronting, disturbing, provocative are debated with civility.”

However, this isn’t actually true. According to Adler’s own words posted in an open letter on the Writers’ Week home page, this year’s event actually seeks to shut down debate on unspecified issues.

“The thread [of Writers’ Week],” Adler wrote, “is the notion of truth – truths we acknowledge, truths we feel are debatable and those beyond debate.”

In this year’s festival, at least ten writers listed as Palestinians are on the program – plus the Egyptian-born founder of the Palestine Festival of Literature, and several other virulent anti-Israel activists. No Jewish Israeli writers were invited, nor, to our knowledge, any author who has defended Israel in their writing or has the expertise to offer attendees anything counter to the Palestinian narrative. It would appear that the Palestinian narrative counts as something “beyond debate” to the organisers.

One revealing panel with a prime-time slot on the opening weekend is titled “Authors Take Sides [in warfare]” and brings together five writers whose views seem to intersect on one topic alone – siding with the Palestinians in their conflict with Israel. These include panel chair Sophie McNeill, who has accused Israel of practising “apartheid”; three Palestinians whose careers have focussed heavily on the production of anti-Israel screeds – Randa Abdel-Fattah, Ramzy Baroud and Mohammed El-Kurd – and, oddly, Jewish bio-ethicist Peter Singer, who has signed some anti-Zionist petitions but whose actual body of work has nothing to do directly with the session’s topic.

Day four of the event marks the zenith of the festival’s Palestine-a-thon. On that day, Palestinian ‘truth-tellers’ get top or exclusive billing in four consecutive sessions, spanning five hours. This starts with “Literary Worlds” – which invites festival attendees to “Explore

the power of literature to reimagine what has been distorted in the real world. Nowhere is this distortion more apparent than in relation to Palestine. Can literature reveal what has been suppressed to narrate the history of dispossession endured by generations of Palestinians?” – and ends with the session “Writing from Stolen Lands.”

And while Abulhawa has drawn the most criticism ahead of the event, she is not alone among the Palestinian invitees to have engaged in hate speech. Case in point; in April 2020, at the start of the pandemic, Baroud accused “racist Israelis” of “deliberately trying to infect Palestinians with... Covid-19.” Meanwhile, El-Kurd has evoked antisemitic tropes, accusing Zionists of having “an unquenchable thirst for Palestinian blood,” among other ugly smears.

Am I saying Palestinian authors don’t deserve a place in the Writers’ Week and similar events? Of course not. They do, along with Israelis and writers from around the world. However, a line must be drawn that excludes people from any background who engage in hate speech – with no exceptions based on sympathy for a particular cause.

Yet in the “woke” left it is increasingly argued that haters like Abulhawa deserve a pass just because they mainly hate Israel, and use the words “Israelis” or “Zionists”, not “Jews”, when spreading timeless slurs.

“In the ‘woke’ left it is increasingly argued that haters like Abulhawa deserve a pass just because they mainly hate Israel, and use the words ‘Israelis’ or ‘Zionists’, not ‘Jews’, when spreading timeless slurs”

The litmus test should be whether their speech would be acceptable if it was framed against any other people besides Jews and Israelis. Indeed, under existing laws and guidelines, people like Abulhawa, Baroud and El-Kurd would struggle to meet the “good character” standards for being granted entry visas to Australia in the first place

– and that law should apply to Palestinian activist writers in the same way as to anyone else.

The use of taxpayer funds to bring such people here only makes the situation even more outrageous.

This year’s Adelaide Writers’ Week deserves to be called

out for what it is – at least regarding the highly polarising and contentious issue of Israel and Palestine. Namely, a source of unadulterated, one-sided propaganda that can only serve to misinform people, breed hatred, and undermine support in Australia for a genuine negotiated two-state resolution of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.

Unwavering Palestinian rejectionism and, frequently, antisemitic hate, are the main reasons such a resolution has not yet been advanced. The Adelaide Writers’ Week festival seems to have deliberately sought to amplify these destructive forces with taxpayer funds – and that is the real “truth”.

AIR

“WORD FOR WORD”

“The grief that accompanies [passage of the first reading of the reform bills] is because of the danger to Israel’s unity. ... We need to make every effort so that following this vote, it will be possible to continue negotiating, to reach an agreed outline that will take us out of this difficult period, into a period of agreed constitutional reform.”

Israeli President Isaac Herzog, responding to the passage of the first reading of the first two elements of the Israeli Government’s controversial judicial reform package (Jerusalem Post, Feb. 22).

“I hear the voices of the people. I hear those who are praising, and I also hear those who are concerned. When there are disagreements among us, it is possible and necessary to talk in order to reach agreements or at least reduce the disagreements among us... Come and let’s talk, here and now.”

Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu, responding in a social media video to calls for dialogue about his Government’s proposed judicial reforms (BICOM, Feb. 22).

“This isn’t the time for slogans and stunts, Mr. Netanyahu. Instead of video clips, call President Herzog, suspend all judicial

reform votes and let’s begin discussions. For the people of Israel, I say this simply: The Prime Minister is lying. We’ve been trying to engage in discussions for weeks.”

Israeli Opposition Leader Yair Lapid, reacting to Netanyahu’s social media video (Ynetnews.com, Feb. 22).

“A good meeting with my colleagues, the Ukrainian Foreign Minister @DmytroKuleba. I informed him about the continuation of aid to Ukraine, and about our intention to support the Ukrainian peace initiative at the United Nations. We discussed deepening cooperation, among other things in the fight against the Iranian reign of terror. Israel will continue to stand by Ukraine.”

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen after visiting Kyiv (Twitter, Feb. 17).

“The need for Australia to take a strong stance is not just a moral one. The IRI [Iranian] regime and affiliated entities have a long track record of threatening, intimidating and violent behaviour targeted at other nations and its critics. It is not in Australia’s interests for the IRI to be able to continue such behaviour with impunity... Unfortunately, at the time of writing, Australia continues to lag behind other nations in responding with action.”

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee report on the inquiry into the human rights implications of recent violence in Iran (Parliament of Australia, Feb. 1).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

TRUTH ABOUT PALESTINIAN DEATHS COULD HELP STOP THEM

Last month in this column, I took on the media tendency to make much of the fact that there was a sharp increase in Palestinians killed in clashes with Israel in the West Bank last year – without noting that those killed were overwhelmingly (at least 85%) armed terrorists or individuals killed while carrying out acts of violence.

Following up on that story, please look at the image below showing the 36 Palestinians “martyred” in January of this year, as assembled by a Palestinian news channel:



Now have a look at the annotations to that image produced by Abu Ali, an Israeli blogger with a background in military intelligence:



All those marked in red – 31 out of the 36 – are either acknowledged members of terrorist groups, or died while carrying out attacks or participating in armed clashes with Israeli troops. The symbols identify the terror group they belonged to, and Abu Ali provides detailed information on each case, including sources.

And what of the five innocent victims? Four were residents of Jenin, where the most intense firefights took place between the IDF and militant groups, and died in the exchanges of gunfire.

The fifth innocent victim, Nayef Eiweydat, 13, sadly died of complications from wounds he received during Israel’s clashes with Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza last August.

So the evidence is again overwhelming, as the data for last year also showed, that more Palestinians are getting killed simply because there is more Palestinian terrorism and violence.

Another frequent misuse of data on Palestinian casualties is emotive but misleading claims about numbers of Palestinian “children” being killed. For instance, reports on casualties last year often noted that around 30 of the 150 or so Palestinians killed in the West Bank in 2022 were “children”.

Of the 36 Palestinians killed in January, six were minors under the age of 18. That sounds bad – but except for the sad case of Nayef Eiweydat mentioned above, every single one of the “children” killed was acknowledged as an armed fighter in a terrorist group, or died actively taking part in armed clashes with IDF troops. They are: Adam Ayyad, 15, fighter with the PFLP terror group; Amer Abu Zaytun, 16, fighter with the al-Aqsa’s Martyrs Brigades terror group; Wadih Abu Ramuz, 17, no known terror affiliation, but participated in an armed clash with IDF forces; Omar Khamour, 14, fighter with the PFLP terror group; and Muhammad Ali, 17, fighter with the Hamas terror group.

It is undeniably and deeply tragic that these young lives have been cut short through violence. But simply citing the number of Palestinian children killed obscures why these young people have been dying – it is because Palestinian groups are committing the horrific war crime of recruiting children as young as 14 as armed fighters.

To put a stop to these tragic deaths, this war crime is the primary reality that needs to change. And by focussing on raw numbers of Palestinian deaths, especially of children, without explaining why and how, NGOs and media outlets are preventing that reality from coming to light. They are thus inadvertently contributing to perpetuating such tragedies.

SIMPLE UNTRUTHS

In late January, the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network hosted a “Palestine Solidarity Conference” in Melbourne. According to *Green Left Weekly*, US-based activist and comedian Amer Zahr told the conference not to engage in “complicated debates about ancestry, revisionist history and contested indigeneity to the land” with Zionists. Instead, Palestinian activists should “keep it simple: they [Israel] kicked us out; they stole our land; and they won’t let us back.”

Zahr did a good job of revealing the main strategy of the pro-Palestinian movement – tell a simple story, and reject the complexity introduced by things like facts, actual history and competing moral claims.

It’s hard to deny that this strategy can be quite effective on places like social media, where short emotive sound-bites and graphic images rule the roost.

But simplifying in the way he proposes is tantamount to

lying – even if many Palestinian activists doubtless believe the lies. This applies to all three elements of his formulation. Most Palestinian refugees fled during the 1948 war without seeing a Jewish soldier; Jews have always lived in the land Palestinians say is exclusively theirs, but which has never been a Palestinian state or nation; and the Jews who arrived in the early 20th century bought the land they lived on from its legal owners – they didn’t steal it. And while most refugees were not allowed back after the war because the Arabs were openly genocidal towards the Jews – and because this is what happens when you lose a genocidal war – Israel did offer compensation to land owners who abandoned their land in the war’s aftermath, even if only a few accepted.

Yet it is no wonder the Palestinians have failed to establish a viable state in the 75 years since then. Like Zahr, they insist on a narrative of “simple” untruths – lying to both others and themselves – making dealing successfully with the reality of their situation all but impossible. AIR



Bassem Eid

PALESTINIANS MUST CONFRONT THE VIOLENCE IN OUR CULTURE

Even more shocking than the massacre of seven civilians outside an east Jerusalem synagogue on Jan. 27 was the fact that this assault on civilians peacefully praying in a sacred space was not condemned but celebrated by Palestinians and their purported admirers as far away as Yemen.

There is something deeply broken in a Palestinian street culture that honours violence against innocents. Multiple generations of Palestinian young people have been taught to hate Jews and Israel’s allies, and to equate attacks on civilians to attacks on military targets.

Too much of the Western world has coddled this perverse cycle. Enough is enough.

There are ominous signs that the forces of cruelty are already on the brink of dragging the Palestinian people and our neighbours through another round of terrible conflict. The shooting outside the synagogue came a day after an Israeli commando raid on an apartment building in the Jenin refugee camp targeted a Palestinian Islamic Jihad cell that was reportedly on the verge of launching a major terrorist attack.

Israeli forces killed nine people in the raid, including seven men who Israeli and Palestinian officials said were armed. Militants in Gaza fired rockets at Israel in response. Then came the shooting that killed five men and two women outside the synagogue.

All humanity should recognise the difference between a

preventative assault on a terrorist cell and the massacre of civilians in a house of worship. Yet Palestinian culture has somehow come to tolerate such chilling slaughter. It happened in 1972, after the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, and in 1976, with the plane hijacking to Entebbe, and so many times since.

Palestinians have been used as pawns by surrounding Arab nations that were pursuing a policy of eternal conflict with Israel. Most Arab countries refused citizenship to Palestinian refugees of the 1948 and 1967 wars in Israel, leaving us crowded in squalid camps.

I should know. I was born in the Old City under Jordanian rule. My family is Muslim, but we lived in the Jewish Quarter. Until 1966, when I was eight, and the Jordanian government forcibly relocated us to the Shuafat Refugee Camp, thus turning me and my family into “refugees”.

One must understand the refugee-isation of the Palestinian people to understand what has perverted our sons’ and daughters’ sense of humanity until they consider a mass shooting an occasion for sweets and dancing.

A Palestinian refugee is not just a refugee for life: Unlike all other refugee populations, the United Nations has given Palestinian refugees the unique curse of inheritability, so that there are now Palestinian refugees of the fourth and fifth generations.

This is how the number of Palestinians considered refugees registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA) ballooned from about 700,000 in 1948 – comparable to the 900,000 Jews who were expelled from Arab and Islamic countries in the same period – to an astonishing 5.6 million today.

UNRWA, which runs schools in the refugee camps, including much of the Gaza Strip, has contributed to the sick street culture with antisemitic education materials that include descriptions of Jews as “impure” and “inherently treacherous and hostile to Islam and Muslims.”


Another factor is the lack of leadership and democratic processes in the Palestinian Government. The supposed moderate, President Mahmoud Abbas, is now serving the 19th year of a four-year term. Contesting him are Hamas, whose charter covenant calls for Israel’s destruction, and PIJ, an Iranian proxy that rains rockets on Israeli cities.

It’s time to admit that Palestinian institutions are broken, and that they have developmentally harmed generations of Palestinian men and women, boys and girls, by whipping them into a constant froth with violently antisemitic educational and media content.

The Palestinian Authority provides a financial incentive for terrorism by providing pensions to the families of those who attack Israelis.

The Palestinian people’s immersion in a culture of violence now spans generations. The corrupt Palestinian institutions must be completely abolished, and an entirely new framework envisioned so that a rising genera-



tion can mature and embrace the prospects of peace and prosperity. 

Bassem Eid is a Palestinian human rights activist. Reprinted from the New York Forward. © Forward (Forward.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

MIDDLE MAN

The visit of Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim to Bangkok on February 9, his first as Prime Minister, was important to both countries – not only to rejuvenate their economic relationship and discuss regional concerns such as Myanmar, but particularly their shared border and the ongoing separatist violence on the Thai side.

Several analysts hope that the new Malaysian PM will give the ongoing Kuala Lumpur-brokered peace talks between negotiators representing the Thai government and Muslim insurgents in the southernmost provinces a boost. Anwar is known far and wide within the Thai state sector, civic networks and even underground insurgent movements and is said to have a deeper understanding of the southern unrest than his predecessors.

The Malaysian Prime Minister spoke about his country's "duty" to facilitate the process toward peace. "That is why we agreed to appoint an acceptable facilitator from a retired chief of our armed forces, known to the PM to work and find ways to assist," Anwar told reporters during a joint news conference with Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha.

Anwar was referring to one of his first major foreign policy initiatives – to change the Malaysian facilitator of the peace talks between the Thai government and Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), the largest and most powerful of the armed insurgent groups. These talks began in early 2020, just before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in Malaysia.

In January, Anwar replaced former national police chief Abdul Rahim Noor with Zulkifli Zainal Abidin, an ex-head of Malaysia's armed forces with a family background that is closely linked to the far south, as the broker for the peace talks.

Malaysia, as facilitator of the peace process, represents a crucial jigsaw piece in the roadmap to solving the insurgency that flared up in January 2004 when militants overran a military camp in Narathiwat province, making off with a large cache of firearms. The theft preceded a wave of attacks and snowballed into a separatist movement seeking autonomy. Since 2004, more than 7,000 people have

been killed and 13,500 others injured in violence across the area known as the "Deep South" – Narathiwat, Pattani, Yala and four districts of Songkhla province.

The main challenge facing the Thai negotiators over recent years is who to negotiate with – specifically, whom ever has influence over combatants involved in the ongoing low-scale attacks. Some observers have cast doubt on whether Anas Abdulrahman, the chief negotiator for the BRN, has the backing of the group's military wing, which has sway over fighters in the field.

The Thai panel in the negotiations has made it known that it would like to see other groups, including MARA Patani, participate in the peace process, but disunity among the rebels remains a problem. MARA Patani, an umbrella panel, had represented Deep South rebel groups and factions, including the BRN, in negotiations with the Thai government. These lasted several years until the BRN and the government began direct negotiations in early 2020.

Five rounds of face-to-face peace talks have been held since then. The BRN made concessions in agreeing to negotiate under the framework of Thailand's constitution and accepting the principle of the unitary Thai state, but there were no major breakthroughs. The two sides also agreed to a Ramadan ceasefire as a sign of goodwill, which ended up lasting longer than the agreed 40 days.

Altaf Deviyati, director of the Iman Research Center, a Malaysian security think tank, says Malaysian facilitator Zulkifli would have much to do in progressing the talks.

"On the one hand, existing talks and confidence-building needs to be protected... but on the other hand, there is a need to make the talks more inclusive," she told *BenarNews*. "Personally, I believe eventually the talks must be inclusive for sustainable peace, but I think we are not there yet."

Statements about inclusiveness refer not only to the sidelined MARA Patani, but particularly the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), a smaller rival to the BRN, which has increased its violent activity, including a double bombing last April during the BRN's Ramadan ceasefire. Despite its limited offensive capabilities, PULO is exerting pressure for inclusion in the negotiations.

Zachary Abuza, an expert on insurgencies in the region, notes that violence rose in 2022 but remained quite low by historical standards. He believes that despite the revived talks and a new Malaysian facilitator, violence may increase as frustration grows in the rebel ranks.

"The Army has gotten violence to a low enough level that they can attribute it to criminality, without making any meaningful concessions or addressing any of the BRN's core grievances. The government's strategy appears to be using protracted peace talks to cause rifts amongst the rebels," he wrote in *BenarNews*. "It's also not clear whether BRN fighters in the field have endorsed the concessions made by the leadership."

Miriam Bell

LABOUR POLITICAL SHAKEUP KICKS OFF ELECTION YEAR

They say a week is a long time in politics, but the first weeks of the political year in New Zealand took that concept to new heights.

Traditionally, New Zealand – and its politicians – take a long, leisurely break over summer. Even when Parliament reconvenes, and the leaders offer up their state of the nation speech, not much happens.

This year has been very different.

When the Labour Party met for its first caucus meeting of the year on January 19, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern surprised everyone by announcing her resignation. It was time for her to leave the role as she “no longer had enough in the tank” to do the job justice, she said.

In the wake of her resignation, there was much commentary about the large amounts of vitriol, misogyny and threats of violence that have increasingly been directed at Ardern. But she has said it was not these that led to her decision.

There was also speculation that a decline in her popularity, from a high of 59.5% in May 2020 to 29% late last year, might have been a factor. Again, Ardern dismissed this.

Nonetheless, the Labour Party was trailing the opposition National Party in the polls. There was a growing view that a change in government to a National/ACT party coalition, with National leader Chris Luxon taking the premiership, was highly likely at this year’s election, scheduled for October.

Ardern’s bombshell announcement has shaken up that assumption, reigniting the election race.

The Labour Party executed a smooth, orderly transition to a new leader. Chris Hipkins, former Education, Police and COVID Response Minister, was sworn in as prime minister within a week.

Hipkins, a savvy political strategist known as a “Mr Fix-it”, was forced to hit the ground running.

Devastating floods swamped Auckland in late January. Two weeks later, the country was hit by Cyclone Gabrielle, which had a catastrophic impact on several regions.

Hipkins navigated these natural disasters efficiently. At the same time, he also reshuffled his cabinet, ditched a host of contentious and unpopular Labour policies and repositioned the party with a focus on “bread and butter” issues, such as the cost of living.

His approach appears to be paying off, with the latest polls showing a surge in Labour’s popularity.

Both parties were polling 34.4%, with National falling 2.8% points and Labour up by 2.7%. But with its potential minor party partner, the ACT party, National would likely have just enough seats to form government.

There are still eight months until the election, and the trajectories of ACT, Labour coalition partner the Greens, and the Maori Party will likely have a big impact on the eventual outcome.

But Labour has clearly regained momentum under Hipkins.

Luxon’s leadership could even be under threat, according to Victoria University political studies lecturer Bryce Edwards. While Luxon unified National and revitalised its polling after assuming the party leadership in Nov. 2021, these improvements have stalled, and his personal poll ratings will be cause for alarm within the party, Edwards says.

For example, in the Curia poll Luxon’s net favourability rating was -5%, down from -1% the previous month. Hipkins’ net favourability was +27%.

Hipkins’ ascendancy and policy reforms mean Luxon’s strategies of “anyone but Jacinda” and “anyone but Labour” are no longer working, Edwards says.

But what does the changed political landscape mean for those interested in policy issues of importance to the Jewish community, and particularly Israel? The odds are – not much.

This year’s election, much like the 2020 election, is set to focus on domestic issues, such as cyclone recovery, the cost of living, inequality, and, potentially, co-governance and the impact of climate change.

Israel Institute of NZ Director David Cumin says New Zealand policy towards Israel tends to be fairly similar, regardless of which of the two major parties is in power. That is because both parties are steered by advice from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAT) in this space.

“Remember that the National Party’s Murray McCully was foreign minister when New Zealand co-sponsored UNSC resolution 2334, and McCully was unable to say that the ‘knife intifada’ was ‘terrorism’,” Cumin noted.

Both National and Labour majority governments have also followed MFAT advice to fund schools in the disputed territories that teach hate, glorify terror and employ teachers who incite violence, he says.

“We also suspect that MFAT or DPMC (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet) is responsible for advising successive prime ministers not to take police and SIS [Security Intelligence Service] advice to proscribe Hamas and Hezbollah as terror entities, but to create an artificial distinction to separate out ‘military wings’ of each group.”

“The Institute hopes that whoever is elected, and appointed to representative roles, will resist the bias of officials to ensure, at the very least, that taxpayer money is not aiding terror, and there are no legal loopholes to allow support for terror from New Zealand,” Cumin concluded.

BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

Eight rockets were fired into Israel from Gaza on Jan. 25, 13 on Feb. 1, one on Feb. 11, and six on Feb. 23, causing no casualties or damage and prompting Israeli retaliatory strikes, including on a Hamas underground weapons factory.

On Jan. 27, a Palestinian opened fire on Jews leaving Friday night prayers at a synagogue in Neve Yaakov, Jerusalem, killing seven and wounding three before himself being killed. On Jan. 28, a 13-year-old Palestinian shot a father and son in Jerusalem before being shot and wounded.

On Feb. 10, a vehicular ramming in Jerusalem killed two brothers, a six-year-old and eight-year-old, as well as their uncle, and wounded several others before the Palestinian attacker was shot and killed.

Various other stabbing, ramming and shooting attacks by Palestinians against Israelis were thwarted or led to no serious casualties.

Continuing Israeli counterterrorism raids throughout the West Bank resulted in dozens of arrests and the deaths of several Palestinians, almost all known terrorist operatives or gunmen attacking security forces.

PA SUSPENDS SECURITY COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL

The Palestinian Authority (PA) announced on Jan. 26 that it was suspending its security coordination with Israel after an Israeli military raid on a terrorist network in Jenin that day killed nine Palestinians. All but one were terrorists or gunmen.

PA Deputy Prime Minister Nabil Abu Rudeineh said the Palestinians also planned to file complaints over the raid with the UN Security Coun-

cil, International Criminal Court, and other international bodies.

US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf told reporters, "Far from stepping back on security coordination, we believe it's quite important that the parties retain, and if anything, deepen security coordination."

HEZBOLLAH BUILD-UP ALONG ISRAEL-LEBANON BORDER

The Hezbollah terror group has built 20 observation towers, each 18 metres high, along the Israel-Lebanon border in the past year, according to Israeli media reports. The towers appear to be a response to Israel's construction of a fortified wall along 140 kilometres of the border.



A new Hezbollah-built observation tower (Image: Efi Shrir)

They represent a violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which forbids Hezbollah from operating near the border.

IRAN ENRICHES URANIUM TO NEAR WEAPONS GRADE

In mid-February, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors in Iran detected uranium enriched to 84% – just 6% shy of military grade uranium used for nuclear weapons.

The IAEA also reported that Teheran failed to update the agency, as legally required, that it had made changes to the connections between

two cascades of advanced IR-6 centrifuges producing 60% enriched uranium at the underground Fordow site.

Earlier, on Jan. 25, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi had warned that Iran had accumulated enough fissile material for "several nuclear weapons". Grossi also expressed concern over Iran's lack of disclosure, which he noted was "inconsistent" with Teheran's international commitments.

IRAN-RUSSIA OIL SMUGGLING COOPERATION

Media reports allege that Russia has begun using Iran to ship oil to bypass Western sanctions. The *Financial Times* reported that the export of Russian oil is occurring via Iran's "ghost fleet" of tankers, now carrying Russian oil instead of Iranian, thus enabling Moscow to breach sanctions using techniques pioneered by Teheran.

In addition, on Feb. 11, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak told Moscow-based reporters that a potential agreement that would allow the delivery of Russian oil and natural gas supplies via Iran to other countries under a "swap arrangement" was a "promising project". The first phase of this arrangement could commence in March, via pipes crossing Turkmenistan, Iranian media reported.

RUSSO-IRANIAN DRONE PARTNERSHIP DEEPENS

The *Guardian* reported that Iran had transferred at least 18 drones, including six Mohajer-6, to Russia's navy in November, following the visit of a Russian delegation to Iran. The drones were reportedly transferred via ships in the Caspian Sea and via Iran's state airlines and were

accompanied by 54 Iranian operatives to help integrate them into the Russian military. The Mohajer-6 is a larger model than the hundreds of Shahed-136 and Shahed-131 loitering munitions Russia has already been employing in Ukraine.

Separately, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that an Iranian delegation recently visited Russia to inspect the site of a planned factory in Yelabuga that, once completed, will produce approximately 6,000 Iranian drones a year for Russia's war on Ukraine, including an upgraded variant of the Shahed-136.

An Iranian Shahed-136 reportedly struck an Israeli-owned tanker, the *Campo Square*, on Feb. 10 in the Arabian Sea.

ISRAEL SUSPECTED OF DRONE ATTACK IN IRAN

Israel's Mossad intelligence organisation was reported to have been behind a drone attack on a military facility at Isfahan in Iran on Jan 29. Sources told US media that the attack was aimed at a weapons-production factory and was successful, contrary to Iranian claims. Reports suggest that the factory targeted was likely making drones or missiles to be shipped to

Russia for its war in Ukraine.

Also in January, reports suggest Israel carried out several attacks on truck convoys crossing from Iraq into Syria that belonged to Iran-affiliated Iraqi Shi'ite militias, and were allegedly carrying weapons systems for Iranian proxies in Syria or Lebanon.

On Feb. 19, reputed Israeli military strikes reportedly resulted in the deaths of at least five people at a military building in the Damascus neighborhood of Kafar Sousah, and damage to several other Iranian military sites across Syria.

ISRAEL AND SUDAN MOVE CLOSER TO FULL RELATIONS

On Feb. 2, Israel's Foreign Minister Eli Cohen met with Sudanese Transitional Government chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in the Sudanese capital Khartoum to discuss the full normalisation of relations between the two countries under the Abraham Accords – which Sudan was the fourth country to join.

On his return to Israel, Cohen stated that the two countries had now finalised the text of a normalisation deal, but the signing would wait till Sudan had returned to civilian

government.

Meanwhile, Chadian President Mahamat Deby visited Israel on Jan. 31, and announced Chad would soon inaugurate an embassy in Tel Aviv.

ISRAELI EARTHQUAKE AID TO TURKEY

More than 350 members of Israeli search and rescue and medical teams returned home in mid-February, after spending over a week in Turkey following the devastating earthquakes that struck the region on Feb. 6 and 7.

One Israeli team established a field hospital at an abandoned medical centre outside the south-eastern Turkish city of Kahramanmaraş, and treated over 470 earthquake victims. A separate search and rescue team of 160+ persons rescued 19 civilians from the rubble in south-eastern Turkey.

Turkish media reported that Israel's was the second-largest international rescue and medical aid contingent sent to the disaster area.

Meanwhile, there have been allegations the Assad regime has been stealing aid meant for earthquake victims in the north of Syria, with video emerging of relief goods being sold on the streets of Damascus, 350km away from the earthquake zone.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

PARKING PROBLEMS

It's a fact that east Jerusalem suffers from a shortage of parks, largely because of a lack of urban planning before Israel captured these neighbourhoods in the 1967 Six Day war.

Recently, the Jerusalem Municipality has taken major steps towards rectifying this problem – yet, bizarrely, rejectionist Palestinian activists have railed against this.

On Feb. 16, the Jerusalem Municipality announced the opening of the NIS 28 million (A\$11.5m) Wadi Joz Park, a 6.1-acre expanse of green grass, trees, exer-

cise equipment, soccer and sports fields, bike paths and picnic tables, all topped off with a state-of-the-art playground.

It's the largest recreational space Jerusalem has developed in decades – larger even than the highly popular Sacher Park in central Jerusalem, convenient to mostly Jewish neighbourhoods.

Jewish Israelis aren't likely to use Wadi Joz Park, as it's not close to their neighbourhoods. Rather, the location was chosen to serve the needs of Arab residents.

Yet prominent Palestinian activists have been essentially telling their kids, "No park for you" – if they are built by Israelis. Commenting on a surge in Israeli investment in improving the quality of life in east Jerusalem, Nasser Al-Hadmi,

head of the "Jerusalemite Committee for Anti-Judaisation", harshly criticised it, explaining to the Hamas-linked *Safa* news agency that, "The occupation wants [to demonstrate] that [Jerusalem] is its unified capital, by eliminating all forms of differences... between its two parts." This is terrible, he said, because it might "cauterise" Palestinian minds, numbing them to Israel's plan to "Judaise" Jerusalem.

That's right – anything Israel does to close the gap in living standards between Jerusalem's Palestinian and Jewish residents is just another manifestation of diabolical "Judaisation". Even opening parks and playgrounds in mostly Arab areas.

With that kind of twisted logic, you'd be forgiven for thinking they've been smoking grass, not playing on it.

COVER STORY

HERZOG'S MOMENT

BETWEEN A CONTROVERSIAL PLAN AND THE PUSHBACK TO IT

Amotz Asa-El

Having finally broken Israel's three-year political deadlock and emerged from last November's election with a narrow, but clear victory, Binyamin Netanyahu's conservative coalition quickly produced a blueprint for a sweeping judicial reform. The reform plan's many critics say it is so radical it appears to have been inspired by Hungary's model of "illiberal democracy".

The plan includes proposals to change the selection process for judges, so the government will dominate it; to allow the legislature to cancel any Supreme Court ruling with a simple 51% majority; to demand an 80% majority among Supreme Court justices in order to overturn legislation; and to forbid the Supreme Court from scrutinising constitutional legislation.

The plan, which opponents charge is meant to disempower the judges and impose complete control of the judiciary by the politicians of the governing coalition, is so sweeping, and the schedule the Government has set for its passage so rapid, that pundits have compared it to a political blitzkrieg – a lightning attack designed to stun the enemy into surrender.

The enemy, however, as so often happens with battle plans, didn't play its scripted part. Within days of the plan's announcement, opposition gathered momentum and soon reached social, political, and geographic levels that the reform's mastermind, Justice Minister Yariv Levin, apparently did not foresee.

The controversy has become so contentious, and the sense of national crisis it spawned so grave, that Israeli



President Herzog's primetime address to the nation on Feb. 12 (screenshot)

President Isaac Herzog felt compelled to use his ordinarily ceremonial post in order to intervene in the political process. His effort has been dismissed by some as quixotic and praised by others as heroic, but most Israelis appear to hope that, even if it does not end the crisis, it will at least help lower the flames of conflict that the plan has sparked.

The backlash to the judicial reform blueprint moved beyond the Knesset and media early, when Supreme Court President Esther Hayut called it, in a televised speech, "a plan to shatter the legal system" and "to change the state's democratic identity."

While her statement was surprising in its tone and language, opposition from the judiciary was predictable. Yet the same cannot be said regarding the Bank of Israel, and its soft-spoken Governor Amir Yaron, who warned Netanyahu that the planned reform might chase away foreign investors.

Yaron was joined by former governors Yaakov Fren-

kel and Karnit Flug, and 270 economists from all Israeli universities, who warned of the plan's potential economic fallout, noting that foreign investors prefer countries with strong and independent judiciaries.

Tel Aviv University's Professor Moshe Hazan even announced his resignation from the Bank of Israel's Monetary Committee, which sets interest rates, saying he wanted to join the pro-judiciary demonstrations, and could not do so while serving in a public capacity with the bank.

The economists were then followed by 500 hi-tech firms declaring a one-hour warning strike in protest against the plan.

Meanwhile, in the street, an anti-reform demonstration attended by 80,000 people in Tel Aviv ten days after the blueprint's introduction quickly metamorphosed into regular demonstrations nationwide that now take place every Saturday night.

On Feb. 13, as the Knesset Law Committee convened to vote on a first-reading draft of the blueprint's first clauses, some 100,000 demonstrators flocked to Jerusalem from across the country, creating a human forest covered by blue-and-white flags.

Meanwhile, protestations and warnings from notable Israelis continued to pile up, including more than 200 law professors and former Supreme Court justices, seven Israeli Nobel Laureates, a battery of former chiefs of the IDF, General Security Service, and the Mossad spy agency, and 70 senior rabbis.

What was initially predicted to remain a domestic Israeli affair then spread beyond the Jewish state's border.

First, following a meeting with Netanyahu in Jerusalem, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a live broadcast alongside Netanyahu: "Building consensus for new proposals is the most effective way to ensure they are embraced and that they endure."

Blinken's understated, but unambiguous, criticism of the way the Levin Plan was being imposed was then seconded by President Joe Biden, who in reply to *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman's request for a comment on the Levin Reform, replied:

"The genius of American democracy and Israeli democracy is that they are both built on strong institutions, on checks and balances, on an independent judiciary. Building consensus for fundamental changes is really important to ensure that the people buy into them so they can be sustained."

Before that, French President Emmanuel Macron reportedly told Netanyahu during their Feb. 2 meeting in the Elysee that the reform "threatens to break the power of the Supreme Court, the only institutional counter-power

in the government," and that, if it passes, Paris would be forced to conclude that Israel has broken away from "the common conception of democracy."

The foreign backlash has also transcended diplomacy, as 56 world-renowned economists, including Peter Diamond of MIT, Oliver Hart of Harvard, Paul Milgrom of Stanford and eight other Nobel Laureates, joined a petition against the Levin Reform.

The foreign economists were joined by foreign jurists, most notably lifelong Israel supporter Irwin Cotler, a former minister of justice and attorney-general of Canada, who said "the judiciary will be undermined by the reform."

Back in Israel, passions were running so high that two war heroes spoke openly of resorting to violence if the reforms went through.

"If someone forces me to live in a dictatorship and I don't have any other choice, I will not hesitate to use live fire," said David Hodak, a senior corporate lawyer who was decorated for fighting wounded as a tank officer during the Yom Kippur War.

Retired air force colonel Ze'ev Raz, who led the squadron that destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, was even blunter, sharing someone else's social media post which said: "If a sitting prime minister assumes dictatorial powers, this prime minister is bound to die, simply like that, along with his ministers and his followers."

Both men soon retracted these statements, but the depth of the crisis and the intensity of the passions un-

corked by the Levin Reform became glaring, and only seemed likely to grow. That is when President Herzog decided to step in.

In a dramatic live address on primetime TV on Feb. 12, Herzog said he felt "the powder keg is ready to explode," and therefore decided to present a document that will hopefully serve as a basis for a dialogue that would produce a different reform, one

based on broad national agreement.

The Herzog Plan includes proposals that the three branches will be equally represented in the forum appointing judges; that changes concerning the court's usage of the "reasonableness" standard in making decisions regarding administrative acts will be decided by broad political agreement; that constitutional legislation (Basic Laws) will require four readings in Knesset instead of the usual three, and in return will not be subject to reviews by the Supreme Court; that the court will be allowed to cancel non-constitutional legislation; and that the Knesset will be allowed to override Supreme Court rulings by a yet-to-



Israel's international allies, like US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left), are starting to weigh in on the judicial reform controversy (GPO/ Flickr)

be negotiated super-majority. He also called for measures to appoint more judges and increase the speed of legal processes in the court system, issues not discussed in the Levin plan apparently designed to create some agreement between the opposing camps.

The speech's effect remains to be seen.

The following day, Herzog met with Levin and, separately, with Opposition Leader Yair Lapid. While this may ultimately prove to have been the beginning of the negotiations that Herzog intended to ignite, as of Feb. 20, the sides still seemed irreconcilably entrenched. Lapid demanded an immediate, 60-day suspension of the legislation process to allow negotiations about the reform proposal, while Levin clarified that the legislation will proceed as planned, including during any such dialogue.

Ultimately, the Herzog initiative's fate, along with the entire reform's destiny, will be decided by Netanyahu. Some analysts believe he is already seeking a ladder with which to climb down from the tree Levin has placed the Government in. Some reports even claim that a rift between the two is evolving, reflecting Netanyahu's displeasure with Levin's inflexibility in the face of the immense pressure Netanyahu has come under.

One possible sign that Netanyahu is seeking a compromise may have been hidden in a letter signed by 12 former heads of the National Security Council, imploring Knesset Speaker Amir Ohana to seek reform via dialogue, while warning that "the intensity of the social clash" that the Levin Reform has triggered "threatens Israel's national resilience."

In itself, that letter was only one of many warnings and condemnations Netanyahu has received since the reform's introduction on Jan. 4. Yet what made this one different was that its signatories included former Mossad head Yossi Cohen, one of Netanyahu's closest aides, and a key player in helping generate the Abraham Accords normalising relations with four Arab states which Netanyahu sees as one of the supreme achievements of his political career.

The letter Cohen signed was much milder in tone than most of the anti-reform petitions, focused mainly on the need for dialogue and consensus. That is why Cohen's pres-

ence among its signatories raises the possibility it was actually designed to help Netanyahu retreat from a campaign of rapid, radical change he may be beginning to regret.

Herzog's speech, delivered the day after Cohen's statement became public, offered a potential roadmap for such a retreat which, as often happens with retreats, might begin with much pain and anguish, but end with a universal sigh of relief.

AIR

HERZOG FORGES A NEW ROLE

Haviv Rettig Gur

The fight over the Israeli Government's judicial overhaul proposal can be divided into two periods: Before President Isaac Herzog's February 12 speech, and after it.

Before the speech, the unforgiving activist base set the tone. Politicians believed they could not afford to give ground. Justice Minister Yariv Levin, Opposition Leader Yair Lapid and many others made a point of rejecting calls for compromise.

Then on Feb. 12, the political script flipped.

The President used his prime time 8pm pulpit to deliver the unpleasant message that both sides had a case and valid reasons for thinking something vital was at stake.

He spoke to the centre-left about the right: "The proposed reform didn't come from nowhere... [B]oundaries have been crossed on this issue over the years." Noting the dearth of Sephardi judges in the judiciary as an example, he told the majority-Ashkenazi centre-left that "this pain felt by our brothers and sisters is real, and it is a big mistake to reject or ignore it."

And to the right he spoke about the centre-left: "There are millions of citizens here who alongside diaspora Jewry and great lovers of Israel around the world see in the reform a real threat to Israeli democracy" and who believe the reform "erases and uproots all checks and balances..."

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[and] that no one will be left to protect citizens from the power of government.”

And precisely because each believed so much was at stake, neither could be allowed to win outright. Neither camp would meekly disappear after such a loss. Victory would only bring further escalation. It was the kind of fight where “when someone wins, both sides lose.”

The speech didn’t spark a mad rush to compromise, but the political vocabulary changed instantly. Politicians who’d spent weeks showcasing their partisan bona fides now declared their eagerness for dialogue. Those who continued to reject dialogue, especially Haredi MKs like United Torah Judaism’s Moshe Gafni, did so angrily, and defensively. The time for compromise, Gafni growled, “was 30 years ago.”

But Justice Minister Yariv Levin’s response was more representative of the general rule. In his statement later that night, he made a point of welcoming dialogue even as he explained why he wouldn’t slow the pace of legislation. His reasoning was simple: He didn’t trust the opposition. They would use the pause to “foot-drag, delay and prevent a real and meaningful reform in the judicial system,” he said.

“Herzog decided to expand the conversation, to force the politicians to contend with the broader public, which polls suggested favour a compromise quote”

compromise.

On the centre-left, the process was much the same. The demand to cancel the plan outright transformed into a demand for a temporary pause – Lapid called for a 60-day freeze – to allow for serious negotiations.

In the days that followed, Levin, Lapid, Knesset Law Committee chair MK Simcha Rothman and National Unity party chief MK Benny Gantz all met with the President. The day after the speech, Levin and Rothman publicly called on Lapid and Gantz to meet them at the President’s House. And on Feb. 15, Herzog asked for two private member’s bills related to the overhaul, from MKs Moshe Sa’ada and Moshe Arbel, to be frozen; both MKs agreed.

The point isn’t that one should believe these signals of moderation; the point is that the politicians suddenly felt they needed to broadcast them.

Herzog had “put up ladders for everyone to climb down, and everyone started looking for ways to use them,” was how one right-wing political strategist put it.



President Isaac Herzog – scion of one of Israel’s most significant political families – has sought to “put up ladders for everyone to climb down” (Image: Shutterstock)

That he refused to budge wasn’t new; that a justice minister who’d declined to be interviewed for two long months felt a sudden need to explain himself was an innovation. Under the public gaze directed his way by the President, he suddenly understood he needed to show he was rational and open to

OUT OF THE BACK ROOMS

There’s a reason Herzog’s speech had that effect, and it points to a surprising new role he has carved out for the Israeli presidency in his 20 months in the position, a role probably unprecedented in Israeli history.

The speech was a carefully planned gambit after several frustrating weeks in which Herzog tried but failed to bring the sides to negotiate behind closed doors.

In a different speech three weeks earlier, on Jan. 24, Herzog described these attempts. In the President’s House, he said, “efforts are being made today – literally today, and every day in the past week, and in the weeks preceding it – the main and possibly only efforts to replace an aggressive zero-sum confrontation with a mechanism that will allow the argument to be managed, and perhaps even resolved for years to come in a way that preserves national unity and the state of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.”

But those closed-door attempts proved fruitless. In meeting after meeting, compromise proposals were quietly considered but publicly opposed. Each time the parties went in front of the cameras, the willingness to compromise they’d expressed behind closed doors evaporated. Each side knew their political base was angry and worried, and none could afford to appear to be caving under pressure.

So Herzog decided to expand the conversation, to force the politicians to contend with the broader public, which polls suggested favour a compromise. His Feb. 12 speech was designed to drag the back-room dialogue into the open, to make the general public part of the process.

That’s why he dwelt at length in the speech on the specifics of a potential compromise. He urged prohibiting judges from overturning Basic Laws – a demand of the right – while requiring supermajorities to amend those semi-constitutional laws – a demand of the left. He proposed amending the judicial selection process to give a larger share of votes to elected politicians, but short of de facto control by the government as Levin and Rothman are seeking. And so on.

The point was simple: To give the watching public a clear sense of what a compromise might look like, and thereby increase the public pressure to reach a deal. Standing before Israel's prime-time television audience, he called on Law Committee Chairman Rothman to "consider the principles I've proposed here today as a basis for continued discussions in the committee – both for coalition and opposition."

BRIDGE BUILDING

The Israeli presidency has always been a largely symbolic position. Denied any real power at the country's founding by Israel's first prime minister David Ben Gurion, the position has been treated over the decades as a respectable retirement for politicians senior enough to deserve it but not influential enough to vie for the hard power of the prime minister's chair.

Herzog had led the Israeli left to a short-lived surge at the ballot box in the 2015 election before being ousted as Labor party leader in 2017. He's a soft-spoken political scion of one of Israel's most significant political families. (His father was Israel's sixth president.) Experienced, well-liked, and now sidelined, he seemed a perfect fit for the largely ceremonial Israeli presidency.

But in his 20 months in the position, Herzog has broken the mould, proving that the presidency could be more useful than anyone expected.

One obvious example was his role in the revival of diplomatic ties with Turkey.

In March 2022, Herzog travelled to Ankara for a state visit. He was received with unusual warmth by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a sharp change in tone from the years when Turkey was the de facto leader of an anti-Israel, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated axis in the region.

The visit was first and foremost a calculated geopolitical pivot for both Ankara and Jerusalem. But it was also a result of Herzog's unexpectedly close ties with the Turkish President, the culmination of a long process of careful relationship-building on Herzog's part that opened a channel of communication between the two men.

When Erdogan lay bedridden with a bad case of COVID, Herzog called him. When Herzog's mother passed away, Erdogan returned the favour. When an Israeli couple was arrested in Turkey in November 2021 for photographing the presidential palace, a call from Herzog expedited their release. During tensions on the Temple Mount or when news broke of an Iranian hit squad reportedly targeting Israelis on the streets of Istanbul, phone calls between the two men helped lower tensions in Jerusalem and focus

Turkish security attention on the danger in Istanbul.

When the Turkish Ambassador presented his credentials to the President in January, Herzog took pains to broadcast a warmer-than-usual reception. The credentials ceremony is usually a simple photo op; for Ambassador Sakir Ozkan Torunlar, it was upgraded to a joint press statement, a sign of special respect in the language of diplomacy. The only other ambassadors granted the honour recently were those from the US and Bahrain.

While many worked on restoring the Israeli-Turkish relationship through quieter channels, Herzog played an out-sized role in clearing the political path to rapprochement.

It's hard to think of another Israeli president who played so central a role in such a strategically significant relationship.

"Herzog inadvertently makes a larger case about the current constitutional reforms: That a permanent path out of the crisis may lie not merely in recalibrating the existing institutions, but in bringing forth new ones"

NEW INFLUENCE

In part, the quiet new influence of the presidency is a function of the man himself. Once one knows what to look for, a pattern emerges in Herzog's

career. One of his first acts as the newly-elected Labor leader in 2013 was to reach out to the Haredi Shas party seeking collaboration in shortening the lifespan of the Netanyahu-Lapid-Bennett Government formed that year. In the 2015 election, his ability to build bridges forged the Zionist Union alliance that delivered for the left its last meaningful ballot-box success with 24 seats.

But it isn't just Herzog. As Israeli politics is overtaken by sectarianism, the country is suddenly discovering a previously unexpected role for its ceremonial president.

The President's House, Herzog said on Jan. 24, "is probably the only place today that manages to hold the trust of the sides and serve as a safe shelter for substantive dialogue in this fight." Israel has never needed such an institution more. Israelis "haven't just forgotten how to agree, we're not even managing to argue. We must strive for broad agreements, not victories. Thinking of this as a zero-sum game is a threat to us all, because the side victorious today will be defeated tomorrow, and vice versa. Neither will enjoy sustained and permanent protection for their values."

In using his traditionally dormant office to such powerful effect, Herzog inadvertently makes a larger case about the current constitutional reforms: That a permanent path out of the crisis may lie not merely in recalibrating the existing institutions, but in bringing forth new ones, new bodies with powers tailor-made to force compromise in an increasingly partisan and belligerent political age.

AIR

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FOR A BETTER WORLD

Strike Zone?

US-Israel coordination may presage action against Iran

Yaakov Lappin

On January 26, the historic five-day joint Israeli-American military exercise called “Juniper Oak” came to an end. The exercise saw unprecedented levels of cooperation between the US military’s Central Command (CENTCOM), which is responsible for the Middle East, and the Israel Defence Forces.

“Juniper Oak” tested Israeli-American readiness and boosted the operational connection between the two militaries to enable them to deal with “regional threats,” according to the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit, but the intended target audience for this message seems to have been Iran.

Some 6,500 US commanders and soldiers took part (along with 1,500 Israeli troops), as did missile ships and fighter jets from both militaries, which fired on simulated naval threats. The two air forces also practised a range of scenarios, including the use of transport and mid-air refuelling aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles, search and rescue helicopters and B-52 bombers, which dropped munitions on targets in southern Israel.

Out at sea, meanwhile, the Israeli Navy’s Sa’ar 5 missile ships were refuelled by an American tanker, and in the air, fighter jets and bombers were refuelled by Israeli and American refuellers, including the American Boeing KC-46 Pegasus, which will be in the IAF’s inventory in the coming years.

An initial review of the exercise was held by IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi and CENTCOM Commander Gen. Michael E. Kurilla aboard an American aircraft carrier in the heart of the Mediterranean Sea. Members of the IDF General Staff and the US Sixth Fleet also participated.

“The IDF and CENTCOM take the same view of

regional threats,” said Halevi. “Israel knows how to defend itself, but it is always good when our best partner is with us so that we learn from one another.” Kurilla, for his part, said the US is committed to Israel’s security and supports building up Israel’s qualitative military edge in the Middle East.

Still, despite the above, Israel has also been busy making its own, independent preparations for a potential strike on Iran, which have accelerated over the past year.

In 2022, the IAF placed long-range strike capabilities at the top of its priority list, undertaking the most detailed planning regarding intelligence, munitions, aerial platforms and refuelling capabilities.

“We have greatly sped up our preparations for activities in Iran,” then-IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi stated in April 2022. “A substantial part of the enlarged defence budget, as just recently summarised, is earmarked for this.”

In June 2022, the IDF launched “Chariots of Fire”, a month-long military exercise and the largest in decades, which included simulations of long-range strikes against Iran’s nuclear sites.

Towards the end of the exercise, the IAF deployed dozens of aircraft over the Mediterranean in a drill to simulate “long-range flight, aerial refuelling and striking distant targets,” according to the IDF.

A solo Israeli strike and a joint Israeli-American strike are both on the table, and both options must be taken seriously, a former intelligence official told *JNS*.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Yossi Kuperwasser, an ex-head of the Military Intelligence Research Division for the IDF and former Director-General of the Israeli Ministry of Strategic Affairs, said the scenario of a joint operation “is certainly reasonable”.

“What has recently occurred is a convergence of US and Israeli approaches,” said Kuperwasser, currently

the Director of the Project on Regional Middle East Developments at the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs.

“While the United States understands the difficulties in renewing the nuclear agreement [with Iran], the Israelis abandoned the idea of enforcing a red line on Iran’s nuclear program that was based on enriching 250 kilograms of 20



Images from the unprecedented “Juniper Oak” US-Israel joint military exercises in late January (Images: US Central Command/ Twitter)

percent-enriched uranium, which Netanyahu had formerly marked out during a United Nations speech in 2012,” he said.

With the “trip wire” for action being moved by both countries, each in their own way, they appeared to have settled on the idea of needing to act “one minute before Iran starts enriching uranium to the military-grade, 90 percent [U-235],” said Kuperwasser.

IDF Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilead, Executive Director of the Institute for Policy and Strategy at Reichman University, Herzliya, and former Director of Policy and Political-Military Affairs at the Israeli Defence Ministry, said in a recent radio interview that US support for Israel was critical for efforts to prevent Iran from going nuclear. Iran, he warned, is on the way to a nuclear weapon, and to stop it, “you need coordination with the US.”

On that same radio station, in July 2022, IDF Maj. Gen. Yaakov Amidror, former National Security Council head, stated, “We can strike Iran without the Americans, too. Perhaps not as well, but we must not as a country depend on the Americans.”

Kuperwasser pointed out that differences still remain in the way Jerusalem and Washington perceive the Iranian nuclear program. The US could in theory live with Iran continuing to enrich uranium to the 60% level, while for Israel, this would represent an unacceptable situation, he said.

“Juniper Oak,” he said, “was designed to send a message to Iran: You are the target. The entire concept is about discouraging them from reaching 90% enrichment. The Iranians need to take it seriously. They could tell themselves that those who want to deter don’t do it as loudly. On the other hand, they cannot ignore this message.”

Iran has responded to significant military threats in the past by taking a step back, particularly when that threat comes from the United States, he argued. Examples include cancelling a plan to mine the Straits of Hormuz in 2003 following American threats, and holding off on a nuclear breakthrough between 2013 and 2015, following Israel’s threat to act in 2012.

“They take real threats seriously when they see them,” said Kuperwasser.

Nevertheless, today, Iran has enriched sufficient levels of uranium to the 20% and 60% level to produce five nuclear warheads, if enriched further and if other aspects of the nuclear program are completed. *[The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed in early February detection in Iran of uranium enriched to 84% – Ed.]*

“It is unclear how long it would take them to reach launchable bombs. The consensus is two years, but I believe it is less because I think that the Iranians are conducting simulations [of nuclear bomb triggers],” said Kuperwasser.

“Some of what they are doing is public, such as metal

uranium metal production. We also know that in the past, they conducted secret activity, like the undisclosed nuclear sites that were active before 2003. We only found out about this in 2018 [following the Mossad’s raid on the Iranian nuclear archive],” he noted.

Israel has the ability to act alone if necessary, said Kuperwasser, and has been developing this capability for the past 18 years.

“If Israel gets the impression that Americans will not do anything, it could happen. It’s not the best scenario, but it’s not unreasonable either,” he added.

Meanwhile, the Sunni-Arab Gulf states, which are deeply threatened by Iran, are continuing to build their own self-defence capabilities, which they may need to activate in the event of a regional conflict following a strike on Iran’s nuclear program, particularly if the United States is involved in the attack, said Kuperwasser. 

Yaakov Lappin is an Israel-based military affairs correspondent and analyst. He is the in-house analyst at the Miryam Institute, a research associate at the Alma Research and Education Centre, and a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University. © Jewish News Syndicate (JNS), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

UNDERSTANDING ISRAEL’S SETTLEMENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

Chaim Lax

The Israeli cabinet voted in favour of the legalisation of ten West Bank outposts on Feb. 13, as well as the advancing of plans for 10,000 new homes in already-existing West Bank Jewish communities.

Coverage in international media outlets, including the

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BBC, AP, The Guardian, and Reuters, failed to provide proper context and vital information necessary to fully understand the Israeli Government's decision.

THE TEN OUTPOSTS: A GUIDE

In the West Bank, a Jewish community that has been established without the recognition or permission of the Israeli government is referred to as an "outpost".

Outposts sprang up in the early 1990s after Israel, as part of the Oslo peace process, froze the construction of new Jewish communities in the West Bank, leading to ideologically driven settlers taking unilateral measures to build in the region.

Outposts can range in size from a few families to hundreds of people. Most are composed of caravan homes (that may not be connected to basic Israeli services like electricity and water), while some feature more advanced dwellings.

Because they were built without the permission of the Israeli government, all outposts are threatened with evacuation and destruction by the Israeli authorities.

The vote to legalise ten outposts now begins the process of granting them official recognition by the state. This will protect them from destruction, connect them to basic Israeli infrastructure, and allow their residents to build permanent homes.

With more than 100 outposts dotting the West Bank, these specific outposts seem to have been chosen for legalisation because the majority are located near established settlements and many were previously slated for legalisation.

The ten outposts are:

Avigayil: Founded in 2001, Avigayil is located near the Jewish community of Maon in the south Hebron Hills. With a current population of approximately 40 families, Avigayil was slated for government recognition as early as 2020.

Givat Harel and Givat Haroeh: Founded in the late 1990s/early 2000s, both of these outposts are located in the Binyamin region to the north of Jerusalem. Due to their small populations, Givat Harel (approximately 60 families) and Givat Haroeh (approximately 22 families) are slated to

be merged into one recognised community. According to reports, both outposts were slated for government recognition as early as 2020.

Givat Arnon: Founded at the turn of the century, Givat Arnon is located outside the community of Itamar in the Samaria region. With fewer than ten families, Givat Arnon was slated to become a recognised community as early as 2020.

Sde Boaz: Founded in 2002, Sde Boaz is located in the Gush Etzion settlement bloc. With approximately 50 families, Sde Boaz was reportedly slated to be recognised by the government as early as 2020.

Ashael: Founded in 2001, Ashael is located in the south Hebron Hills, around a government-recognised water tower. With a population of approximately 60 families, Ashael was slated for government recognition as early as 2020.

Beit Hogla (Roeh Nevo): Founded in 1993 as a farm, Beit Hogla is located on the road to Jericho in the Jordan Valley. In 2016, the community of Roeh Nevo sprung up alongside it. There are approximately 35 families in the community.

Malachei Hashalom: Founded in 1998, the Malachei Hashalom farm has hosted residents since 2016. Located next to the Jewish community of Kochav Hashachar, Malachei Hashalom is home to a number of families.

Shaharit: Founded in 2011, Shaharit is a farm community located in the Samaria region. It was reportedly slated for government recognition as early as 2018.

Mitzpe Yehuda: Founded in 2019, Mitzpe Yehuda is a farm community located next to the community of Kedar, between Gush Etzion and Maaleh Adumim (outside of Jerusalem).

Contrary to what has been portrayed in the media, the Israeli cabinet decision does not mean that these outposts will immediately become recognised legal communities in the West Bank.

The Government now has to prove to the Supreme Court that these outposts were built on public state land. Since a number of these outposts are alleged to have



The ten West Bank outposts the Israeli cabinet has voted to legalise (Image: Google Maps)

been built fully or partly on private land, it can be a lengthy period of time (possibly a number of years) until the legal process for recognition is concluded.

The Israeli Government also chose to approve the construction of 10,000 new homes for established Jewish communities in the West Bank.

However, just like the legalisation of the outposts, the international media omitted vital context and relevant information.

Despite the suggestions in some media, the Israeli Government's approval of construction does not mean that there will be shovels in the ground any time soon.

The next step is for the Higher Planning Committee of the Civil Administration to meet and approve these plans. The Higher Planning Committee, which has not met for nine months, is notorious for delays due to understaffing and bureaucratic complexities.

Once the construction plans have been through the Higher Planning Committee, there are further steps in the approvals process before they can be certified and actualised.

Even if there is no opposition to the building plans (which warrants extra steps), there are still approximately five steps between the approval of the Higher Planning Committee and the final authorisation for these homes.

Then, once these homes receive their final authorisation, it may be a number of years before they are finally built and families can move into them.

Several major media outlets parroted the claim that the approval of these homes will seriously impact any future peace negotiations between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority.

However, it should be noted that most Jewish communities in the West Bank are located in so-called "consensus settlement blocs" that numerous Israeli governments have maintained will remain under Israeli control in any future peace deal.

The majority of these blocs are located close to the Green Line, and can be easily incorporated into the permanent borders of the Jewish state, while not infringing on

the contiguity of a future Palestinian state.

As the communities in these blocs are the fastest-growing Jewish communities in the West Bank, it can be understood that the vast majority of these 10,000 homes will be built in these consensus settlements.

While the outcry and the hyperbole of news reports concerning the Israeli cabinet's decision may have given the impression that the two steps – legalisation and construction – will come into effect immediately, it is important to understand that the Government's announcement is but the beginning of a possibly years-long process that includes the participation of a number of legal bodies that are tasked with oversight and compliance with regulations. AIR

Chaim Lax is a contributor to HonestReporting, a Jerusalem-based media watchdog with a focus on antisemitism and anti-Israel bias, where a version of this article first appeared. © The Algemeiner (www.algemeiner.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

EXPLAINING TERRORIST TEENS

Yoni Ben Menachem

The participation of Palestinian teens in acts of terrorism against Israel is not new. Palestinian terror organisations were training children as early as 1970. More recently, the phenomenon was witnessed in the First Lebanon War in 1982 when IDF soldiers encountered Palestinian youth sent by the PLO to shoot RPG rockets at them. They later received the nickname "RPG children." Their actions as combatants continued in the Second Intifada in 2000-05 and during the "knife intifada" in 2015.

In recent weeks, this spectacle has resurfaced in eastern Jerusalem. So far, three Palestinian youths have carried out attacks against Israelis. In one case, 13-year-old Muhammad



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Aliwat carried out a shooting attack at Israeli civilians in the village of Silwan in eastern Jerusalem.

Security officials in Israel are very concerned about the renewal of this phenomenon. These attacks usually take place in the Old City or the Jewish neighbourhoods adjacent to eastern Jerusalem against Israeli citizens and members of the security forces.

The attackers have received the nickname in Arabic *Ashbal al-Quds* (boys of Jerusalem), and they have become the new heroes of the Palestinians' struggle against Israel. The young generation sees Israel as an enemy that must be defeated through acts of terror and jihad.

Its new heroes are the terrorists Udai Altamimi, who murdered female IDF soldier Noa Lazar at Jerusalem's Shuafat checkpoint; Khairy Alkam, who carried out the massacre at a synagogue in the Neve Yaakov neighbourhood in Jerusalem; Fadi Abu Shchiedem, a schoolteacher who murdered Israeli Eli Kay in the Old City; and Misbach Abu Sbeich, who murdered two Israelis in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in 2016 and whom the Palestinians call the "Lion of Jerusalem".

The Palestinians give different explanations for the phenomenon of youth joining the latest wave of violence, and they shift the blame to Israel. They blame Israel for provoking the Palestinians with its actions at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and for what they see as neglect by the Jerusalem Municipality of the eastern neighbourhoods. They are outraged over the demolitions of illegal houses by Israel and the measures the IDF has been taking against armed terrorist groups.

However, the actual reasons for the recent renewal of this phenomenon are the following:

Wild incitement by the Palestinian Authority and the terrorist organisations against Israel and Jews on social networks, especially on TikTok and Instagram.

In the security establishment, such videos on social networks are called "terrorist porn" – shocking images of Palestinian deaths in Jenin and Nablus, Israeli bombings in Gaza, Israeli citizens praying on the Temple Mount, and videos of Palestinian terrorists presented as heroes.

Incitement in the education system and home educa-

tion. About 200 schools operate in eastern Jerusalem. Most of them follow the PA's curriculum that emphasises the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba, ignores the existence of the State of Israel and the Oslo Accords, and emphasises the importance of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the struggle against Israel.

Palestinian parents often contribute to the incitement and instil in their children a shocking hatred of Israel and Jews. They do not protect their children against incitement. On the contrary, many encourage the culture of death in their children, and celebrate the death of every child and teenager killed during an attack, declaring them "martyrs".

The Israeli concern now is expansion of the phenomenon toward the upcoming month of Ramadan (March 22–April 20, 2023), when Palestinian youth may unleash attacks full of hatred and commit to taking revenge on Israelis for the deaths of Palestinian terrorists at the hands of Israeli security forces. They will claim they are acting in the name of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa, and most want to become local heroes and bring honour to their families.

The religious leaders in eastern Jerusalem support this phenomenon, and public leaders and PA officials make no attempt to remove children from the circle of terror. For them, all means are acceptable to fight against Israel: the children are brainwashed with a broad and warped social consensus and religious legitimacy. The barrier of fear is overcome through false promises that they will reach heaven.

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. © Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs (www.jcpa.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

NORMALISATION – AN ARAB VIEW

Hussain Abdul-Hussain

As a student in Lebanon in the 1990s, I believed that the Jewish state sought to occupy Arab lands "from the Euphrates to the Nile," and I was hardly alone. My view of Israel began to change, though, in 2000, when I saw Israel for the first time, albeit through barbed wire. I had just graduated from the American University of Beirut, and Israeli troops had just withdrawn from southern Lebanon. This prompted many Lebanese – myself included – to flock to the border and look through the

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fences. The communities on the Israeli side appeared to be impeccably designed, while Lebanon was still recovering haphazardly from a decade and a half of civil war.

I wanted to know what made Israel stable and prosperous, yet in Lebanon at the time, literature about Israel consisted mainly of antisemitic books. I turned to the internet, scavenging for resources that helped me learn Hebrew. I also found one spot in Beirut – at the westernmost tip of Beirut’s coastline, underneath the New Lighthouse – where my AM radio could receive the signal from Israel’s *Reshet Alef* channel. I spent hundreds of hours listening, learning, and decoding printouts of the Hebrew press, all in secrecy for fear that doing so would be construed as “normalisation with the Zionist enemy.”

I also drove to the border to train my Hebrew across the barbed wire. Israeli troops were amused that a Lebanese was dabbling in their language, but Hezbollah militiamen berated me for “talking to the enemy.” Lebanese law prohibits any dealing with Israelis, including talking to them. I was learning about Israel, but at an agonisingly slow rate.



Lebanese-born analyst Hussain Abdul-Hussain: Arab advocates of peace with Israel have a crucial role to play and should not remain silent (YouTube screenshot)

My break came when I immigrated to Washington in 2004, where I started consuming everything Hebrew, from the writings of Rabbi Kook, the father of religious Zionism, to books by left-wing writers like Amos Oz. I watched all kinds of Israeli films and television shows, old and new, from *Sallah Shabati* to the popular series *Srugim* and *Shababnikim* [dramas about the lives of young religious and ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel – Ed.].

Yet to this day I have not visited Israel. Doing so would risk entanglement with Lebanese authorities during my visits to Beirut.

Still, I came to see that Zionism is not a conspiracy, but the basic idea that the long history of antisemitism and Jewish suffering, culminating in the Holocaust, created the need for a sovereign Jewish homeland. For Israel, that sovereignty is non-negotiable. This may seem obvious, but it has direct implications for the debate over normalisation.

I have found that the Palestinian diaspora, especially in the United States, wants a binational state where Jews

and Arabs would live equally, at least in theory. Yet both Jews and Arabs know that demographics favour the latter – there are two million Arabs in Israel now, five million in the Palestinian-controlled territories, and growth trends favour Arabs – so the passage of time would wrestle sovereignty out of Jewish hands.

In my first job as a reporter, at the now-defunct Lebanon *Daily Star*, I covered the Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002, where the Arab Peace Initiative first saw the light of day. In theory, the initiative calls for the same kind of two-state solution favoured in Washington and across Europe. The catch is that the Arab plan called for “a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem in accordance with United Nations General Assembly resolution 194” – which included what the Palestinians see as the legal basis for the “right of return” – which Israelis see as another demographic threat to their sovereignty.

In the 1990s, Israel experimented with the two-state solution while postponing discussion of Palestinian claims to a right of return. Although the Second Intifada (2001–2005) appeared to kill the peace process, in 2008, then-Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made an offer to Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas: Palestinians would get the West Bank in full (with minor land swaps) and a land bridge to the Gaza Strip. Abbas did not accept because he said the “refugee issue was not resolved.”

Four years later, Abbas himself tried to convince Palestinians that peace meant accepting a state in the West Bank and Gaza, without returning to lost homes inside of Israel. Speaking of his own home in Safed, he said, “It’s my right to see it, but not to live there.” His statement enraged Palestinians, forcing him to walk it back.

A two-state solution is no closer today than it was in 2012. It should not be surprising that some Arab states finally decided that there was no point in waiting for Palestinians to accept a version of the two-state solution that did not embed within itself a demographic threat to Jewish sovereignty. Was it their obligation to perpetuate an endless conflict and harm their own interests in the name of solidarity? Beginning with the UAE and Bahrain, they chose to establish relations with Israel.

The question now is whether Saudi Arabia will join them in normalising relations. Saudi Arabia plans to become the Middle Eastern hub of multinational corporations, which will be difficult to do without the Israeli economy, the third largest in the region. Riyadh also recognises the need for allies who face similar threats from Iran. Thus, it has been inching closer to peace with Israel, with its media leading the way, including *Al-Arabiya*’s unprecedented interview with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in December.

Saudi networks have started inviting Israeli pundits on their shows, a practice that remains taboo on most Arab

channels. Saudi networks have found it hard to pair Israelis with Arab counterparts, who are usually mindful of laws (or harassment even in countries at peace with Israel) in their home countries that criminalise going on any TV with Israeli guests. The silver lining? Plenty of airtime for Arab commentators, myself included, who treat Israelis as peers.

For his part, Netanyahu has tasked one of his closest advisers, Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, with bringing Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords.

While Riyadh and Jerusalem negotiate, Arab advocates of peace have a crucial role to play. The first step is to defy pervasive shaming by fellow Arabs and come out as proponents of normalisation. Their voices can help bring peace talks across the finish line, because fear of a public backlash is precisely what constrains so many Middle Eastern leaders who would prefer to treat Israel as a neighbour, not an enemy.

For those questioning whether to go public with their views on normalisation, it is worth recalling the words of the fourth Muslim caliph and first Shi'ite imam, Ali Bin Abi-Talib, who said: "Don't feel lonely when you travel on the road of rightness alone."

AIR

Hussain Abdul-Hussain is a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Reprinted from The Dispatch (thedispatch.com). © The Dispatch, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ISRAEL'S RUSSIA-UKRAINE DILEMMA

Daniel Rakov

The inauguration of Binyamin Netanyahu's new Government has led to increased international pressure for a change in Israel's semi-neutral, reserved position on the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, Washington and like-minded Western countries demand that Jerusalem go the extra mile in supporting Ukraine. On the other hand, the Kremlin expects Netanyahu, who has boasted in the past about having an extraordinarily close relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, to preserve and deepen Russian-Israeli cooperation.

What considerations drive the Russian and the Israeli thinking about each other, and will Netanyahu change his country's policy toward Russia?

From the Russian perspective, Israel remains, despite the Russian-Western rupture, one of the friendliest Western-oriented countries. Israel continues a high-level political dialogue with the Kremlin; it staunchly refuses to give offensive weapons to Ukraine; it hasn't imposed national

economic sanctions on Russia; it hasn't abolished flights to/from Russia; there is still a visa-free regime between the two countries, and it didn't expel Russian diplomats.

Russia sees Israel as an important regional power capable of inflicting severe military and political reputational damage on Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin is known for his sympathy for Israel and the Jewish people and, over the years, has invested heavily in his relationship with Netanyahu in the expectation that the latter might help bridge the gaps between Moscow and Washington.



Israeli PM Netanyahu has boasted in the past of his strong relationship with Russian President Putin (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

From the Israeli perspective, the war in Ukraine put potential Russian damage to Israel's national security at the forefront of the bilateral relationship and diminished the benefits to Israel from this relationship. Three main threat scenarios dominate the Israeli view of Russia: that the Russians would exploit their hegemony in Syria to restrict Israeli freedom of military operations therein; that they would cooperate closely with Iran against Israel; or that Moscow would hinder the repatriation of Russian Jews to Israel.

In the eyes of Jerusalem's decision-makers, Russia's status as the most stubborn supporter of Iran's clerical regime among global powers is an important factor in Israel's multi-faceted confrontation with Teheran. Moscow's growing use of Iranian weapons for the war in Ukraine (mainly attack drones), and export routes to Asia through Iranian territory have yet to expand into joint action between the two countries against Israeli operations in Syria. Russia is not happy about the frequent Israeli strikes against Iranian targets in Syria, yet so far has been sticking with its policy of acquiescing to them. At the same time, the Israelis are anxious about growing security cooperation between Moscow and Teheran – including the joint venture to produce Iranian-designed drones in Russia, the sale of Russian military-grade imaging satellites to Iran, and reports that advanced SU-35 fighter jets are soon to be supplied to Teheran.

Moscow pays attention to the public debate inside Israel about a possible change of course considering the Ukraine

war, and uses info-warfare to try to dissuade Jerusalem by raising the threat that Russia will retaliate by obstructing Israeli freedom of operations in Syria. Still, looking at the poor Russian military performance in Ukraine, many Israeli pundits question whether the small Russian military contingent in Syria is realistically capable of, or willing to, limit the ability of the Israeli Airforce to operate in that arena.

In the past, Israel has succeeded in convincing Russia to abolish some of its arms deals with Iran and restrain Iranian nuclear ambitions. Netanyahu may be hoping to do so again. Israel still thinks that the nuclearisation of Iran is contrary to Russian interests. Yet, Jerusalem has no illusions that Moscow would be prepared to undertake any proactive diplomacy to deter Teheran from crossing dangerous red lines towards becoming a nuclear threshold state.

Moscow has identified Israeli fears that it will stop *aliya* (immigration to Israel) of Russian Jews, and initiated legal proceedings in July 2022 to terminate the activities of the Jewish Agency in Russia, the body which facilitates such immigration. Court deliberations on the decision resumed on February 17 after being postponed repeatedly since August. This might serve as yet another signal from the Kremlin to Netanyahu to refrain from drifting further away from Moscow, although the prolongation of the procedure implies that the threat of shutdown serves the Kremlin's interests better than the actual closure of the Jewish Agency offices would.

While Israel has not imposed national sanctions on Russia [and indeed lacks a legislation framework for doing so, *Ed.*], the scope of economic cooperation between the countries has dwindled, as Israel has acted vigorously to find substitutes for importing Russian oil and grains.

The memory of the Holocaust, which provided the seemingly uncontroversial basis for relations due to Israeli gratitude over the Red Army's liberation of the main Nazi concentration camps in WWII, became toxic after Moscow branded Ukraine, led by the Jewish President Volodymyr Zelensky, a "Nazi regime". Moreover, Israelis cannot accept the increased usage by the Russian propaganda machine of antisemitic narratives in attacking the West.

The crucial predicament for Israel comes from Western demands to do more for Ukraine, especially in the military realm. The Israeli National Security Council is reportedly conducting an examination of Israel's policy on the issue. Former PM Naftali Bennett himself admitted a few weeks ago that there is now a need to revisit his policy of not openly choosing sides, introduced during his premiership (2021-22) – and which was actually

directly derived from a policy developed by Netanyahu in 2015.

While weighing the pros and cons of any choice, there are two primary considerations in Jerusalem militating against a dramatic policy shift. Firstly, Israel would rather avoid a significant crisis with Putin. Russia is not expected to remove itself as an influential player in the Middle East, as it tightens ties with Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies and has no intention of withdrawing its troops from Syria.

Secondly, Israel is unique compared to the vast major-

ity of Western countries. It is not a member of any formal military alliance (such as NATO) and fights alone to defend itself. It constantly faces a never-ending series of prolonged explosive conflicts (in Gaza, the West Bank Lebanon, Syria, and Iran, to name a few) and ongoing domestic instabil-

ity (especially surrounding the judicial reform proposals), forcing the Government to carefully consider which fights to pick. Therefore, the comparisons being made between Israel and the Baltic states, which did stand firmly with Kyiv (and contributed military equipment to Ukraine worth several percent points of GDP), are unfounded.

Nevertheless, several important factors are today encouraging an adjustment in Israel's stance on Russia. First, as Iran openly approaches the nuclear threshold, Israel will need backing from the US and Western countries if it is to consider bold actions to stop Teheran. If Israel expects the West to support it against its major security threat, the Western leaders expect Israel in return to stand up to Russia, especially since Moscow has become Teheran's leading strategic partner.

Secondly, Israel is facing other major challenges in the coming weeks and months that directly touch on its vital relations with the liberal, democratic West. For one, the controversial judicial reform proposals have led to warning messages from Washington and OECD countries which are worried that Israel may be shedding essential elements of its liberal democratic nature.

“Several important factors are today encouraging an adjustment in Israel’s stance on Russia. First, as Iran openly approaches the nuclear threshold, Israel will need backing from the US and Western countries”

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Similar tensions have also arisen surrounding the agenda of the current right-wing Government to push ahead with construction in settlements in the West Bank. The upcoming holy month of Ramadan is predicted to result in heightened volatility in the always combative Palestinian arena, while in the background the danger of a sudden and broad flare-up vis-à-vis Hezbollah or Syria is always looming.

Therefore, Israel's relations with the West must be actively maintained and improved, and convergence in Ukraine could contribute to their stabilisation.

Third, appearing to "sit on the fence" harms "Israel" as a global brand. The aforementioned unique circumstances of Israel's strategic position are hard to explain and some interlocutors from abroad inevitably conclude that "Israel is afraid of Russia." Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky still uses Israel as a metaphor for a strong country capable of defending itself if only given money and weapons, arguing Ukraine should become more like Israel in that respect.

However, the current policy undermines Israel's image as a principled and powerful international actor and undercuts its credibility as a security partner to the West.

Israel-Ukraine relations remain tense under the Netanyahu Government as Kyiv continues to express expectations that Israel change its position and fully align against Russia. New Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen was harshly criticised during his first days in office when he agreed to receive a phone call from his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov before speaking with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister.

It took some time to organise a visit by Cohen to Kyiv in mid-February, with the Ukrainians putting firm demands for an increase in Israeli financial support and a shift its declaratory policy further in favour of Ukraine. Still, Cohen, the most senior Israeli official to visit Kyiv since the beginning of the war, received a warm reception on Feb. 16, and was granted an audience with Zelensky. Russian commentators paid attention to the fact that Cohen refrained from criticising Moscow, or even mentioning it in any way, during the visit. Yet, Cohen promised to support a Ukrainian peace plan in the UN and to help with the country's economic reconstruction.

Looking ahead, however, the reserved, semi-neutral approach still remains the consensus view across most political blocs in Israel. While the risk of reputational damage in the West remains, there is ongoing debate about its severity. Although Netanyahu promised that he would "look into" the transfer of weapons to Ukraine, two months after his return to the top job, it seems that his solution to the conflicting demands appears to involve only small, incremental changes in policy – a more publicly supportive line towards Ukraine, along with increased small-scale security assistance in non-lethal equipment to Kyiv.

AIR

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“SANTA IS SATAN!": AUSSIE PREACHER

Ran Porat

Australian preacher Sufyaan Khalifa does not seem to understand humour. And like other Australian Islamist extremists, he also doesn't like Christmas.

Khalifa was born in Algeria and now lives in Perth. He has thousands of loyal followers on social media and other platforms online, and to them he has been diligently pushing some notorious conspiracy theories about coronavirus, historical events, the illuminati, the Freemasons and what-not. Khalifa also excels at spewing extreme antisemitic tropes about the Jews and Israel.

His messages are sometimes simply bizarre. For example, he claimed that the children's song "Baby shark" is dangerous because it "leaves a psychological residue" on children's minds. He also attacked the popular Korean pop band BTS because their songs allegedly promote "homosexuality, sodomy, and a culture that erases the human nature of Man."

In a recent example, Khalifa warned in an online video (Sept. 30) about "The Great Reset" – a conspiracy popular among anti-vaxxers and people of similar beliefs, about an evil plan being prepared by a global cabal. It is based on a rather vague economic recovery plan by that name discussed at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his video, Khalifa told everyone watching that the "big reset", as he calls it, is about to happen, and hence they must take out their life savings from the banks and buy gold "as soon as possible, because when the reset happens, you will lose everything."

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‘SANTA IS SATAN’

Now, Khalifa is asserting that a joke in the *Disney Plus* TV series “The Santa Clauses”, wherein kids misspell Santa’s name as ‘Satan’, is proof that Santa is indeed Satan.

“Every year our children are exposed to Pagan religion, to Santa Claus religion,” says Khalifa in his video (Dec. 2022), “the fatty man who comes every year to our children presenting them gifts.”

Turning serious, Khalifa declares “But this year he came with a special message, which has been put forward intentionally by *Disney Plus*, saying to our children that I – Santa Claus – I am Satan.”

With an ominous piano tune in the background, Khalifa then goes on to present a short segment from the TV series. In it, children hold letter posters that together create the sentence: “We love you Satan” to Santa and others. After Santa laughs, the kids correct the mistake, and change the name to Santa.

Khalifa looks at the camera, and cautions: “See how tricky this *Sheitan* (Satan) is. They are coming to the subconscious of our children to teach them: You can love Satan in a funny way.”

“That’s the first step,” Khalifa explains. “[In] the next step you will be worshipping Satan himself. Because a day will come where Santa Claus will remove the real mask, and you will see Satan himself in your homes, sleep[ing] in your beds with your kids... This is a dire warning.”

He finishes with a rejection of Christmas – even for Christians. “This message is for the Muslims. The Christians. The Jews. Anyone who believes in Allah and the day of judgment: do not celebrate Christmas. This is a pagan religion. This is not from God. Do not let your kids love Satan, but teach them to love Allah, the creator, God.”

The video ends with a screen grab from the TV series, with the picture slowly closing in on the smile of one of the children holding one of the “Satan” letters, and a text at the bottom saying: “PROTECT [sic] your children from Satanism.”

‘MASONIC CRONE’ QUEEN ELIZABETH

Earlier, the passing of Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II in Sept. 2022 had been a cause for celebration for Khalifa. In a series of two short video reels, he used the occasion to vilify the late monarch, spread antisemitism and regurgitate fake news and conspiracies.

“The crone Queen Elizabeth II passed away and moved to meet her god,” Khalifa said in the first video (Sept.

27). But this encounter with the Lord would end up with retribution for the deceased Queen’s actions on earth: “I do not say that she moved to God’s mercy as some of the hypocrites say, rather that she moved, God willing, to the punishment of God.”

A day later (Sept. 28), Khalifa clarified exactly why he thinks Elizabeth II will be punished in the afterlife. In the second video titled “The Crone, the sponsor of the Masonic”, Khalifa cries: “And who gave the right to the virus people, the people of the enemy of God and the enemies of his prophets, [who] gave them [the Jews] the right to settle in Palestine? Didn’t they [the British]? Isn’t the Balfour Declaration [behind this]?”. Apart from the antisemitism, Khalifa seems unconcerned by the fact that the Balfour Declaration was published before Elizabeth was born, and Israel already existed when she took the British throne, so he is saying God will punish her for matters she personally had nothing to do with.



Sufyaan Khalifa: Even Christians should not celebrate Christmas (YouTube screenshot)

Then he goes into poetic mode with more poison against Israel and the Jews: “I mean, why do we hide the sun with a sieve? Why don’t we tell people the truth that this was not a snake in our party like the many snakes in the countries of the world? But these are the biggest snakes and they [were exposed], praise be to God, [as] Lord of the worlds.”

Khalifa adds that current British King, Charles III, who inherited his position from his mother, “will never be better than her” and “He is bankrupt and the whole family is a cursed Masonic family. All the British royal family is a cursed Masonic family.”

He concludes with bringing back the conspiracy that Diana, King Charles’ first wife, did not die in 1997 in a car accident, but was instead murdered by the royal family to hush her up. “When Princess Diana wanted to go out on the line, they killed her,” says Khalifa. “This is the truth – whoever wants to destroy them [the royal family], they kill [him/her].”

Sufyaan Khalifa clearly does not have much of a sense of humour, but he is so wildly extreme it is almost funny. Yet if he is allowed to continue to spread his hate, lies and antisemitism with impunity, the joke is on us.

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.





THE BIBLIO FILE

A Marketing Microscope

Political Marketing and Public Diplomacy by Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestinian Advocacy Groups

Andrew Lim

Palgrave MacMillan, Oct. 2022, 149 pp., A\$82.96



Jamie Hyams

New Zealander Andrew Lim's monograph *Political Marketing and Public Diplomacy by Pro-Israel and Pro-Palestinian Advocacy Groups* is derived from the author's PhD research into how political marketing can be utilised outside of party politics by advocacy groups. He uses as case studies two pro-Israel advocacy groups and two pro-Palestinian advocacy groups: New Zealand's Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa (PSNA) and Israel Institute of New Zealand (IINZ), and Australian-based groups, the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC) and Australia Palestine Advocacy Network (APAN).

Rather than passing judgement on the merits of the causes the respective organisations seek to advance, Lim seeks to "break new ground within the political marketing literature" and to ascertain whether the groups conform to specific types of marketing models.

He describes the two pro-Israel groups as "sales-oriented groups", while the pro-Palestinian organisations are "product-oriented advocacy groups," the difference being that the former "were willing to use market intelligence to identify and target segments that were pro-Israel and could influence public opinion and government policies towards Israel."

To arrive at these conclusions, he studied extensive primary materials from each group (1,898 webpages, social media posts, audio-visual and printed material), as well as secondary sources about the groups, supplemented by interviews with office-bearers representing some of them.

In describing the aims and activities of each group, Lim strives to maintain a neutral, non-judgemental tone, and largely succeeds, often placing anti-Israel slurs in quotation marks, for example, although at times adopting the rhetoric of the organisation being profiled. On occasion, the mask of neutrality appears to slip a little towards the pro-Palestinian groups. For instance, he regularly describes the BDS campaign as seeking "to advance Palestinian rights and self-determination by applying economic and social pressure on Israel," while accusations that the campaign is antisemitic are "alleged".

He also describes one AIJAC strategy as "shifting blame" onto the Palestinians, rather than, for example, "apportioning blame". Furthermore, in discussing APAN, he refers to the Australian Coalition's "claim to support a two-state solution." While APAN may be cynical on this point, it is clear that this is what the Coalition does support. IINZ and AIJAC activities are

described as including "combating both real and perceived anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism" (my underlining), while the PSNA and APAN "supported many key Palestinian goals, such as advancing Palestinian rights, justice and statehood" (rather than *perceived* Palestinian rights and justice).

It is hard to assess the accuracy of Lim's findings in relation to the PSNA, IINZ and APAN, but in relation to AIJAC there are various errors and omissions. Admittedly, Lim was handicapped by an AIJAC policy of not speaking to researchers about its activities, a point he stressed several times, conceding his conclusions were "highly speculative". However, some errors were easily avoidable, such as continually referring to the Rambam program, in which AIJAC takes groups on study visits to Israel, as "Ramban". His examples of those who participated, and of AIJAC activities in general, omitted many of the most prominent and important.

Elsewhere, he refers to the AIJAC Forum as an "internship programme", whereas it was, in fact, a largely autonomous volunteer group that AIJAC supported.

There were also some very questionable generalisations, such as stating that AIJAC frames "opposition to Israel as being motivated by anti-Semitism." While it is true that some opposition to Israel is motivated by antisemitism, there are other causes that AIJAC also discusses regularly, including Palestinian nationalism, geopolitics, a left-wing mindset that sees Palestinians as victims of colonialism, groupthink in some elements of the media and sheer ignorance.

Overall, the book is a mildly interesting if patchy rundown of the activities and strategies of the four groups profiled, albeit from someone lacking expertise in the subject matter that is the focus of those groups. However, its conclusions are directed at those interested in political marketing theory, rather than Middle East politics.



The “Nakba” Narrative

Its origins, history and implications

Sol Stern

Israel will soon celebrate the 75th anniversary of its independence. Around the same time, Palestinians will stage their annual Nakba Day, the official commemoration held every year on May 15 to protest Israel’s creation. The marking of this supposed “catastrophe” (*nakba*) will surely be a key feature of the elite media discussion of Israel’s anniversary. As such, it will represent an ongoing public-relations triumph for the Palestinians – and a victory for deceit and disinformation.

The Nakba narrative depicts the founding of Israel as a catastrophe that resulted in the dispossession of the land’s native people. Yasser Arafat, then the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), invented “Nakba Day” on May 15, 1998, just as Israel was celebrating its 50th anniversary. From his West Bank headquarters, Arafat read out marching orders for the day over PA radio stations and public loudspeakers:

The Nakba has thrown us out of our homes and dispersed us around the globe. Historians may search, but they will not find any nation subjugated to as much torture as ours. We are not asking for a lot. We are not asking for the moon. We are asking to close the chapter of Nakba once and for all, for the refugees to return and to build an independent Palestinian state on our land, our land, our land, just like

other peoples.

Nine Palestinians were killed that day. Hundreds more (including some Israelis) have died during Nakba Day riots over the subsequent quarter century.



The refugee tragedy of 1948 was initially described as afflicting Arabs and the Arab world, not Palestinians or Palestine specifically (Image: Alamy Stock Photo)

Yet it wasn’t the deadly violence that made the first Nakba Day historically significant. Rather, at a time when the 1993 Oslo peace accords remained in force and still offered an opportunity to achieve a “two-state solution” to the conflict, Arafat decided to weaponise the Palestinian narrative into a declaration of permanent war against Israel. The key element of his Nakba Day speech was

his claim that there were five million Palestinian refugees who had a sacred “right of return” to their homes in Jaffa, Haifa, and dozens of formerly Arab cities, towns, and villages in Israel.

In three-plus decades as Palestinian leader, Arafat failed to accomplish anything constructive for his people. But Nakba Day did advance his goal of prolonging the glorious struggle against Zionism. The PA now claims there are seven million refugees. Arafat’s successor, Mahmoud Abbas, is just as adamant that the conflict must go on and on until all the refugees are granted the right to return to their former homes in Israel. Abbas even offered an updated version of the Nakba last summer when he publicly declared, in Germany, that the Palestinians had suffered the equivalent of “50 Holocausts” at the hands of the

Jews.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Palestinians will express their rage over Israel’s existence by joining Nakba Day riots in May. We can also expect an upsurge of support for the 25th annual Nakba commemoration from the international leftist coalition that celebrates the Palestinians as unique victims of Western racism, colonialism, and Zionist perfidy. In

street demonstrations and on college campuses, activists will be chanting the slogan that sums up the final goal of the Nakba narrative: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

The Nakba has even entered the halls of the US House of Representatives through a resolution authored by Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib and endorsed by six of her Democratic Party colleagues. The resolution calls on the US Government to “commemorate the Nakba through official recognition and remembrance” and to “reject efforts to enlist, engage, or otherwise associate the United States Government with denial of the Nakba.”

Their fellow members of Congress need not worry about the danger of Nakba denial. The problem is the reverse. All too many perfectly sensible people, including quite a few liberal Israelis, seem willing to ignore the deadly implications of the Nakba narrative for fear of being accused of insensitivity to another people’s suffering.

If “nakba” merely means catastrophe, then the word is a fitting one. Unquestionably, Palestinians suffered a terrible human tragedy in 1948. Around 700,000 men, women, and children lost their ancestral homes, and Palestinian civil society disintegrated. The refugees dispersed to the Jordanian-occupied West Bank, the Egyptian-occupied Gaza Strip, and neighbouring Arab countries. Ninety percent have since passed away, but around two million of their progeny languish in dismal refugee camps. After 75 years, this giant remnant should be resettled in new housing and compensated for their losses. Resettlement is exactly how every other refugee catastrophe after World War II (including a total of 13 million refugees in Europe alone) was solved.

But the Nakba has more than one meaning. The version now promoted by Palestinian leaders and their supporters assigns exclusive blame for the 1948 catastrophe to the Jews,

while proposing an absurd remedy that would mean suicide for the Jewish state.

Supporters of Israel are often asked to prove their decency by acknowledging the reality of the Nakba. There’s no reason to shrink from that challenge. What’s needed is a serious forensic examination of the various Palestinian narratives, their truths, falsehoods, and their hatreds. The place to begin that inquiry is with the very first Nakba text, published in Beirut 75 years ago.

On Aug. 5, 1948, not quite three months after the new state of Israel was invaded by five Arab armies, a short volume titled *Maana al-Nakba* (later translated as *The Meaning of the Disaster*) appeared in Beirut to popular acclaim. The author was Constantine K. Zurayk, a distinguished professor of Oriental history and Vice President of the American University of Beirut.

Zurayk was the wunderkind of the Arab academic world. Born in Damascus in 1909 to a prosperous Greek Orthodox family, he was sent off at 20 to complete his graduate studies in the United States. He then returned to Beirut and the American University.

Zurayk soon became one of the leading advocates of the liberal, secularist variant of Arab nationalism. After Syria won its independence in 1945, he was chosen to serve in the new nation’s first diplomatic mission in Washington, D.C., and also served with the Syrian delegation to the United Nations General Assembly.

Zurayk’s 70-page book reflected the sense of outrage among the Arab educated classes over the 1947 UN partition resolution and the creation of the Jewish state. It then became a reference point for future pro-Palestinian historians and writers.

In previous writings about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I wasn’t able to comment on Zurayk’s book. It was never published in the United States. It was only recently that I found a rare copy in a university library and finally read the real thing.

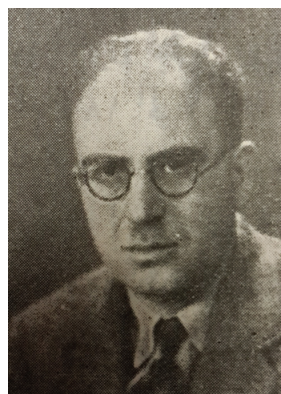
It was not what I expected. *The Meaning of the Disaster* actually isn’t about the tragedy of the Palestinian people. According to Zurayk, the crime of the Nakba was committed against *the entire Arab nation* – a romantic conception of a political entity that he and his fellow Arab nationalists fervently believed in. Zurayk was no champion of an independent Palestinian state.

In an introductory paragraph, Zurayk writes about “the defeat of the *Arabs* in Palestine,” which he then calls “one of the harshest of the trials and

tribulations with which the *Arabs* have been afflicted throughout their long history.” Zurayk’s only comment about Palestinian refugees is that, during the fighting, “four hundred thousand or more *Arabs* [were] forced to flee pell-mell from their homes.” (All italics added.)

Zurayk predicted that all Arabs would continue to be threatened by international Zionism: “The Arab nation throughout its long history has never been faced with a more serious danger than that to which it has today been exposed. The forces which the Zionists control in all parts of the world can, if they are permitted to take root in Palestine, threaten the independence of all the Arab lands.”

The Arabs also faced the immense power of Western imperialism, according to Zurayk, but this would prove merely a “temporary evil”. On the other hand, “the aim of Zionist imperialism is to exchange one country for another, and to annihilate one people so that another may be put in its place. This is imperialism, naked



Constantine Zurayk (Image: Wikipedia)

and fearful in its truest color and worst form.”

Zurayk not only insists that Jews have no national rights in Palestine, but he denies the historic connection between the Jewish people and the ancient land of Israel. “The Zionist Jews who are now immigrating to Palestine,” he writes, “bear absolutely no relation to the semitic Jews.” Zurayk dredges up the discredited theory that the Eastern European Jews were descended from Khazar tribes that converted to Judaism in the eighth century.

Still, Zurayk is left to wonder how the combined Arab armies, far outnumbering the Jews, could have allowed the Zionists to achieve their military objectives in Palestine. His answer is rife with antisemitic canards and conspiracy theories:

The causes of this calamity are not all attributable to the Arabs themselves. The enemy confronting them is determined, has plentiful resources, and great influence. Years, even generations, passed during which he prepared for this struggle. He extended his influence and his power to the ends of the earth. He got control over many of the sources of power within the great nations so that they were either forced into partiality toward him or submitted to him.

Zionism ... is a worldwide network, well prepared scientifically and financially, which dominates the influential countries of the world.

Not content with depicting Jews as devious manipulators of power and wealth, the secularist Zurayk also ventures into the realm of theology to offer his readers a grotesque slander of Judaism. “The idea of a ‘chosen people’,” he writes, “is closer to that of Nazism than to any other idea and [in the end] it will fall and collapse just as Nazism did.”

Constantine Zurayk’s fiction that the “Arab nation” suffered the Nakba

didn’t survive for long. In the June 1967 Arab–Israeli war, three Arab states again attempted to undo Zionism. When they failed and lost even more territory to Israel, the Arab coalition to destroy Israel fell apart. Two of those countries eventually signed a separate peace with the Jewish state. Pan-Arab nationalism was dead.

The meaning of the Nakba had already changed as Palestinian activists and historians began depicting the events of 1948 exclusively as a tragedy for their own people. In the mid-1950s, Aref el-Aref, a noted Palestinian journalist, historian, and mayor of east Jerusalem during the Jordanian occupation, published a six-volume history of the Palestinian struggle titled *The Nakba of Jerusalem and the Lost Paradise*. Many more Nakba books with an exclusively Palestinian focus were published over the next four decades.

The most influential of those volumes, particularly for audiences in the West, was Edward W. Said’s *The Question of Palestine*, published in 1979. Said, a popular Columbia University English professor and a member of the Palestinian National Council, was something of an icon in liberal intellectual circles because of his earlier book, *Orientalism*. In that work, Said framed the history of colonialism in the Arab and Islamic world within a system of Western racist thought.

In *The Question of Palestine*, the author argued that the game was stacked against the native Palestinians in favour of the white Zionists, because of the same dominant racist ideologies. Said denounced “the entrenched cultural attitude toward Palestinians deriving from age-old Western prejudices about Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient. This attitude, from which in its turn Zionism drew for its view of the Palestinians, dehumanized us, reduced us to the barely tolerated status of a nuisance.”

“Certainly, so far as the West is concerned,” Said continued, “Palestine has been a place where a relatively advanced (because European) incom-

ing population of Jews has performed miracles of construction and civilizing and has fought brilliantly successful technical wars against what was always portrayed as a dumb, essentially repellent population of uncivilized Arab natives.”



Mural depicting Palestinian intellectual Edward Said – the most influential recent author promoting the contemporary Nakba narrative (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

This was a harsh and distorted view of the Zionist movement. Still, Said was somewhat constrained relative to later declarations by Palestinian leaders comparing the Nakba to the Holocaust.

What the early Nakba studies did have in common was an indictment of the Jews for dispossessing the Palestinians, while finding no fault at all on the Palestinian side. Several Israeli revisionist historians and “post-Zionist” pundits also endorsed aspects of the Nakba narrative.

Yet that narrative was rebutted by other historians of the Israel–Palestinian conflict. That is how scholarly controversies usually play out in open societies.

It is in totalitarian societies that national narratives are enforced by the ruling government. Until the mid-1990s there could not have been an officially endorsed Palestinian narrative, because the Palestinians had no governmental institutions. Ironically, it was an audacious diplomatic initia-

tive taken by the Israeli government in pursuit of peace with the Palestinians that had the unintended effect of creating an officially approved Nakba narrative.

In January 1993, Israeli representatives made secret contacts with high-ranking officials of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Oslo, Norway. The discussions blossomed into what became known as the Oslo process, and by September of that year, they culminated with the famous handshake on the White House lawn between Yasser Arafat and the then Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

At the time, Arafat was stranded in Tunis, far from Palestine and in a very precarious position. Along with his PLO cadres, he had been expelled from Jordan in 1970, thrown out of Beirut by Israel's army in 1982 and then again kicked out of Tripoli, Lebanon, by the Syrians. Arafat's reputation was in tatters among many Arab governments because of his decision to support Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

In signing the Oslo Accords, the Rabin Government threw Arafat a lifeline. Political controversy later erupted in Israel and elsewhere over the wisdom and practicality of the peace agreements. For the purpose of our argument here, however, it's sufficient to note that the document signed by Rabin and Arafat represented a fairly straightforward political deal, a *quid pro quo* of sorts.

Arafat was rescued from his Tunis exile and installed in the West Bank to run a Palestinian government for the first time ever. That was the *quid*. After an interim period of five years, final-status negotiations were expected to bring the Palestinians an independent state that would in turn recognise Israel. That should have been the *quo*.

Unfortunately, Arafat pocketed all his benefits (i.e., his triumphant return to Palestine and installation as PA president) up front. When he then

reneged on his obligations to Israel, Arafat's weaponised Nakba narrative became a self-manufactured excuse to break the Oslo agreements without suffering any penalty.

In early 1998, as Israel was preparing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its birth, Arafat and his lieutenants were holding conversations about that upcoming event as well as another pressing issue for the Palestinians. The end of the five-year interim arrangement was approaching, which meant final-status negotiations were supposed to start.

Arafat was under conflicting pressure from two internal factions over the refugee issue. The dominant group was sometimes referred to as the "outsiders", because they had spent the years since 1948 in exile. Salman Abu Sitta, a member of the Palestine National Council, an original refugee and one of the most active members of the outsider faction, had been urging Arafat never to give up on the right of return. In early 1998, Abu Sitta drafted a public letter to Arafat about the refugee issue that was co-signed by dozens of prominent Palestinians. It said in part:

We absolutely do not accept or recognize any outcome of negotiations which may lead to an agreement that forfeits any part of the right of return of the refugees and the uprooted to their former homes from where they were expelled in 1948, or their due compensation, and we do not accept compensation as a substitute for return.

One of the signatories was Edward Said, by now a true believer in the most extreme version of the Nakba narrative and the right of return. In an interview with Israeli journalist Ari Shavit, Said berated Arafat for even



Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat (right) with his successor Mahmoud Abbas (left): Both have used the Nakba narrative as the key reason to reject two state peace deals (Image: AAP)

thinking he "can sign off on the termination of the conflict."

Yet there was also a more moderate faction within the PA, including those who had never left Palestine as refugees. Some had served as local officials during the period of the Jordanian occupation of the West Bank. One of their leaders was Sari Nusseibeh, president of Al-Quds University and Arafat's principal representative in Jerusalem. In his memoir, *Once Upon a Country*, Nusseibeh describes a meeting with Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas on the issue of the refugees' right of return. Nusseibeh recounts the following exchange with Abbas:

Nusseibeh: You have to level with us. What is it you want, a state or the right of return?

Abbas: Why do you say that? What do you mean by either/or?

Nusseibeh: Because that's what it boils down to. Either you want an independent state or a policy aimed at returning all the refugees to Israel. You can't have it both ways.

No other Palestinian leader has acknowledged in such stark terms that when the Nakba narrative includes the right of return, it kills any chance for peace as well as for an independent Palestinian state. The return of the refugees was a deal breaker for Israel, but also for the Clinton Administration that helped broker the Oslo Accords.

A reluctant Arafat was finally dragooned by President Clinton to go to Camp David in 2000 for the final-status negotiations, but the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The PA President stormed out of the meeting after turning down a generous offer for an independent state. According to Clinton adviser Dennis Ross, in order for the Camp David summit to have succeeded, “the Palestinians had to give up their ‘right of return’ to Israel.”

After Camp David, the Clinton and Bush Administrations continued to press Arafat to reconsider his position. Instead, the PA President doubled down. In his 2004 Nakba Day speech, he made his commitment to the refugees’ right of return even more explicit:

“The issue of refugees is the issue of the people and the land, the cause of the homeland and the cause of the entire national destiny, no compromise, no compromise, no settlement, but a sacred right of every Palestinian refugee to return to his homeland, Palestine.”

Another round of peace negotiations took place four years later, this time directly between Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the PA’s President Mahmoud Abbas. They held 35 one-on-one meetings in Jerusalem over a span of seven months. At the last session on Sept. 16, 2008, Olmert offered Abbas an independent Palestinian state with its capital in east Jerusalem. He showed Abbas a proposed map of

the borders of the two states that, through territorial swaps, would give the Palestinians almost 100% of the territory of the West Bank and Gaza held by the Arabs before the 1967 war. Olmert agreed to allow a token number of refugees to enter Israel on humanitarian grounds but said the agreement had to end all Palestinian claims about the right of return.

Abbas said he would consider the offer and return in a few days with his answer. But he never came back, and the negotiations abruptly ended. In an interview I conducted with Olmert a few years later, the former prime minister made it clear that the sticking point for Abbas was the right of return.

After Olmert’s proposed map became public, Abbas claimed his hands were tied because the refugees would settle for nothing less than the right

“Abbas (like Arafat before him) was responsible for spreading the Nakba lies and hatred into the refugee camps, which then sparked the militancy among the Palestinian masses who, he claimed, prevented an agreement”

to return. How, he asked plaintively, could he turn against his own people?

Left unsaid was the fact that Abbas (like Arafat before him) was responsible for spreading the Nakba lies and hatred into the refugee camps, which then sparked the militancy among the Palestinian masses who, he claimed, prevented an agreement with Olmert.

The refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza have become the permanent places of residence for more than two million Palestinians. They are administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) established by the UN in 1949 to take care of what was expected to be a temporary humanitarian crisis. Instead, the vast network of UNRWA camps became permanent, a state within a state. After the Oslo Accords, Arafat’s PLO was able to take over the camps, albeit under the continuing legal umbrella of UNRWA.

In a video produced by the Centre for Middle East Research, children at an UNRWA summer camp can be seen singing martyrdom songs and praising suicide bombers. An UNRWA teacher promises a classroom of children as young as ten: “We will return to our villages with power and honour. With God’s help and our own strength, we will wage war. And with education and Jihad we will return.” Speaking to the camera, a teenage girl announces, “I dream that we will return to our land and with God’s help [Abbas] will achieve that goal and we will not be disappointed.”

Abbas knows that day will never come. Instead, his Government’s Nakba narrative guarantees that the Palestinian teenager will remain trapped in her refugee ghetto for decades to come. For the PA President, though, there are many benefits in perpetuating the impossible dream. It provides him with a tale of unprecedented victimhood and a seemingly just cause to champion in the international arena. It also certifies his militancy within Palestinian

politics, where militancy is the coin of the realm.

To sum up, Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas revised Constantine Zurayk’s original claim that Zionism committed its crimes against the entire “Arab Nation”. But they also revived Zurayk’s big Nakba lie that “the aim of Zionist imperialism is to annihilate one people so that another may be put in its place.”

By continuing to promote this hateful narrative, the Palestinian leaders signalled, and continue to signal, that the struggle is not merely about the consequences of the June 1967 war. It also means that Israel’s struggle for independence and legitimacy is not yet over.

AIR

Sol Stern is a veteran American journalist and author. © Commentary magazine (www.commentarymagazine.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved



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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

JUDICIOUS REPORTING

Weekly protests in Israel against controversial proposed reforms of the country's justice system by the Netanyahu Government generated widespread media coverage.

An excellent summary ran in the *Australian Financial Review* (Feb. 15) noting the issue is "rooted in a decades-old culture war between different parts of Israeli society."

Advocates, it said, believe "the move would...ensur[e] that government decisions better reflect the electoral choices of a majority of the population."

Critics, however, fear "the proposals would...giv[e] too much power to the government; endangering minority rights; and removing limits on the prime minister's ability to enact legislation that might allow him to escape punishment in his ongoing corruption trial."

An SBS online report (Feb. 15) on the judicial reform plans quoted AIJAC research associate Ran Porat saying "the worry of protesters is that the government is eliminating political rivals, ... protesters feel it's a dictatorship in the making."

GONE GUY

The *Australian* (Feb. 16) reported ABC Managing Director David Anderson's admission in Senate Estimates that the broadcaster no longer employs Jerusalem-based producer Fouad Abu Gosh.

The *Australian* noted, "last year, Abu Gosh posted a series of anti-Semitic tweets before deleting his social media accounts. Some of his posts compared Israeli police to Nazis, and warned of a Zionist conspiracy to take over the entire Middle East."

AIJAC's Colin Rubenstein was

quoted saying "the outcome also shows that the ABC understands there are red lines that its journalists must not cross."

Meanwhile, according to *Crikey* (Feb. 21), SBS reinstated reporter Essam Al-Ghalib, who was briefly suspended for tweets made in 2014/15 that included references to Israel putting Palestinians in "concentration camps" and accusing Israel of being "the biggest terrorist in the world."

MARK OF SHAME

Canberra Times columnist Mark Kenny employed International Holocaust Remembrance Day to launch a vehement attack on Israel, making implied Nazi parallels. On Jan. 26, Kenny said, "At the beginning of WWII, there were some 9 million Jews in Europe, and by the end, less than 3 million," adding that "antisemitism remains rife, as does its corollary, anti-Islamism."

After discussing the Holocaust, he then slid directly into talking about Israel, implying it was similar by saying, "Another resonance with the perils of toxic nationalism right now though is the slide towards authoritarianism in Israel itself and the occupied West Bank presently under the harsh new Netanyahu government."

He concluded the article by making his ugly parallel even more clear, "The world cannot be allowed to forget what happened to the Jews of Europe in the middle of the last century. But neither should it turn a blind eye to Palestinians whose lands have been stolen..."

Kenny's column on Feb. 19 contained an attack on Australian support for Israel, saying "Australia has always defended Israel fiercely, justifying this loyalty (despite unconscionable policy

and aggression) with the claim that it is the only committed rule-of-law democracy in the Middle East. Yet even that rationale is all but lost as Israel teeters on the edge of a religious-authoritarian abyss under the most extreme right-wing government in its history."

AIJAC's Jamie Hyams' rebuttal appeared on the *Canberra Times* letters page (Feb. 22). He slammed Kenny's Jan. 29 piece for "shamefully compar[ing] the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the Holocaust, falsely accusing Israel of abusing Palestinian human rights and stealing their land." Kenny, he wrote, "ignored... Israeli offers of Palestinian statehood and many other peace initiatives."

DEATH COUNT

The need to differentiate between civilians and terrorists killed was mostly respected by media reports of an Israeli raid on a terror stronghold in Jenin on the West Bank on Jan. 26 and the shocking murder the next day of seven Israeli civilians outside a synagogue in the Neve Yaakov neighbourhood in east Jerusalem.

Channel 7's Jan. 27 bulletin said of the raid that "nine people were killed during the incident, including two civilians," making it clear that most were militants.

Channel 10 Melbourne's Jan. 27 report of the raid noted Israel said "their forces were fired upon while carrying out an operation against Islamic Jihad fighters. What ensued was a gun battle lasting hours."

News Corp papers reported the raid on Jan. 28 with the misleading headline, "Israel kills 10 including a mother in West Bank." The article itself was more nuanced.



SHOWING NO RESISTANCE

The *Australian* (Jan. 30) condemned the Neve Yaakov massacre, saying “there is no moral equivalence between Israeli security forces targeting a terrorist cell preparing to attack Israeli targets and the slaughter of innocents at prayer.”

Middle East correspondent Allyson Horn’s *ABC TV* “7pm News” report (Jan. 27) on Israel’s Jenin raid acknowledged Palestinians said “seven militants were among the dead” but romanticised the terrorists calling them “armed resistance groups”.

The next day Horn again referred

to “resistance organisations”.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

SBS Radio “Arabic24” (Jan. 30) Palestinian correspondent’s report discussed the raid, noting nine of the ten killed were “armed”, but failing to say Israel’s mission was to stop a planned terror attack.

An *SBS TV* “News in Arabic” (Feb. 1) report on a tiny pro-Palestinian demonstration in Sydney, said Israeli soldiers “stormed” Jenin and killed nine “demonstrators,” not armed militants.

The *SBS TV* “News in Arabic” Jan.

27 bulletin covering the Jenin raid referred to Tel Aviv as Israel’s capital but noted Israel said it carried out the operation to prevent an Islamic Jihad attack.

THE NUMBERS GAME

The subtext of Middle East correspondent Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop’s *ABC News Radio* (Feb. 1) report of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s arrival in Israel was problematic.

While Rubinsztein-Dunlop noted that “a Palestinian gunman killed seven people outside a synagogue in a settlement in Jerusalem,” he added



IN PARLIAMENT

The following four comments and questions were from the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee Senate Estimates hearings on Feb. 16:

Greens Foreign Affairs spokesperson Senator **Jordon Steele-John** (WA) – “Minister, are you concerned about Israel’s decision to push ahead with the construction of mass settlements across the Green Line against international law?” Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) – “Yes. We do not support unilateral actions which reduce prospects of a just two-state solution. Settlements... are an obstacle to peace.”

Senator **Steele-John** – “Thirty-five Palestinians were killed in January 2023; 153 Palestinians were killed in 2022, more than in any year since 2005. Has the Australian government made representations to the Israeli government condemning this violence?”

Senator **David Fawcett** (Liberal, SA) – “...have the officers sought a briefing or other information from DFAT regarding recognising a Palestinian state?” Senator **Wong** – “No, not in the terms in which that question is cast.”

Senator **Wong**, asked by Senator **Fawcett** about the ALP platform to recognise a Palestinian state – “Well, the platform resolution is an expression of the views of the national conference, which also make clear this is ultimately a decision, a matter for government... my principal consideration is advancing the cause of peace.”

Shadow Attorney-General **Julian Leeser** (Lib., Berowra) – Feb. 15 – “The Iranian regime is a criminal regime... they act no differently than the terrorists who dispense their version of justice from the barrel of a gun on the back of a Toyota truck. Iran’s crimes against their own people have destroyed the resemblance of legitimacy. That’s why I support moves to make Iran’s

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps listed as a proscribed terrorist organisation. The IRGC are feared; they operate at home and abroad. The Australian Signals Directorate has confirmed that guard affiliated actors have targeted Australian organisations with ransomware attacks. They’re a known supporter of listed organisations such as Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria. The repeated actions of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps rob them of any governmental legitimacy.”

Greens Deputy Leader and Anti-Racism spokesperson Senator **Mehreen Faruqi** (NSW) – Feb. 8 – “...Israel has to be called out for its ongoing apartheid and oppression of Palestinians. Universities should be politically active places. That is why last week Senator Steele-John and I wrote to university VCs, urging them not to adopt the IHRA definition...”

Senator **Janet Rice** (Greens, Vic.) – Feb. 7 – “Palestine is... under occupation. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and many other organisations have clearly stated that the actions of the extreme right-wing Israeli government constitute apartheid. Due to the ongoing military blockade of Gaza by the Israeli government, 97 per cent of the water is undrinkable. Media reports indicate that recently there were 144 attacks on Palestinians in a single day.”

Senator **Fawcett** on condolence for the late Senator Jim Molan – Feb. 6 – “The report they issued, for example, about Israel and some of Israel’s military conflicts, where, in his words, Israel demonstrated that they had standards for their defence force in terms of adherence to the rules of armed conflict that matched, if not exceeded, those of our own—this earned him many critics, but it’s an example of where he was prepared to put himself forward to advocate the values that he believed were important.”

Senator **Wong** media release – Jan. 28 – “Australia unequivocally condemns the horrific terrorist attack that claimed the lives of at least seven worshippers in Jerusalem on Friday evening... That such a cowardly and callous attack occurred on a day where we remember the atrocities of the Holocaust is utterly reprehensible.”

that “at least 35 Palestinians, including militants and civilians, have been killed in violence in the occupied West Bank in the past month, including ten in an Israeli raid last week.”

In fact, 31 of the 35 killed were militants.

SBS TV “World News” reporter Virginia Langeberg’s story (Jan. 31) included basic context, referring to “a 26-year-old shot dead by Israeli forces the previous night. The army said the man rammed his car into a group of soldiers as he attempted to flee an inspection... last Friday... a Palestinian opened fire, killing seven people. The day before, Israeli forces had carried out a deep raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank, killing ten people, mostly gunmen.”

MCLEOD’S MISSTEPS

Channel 9 News’ European correspondent Brett McLeod’s reports filed from Israel and the West Bank during Blinken’s visit left a lot to be desired.

A Jan. 28 report from McLeod said the Neve Yaakov “attack came a day after a deadly raid by Israeli forces on a West Bank refugee camp,” with the report referring only to “a raid by Israeli troops... that left nine people dead” without noting they were almost all gunmen.

A Feb. 1 item on Blinken’s meeting with Abbas included McLeod stating that “Blinken said the US opposes action by either side stopping a two-state solution. But most of his examples were of Israeli policies.” McLeod also included Palestinian vox pops in Ramallah but no Israelis.

In his Jan. 31 report, McLeod said the Blinken-Netanyahu press conference “talk[ed] of hope for the future,” with the latter “suggesting peace was not far away. Without saying how.” Yet the report included Netanyahu explaining that “working to close finally the file of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I think, would also help us achieve a workable solution with our Palestinian neighbours.”

McLeod also mentioned “yet another funeral. [A] 26-year-old man shot while driving towards an Israeli checkpoint at Hebron, the 35th Palestinian killed by Israeli forces this month.”

The driver killed was attempting to ram the soldiers, and was actually the 31st terrorist killed out of the 35.

HORN’S POINTED REPORT

Middle East correspondent Allyson Horn’s extended report for the *ABC TV* flagship current affairs program “7.30” (Feb. 7) eschewed analysis in favour of an overall narrative that Palestinians are victims of Israeli aggression.

Noting that ten Palestinians killed in Jenin during an Israeli raid in January were “mostly armed militants”, Horn balanced this by quoting a UN statistic that 2022 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank “since they began recording fatalities in 2005.”

Except Horn failed to explain that an overwhelming majority of those killed were terrorists or involved in violence.

Horn missed an opportunity to ask Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade member Deyaa Abu Waad what he means when he says Palestinians “want to live freely” by following up his comment that “this occupation has been procrastinating for 74 years backed by the UN... ignor[ing] the Palestinians and their rights.” This comment suggests “freedom” means Israel’s destruction, not a state on the pre-1967 armistice lines.

Horn said the “peace process [has] stalled for nearly a decade,” but did quote veteran Israeli security expert Yossi Kuperwasser explaining that “there is no partner on the Palestinian side for peace negotiations that would lead to an agreement that... can be acceptable for Israel.”

Earlier, an *SBS TV* “World News” (Feb. 4) report claiming settlements impede a two-state solution included

veteran Palestinian propagandist Mustafa Barghouti making the outlandish claim that the 1993 Oslo Accords were “an intentional policy of establishing more settlements, illegal settlements to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.”

ARMED WITH THE FACTS

On *Sky News* (Jan. 30), Zionist Federation of Australia’s Bren Carlill challenged claims of equivalence between the murder of seven Israelis outside a synagogue in Jerusalem with an Israeli raid on a terrorist stronghold in Jenin.

Dr Carlill said Israeli forces went to Jenin “in order to prevent a terrorist group from carrying out an imminent attack... their entire purpose... was to arrest terrorists... nine out of those ten people [they] killed were shot while they were shooting at Israeli soldiers.”

He dismissed suggestions that proposals to let more Israeli civilians carry firearms were irresponsible, explaining that “almost everyone in Israel has gone through the military... [and] know the safe way of handling weaponry” adding that “civilians... have been targeted by Palestinian terrorists. And if [they] have to wait for [the] police... more... will die.”

IN A STATE

On *ABC TV* “News24” (Jan. 30), former Australian diplomat Bob Bowker insisted only a binational state would stop ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

Bowker said the two-state solution has “been pursued courageously by Israelis and Palestinians and Arab governments and Western governments for the last 30 years” but “they no longer resonate on the street and they will not be revived in any meaningful way.”

The next day, Dan Shapiro, the Obama Administration’s Ambassador to Israel, told *ABC Radio National*

“Breakfast” (Jan. 31), “even those who reject a two-state solution often find that they can’t really articulate a good future. And I think in some ways that’s the logic that will eventually bring us back to that very difficult task. As hard as it looks right now.”

He argued the Abraham Accords process of “normalisation between Israel and... Arab countries” could “draw some positive energy... into the Israeli-Palestinian arena.”

NON-INCIDENTAL INCIDENTS

An *SBS TV* “World News” (Feb. 7) report of an Israeli raid near Jericho that resulted in five deaths, noted “the military wing of Hamas says it will avenge the deaths of its members.” Earlier, on *ABC TV* “Mornings” (Feb. 7), Middle East correspondent Allyson Horn’s report said, “Hamas, which is the Islamic militant group that runs Gaza, says the men who were killed here were affiliated with them, with Hamas.”

On Feb. 11, *SBS TV* “World News” and *Channels 7* and *9* simply referred to east Jerusalem as the location of a terror attack that saw a Palestinian man drive a car into a crowded bus stop in the Ramot neighbourhood, killing two Israelis and injuring many others. By contrast, *Channel 10*’s bulletin said, “A driver rammed his car into a crowded bus stop in a Jewish settlement in east Jerusalem.”

Visiting Israeli Christian Arab activist Yoseph Haddad told *Sky News* (Feb. 16) that “Palestinian terrorist[s] do... not kill only Jews. Yezan Fellah from the Druze community. Amir Hourri from the Christian community. And just two days ago, Asil Sawaed from the Muslim community were killed by terrorist Palestinians. That’s why terrorism does not discriminate between religion, between race, Christians, Muslims, Druze.”

ISRAEL’S RUSSIAN DILEMMAS

On *ABC Radio* “PM” (Jan. 31) John Blaxland explained the complicated geopolitics behind a suspected Israeli orchestrated drone strike on an Iranian factory allegedly supplying Russia with missiles and drones for use in Ukraine.

Professor Blaxland said, “Israelis by and large would be very supportive of Ukraine,” but are wary of Russia’s “ability to inflict so much pain simply through facilitation of Iranian support to Lebanon and Iranian action in and through Syria.”

On *SBS TV* “World News” (Jan. 30), Professor Amin Saikal incorrectly claimed, “this is the first time that Israelis may have carried out a direct attack. So therefore, this development is potentially very ominous.” In fact, Israel reportedly conducted at least two such drone strikes on Iran in 2021, and potentially others earlier.

IHRATIONAL CLAIMS

Pro-Palestinian activists vented their anger at Australian educational institutions for adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism.

Guardian Australia’s Jan. 25 report that Melbourne University adopted IHRA gave disproportionate space to unfounded accusations that a threat of being labelled antisemitic will be used to stifle free speech.

On Feb. 10, the *Illawarra Mercury* (Feb. 10) reported Wollongong University academic Marcelo Svirsky’s assertion that “The bottom line of this definition is to shut down critical views of the policies of state of Israel.”

SBS TV “News in Arabic” (Jan. 27) noted Melbourne University’s adoption of the IHRA definition in a story noting the Executive Council of Australian Jewry’s latest annual report into antisemitism. SBS’s story included a pro-Palestinian activist claiming the definition is a tool to

prevent criticism of Israel and a Melbourne University statement rejecting the assertion.

THE OTHER REFUGEES

Discussing his new book *The Arc of a Covenant, The United States, Israel and the Future of the Jewish People* on *ABC RN* “Between the Lines” (Feb. 18), visiting AIJAC guest Walter Russell Mead dispelled the notion that Israel is a European implant that doesn’t belong in the Middle East.

Mead explained that “more Israeli Jews are from the Middle East, some of them from countries like Yemen [began] migrating from... to Palestine even before the Zionist movement got going. But the vast bulk of them came after 1948, when many Arab governments expelled their Jews.”

He explained that “roughly the same number of Jews were driven from their homes as Palestinians. And the thing is that Bibi Netanyahu’s coalition, his supporters tend to come from this Middle Eastern Jewish population and their hard-line attitudes, their lack of trust toward the Arabs, their lack of sympathy for the Palestinians, reflects their own historical experience as a persecuted minority in the Middle East.”

CREDIT WHERE IT’S DUE

On *Sky News*’ “The Rita Panahi Show” (Feb. 10), Mead praised Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s achievements, noting Israel’s successful hi-tech industry and the Abraham Accords.

He said, “Those were policy choices that Netanyahu’s Government put into place and then kept going. Look at the Abraham Accords. What Israeli leader in history has signed as many agreements with as many Arab states as Bibi has done?”

On Feb. 2, the *Australian*’s Foreign Editor Greg Sheridan also extolled Netanyahu’s leadership, calling him “the king of Israeli politics and the critical figure in the Middle East.”

MEDIA MICROSCOPE

Allon Lee

A FESTIVETIME

In February, the 2023 Adelaide Writers' Week attracted the kind of publicity that money can't buy – most of it negative – as its Director, publisher Louise Adler, faced intense criticism for some of her choices.

As News Corp's David Penberthy reported in the *Australian* (Nov. 16), "Ukrainian and Jewish leaders have condemned Adelaide Festival Writers Week for giving a platform to [Palestinian author Susan Abulhawa]... a fierce critic of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky whom she has described as 'a depraved Zionist trying to ignite World War III'" and Palestinian poet Mohammed El-Kurd who "has... accused Zionists of eating the organs of Palestinians and 'lusting' for Palestinian blood."

Adler was quoted defending their participation, saying, "We should encourage a diversity of opinion and create a brave space, a courageous space."

But as AIJAC's Justin Amler and Tammy Reznik observed in the *Australian* (Feb. 18), the festival invited seven writers "listed as being from Palestine – and none from Israel," which "seems to run counter to the 'notion of truth' festival director Louise Adler says she seeks to promote." They also asked why these writers should receive a visa to enter Australia to attend when "many rightfully argued [the rap artist] Ye should not receive a visa on character grounds, given his public statements promoting hatred" against Jews.

On Feb. 16, Association of Ukrainians in South Australia President Frank Fursenko expressed his disgust on *ABC Radio Adelaide*, saying, "Ukraine... a neutral nation, has just been invaded, and everyone can see every day on television what the Russians are doing... This... woman[s]... going to be given a stage here to espouse her particular point of view." Adler defended Abulhawa, saying "if we want to understand what is behind the invasion of the Ukraine, who better to platform than someone who is an expert in the history of Russia?"

In Adelaide's *Advertiser* (Feb. 16), Penberthy wrote, "Our premiere arts festival is about to give a platform to someone who thinks this inexcusable war is pretty much the fault of the Ukrainian people themselves for electing a democratic government that dared float the idea of joining NATO to shield itself against Russian expansionism." He also questioned Adler's notion of "brave[ry]" if "10 people

speaking at Writers Week, all... have the exact same view on the Palestinian cause."

On Feb. 16, the *Advertiser* editorialised, "robust debate is welcome. But arguments must be based on evidence, not hateful bile." On Feb. 23, the paper called for "Ms Adler [to] resign her position with the festival and head back to her home state of Victoria." It also reported that two Ukrainian writers had withdrawn from the festival in protest.

In the *Australian* (Feb. 20), Zionist Federation of Australia President Jeremy Leibler contrasted the Adelaide situation with the "confected outrage and intimidation" experienced by artists at the 2022 Sydney Festival at the hands of pro-Palestinian activists who demanded it be boycotted because it included a "non-political [dance] performance that made no reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

A Nine Newspapers report (Feb. 22) noting Writers' Week sponsor MinterEllison was boycotting it in protest was given the misleading headline "Law firm boycotts festival over inclusion of Palestinian authors" in the *Age*. The problem is not Palestinian authors but the expression of anti-Jewish and anti-Ukrainian bile.

A letter from AIJAC's Jamie Hyams published in the *Age* the next day commended MinterEllison for "understanding the difference between free speech and racism."

On Feb. 21, News Corp websites ran a short op-ed by the former Australian Friends of Palestine Association (AFOPA) head Sam Shahin who lamented that "We used to say: 'we disagree with you, so you are wrong'. Today's dangerous narrative seems to have shifted to 'we disagree with you, so therefore you must be a bad person.'" Yet AFOPA promotes boycotts of Israel.

News Corp columnist Andrew Bolt slammed the festival (Feb. 23), saying, "taxpayers are funding what is meant to be a week of talk about books and authors... but what they're getting is actually a hate-fest of the Left, denouncing Australia, Israel and the US."

Meanwhile, Nine Newspapers columnist Osman Faruqi (Feb. 23) called for a timeout on "cancel culture", framing the issue as irate pro-Israel activists accusing writers of antisemitism – conveniently leaving out the Ukrainian community. His plea was also inconsistent because, in January 2022, he urged understanding for artists wanting to boycott the Sydney Festival to protest Israel.

"The 2023 Adelaide Writers' Week attracted the kind of publicity that money can't buy – most of it negative – as its Director, publisher Louise Adler, faced intense criticism for some of her choices"

THE LAST WORD

Jeremy Jones

ANTI-JEWISM

Enough is enough. It has to stop. We are witnessing a distressing and outrageous tolerance of a destructive and corrosive slur.

The Nazis lost on the battlefield almost 80 years ago, but their hooked cross has worshippers and their spirit has supporters in many parts of the world.

I am not referring to the far-right underworld, which has received a great deal of media attention in Australia and elsewhere, as their visibility, and possibly also membership and capabilities, reach new levels.

There is enough residue of decency in our society for widespread condemnation of that swill.

Far more insidious than people who wear their racism on their sleeves are those who further the global aim of Nazism through one particularly malicious slur, which I see being more and more “normalised”.

In *Green Left Weekly* in January, Rupen Savoulian thundered, “If Adolf Eichmann were alive today, he would have been very proud of the new Israeli government.”

More disturbingly, an Australian academic used the theme of International Holocaust Remembrance Day to attack Israel.

After a series of paragraphs on Nazism, in which both the context of pre- and non-Nazi antisemitism and the declared aim of Nazis to murder every Jew on the planet were excluded, Mark Kenny, in the *Canberra Times*, meandered on to the Middle East.

If this segment of the article had appeared, for example, as part of a discussion of unresolved political problems or of how different societies respond to terrorists existentially opposed to their existence, it may have been contentious but not offensive – except for a ridiculous and juvenile final sentence.

But to tack it on to the end of a piece on Nazism and conclude with a clear identification of Israel as a similar villain, alleging it “stole” land and abused human rights “because of nationality and religion,” was beyond the pale of decency.

As if we don’t have enough individuals in this country who will spruik comparisons of Israel with Nazi Germany, the Adelaide Writers’ Week organisers decided to invite some

repulsive guests who are being defended as simply having “opinions” with which others disagree.

Susan Abulhawa and Mohammed El-Kurd both provide a defence of, even applause for, the murder of civilians. But worse still, they play free and easy with the despicable claim that an ideology which sought global domination, genocide of a number of groups of human beings and the subjugation of other groups, wreaking untold destruction, is no different to the self-determination of an ancient people, and the consequences resulting from successive attempts to destroy that people.

Mr El-Kurd compares Israelis to Nazis, in the context of a grab-bag of antisemitic tropes, including blood libel, claiming Israelis take Palestinian body parts and eat them, saying Israelis “are thirsty for Palestinian blood”.

Ms Abulhawa justified genocide of any and all Israelis in her recent statement “Every Israeli, whether in a synagogue, a checkpoint, settlement, or shopping mall is a colonizer who came from foreign lands... The whole country is one big, militarised tumor.”

Unable to stick to the script that Zionism is the equivalent to Nazism, she argues “One cannot overstate what an abomination Israel truly is. They’re worse than Nazis.”

This channelled a former president of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils who, when given the opportunity to walk away from his comments that Israel was like Nazi Germany, told ABC Radio he had misspoken: Israel was actually much worse than Nazi Germany.

To make this analogy is to whitewash Nazism – considering self-determination the same as global expansionism and self-defence as equivalent to genocide. It is deliberately offensive to Jewish people, who know only too well what Nazism really is. It is insulting to the Allies who fought Nazism.

It is such a uniquely evil slur that diplomat and writer Conor Cruise O’Brien coined a special word for it – Anti-Jewism, an ugly word for a very ugly slander.

We should never, ever accept it as part of civil discourse.



Susan Abulhawa (Image: Wikimedia Commons)



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