

ON THE FRONT LINE

Eyewitness accounts from Israel's ongoing war with Hamas



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WITH COMPLIMENTS

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EDITOR'S NOTE

April's *AIR* edition offers several eyewitness accounts from the front line of Israel's on-going war with Hamas – initiated by Hamas' campaign of mass murder, rape, torture and kidnapping on October 7 – which is now in its sixth month.

Well-known Israeli security affairs correspondent Ron Ben-Yishai reports from inside an Israeli unit in action in Khan Yunis and discusses the numerous ways the IDF has learned to cope with the realities of the tunnel-ridden and heavily booby-trapped urban landscape of Gaza. Also, US reporter Charlotte Lawson witnesses IDF efforts to facilitate greatly increased humanitarian aid flows into Gaza, while Jonathan Spyer writes about accompanying an Israeli unit attempting to suppress Hamas-linked terror on the West Bank.

Also featured this month is US-based statistics expert Prof. Abraham Wyner's evidence-based argument that the widely cited Palestinian casualty figures coming out of Gaza are fabricated. Plus, three former top US officials – John Hannah, Elliott Abrams and Lewis Libby – offer an original plan for reconstructing and rehabilitating Gaza, post-war.

Finally, don't miss Ilan Evyatar's report on the increasing public disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem, Rany Ballout's look at the Hamas propaganda flooding the Arab world, and Ahron Shapiro's deconstruction of an example of journalistic unprofessionalism from ABC "Four Corners".

We invite your feedback on any aspect of this edition at editorial@aijac.org.au.

Tzvi Fleischer

ON THE COVER

An IDF infantry commando soldier in action in Khan Yunis, the Gaza Strip, February 2024 (Image: Ran Zisovitch/ Shutterstock)



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COLIN RUBENSTEIN

NOT ABOUT NETANYAHU

Perhaps nothing exemplifies the challenges that Israel faces in the current, lower-intensity phase of its war against Hamas than the IDF's second raid on the Shifa Hospital compound in northern Gaza on March 18. This saw the elimination of at least 140 armed terrorists including a top Hamas commander.

Israeli forces, it should be remembered, first took control of the site in November, after lengthy gun battles with terrorists taking shelter there, and found Hamas tunnels, including a major command and control centre, beneath the hospital grounds.

However, Israeli reserve units soon withdrew from most of northern Gaza, and the front moved south to Khan Yunis and eventually reached the outskirts of the southernmost Gazan city of Rafah, where it remains to this day. But Hamas returned to Shifa.

This is not entirely unexpected. Outmatched by the IDF, Hamas' strategy since the massacres in southern Israel on October 7 has been largely to hide in tunnels or among civilians for as long as possible, hoping to eventually re-emerge to resume control.

Hamas' hope is that international pressure on Israel and/or a hostage deal will allow a return to something much like the status quo that existed on October 6. Then, still in power and with the achievement of having coerced Israel into freeing many hundreds of convicted terrorist killers, it would then have the means to rearm and try to repeat the October 7 slaughter again and again in the future, as its leaders continually asserts it will.

Unsurprisingly, the overwhelmingly majority of Israelis are absolutely determined to prevent this, and stand behind their Government's declared goal of eliminating Hamas control over the entirety of Gaza.

Barring an unexpected surrender by Hamas, this necessitates an eventual offensive into Rafah, after creating safe havens for the city's 1.2 million non-combatants.

Some analysts and foreign political leaders have strongly implied that this stance is solely the product of Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu and his coalition partners – perhaps for political reasons. This is just wrong.

Polls show Netanyahu is indeed unpopular in Israel, but he is absolutely correct when he says he speaks for a large majority of Israelis in demanding that the IDF must be allowed to complete its war to eliminate both Hamas' capacity to control and its military capabilities and infrastructure.

As Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong herself said in Jerusalem in January, the Australian Government "believe[s] that Hamas has no place in the future governance of Gaza."

This should indeed be beyond argument – but Hamas will not leave of its own accord and will thus have to be removed by force. Yes, Gaza's civilians are paying a high price, as Hamas always intended (see military expert John Spencer's important comments on p. 7), but there is every reason to believe that various new aid routes – and a declared Israeli policy of seeking to "flood" Gaza with aid – will soon ameliorate the worst of the problems in getting essentials to them (see p. 16).

Meanwhile, Israeli young people are constantly losing their lives in a war Israelis neither wanted nor asked for, yet they know a Hamas victory would surely be a much worse outcome. Israelis would be left completely vulnerable not only to an empowered Hamas, but to Iran's numerous other terrorist proxies including especially Hezbollah, keen to follow Hamas' example. For the Palestinian civilians that Hamas treats as human shields, war would likely soon destroy their lives yet again.

In addition to completely distorting the reasons for the current situation in Gaza, the fashionable trend for foreign leaders to encourage Israelis to dump Netanyahu, as US

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer did recently, is highly ill-advised for other reasons. It encourages Hamas to harden its negotiating position, and greatly undermines Western interests vis-à-vis the Iranian-led “axis of resistance.”

Moreover, it could also ironically pave an avenue for a potential political comeback for Netanyahu, on the rocks politically due to his mismanagement of the Hamas threat in the years leading up to October 7 and divisive judicial reform proposals last year, but now able to play the card of standing up to outside pressure and threats to Israeli independence.

This is why National Unity party leader Benny Gantz, Netanyahu’s most popular rival whom polls say would likely beat Netanyahu handily if elections were held tomorrow, unhesitatingly rebuffed Schumer’s comments and rejected such external influence in Israeli politics.

The scapegoating of Netanyahu and his controversial coalition partners for the unavoidable ugliness of the current Gaza war also explains an exaggerated tendency to insist the Israeli PM cannot offer a post-war vision for Gaza’s future. Actually, he is offering such a vision – its effectiveness and feasibility can be debated but its existence should not be denied.

It was outlined recently by veteran *Yedioth Ahronot* military correspondent Ron Ben-Yishai on March 15 (see also p. 12): “In Netanyahu’s vision, the demilitarised Gaza Strip would have an open path to the outside world via a land corridor in Egyptian territory, along the border with Gaza, and a sea corridor leading to Cyprus,” Ben-Yishai wrote.

“These corridors would enable Gazans to move freely in and out of the Strip, develop trade and economic relations with foreign lands, fish the waters offshore... without moving through Israel. But Israel would maintain overall security control of the corridors to prevent weapons and raw material to produce them, from being smuggled into Gaza.”

This “Singapore model” for Gaza, Ben-Yishai noted, was originally conceived of by Israeli peace visionary Shimon Peres in the 1990s.

The truth is that, in 2005, after Israel removed all of its settlements and soldiers from Gaza, the road for the Palestinian Authority to realise such a model was wide open.

Sadly, the Palestinian leadership, as has so often been the case, missed the opportunity. The PA politically imploded under the weight of its own corruption and Hamas booted out Fatah in a bloody coup, putting the territory on the genocidal path towards October 7.

Any plan to advance moves toward a two-state outcome requires fully learning the lessons of the tragic 18 years since disengagement, including the need for thoroughgoing deradicalisation and the construction of a Palestinian political culture which accepts coexistence. Anyone who thinks Netanyahu is the key barrier to rapidly moving toward a two-state resolution in the wake of October 7 – or, absurdly, believes leaving Hamas’ remaining forces intact won’t be an insuperable barrier to progress – is not only failing to address those lessons, but directly flying in the face of them.

AIR

“” WORD FOR WORD

“Israel has a right to go after Hamas. Hamas could end this conflict today by releasing the hostages, laying down arms, and surrendering those responsible for October 7th. Israel has an added burden because Hamas hides and operates among the civilian population. But Israel also has a fundamental responsibility to protect innocent civilians in Gaza... Tonight, I’m directing the US military to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine and temporary shelters.”

US President Joe Biden during his State of the Union Address (Whitehouse.gov, March 7).

“How do we define victory? We define it as the destruction of Hamas’s military and governing capabilities, as the return of the hostages, which we’re working [on] right now, and also as pre-

venting Gaza from becoming a threat to Israel at any time in the future... If we achieve these goals, then we will also deliver a stinging blow to the Iran terror axis, which is behind everything that we’re seeing here today.”

Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu addressing an AIPAC delegation (Twitter/X, March 19).

“Did Hamas consult the Palestinian leadership or any Palestinian national party when it made its decision to carry out the ‘adventure’ of last October 7, which led to a catastrophe more horrific and crueler than the Nakba of 1948?... [October 7] caused the return of the Israeli occupation of Gaza.”

Fatah statement condemning Hamas (Jewish Chronicle, March 17).

“Hamas is irreconcilable... I think it is not debatable. I think they are the equivalent of al Qaeda or the Islamic State. They have to be destroyed, just as we had to destroy the core al Qaeda and... helped the Iraqi security forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces destroy the Islamic State.”

Former US Commander in Iraq and CIA director Gen. David Petraeus (Times of Israel, March 15).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

PALESTINIAN FANTASY LAND

Readers may have seen the shocking polls that show Palestinians overwhelmingly support what Hamas did on October 7. A poll back in December by the reputable Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research (PCPSR) showed 72% of Palestinians thought Hamas' launching of mass attacks on Israel on that date was a "correct decision". Interestingly, 85% of West Bank residents said it was "correct" compared to only 57% of Gazans – who have had to live with the consequences to a much greater extent.

Yet there was something even more shocking in the survey. Fully 90% of the Palestinians surveyed denied that Hamas had committed any attacks on Israeli civilians, or other war crimes, such as mass sexual assaults, on October 7.

This is despite the fact that Hamas itself captured many of the atrocities its forces committed on video and published them on social media, where they were then broadcast around the world. The survey actually asked about the videos and found that 85% of Palestinians surveyed said they had never seen any such videos.

These surveys strongly suggest that most Palestinians live in a fantasy land in which they can deny any facts which do not fit with a narrative of blameless Palestinian victimhood and total Israeli evil.

In the survey, a large majority of Palestinians (78%) agreed that it is illegal and unacceptable to kill civilians and a smaller majority, 52%, said it was illegal and unacceptable to capture civilians as prisoners. But most Palestinians simply do not believe Hamas did these things on October 7. Given the overwhelming evidence sourced from the perpetrators themselves in this instance, it seems impossible to even imagine any kind of evidence that could overcome such denial.

This denial has been facilitated primarily via the media outlets Palestinians consume – especially the Arabic version of Qatar's Al Jazeera. While there is no firm data, Khalil Shikaki, the head of PCPSR, has estimated that Al Jazeera today is the major news source for some 50% of Palestinians. And Al Jazeera in Arabic (unlike in English) has reportedly never admitted or reported there were any atrocities against civilians on October 7. As Shikaki told the *Times of Israel*, "Al Jazeera [Arabic] was more focused on the glorification of what happened, relying on the official statements by Hamas and repeating those quite often." (For more on the glorification of Hamas and its public promotion in Middle East media, see pp. 32-33).

Most other news outlets Palestinians watch or follow

on social media are no better, including official Palestinian Authority media.

October 7 denial is actually part of a longer-term pattern. I have seen example after example in the past where a Palestinian attempted to carry out a terror attack on Israelis and was killed in the process, and PA media or Al Jazeera presented the story as one of Israelis suddenly murdering an innocent Palestinian for no reason – despite clear video evidence that he or she tried to attack Israelis.

No wonder Palestinians – and their most rabid supporters – have been insisting Israel is committing "genocide" on them since long before October 7. They are constantly falsely told in the media they consume of Palestinians being murdered by Israeli soldiers or civilians just because they were Palestinian.

And no wonder a negotiated two-state peace has proven so impossible, despite numerous serious Israeli offers. No one could or would make peace with the demonically evil and murderous Israelis – who constantly attack and murder innocent people, and then launched a bloody war into Gaza for no good reason. And this is what Palestinians see in the fantasy land they get through Arabic media as well as pro-Palestinian social media.

THE TRUTH ABOUT PALESTINIAN NATIONALISM

In the February edition of the *AIR*, leading American academic and historian Michael Mandelbaum made the point that "Palestinian nationalism [is] the only one of the many nationalist movements that have appeared since the nineteenth century that has as its aim not the creation of its own nation-state but rather the destruction of the state of another people." He argued this is the key reason Israeli-Palestinian peace has been so elusive.

Some might discount this claim because while Mandelbaum is a leading intellectual, he is also, of course, Jewish.

But they should then listen to British Palestinian writer John Aziz – who wrote some remarkably similar things in *Foreign Policy* on March 15.

Aziz said that "The Palestinian case for self-determination – like any stateless people – is bulletproof," but then went on to say, "The trouble is that Hamas' demands go far beyond demanding self-governance. What they and Palestinian anti-Zionists demand is the right to extinguish their neighbor's self-governance, and conquer their neighbor's territory."

He admits this Palestinian view is far from limited to Hamas: "This overarching narrative of Palestinian resistance against the existence of any kind of Israel or Zionism has been deeply embedded into the cause since the start of the conflict—and has produced little but tragedy for Palestinians."

Aziz went on to say that "in the 1990s...the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) renounced the strategy of

violence, recognised Israel, and switched toward a strategy of diplomacy and negotiation. But this did not last very long,” noting Yasser Arafat soon “gave his blessing to armed groups including Hamas to initiate a Second Intifada.”

Palestinians like Aziz who escape the fantasy land emanating from their leaders, media and Al Jazeera, as discussed above, can advocate for Palestinian rights while also recognising that the maximalism and rejectionism which have dominated Palestinian nationalism for a century are a recipe for endless frustration and never-ending violence. A two-state peace would then be eminently possible. But we seem to be a long way off from the development of Palestinian leadership capable of adopting such realism.

AIR



John Spencer

THE POLITICAL PURPOSE OF HAMAS' TUNNELS

The use of tunnels in wars is not new. Seeking advantage by using either natural or man-made spaces underground is as ancient as warfare itself – from stories of tunnels being used to win massive battles in the Bible to underground spaces becoming key factors in urban battles, like Mariupol and Bakhmut in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Modern nations including the United States, China, and North Korea invest billions in deep-buried military bunkers and tunnel complexes. But what Israel has faced in Gaza represents a unique first in war – namely, a case in which tunnels form one of two pillars, along with time, of a combatant's political-military strategy.

Before the Israel-Hamas war, both the presence of Hamas tunnel networks and their growth over the years were very well known. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and scholars estimated before the war that there were 480 km of tunnels ranging from 4.5 metres to over 61 metres below the surface. The estimates were wrong.

After three months of close combat, Israeli forces have unearthed massive invasion tunnels four kilometres long, underground manufacturing plants, luxury tunnels with painted walls, tile floors, ceiling fans, and air conditioning, and a complex, layered, labyrinth underneath all areas of Gaza. New estimates say the network may include between 563 to 725 km of tunnels, with close to 5,700 separate shafts.

The sheer size of Hamas' underground networks may, once fully discovered, be beyond anything a modern military has ever faced.

But more importantly than the scale of the tunnels in Gaza, the Israel-Hamas war is the first war in which a com-

batant has made its vast underground network a defining centrepiece of its overall political-military strategy.

In the past, military tunnels and bunkers have been built specifically to gain a *military* advantage. Underground spaces enable militaries to conserve capabilities by avoiding detection and strike, to hold terrain by using the tunnels for mobile defence tactics, or even offensively to use guerrilla tactics to attrit the attacking force.

For the first time in the history of tunnel warfare, however, Hamas has built a tunnel network to gain not just a military advantage, but a *political* advantage, as well.

Hamas weaved its vast tunnel networks into the society on the surface. Destroying the tunnels is virtually impossible without adversely impacting the population living in Gaza. Consequently, they put the modern laws of war at the centre of the conflict's conduct. These laws restrict the use of military force and methods or tactics that a military can use against protected populations and sites such as hospitals, churches, schools, and United Nations facilities.

Almost all of Hamas' tunnels are built into civilian and protected sites in densely populated urban areas. This complicates discriminating between military targets and civilian locations – if not rendering it entirely impossible because Hamas does not have military sites separate from civilian sites.

Hamas' strategy is not to hold terrain or defeat an attacking force. Its strategy is about time – time for international pressure to mount on Israel to stop its military operation.


The group wants as many civilians as possible to be harmed by Israeli military action – as one of its officials put it, “We are proud to sacrifice martyrs.” It wants the world's attention on the question of whether the IDF campaign is violating the laws of war in attacking Hamas tunnels that are tightly connected to civilian and protected sites. It wants to buy as much time as is needed to cause the international community to stop Israel.

To deal with tunnels at the tactical level, Israel has demonstrated some of the world's most advanced units, methods, and capabilities to find, exploit, and destroy tunnels. From specialised engineer capabilities and canine units to the use of robots, flooding to clear tunnels, and both aerial-delivered and ground-emplaced explosives, to include liquid explosives, to destroy them.

But the strategic challenge is entirely different. To destroy many of the deep-buried tunnels, the IDF has required bunker-busting bombs, which Israel is criticised for using. And most importantly it has required time to find and destroy the tunnels in a conflict in which Hamas' strategy is aimed at limiting the time available to Israel.

Hamas' strategy, then, is founded on tunnels and time. Hamas is in the tunnels. Its leaders and weapons are in the tunnels. The Israeli hostages are in the tunnels. And Hamas'



strategy is founded on its conviction that, for Israel, the critical resource of time will run out in the tunnels. 

John Spencer is chair of urban warfare studies at the Modern War Institute at West Point. He is also a founding member of the International Working Group on Subterranean Warfare. © Modern War Institute (mwi.westpoint.edu), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

ALL IN THE TIMING

Despite having such a long and controversial public record, the coming ascension of Prabowo Subianto to the Indonesian presidency in October still has experts and insiders questioning what he will actually do once he takes office.

Prabowo owes his election victory in no small part to his pledges of continuity with the policies of the popular incumbent Joko Widodo; that, and the drafting of Jokowi's son Gibran as his running mate.

Yet, Prabowo could hardly be more different in terms of temperament, personal style and political background. For him, power is everything. The always ambitious former general was once Suharto's son-in-law and a zealous defender of the regime, but when the political tide turned, he returned from exile as a democratic politician with authoritarian populist leanings.

It took several elections for Prabowo to recraft himself into an electorally appealing form, yet he is, and has always been, a military man. With that comes nationalism and a certain pragmatism where the national interest is concerned.

"National power must be military power," Prabowo declared in a presidential debate on January 7. "Without military power, the history of human civilisation will teach us that a nation will be crushed like Gaza is currently."

Since becoming defence minister in 2019, Prabowo has embarked on an ambitious military modernisation program that saw defence spending consistently rise, much of it directed towards equipment purchases and building up a domestic defence industry.

Notably, during this period Prabowo has also pursued closer ties in the Middle East. In 2021, he spoke at the opening of the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Strategic Dialogue in Manama, Bahrain, where he emphasised Indonesia's commitment to monitoring security in the Middle East, given the role of extremist groups in the region that also affect Indonesia. He has also worked to strengthen military cooperation with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and other nations in the region.

In 2023, Prabowo brokered a deal to buy second-hand

Mirage fighter jets from Qatar, although the deal was recently cancelled due to budgetary constraints. He also visited the UAE at the invitation of President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed to discuss defence cooperation and participated in the IDEX exhibition in Abu Dhabi to promote the Indonesian defence industry. Sheikh Zayed recently conveyed his congratulations to Prabowo on his electoral success.

Prabowo also has strong ties with Jordan, where he spent years in exile following his discharge from the Indonesian military due to alleged insubordination and human rights violations during the fall of Suharto in 1998. His close relationship with King Abdullah dates back to military cooperation between the two countries in the 1970s and '80s, while his time in the kingdom during the early 2000s included business ventures and roles as a military adviser.

An obvious link between the UAE, Bahrain and Jordan is that all maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, the former two under the framework of the Abraham Accords in 2020. Moves to expand this diplomatic umbrella of Arab-Israeli normalisation have included overtures to the world's largest Muslim-majority nation.

A recent article from the *Israel Insider* news service reported that Israel and Indonesia had planned to announce an upgrade of relations in October 2023, but the outbreak of war in Gaza has scuttled those plans, according to sources involved in the negotiations.

Andi Widjajanto, a senior adviser to Jokowi, and Ronen Levy, then the director-general of the Foreign Ministry and one of the key Israeli players in the Abraham Accords, met in Jerusalem in September, along with Dan Shapiro, who at the time was the US State Department's senior adviser for regional integration, to finalise the text of a memorandum of understanding.

The MOU stated that the parties seek to "expand upon the Abraham Accords and promote peace, co-existence, mutual understanding and respect." They further agreed to open reciprocal liaison offices focused on developing bilateral relations, with an emphasis on economy, trade, technology, innovation and culture.

The report noted Prabowo's history of contacts with Israelis, including meeting with then-National Security Adviser Eyal Hulata at a conference in Manama in 2021. After the meeting became public, Subianto issued a statement saying it was not prohibited for him to speak to Israeli officials when it is in the national interest.

The Indonesian military has long maintained back-channel relations with their Israeli counterparts, purchasing military equipment during the 1970s and '80s, while Prabowo has retained interest in Israeli military and agricultural technology. For him, the national interest trumps religious ideology – yet the intense pro-Palestinian feeling within Indonesia stirred by the Gaza war will give him pause.

Observers believe Jakarta-Jerusalem ties also hinge

upon mooted Israel-Saudi normalisation, suggesting that the backlash would be lessened if the two occur in the same period of time. The Gaza war has forestalled this possibility for now.

AIR



Alex Benjamin

EMPTY WORDS

“It’s not worth the paper it’s printed on!” Rome, last month. At a meeting of Jewish leaders from all over Europe, this frustrated, almost plaintive assertion came from one of the presidents of the Dutch Community. Vigorous head nods from other Jewish leaders showed this attitude wasn’t unique to either the speaker, Ellen van Praagh, or the Netherlands.

Van Praagh was referring to the many European plans in place designed to counter hate speech and antisemitism, as well as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism.

Back in 2021, amidst the COVID pandemic and a worrying rise in antisemitism across the continent, the European Commission published its strategy for combatting antisemitism. In it, the Commission invited the European Parliament and the European Council to support the implementation of the strategy, and promised to publish comprehensive implementation reports in 2024 and 2029.

Member states were also urged to adopt measures and develop national strategies for combatting antisemitism based on the plan. Many did. A great many also signed up to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism, trumpeting it in the media.

Yet “the proof of the pudding is in the eating,” the old adage says.

Today, across Europe, reported or documented cases of antisemitism have gone through the roof since October 7. In places where there is proper data collection – such as the UK, Spain and France – the rise is over 1000%. Even prior to the Hamas pogrom, the numbers were already concerning.

Today we are looking at levels of antisemitism last seen in 1939 in Nazi Germany. And that is not hyperbole.

In Holland, they cancelled Holocaust Memorial Day events at universities over security concerns and because of vociferous opposition. Just recently, there were massive protests as Israel’s President Isaac Herzog opened a new Holocaust Museum in Amsterdam. In Spain, even before October 7, the Israeli Ambassador was forced to take shelter in a safe room at a university as a pro-Palestinian mob chased her entourage.

In capitals across the continent, there are regular

protests where one can often see Nazi images referring to Jews, images drawing parallels between Gaza and Auschwitz, and calls for Jewish genocide and ethnic cleansing “from the river to the sea.” You can read placards calling Jews terrorists, and the blood libel of child killers is regularly used. Death threats against rabbis are common. European citizens who have served in the IDF are outed in their communities through letter campaigns pointing out that a “child killer” is living next to them. Flights arriving from Israel are tracked and met by protesters.

I was in London recently visiting family and was genuinely shocked at the number of people with anti-Israel stickers bearing the entirety of Israel marked out in Palestinian colours with a gun beside it, or a paraglider motif. It was no longer my city, and it confirmed what UK Rabbi Avi Lazarus had told us in Rome: he just doesn’t feel safe as a “visibly Jewish” person there anymore.

Strategies, national plans, the adoption of the IHRA definition? At this stage, they appear to have been nothing more than virtue signalling, with no visible or demonstrable practical application across Europe today.

This was the message from Jewish community leaders in Rome. The words, plans and guidance adopted had not trickled down to ground level. Police are hamstrung at openly antisemitic protests, and the courts have no framework to prosecute the anti-Zionists and antisemites who have made collective Jewish life here in Europe hell, and who feel they can act with impunity.

Care to hazard a guess what the number one cost today is for Jewish communities? Security. In many communities, Jews are on their own, footing the bill for private security and equipment, funds that could be used for schooling, community development and infrastructure, or festivals.

The EU just put out a call for funding the security of Jewish institutions, but the bureaucracy is often so cumbersome that, as one prominent Rabbi put it, “it’s like asking someone to fill out a lengthy insurance form while your house is on fire.”

The EU strategy in 2023 was updated to include the words “fostering Jewish life” after combatting antisemitism.

Any strategy is eventually put to the test in the real world and by any yardstick, the “EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life” is failing miserably. Van Praagh was right. If governments are not prepared to turn words into action, the words are simply not worth the paper they are printed on.

Over the next month, even as many of us are paying for our own security, European Jewish leaders are bringing together some prominent lawyers to find ways of putting the EU’s well-meaning but useless words into some actionable legal frameworks. It seems that the Jews have no choice but to “foster” their own communal life. It has ever been thus.

AIR

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BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

More than 15,000 projectiles of various types have been fired at Israel since October 7, at least 9,000 of these from Gaza. The IDF had suffered 251 fatalities in Gaza as of March 19. 134 hostages are still held there, at least 34 of whom have been confirmed dead.

Several senior Hamas officials were killed this month. Hamas' number three, the deputy commander of its military, Marwan Issa, was killed in an Israeli airstrike on March 11. On March 6, Israel eliminated Hamas rocket commander Omar Atiya Daruish Aladdiny. Hadi Ali Mustafa, reportedly in charge of planning international attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets, was killed in Lebanon on March 12. Muhammad Abu Hasna, a Hamas official allegedly responsible for stealing humanitarian aid and distributing it, was killed in a strike next to a UNRWA distribution centre in Rafah on March 13.

Israeli forces again took control of Shifa Hospital, Gaza's largest, in an operation beginning on March 18, acting on intelligence Hamas had re-established a command and control centre there. Over three days, the IDF arrested around 300 terror suspects and killed 140 gunmen, including Faiq Mabhouh, head of operations in Hamas' internal security force.

An Israeli soldier was fatally stabbed on March 14 at the Beit Kama Junction in Israel by an Israeli Arab citizen, and there have been numerous terror attacks and attempted attacks in the West Bank.

HAMAS THREATENS GAZANS WHO ASSIST AID DISTRIBUTION

A Hamas-linked website warned on March 11 that any Palestinians in

Gaza who cooperate with Israel in the distribution of humanitarian aid would be regarded as collaborators, which means they would be liable to be put to death. Hamas executed the head of the Doghmarsh clan of northern Gaza on March 14, alleging he was collaborating with Israel and seizing aid. Israel has been seeking to work directly with Palestinians in Gaza to distribute aid, potentially as a prelude to them taking on a leadership role in the enclave post-war. Hamas is reported to have been stealing around 60% of the aid that enters Gaza.

On Feb. 29, around 100 Palestinians in a huge mob that swarmed a convoy of aid trucks Israel had organised with Palestinian businessmen to bring aid to northern Gaza were killed – either trampled in the stampede, run over as the truck drivers escaped, or shot by Palestinian gunmen. Contrary to reports, no Israeli forces fired on the crowd, but soldiers did fire on a group that advanced towards them after the trucks left.

NEW PA PM

On March 14, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas appointed his ally, former Finance Minister Dr Mohammad Mustafa, 69, as the new Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority (PA). The previous PM, Mohammad Shtayyeh, and his government resigned in late February.

This occurred amid American pressure to reform the Fatah-controlled PA in the leadup to possibly retaking power over Gaza, which was governed by the PA until a 2007 Hamas coup. Mustafa will be tasked with forming a new administration made of professional technocrats.

However, analysts almost universally agreed that Mustafa's ap-



New Palestinian PM Dr Mohammad Mustafa (Image: Wikipedia)

pointment offered very little hope of progress in ridding the PA of its intrinsic problems, such as corruption and involvement in terror, given his lack of independence or political power.

LEBANESE BORDER VIOLENCE UPDATE

At the end of February, Hezbollah rejected a French ceasefire proposal in the violence between Israel and Hezbollah that would have seen Hezbollah withdraw to ten km from the border.

As of mid-March, Hezbollah claimed to have carried out 1,200 strikes against Israel since October 7.

A Hezbollah anti-tank missile killed an Indian national and injured nine other foreign nationals on March 5.

Since October 7, the IDF has targeted more than 3,400 Hezbollah sites including 120 observation posts, 40 weapons depots, and 40 command centres, and killed some 300 operatives, mostly members of Hezbollah, including five senior commanders.

HOUTHJI ATTACKS CONTINUE UNABATED

Houthi attacks against international shipping and US and European naval forces have continued unabated since November on a near-daily basis, with US and European forces regularly destroying Houthi missiles

and loitering munitions, as well as maritime and underwater drones. On March 9 alone, US, British and French forces shot down at least 28 Houthi drones.

The last round of joint US-UK strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen was launched on Feb. 24, striking underground weapons storage facilities, missile storage facilities, drones, air defence systems, radars and a helicopter.

On March 2, the British-owned cargo ship the *Rubymar*, struck by the Houthis on Feb. 18, sank, causing a potential ecological catastrophe. The Swiss-owned cargo ship *MSC SKY II* was struck on March 4. On March 6, the Houthis struck a Greek bulk carrier, killing three crew members.

NEW ANTI-ISRAEL TERROR GROUPS IN EUROPE

According to a March 12 report, European authorities have foiled several terror plots since October 7, some involving suspects posing as refugees. Police in Austria and Bosnia arrested two separate groups of Afghan and Syrian refugees carrying arms, including Kalashnikov assault rifles and pistols. Pictures of Jewish and Israeli targets were found on suspects' mobile phones. Additionally, Italian authorities detained three Palestinians suspected of being members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, a designated terror group.

UN REPORT ACKNOWLEDGES HAMAS' SEXUAL VIOLENCE

On March 4, the United Nations released a report acknowledging there were "reasonable grounds to believe" that some victims of Hamas' October 7 attacks were subject to "rape and gang rape", often followed by their murder. The report highlighted a pattern of victims, primarily women, found naked, bound and shot, across multiple locations. Additionally,

women and children taken back to Gaza as hostages by Hamas faced rape, sexualised torture, and cruel treatment, the report said.

IRAN ELECTION SEES RECORD LOW TURNOUT

Iran's March 1 parliamentary election saw a historically low turnout of 41%, the lowest since the 1979 revolution. Out of the country's 61 million voters, only 25 million voted for its parliament and the Assembly of Experts, the influential body responsible for overseeing and appointing the successor to ageing Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Reformists and critics were barred from participating in the elections, including previously mainstream regime figures such as former president Hassan Rouhani and former Intelligence Ministry head Mahmoud Alavi.

Meanwhile, new reports from human rights groups say Iran ex-

ecuted a total of at least 834 people in 2023, the highest number since 2015. NGOs say that, in the wake of the mass uprisings following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, Iranian authorities have been using the death penalty to spread fear and prevent further protests.

IRAN'S FISSILE MATERIAL STOCKS CONTINUE TO INCREASE

The March 2024 periodic reports of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Iran again noted an increase in the Iranian stockpile of fissile material to 5,525 kilograms of enriched uranium, a tonne more than in November last year. An insignificant decrease in the amount of 60% enriched uranium was also noted, to around 121.5 kilograms. Experts say Teheran can now produce enough military-grade uranium for more than a dozen atomic warheads within a few weeks.



LOVE AND BALLOONS KNOW NO BORDERS

One unexpected effect of the hostilities between Israel and Hamas and Hezbollah is that users of dating apps in Israel and Lebanon are increasingly seeing profiles of people from each other's countries. The apparent cause is the IDF blocking some global positioning system (GPS) signals to disrupt Hezbollah attacks. It is reported that more than 60% of profiles on the dating app Tinder in Lebanon in February were from Israel. Some in Lebanon reportedly believed it was a Mossad trick to discover information about Lebanese residents.

In its March 5 report on the issue, the *National*, a UAE newspaper, spoke to some of those affected. One Israeli jokingly said he hoped to be called up to serve if the IDF entered Lebanon, so he could have the opportunity to meet some

of the matches.

A comment from Lebanese user Omar was revealing in terms of how Lebanese people are incited to hatred of Israel. He said, of the Israelis showing up on his app, "I keep seeing them and they're absolutely gorgeous, but I can't do anything because we're divided by an apartheid wall and a genocidal army that doesn't take too well to Arabs."

What he calls an "apartheid wall", most would call a secure border, and he clearly doesn't realise that Israel has an Arab population of around two million, some of whom serve in that army.

But if dating apps caused bemusement in Lebanon, an Israeli balloon caused far more consternation after it landed in the town of Habbouch, a few kilometres from the Israeli border.

Local authorities were concerned because they were unable to translate the Hebrew writing on the suspicious heart-shaped object. However, these fears were assuaged when it was ultimately revealed the inscription read "Happy Birthday."

COVER STORY

ON THE FRONT LINE

WITH THE IDF IN GAZA

Ron Ben-Yishai

KHANYUNIS – The tank turret of the deputy commander of the IDF’s 9th Battalion is an excellent vantage point – not only for surveying the “Hamad Towers” neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Khan Yunis, but also the developments that have taken place in combat thanks to the experience the IDF has gained over the last five months.

I saw this with my own eyes when I joined a raid on that neighbourhood – which was financed by Qatar for middle class Hamas administrators in the Gaza Strip. It consists of five-storey buildings with spacious apartments, underground parking and air conditioning, but also includes shaft openings leading to tunnels under the neighbourhoods.

These were an integral part of the construction specifications.

The commander of the 9th battalion, Lieutenant-Colonel Nati, is an armour man, but the combat team under his command that day was composed mainly of infantry forces from the Givati Brigade.

Moving towards our target, I could hear fighter helicopter pilots asking, almost begging, to be given targets, and a UAV operator asking if we needed his assistance in tracking a terrorist who had encountered the forces and managed to escape.

There was also a rescue tank, in case one of the tanks got stuck during the battle. The observation planes which flew over the arena transmitted, in real time, a complete picture of what was happening on the battlefield to the IDF General Staff headquarters and other parties.

The IDF has come a long way, and learned many lessons, since it began manoeuvring inside the Gaza Strip on October 28.

This is expressed in the close integration between the main elements of the force in the air and on land, in the

ability to gather intelligence while fighting and translating it into operational action within minutes; and in the skill of managing a battle in a built-up, dense urban area, while directing unimaginable amounts of fire of all kinds.

It can be said that the fighting that the IDF is currently conducting in the Gaza Strip is the first and only example of its kind in the world.

This is not only because of the need to fight on two different levels – above and below ground – but also, and above all, because of the way Hamas fights from, within and below the civilian population, using public and humanitarian facilities.

According to Hamas’ operational methods, those who are called in military parlance “non-involved” are an integral part of the battlefield, whether they stay in their homes or become refugees.

The IDF is forced to act even as international law and the fear of the fate of the abducted Israeli hostages limit its freedom of action and greatly slow down the pace of combat.

Testimonies from Hamas prisoners show that the organisation did not really believe that the IDF would ever invade Gaza with large-scale forces and seek to recapture the territory of the Strip. Hamas had a *conceptzia* (set of perceptions that together form an overarching strategic framework – Ed.) according to which the Israelis fear losses and kidnappings among the soldiers, and therefore would not dare to carry out a ground operation.

Hamas’ Gaza head Yahya Sinwar and Muhammad Deif, his senior military commander, prepared their forces mainly for defence against a major air attack by the IDF, such as was the case in Operation Guardian of the Wall in May 2021. They therefore invested most of their efforts in digging tunnels and the underground infrastructure for

“The IDF has come a long way, and learned many lessons, since it began manoeuvring inside the Gaza Strip on October 28”

command and control.

Hamas also prepared for guerrilla warfare on the basis of brigades and battalions composed of local residents. For this purpose, combat compounds were established that would allow the IDF forces to be hit with explosives, anti-tank missiles, RPGs, and sniper fire, with Hamas members hiding in the combat tunnels below the surface and coming up through the shafts.

Above ground, Hamas prepared hundreds and maybe even thousands of apartments and houses where it stored weapons, explosives, light mortars, RPGs and anti-tank missiles, as well as personal equipment such as protective vests and uniforms.

Some of these military storage apartments were in two- or three-storey residences, and others were in high-rise buildings.

The organisation's fighters could reach these buildings or nearby alleys through the tunnels and shafts while posing as unarmed innocent civilians – then, as soon as the IDF approached, enter the refuge apartment, put on a uniform, equip themselves with weapons and start conducting the fighting.

In the buildings erected in Gaza in recent years, these shafts were actually dug as part of the construction plans, probably at the same time as the tunnels underneath. This also includes the new wings in major hospitals such as Shifa and the Indonesian Hospital, and even the UNRWA headquarters in Gaza.

THE PROBLEM OF THE DISAPPEARING ENEMY

The fighting that the IDF conducts against this formation is unique because of the vast extent of the underground tunnel system – which is used to conduct the fighting and not just to hide from the Israeli Air Force.



Unprecedented integration between ground forces, intelligence gathering and aerial forces is the key to IDF success in Gaza (Images: IDF)

One of the greatest achievements of the IDF has been the ability to gather intelligence quickly while fighting to locate the shafts that lead to the tunnels and concealed rocket launchers. This happened thanks to the integration between the IDF and the Shin Bet domestic security service, especially after October 7.

Not only has the Shin Bet become the main intelligence arm of the fighting forces, but members of its operational units fight underground alongside specialised units of the IDF, and of course in operations to try to free the Israeli hostages – most of which did not come to fruition out of fear for the lives of the abductees.

The Shin Bet did not take the place of IDF intelligence, but became the main source of “Humint” (human intelligence), while the IDF intel branches mainly provide technological intelligence and visual reconnaissance.

This close combination of the Shin Bet and the IDF provides the forces in the field with locations and targets for attack and thereby allows the forces to avoid staying in one place, which exposes them to attack from terrorists. Thanks

to this intelligence, the IDF constantly locates shafts and tunnels that it didn't know existed, in areas that were supposedly already conquered.

But it's not just about intelligence: the development of combat methods also allows the IDF's special units, with or without Shin Bet operational units, to fight inside the tunnels themselves.

It can be assumed that this is done using technological means such as robots, drones of various types, and of course with the assistance of dogs.

Another important element of Hamas' fighting methods is the ability to appear from unexpected directions, hit forces with deadly RPG fire and IEDs, and then disappear. This phenomenon, which is also characteristic of Hezbollah

lah's fighting method in the north, is called in the IDF: "the problem of the disappearing enemy." The army deals with it through its intelligence/technological surveillance capabilities and the integration of the Air Force into ground combat.

A terrorist coming out of a shaft today, or two terrorists moving with an RPG launcher between houses, are often discovered by the ground forces from observation positions deployed as they move toward their target, or by the "Zik" [Hermes 450 drone] operator, whose UAV accompanies the fighters like a guardian angel from above. You will then hear in the control cabin for the Zik, located at an air force base inside Israel, the command "two-three, launch!" And the terrorists are struck by a missile from above.

This happens both day and night. Sometimes, a combat helicopter hovering in circles in the immediate vicinity, usually over Israeli territory, launches a "Hell-fire" air-to-surface missile at a Kornet anti-tank missile position located on a high floor of one of Gaza's buildings.

The aid officer of the battalion combat team who operates in the same sector also knows how to give an accurate reference point from an encrypted cell phone-like device to a fighter plane flying in waiting circles over the sea, and equipped in advance with various types of precision weaponry to hit any terrorists spotted.

Never before in the IDF, nor any other army, has the air force been so closely integrated into the ground battle. And like the armaments of the aircraft, the composition of the ground combat team is also adapted to the specific mission it performs.

As mentioned, Lt. Col. Nati used to operate a tank battalion, but in this mission his combat team had only one tank company, while the other two companies were infantry companies of the Givati Brigade.

This interagency integration, which the IDF has perfected, is what allows the IDF today to locate terrorists even when they only appear on the surface for a few minutes.

But the enemy also studies the IDF and its behaviour patterns. It can be assumed, for example, that Hamas assumes that the IDF will reach certain buildings or sites based on information obtained from the interrogation of prisoners. It takes advantage of the hours of darkness to place charges at the entrance of those buildings, in the tunnel shafts and near the rocket launchers that are buried underground – connected by an electric wire to an operator who is far away, on the rooftop of a building

overlooking the site.

There are also charges that are activated by means of a trap as soon as the force approaches the target; "proximity charges" that the terrorists attach to the tanks by hand, and magnetic charges that are attached to a tank and activated seven seconds later to allow the terrorist to escape.

The use of these charges, especially the large charges buried under the roads and in the walls of the houses on both sides of the main streets, is one of the main reasons for the terrible destruction in the Gaza Strip, which is often blamed on the activities of the Israeli Air Force (which

admittedly did hit quite a few high-rise buildings that were used as observation posts or as bases for anti-tank fire).

One of the most important means of maintaining the security of IDF troops in Gaza is the giant D9 bulldozers or as they are called in the military: *Dubi* ("Teddy Bear"). These expose explosive charges and also create

holes in the walls of buildings (known as "mouseholes" – *Ed.*) so that the soldiers do not have to enter through the main entryways – which may well be booby-trapped.

When the IDF prepared for its ground operations in Gaza, it first largely emptied the northern Gaza Strip of uninvolved civilians by means of telephone warnings, announcements and other means. It then destroyed the tall buildings where Hamas had placed its key military positions.

The same has been happening in the southern city of Khan Yunis over recent weeks. The IDF begins by opening fire at the edges of an area it plans to enter to signal the population to evacuate. Today, the army also knows how to set up a "drain" – that is, a checkpoint at the exit from the area through which the civilians are routed and where it is possible to distinguish between them and terrorists trying to escape.

Only after most of the non-involved civilians have left is a rolling curtain of fire activated, which includes not only aerial fire but also tank fire, aimed at every structure that the IDF and the Shin Bet identify as being used by Hamas fighters. Only then will the infantry and engineering forces enter.

The identification of Hamas sites is incredibly accurate. In almost every such location that IDF fighters enter, they find a large amount of AK-47 Kalashnikov rifles, RPGs, explosives of all kinds, vests and uniforms, and in many cases, the terrorists themselves.

Another factor in the widespread destruction in the Gaza Strip has been the larger strategic tunnels and the



The IDF has become familiar with the labyrinth of tunnels, using specialised units to fight inside them (Image: IDF)

longer but smaller combat tunnels that pass under the residential areas and offices in its crowded cities and towns.

In Khan Yunis alone, it is estimated, there are about 160 km of tunnels. The IDF hardly touches combat tunnels at this stage, but it had destroyed about 20 km of strategic tunnels in Khan Yunis by the end of February.

The destruction is usually carried out by means of explosions, which can cause the collapse of the buildings above these tunnels.

The explosives planted by Hamas, the tunnels that are being destroyed and the aerial and ground fire of the IDF have meant that approximately 70% of the buildings in the northern Gaza Strip are no longer habitable. But this is also one of the reasons for the relatively small number of casualties among IDF fighters.

TWO REMAINING GOALS

Gloomy predictions of thousands of IDF combat deaths made by Israeli cabinet members before the ground manoeuvre into Gaza have proven false because, among other things, IDF forces today do not grope in the dark looking for shafts, as they did at the beginning, but know where to go and are able to identify a shaft even before they see it visually.

The problem of the “disappearing enemy” has been overcome through a combination of Shin Bet intelligence and close air cover.

IDF forces overcame their security problems through the extensive use of advanced technologies, the use of dogs and breaking into buildings through “mouseholes” rather than coming through the main entrance.

In the first phase of the ground operations, the IDF entered the northern Gaza Strip alone with a force of three divisions. This was intended to overcome the initial organised resistance of the brigades and battalions that Hamas had prepared to fight in what the IDF called at the time its “centres of gravity” – those compounds above and below the surface of the ground where Hamas members organised and from which they went forth to fight.

Enormous firepower and a large quantitative advantage of armoured vehicles and infantry forces on the ground succeeded in quickly dismantling the organised resistance of Hamas, which at that stage would often come out with ten or more fighters and try to take on IDF formations face to face.

The organised resistance of Hamas was broken, and the brigades, battalions and company became small teams, which acted on local initiative and without organised control, in trying to harm IDF forces.

This is also what happened in Khan Yunis and what will probably also be the case in Rafah.

This is what the IDF defines as “dismantling” the organised resistance of the Hamas fighting frameworks.

The IDF is trying to dismantle Hamas not only by physically killing terrorists but also by destroying the infrastructure, including the means of weapons production and the tunnels that may allow them to continue fighting in the future.

However, so far, the IDF has not been able to achieve two important goals: the release of all the abductees and the elimination of senior members of the civilian and military leadership of Hamas in the Gaza Strip [*with the exception of Hamas’ number three commander in Gaza, Marwan Issa, killed by Israel in mid-March – Ed.*].

“We need to show momentum,” said a very senior member of the Israeli intelligence community in a closed discussion. “We must carry out a series of moves that will convince the residents of the Gaza Strip that the Hamas dream is over. People in Gaza still do not believe that Hamas will fall and we, through fighting on the ground, need to convince them.”

It is likely that the IDF will succeed in this mission sooner or later. But the release of the abductees is not certain, and every day that passes makes this cloud more and more gloomy. This is not a military problem at the moment: the chance of releasing all the abductees, or even most of them, in a military operation is very small.

The key is vigorous international diplomatic action, especially American and Arab. We have to remember that we are dealing with fanatical jihadists like Yahya Sinwar and his brother Muhammad, Muhammad Deif and others, who do not care about the plight of the population in Gaza. In such a situation, the levers of pressure that Israel can use are not many and do not have the impact we would like. Starving the population in Gaza, the Shin Bet says, will not help. The leadership needs to be eliminated or expelled and then the rest will fall like dominoes and the abductees may be liberated. AIR

Ron Ben-Yishai is a veteran Israeli military reporter and National Security correspondent for the Israeli daily newspaper Yediot Ahronot and Israeli TV’s Channel 1. © Yediot Ahronot, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved. Translated from the Hebrew by AIJAC staff.

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THE BATTLE TO DELIVER HUMANITARIAN AID TO GAZA

Charlotte Lawson

KEREM SHALOM, Israel – Semi-trucks piled high with food and other supplies passed through this southern crossing and into the Gaza Strip by the dozens under the midday sun. Hours later, according to a preliminary Israel Defence Forces (IDF) assessment, Palestinian gunmen opened fire on and killed several civilians lining up by a 31-truck aid convoy that had reached Gaza City.

Israeli officials fear the incident on March 14, in which they say no IDF shots were fired, may be part of a Hamas campaign to exacerbate and weaponise Gaza’s worsening humanitarian situation. Widespread looting and lawlessness have already forced some aid groups to suspend operations in the enclave, as Israel struggles to secure safe passage for private contractors to reach civilians in need. Meanwhile, the US, Israel, and other regional partners have begun to flood the Strip with aid – from the land, sea, and air – in an effort to bypass the distribution issues inside Gaza.

“I want to emphasise a critical point,” Col. Elad Goren, the civil affairs head of COGAT (“Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories”), the Israeli agency tasked with facilitating humanitarian aid shipments into Gaza, said from the Kerem Shalom checkpoint that day. “Israel is doing everything, and I mean everything, it can to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of Hamas’ actions in the Gaza Strip.”

The Geneva Convention, of which Israel is a signatory, requires warring states to allow for the “free passage” of food and other humanitarian assistance. Israel insists it has done just that.

Before the war, an average of 70 trucks carrying food arrived in Gaza every day, Israeli officials said [*The figure often cited by aid agencies of 500 trucks/day pre-war includes all goods, not just food and essentials.*] As the wartime need has grown, so too have Israel’s efforts to inspect and facilitate aid shipments in an expedited manner. Since the beginning of March, an average of 126 trucks per day have entered the Strip. As of mid-March, more than 16,000 trucks – some 9,500 of them carrying more than 200,000 tons of food – had crossed into wartime Gaza in all, according to COGAT.

All trucks entering Gaza undergo Israeli inspections

to prevent items that can be used for military purposes from reaching Hamas, though some dual-use material can enter the Strip if it has a clear humanitarian purpose. Of the international aid that reaches the inspection sites, 99% passes into the enclave unhindered, according to COGAT.

“What Israel is prioritising right now in terms of the aid making its way is food, water, medical supplies, and shelter equipment,” Shimon Freedman, a spokesman for COGAT, told the *Dispatch*. “The security inspections are necessary to prevent things from getting to Hamas, but it’s not standing in the way of aid making its way to the people in Gaza who need it.”

But Israel says the challenge isn’t in the volume of aid going into Gaza but in its distribution to civilians in the combat zone – a role traditionally left to humanitarian organisations like the UN World Food Program (WFP), which in February halted its operations in Gaza, citing the dangers posed by the “collapse of civil order” within the Strip. Gazans are now increasingly reliant on private



A truck carrying food and other humanitarian aid moves through a security checkpoint at Kerem Shalom, Israel, into the Gaza Strip on March 14 (Image: Charlotte Lawson)

contractors for incoming supplies. The UN delivered less than 10% of aid shipments to northern Gaza this month, compared to 25% last month, even as the UN children’s agency said on March 15 that nearly one-third of children under two in northern Gaza have acute malnutrition.

This reduced UN involvement has led to bottlenecks on the Gazan side of the border, where rows of white pallets containing tons of humanitarian aid waiting to be collected and delivered were visible from the Israel-run checkpoint when I visited on March 14.

“This is not a rare scene. Often, there are hundreds of trucks worth of aid waiting on the Gazan side to be picked up. That is the biggest obstacle to aid reaching Gazans in need,” Goren said. “The international organisations do not have the capacity, and have yet to take real steps to improve that capacity, to distribute the humanitarian aid through the Gaza Strip – including the north... If the UN wants to

see more aid reach northern Gaza, they need to coordinate more convoys – as simple as that.”

Israel recently opened a new border crossing near Be’eri – one of the Israeli communities most devastated by the October 7 attack by Hamas that left nearly 1,200 dead – in the hopes that aid convoys can circumvent areas with a significant Hamas presence. On March 12, six trucks carrying food for 25,000 people used the route as part of what COGAT called “an experimental pilot in order to prevent Hamas from taking over the aid.”

The supplies-laden convoys typically need to drive through the southern part of the Strip to reach the north, where the humanitarian situation is most dire. This lengthy journey means that aid has frequently been seized by Hamas en route.

“The biggest challenge to date, which may be in the process of being solved, is the problem of bringing assistance through the southern Gaza Strip, where Hamas still has nominal control,” Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told the *Dispatch*. “In other words, that aid has been diverted, it has been hijacked, it has been fought over.”

But even in parts of northern Gaza under IDF control, doling out aid is a dangerous task – evidenced by the reported attack on civilians awaiting food shipments in Gaza City on March 14. (While the Hamas-run Gaza Ministry of Health accused Israeli forces of opening fire on the crowd, killing 21, an initial IDF assessment found that no shots had been fired by its troops at any stage during the incident. Footage released later appeared to show rogue Palestinian gunmen approaching and shooting at the queuing Gazans.)

Israeli officials believe Hamas has several possible objectives for disrupting the flow of humanitarian assistance. The most obvious is that intercepting food and other supplies helps the group fuel its war effort against Israeli forces. Moreover, targeting the convoys discourages international organisations and private contractors from involving themselves in aid deliveries, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis and intensifying global pressure on Israel to abandon its war aims.

American support may help Israel combat Hamas’ attempts to disrupt incoming humanitarian assistance. During his State of the Union address on March 7, US President Joe Biden announced the US military-led construction of an offshore floating pier and 1,800-foot-long causeway to deliver up to 2 million meals per day to Gaza. If successful,

the project would permit Israel to facilitate aid deliveries to large crowds in a more controlled environment by keeping much of the distribution network on the sea and beach, where – unlike dense urban areas – it’s difficult for armed Hamas fighters to hide and launch attacks.

Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant welcomed the dock, which Israeli forces will secure from the land, after Biden’s announcement this month.


The pier, which will take 60 days to become operational and involve more than 1,000 US military personnel, is one component of a broader effort to ramp up humanitarian assistance reaching Gaza. On March 15, a ship towing 200 tons of food from the World Central Kitchen reached the shores of Gaza in the first delivery through a new sea corridor. The US military has been conducting airdrops into the besieged enclave since March 2, delivering more than 200,000 meals in total.

Israel is working closely “with the international community to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the people of Gaza, and we have placed no limit on the amount of aid that can enter into Gaza,” said Goren, the COGAT civil affairs head. “It’s important to remember that this war started because Hamas attacked



A barge transporting humanitarian aid from the World Central Kitchen organisation, led by the United Arab Emirates, off the coast of Gaza (Image: IDF)

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Israel on October 7, and that every day since Hamas has proven that it doesn't care about civilians – not on the Israeli side, and not on the Gazan side of the border.” AIR

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WEST BANK STORY

Jonathan Spyer

“**Y**ou meet the terrorist at the end of the process, on the road, but there's a whole system that leads up to that point, so if you can hit at what lies behind, and prevent it, then that works too,” Maj. Shlomo Ohayon tells me, as we sit in his command vehicle.

It is the very early hours of the morning, outside of the village of Seir al Shuyukh in Gush Etzion in the West Bank. There is dead silence all around, punctuated only by the crackle of the communications in the jeep. Ohayon is the deputy commander of Battalion 910, part of the IDF's Etzion Brigade. The battalion, as part of its ongoing mission, has received a list of four individuals suspected of terror activity in the sector. They are setting out to apprehend these men.

Battalion 910 is a reserve formation made up of graduates of the Kfir Infantry Brigade. Mobilised immediately after October 7, they have spent the past four months in Gush Etzion, between Jerusalem and Hebron.

Events in the West Bank receive little coverage in Israeli

and international media. With full-scale war underway in Gaza, something close to it on the northern border, and the region on the edge of conflagration, it isn't hard to understand why. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to ignore the simmering tensions in the area south of Jerusalem.

Battalion 910 has carried out more than 400 arrests of suspects since arriving in the sector. Those arrested are connected to a variety of organisations, and to none. The battalion has prevented a series of planned assaults on the Jewish communities in the area, and ongoing attempts to fire at vehicles.

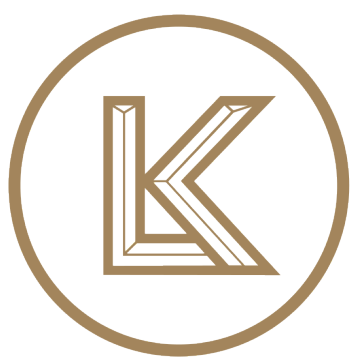


Soldiers in the Etzion Brigade take part in a raid in the Gush Etzion village of Seir al Shuyukh (Image: Jonathan Spyer)

This area, and the nature of its challenges, are somewhat familiar to me. It takes just 30 minutes on the quiet roads in the early morning hours to reach 910's headquarters from my home in south Jerusalem. But more to the point, I spent a stint of reserve duty here, in a similar winter of fog and uncertainty, 24 years ago, in the opening months of the Second Intifada.

The conditions were different then, but the core issues remain much the same. The security of the highways

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leading to Jerusalem is paramount. Nowadays, this means intelligence-led operations into the villages adjoining the main arteries, where support for Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and other terror organisations is high.

Back in 2000, we couldn't enter the populated areas because of the provisions of the Oslo Accords. The jeep patrols on the main roads would be fired at regularly from the villages, with little response. Two civilians, the engineer Tzachi Sasson and Dr Shmuel Gillis, were killed on the road at that time.

It's different now. But nothing is resolved. This quickly becomes apparent. As the convoy enters Seir al Shuyukh, there is a sudden illumination of yellow light all around. Our jeep has been hit by a Molotov cocktail. The response is matter of fact. We keep moving, as quickly as possible given the circumstances, to the house where the reason for the mission is located.

The suspect's home is located next to a school. The young man that the battalion is looking for is not connected to any organisation. There is intelligence that he has begun to prepare a private stock of Molotov cocktails. Another part of the force has approached the house from the opposite direction. It is quickly surrounded.

The arrest itself takes place with no particular drama. The target, a young man, offers no resistance. He is swiftly led away by two members of the force, his hands restrained by zip cuffs. We continue to El Aroub, where the next arrests are taking place.

Ohayon and his driver are both natives of Kiryat Arba, a short drive south of the Gush Etzion bloc. The IDF spokesperson's representative in the jeep with us is from a national-religious family in Jerusalem. This representation reflects many of the interactions I have had with the IDF over the last months of conflict – in Gaza and the northern border as well as in the West Bank.

There is a very noticeable over-representation of people from Israel's national-religious community in the frontline units of the IDF of 2024. This was mildly apparent even 24 years ago. It is now very pronounced. It may also be seen through perusal of the casualty figures.

Ohayon, however, is dismissive of any suggestion of local affiliations. "I've known this stuff all my life but it's not what motivates me. There are people here from Tel Aviv too. And there's a mission, and we need to carry it out. The mission is the defence of our home. And our home is the State of Israel. That's what motivates me."

The 910 Battalion has suffered no fatalities since it arrived in the area four months ago. One soldier was killed in a road accident. Two others have been wounded. This record belies the level of activity undertaken by the battalion and is a source of some pride.

"October 7 found us ready, because we'd already carried out active service that year," Nomi, a major, and the

operations officer for the 910 Battalion, tells me back at the battalion's headquarters. Nomi, an immigrant from France, is a rare example of a female operations officer in one of the IDF's combat battalions.

On October 7, when the 910 Battalion was mobilised, she was in Brittany with her family for the holidays.

"I woke up and saw the messages. And, you remember, the number of dead was rising throughout the day. So I knew I had to get back."

She has been doing reserve duty with the 910 Battalion for six years. They had already been mobilised. "But only El Al was flying. So I managed to get to Paris, and I got a Paris-Marseilles flight, and then a flight to Israel. I got here after two days." She has been in Gush Etzion since then.

"We know that there is weaponry in the villages. And many of the villages are aligned with Hamas. There was an attempt to run over one of our soldiers in El Aroub. The terrorist was killed immediately. And there's firing sometimes on the Jewish communities. But from a distance, and not accurately."


"In Adura, there was an attempted attack, just a week ago. The terrorists had M16s and axes. And just two days ago, in Halhoul, we arrested people from the Islamic Jihad," Alon, a deputy company commander, another graduate of the Kfir Brigade, tells me, after the arrests are done and the night's business mainly concluded.

Alon, a medical student in Beersheba, has been in Gush Etzion since Oct. 8, like the others.

This is a snapshot of a simmering potential third front, on which the lid is currently being kept, with much ongoing effort. The underlying logic of the situation is identical to that of the other arenas, though the balance of the sides is very different.

Noted Israeli writer Yossi Klein Halevi, at a recent event in Jerusalem, said that Israeli society's response to October 7 and what has followed indicated that Israelis retain an "intuition of peoplehood." It is a memorable phrase. I think he was referring to the instant, instinctive solidarity and mobilisation that was witnessed in the first days, replacing the fractious divisions of the preceding months.

This intuition, it seems to me, may be witnessed in its steadiest and purest form in the frontline units of the army, both regular and reserve.

This is a consolation for the fact that a quarter of a century on from my own generation's turn, some of the best young people of Israel are still out there in the night, dealing with the machinery of conflict, a 30-minute drive from downtown Jerusalem. 

Jonathan Spyer is director of research at the Middle East Forum and director of the Middle East Centre for Reporting and Analysis. He is author of Days of the Fall: A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars (2018). © Jerusalem Post (www.jpost.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



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Numbers Do Not Add Up

Hamas-sourced Gaza casualty figures appear bogus

Abraham Wyner

The number of civilian casualties in Gaza has been at the centre of international attention since the start of the war. The main source for the data has been the Hamas-controlled Gaza Health Ministry, which now claims more than 30,000 dead, the majority of which it says are children and women. Recently, the Biden Administration lent legitimacy to Hamas’ figure. When asked at a House Armed Services Committee hearing how many Palestinian women and children have been killed since October 7, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said the number was “over 25,000”. The Pentagon quickly clarified that the Secretary “was citing an estimate from the Hamas-controlled Health Ministry.” President Biden himself had earlier cited this figure, asserting that “too many, too many of the over 27,000 Palestinians killed in this conflict have been innocent civilians and children, including thousands of children.” The White House also explained that the President “was referring to publicly available data about the total number of casualties.”

Here’s the problem with this data: The numbers are not real. That much is obvious to anyone who understands how naturally occurring numbers work. The casualties are not overwhelmingly women and children, and the majority may be Hamas fighters.

If Hamas’ numbers are faked or fraudulent in some way, there may be evidence in the numbers themselves that can demonstrate it. While there is not much data avail-

able, there is a little, and it is enough: From Oct. 26 until Nov. 10, 2023, the Gaza Health Ministry released daily casualty figures that include both a total number and a specific number of women and children.

The first place to look is the reported “total” number of deaths. The graph of total deaths by date is increasing with almost metronomical linearity, as the graph in **Figure 1** reveals.

The graph reveals an extremely regular increase in casualties over the period. Data aggregated by the author and provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), based on Gaza MoH figures.

This regularity is almost surely not real. One would expect quite a bit of variation day to day. In fact, the daily reported casualty count over this period averages 270 plus or minus about 15%. This is strikingly little variation. There should be days with twice the average or more and others with half or less. Perhaps what is happening is the Gaza Ministry is releasing fake daily numbers that vary too little because it does not have a clear understanding of the behaviour of naturally occurring numbers. Unfortunately, verified control data is not available to formally test this conclusion, but the details of the daily counts render the

numbers suspicious.

Similarly, we should see variation in the number of child casualties that tracks the variation in the number of women. This is because the daily variation in death counts is caused by the variation in the number of strikes on residential buildings and tunnels which should result in considerable variability in the totals but less variation in the percentage of deaths across groups. This is a basic statistical fact about chance variability.

Consequently, on the days with many women casualties there should be large numbers of child casualties, and on the days when just a few women are reported to have been killed, just a few children should be reported. This relationship can be measured and quantified by the R-square (R^2) statistic that measures how correlated the daily casualty count

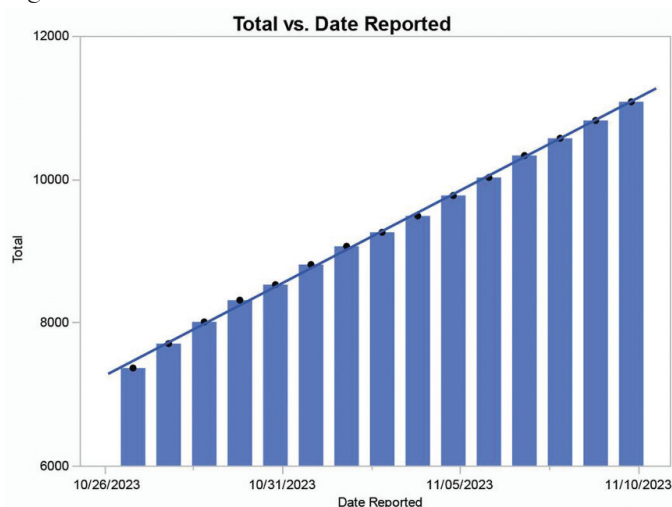


Figure 1

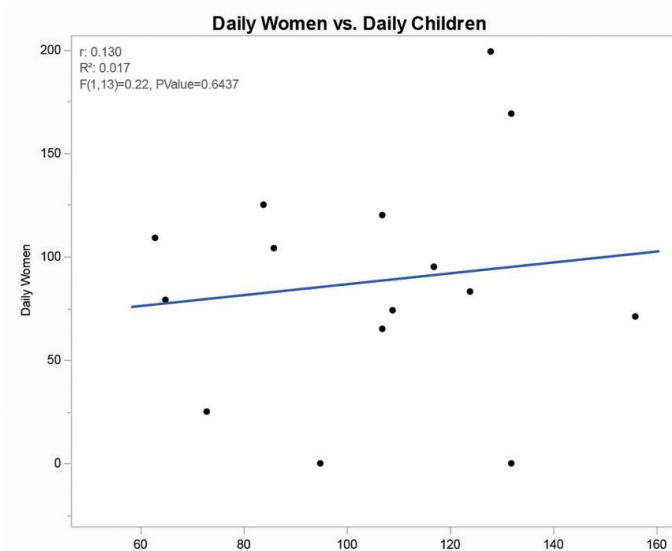


Figure 2



for women is with the daily casualty count for children. If the numbers were real, we would expect R^2 to be substantively larger than zero, tending closer to 1.0. But R^2 is .017 which is statistically and substantively not different from zero (Figure 2).

This lack of correlation is the second circumstantial piece of evidence suggesting the numbers are not real. But there is more. The daily number of women casualties should be highly correlated with the number of non-women and non-children (i.e., men) reported. Again, this is expected because of the nature of battle. The ebbs and flows of the bombings and attacks by Israel should cause the daily count to move together. But that is not what the data show. Not only is there not a positive correlation, there is a strong negative correlation, which makes no sense at all and establishes the third piece of evidence that the numbers are not real.

The correlation between the daily men and daily women death count (Figure 3) is absurdly strong and negative (p -value < .0001).

Consider some further anomalies in the data: First, the death count reported on Oct. 29 contradicts the numbers reported on the 28th, insofar as they imply that 26 men came back to life. This can happen because of misattribution or just reporting error. There are a few other days where the numbers of men are reported to be near zero. If these were just reporting errors, then on those days where the death count for men appears to be in error, the women's count should be typical, at least on average. But it turns out that on the three days when the men's count is near zero, suggesting an error, the women's count is high. In fact, the three highest daily women casualty counts occur on those three days.

There are three days where the male casualty count is close to zero. These three days correspond to the three highest daily women's casualty counts (Figure 4).

Taken together, what does this all imply? While the evidence is not dispositive, it is highly suggestive that a

process unconnected or loosely connected to reality was used to report the numbers. Most likely, the Hamas Ministry settled on a daily total arbitrarily. We know this because the daily totals increase too consistently to be real. Then it assigned about 70% of the total to be women and children, splitting that amount randomly from day to day. Then it in-filled the number of men as set by the predetermined total. This explains all the data observed.

There are other obvious red flags. The Gaza Health Ministry has consistently claimed that about 70% of the casualties are women or children. This total is far higher

than the numbers reported in earlier conflicts with Israel. Another red flag, raised by Salo Aizenberg and written about extensively, is that if 70% of the casualties are women and children and 25% of the population is adult male, then either Israel is not successfully eliminating Hamas fighters or adult male casualty counts are extremely low. This by itself strongly suggests that the numbers are at a minimum grossly inaccurate and quite probably outright faked. Finally, on Feb. 15, Hamas admitted to losing 6,000 of its fighters, which represents more than 20% of the total number of casualties reported.

Taken together, Hamas is reporting not only that 70% of casualties are women and children but also that 20% are fighters. This is not possible unless Israel is somehow not killing non-combatant men, or else Hamas is claiming that almost all the men in

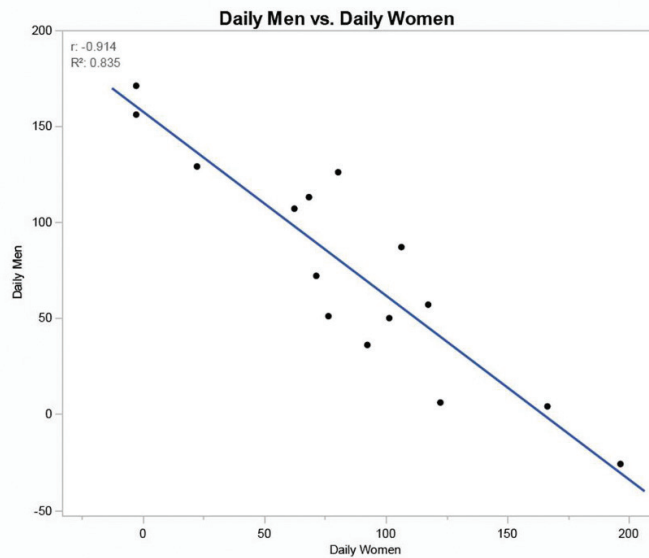


Figure 3

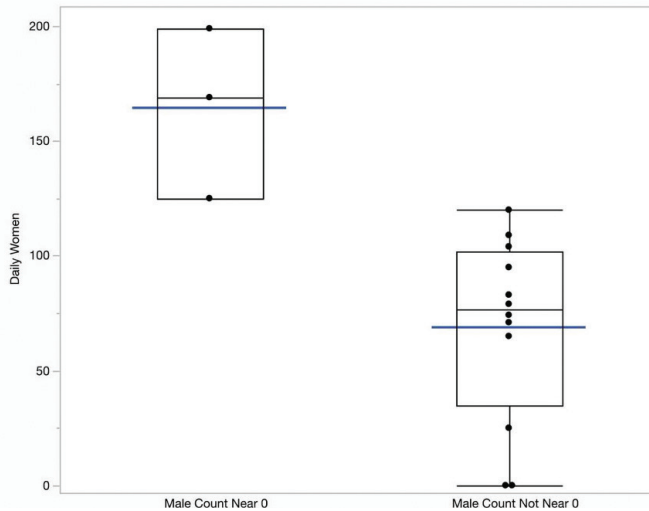


Figure 4

Gaza are Hamas fighters.

Are there better numbers? Some objective commentators have acknowledged Hamas' numbers in previous battles with Israel to be roughly accurate. Nevertheless, this war is wholly unlike its predecessors in scale or scope; international observers who were able to monitor previous wars are now completely absent, so the past can't be assumed to be a reliable guide. The fog of war is especially thick in Gaza, making it impossible to quickly determine civilian death totals with any accuracy. Not only do official Palestinian death counts fail to differentiate soldiers from

children, but Hamas also blames all deaths on Israel even if caused by Hamas' own misfired rockets, accidental explosions, deliberate killings, or internal battles.

One group of researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health compared Hamas reports to data on UNRWA workers. They argued that because the death rates were approximately similar, Hamas' numbers must not be inflated. But their argument relied on a crucial and unverified assumption: that UNRWA workers are not disproportionately more likely to be killed than the general population. That premise exploded when it was uncovered that a sizable fraction of UNRWA workers are affiliated with Hamas. Some were even exposed as having participated in the October 7 massacre itself.

The truth can't yet be known and probably never will be. The total civilian casualty count is likely to be extremely overstated. Israel estimates that at least 12,000 fighters have been killed. If that number proves to be even reasonably accurate, then the ratio of non-combatant casualties to combatants is remarkably low: at most 1.4 to one and perhaps as low as one to one. By historical standards of urban warfare, where combatants are embedded above and below into civilian population centres, this is a remarkable and successful effort to prevent unnecessary loss of life while fighting an implacable enemy that protects itself with civilians. AIR

Abraham Wyner is Professor of Statistics and Data Science at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and Faculty Co-Director of the Wharton Sports Analytics and Business Initiative. This article is reprinted from Tablet Magazine, at tabletmag.com, the online magazine of Jewish news, ideas, and culture. © Tablet Magazine, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved. (The data used in the article can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/WynerGazadata>.)

RELATIONSHIP TROUBLES

Ilan Evyatar

Spats between American presidents and Israeli prime ministers are nothing new: President George H. W. Bush clashed with Yitzhak Shamir over settlement expansion and refused to give Israel loan guarantees for the absorption of the wave of Soviet immigrants in the early 1990s. His son, George W. Bush, clashed with Ariel Sharon in October 2001 at the height of the Second Intifada, just a few weeks after 9/11, when he signalled that the US would call for a Palestinian state. Sharon responded, publicly, by inferring that Bush was behaving like Neville

Chamberlain in Munich and wanted to “appease the Arabs at our expense.”

Spats between American presidents and current PM Binyamin Netanyahu are also definitely not new. Netanyahu had a troubled relationship with Bill Clinton. After their first meeting, the President reportedly said: “Who the f**k does he think he is? Who’s the f**king super-power here?” His relationship with Barack Obama was no better, to put it mildly: In his recently published memoir, *My Brother’s Keeper*, former Netanyahu chief of staff Ari Harrow describes some Obama-Netanyahu “moments” including how at a photo-op between the two leaders after the 2014 Gaza war (Operation Protective Edge) “displayed the body language of men who wanted nothing to do with one another.” Things got even worse after Netanyahu spoke to a joint session of Congress to oppose the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, without the Administration’s agreement.

Fast forward a decade, and five months into the latest Gaza conflict, and it seems that the language between an American administration and an Israeli leader has rarely been so belligerent or so openly expressed.



Biden and Bibi in better days (Image: GPO/ Flickr)

President Joe Biden went on *MSNBC* to tell viewers that Netanyahu “is hurting Israel more than helping.” Vice President Kamala Harris said there was a need to distinguish between the Israeli Government and the Israeli people, and the strongly pro-Israel majority leader Chuck Schumer – the highest ranking Jew in the American Congress – delivered the toughest blow in what seems like a coordinated attack by calling for Netanyahu’s ouster: “The Netanyahu coalition no longer fits the needs of Israel after October 7... a new election is the only way to allow for a healthy and open decision-making process about the future of Israel, at a time when so many Israelis have lost their confidence in the vision and direction of their government.” Biden called it a “good speech”.

While serving as Obama’s vice president, Biden once said, “I don’t agree with a damn thing you say, Bibi, but I still love you.” The disagreement remains. The love seems to have been lost.

The comments came in the wake of the Biden Adminis-



tration’s growing frustration with the Netanyahu Government, and especially its hard-right elements, frustrations that had been building even before the Gaza war.

The Administration believes that, given its unprecedented support for Israel during the war, Jerusalem should be more receptive to Washington’s demands. Among these are:

- That Jerusalem facilitate the transfer of greater amounts of humanitarian aid into Gaza;
- That the IDF move to employing more pinpoint military methods leaving less wide-scale destruction in Gaza;
- That it also refrain from a major ground operation into the southern Gazan city of Rafah, the last Hamas bastion in the Strip, and instead only pursue limited raids there;
- And, above all else, that it plays ball with US plans for a broad initiative that would see Israeli normalise ties with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries in exchange for commitments to move toward establishing a demilitarised Palestinian state at some point.

The Administration hasn’t just been verbally critical. There have been insinuations that it could take steps such as placing restrictions on the use of American weapons if, for example, Israel crosses a “red line” and goes into Rafah without first finding a solution for the 1.5 million Palestinians who have been displaced there from other parts of the Strip.

Biden and the entire upper echelon of the Administration also recently hosted Benny Gantz, the leader of the National Union party, a Netanyahu rival despite currently participating in the War Cabinet, and the man who is likely to replace Netanyahu if elections are held in the near future. It is clear President Biden and his staff believe Gantz would be a far easier Israeli leader to deal with than Netanyahu and much more likely to sign up for its plans for the day after.

It should note, however, that Gantz too was critical of Schumer’s anti-Netanyahu tirade – he called the Senate Majority Leader’s comments “counter-productive and unacceptable”. Moreover, like Netanyahu, Gantz believes Israel must complete the job in Rafah.

Netanyahu has fiercely rebuffed the US criticism of his Government, noting that his position that Israel needs to finish off the battle against Hamas – including taking Rafah – represents the views of the vast majority of Israelis. He also called Schumer’s comments “wholly inappropriate” and said that Israel is not a “banana republic” that will have elections “foisted” upon it.

On both sides, domestic politics is clearly at play. With elections now just a few months away, Biden needs to placate Arab American voters and progressives, who condemn him for taking Israel’s side in the war against Hamas, a sentiment that could cost him key states such as Michigan,

where there is a large Arab American population.

Netanyahu for his part needs to keep his hard right coalition partners happy – and is also likely to come under heavy pressure for new elections once the current war winds down. Playing hardball with the US while proclaiming variations on the theme, “I am the only one who can stand up to the international community and resist pressure for a Palestinian state” have never harmed him with his political base before.

The latest spat has been described as both a “watershed” moment and an “earthquake”, but just how far apart the US and Israel are drifting is actually unclear. After all, just as spats between Israeli PMs and American presidents are nothing new, so too there is little new in claims that profound damage to the US-Israel relationship is just around the corner.

Israel’s former ambassador to the United States, Danny Ayalon, who held the position from 2002-2006 and witnessed ups and downs in the relationship between President George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon, suggested to me that the difference between the present crisis and previous disputes is that previous examples were generally relatively short-lived. Bush and Sharon, for example, soon built up a strong working relationship after their early disagreements.

“Netanyahu is doing a lot of damage [to the US-Israel relationship],” Ayalon argues. “He needs to take the initiative. He should have put forward a plan for the day after the Gaza War.”


This time the dispute also comes amid changing dynamics in the United States. There is a big generational gap in support for Israel, with young Americans far less supportive of Israel than their elders, while young Jewish Americans tend to be less involved with Israel. Support for Israel in the Democratic party is declining, and progressives are increasingly overtly pro-Palestinian. Minority groups have a far greater weight than in the past and tend to disapprove of Israel’s actions. The changes in the Democratic party base mean that Israel is increasingly becoming a partisan issue, where bipartisan support was largely the norm over recent decades.

Yet Republican support is also not guaranteed. In the evangelical community – once a pro-Israel bedrock – parts of the younger generation are also turning away from Israel. Meanwhile, the party as a whole is growing more isolationist in the current era of increasing dominance by Donald Trump. More than half of Senate Republicans recently voted against an aid package for Israel, Ukraine and Taiwan (though many did so to leverage their votes to get a quid pro quo on immigration they were seeking.)

Back in 2010, I spoke with the French philosopher and public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy, who had just spent a year travelling the US. Discussing with me the question

of American support for Israel, he warned: “I don’t want to be a prophet of bad omen, but nothing grants that this miraculous friendship will last forever... Nothing is eternal in the history of human beings... Politicians have a tendency to believe that the situation of the moment can be frozen for eternity. That is not the case.”

So, as the currents that Lévy warned of gather force, is Israel destined to find itself facing a future where American support is constantly in question?

Not so fast, says Ayalon. For the moment, Israel and the United States still have common values and common interests, and only a strong Israel can maintain stability in the region. “I don’t see a change in the immediate future,” he says. 

Ilan Evyatar is a former editor-in-chief of the Jerusalem Report. He is co-author with Yonah Jeremy Bob of Target Tehran: How Israel Is Using Sabotage, Cyberwarfare, Assassination – and Secret Diplomacy – to Stop a Nuclear Iran and Create a New Middle East (Simon & Schuster, 2023).

A PLAN FOR GAZA

John Hannah, Elliott Abrams & Lewis Libby

What is next for Gaza? With or without a hostage deal, the best hope for peace depends on continuing along the path endorsed by US President Biden after Hamas’ October 7 attack: Destroy Hamas’ military and governance capabilities; prevent its ability to threaten Israel again; and deal a defeat to Iran’s “axis of resistance”.

Such hopes won’t be realised by military means alone. As evidenced by the Feb. 29 aid convoy stampede that saw scores of desperate Palestinians die, what’s required is a simultaneous effort to address Gaza’s humanitarian crisis and vacuum of order arising in the war’s wake. Left unattended, a descent into anarchy will worsen Gazan despair, deepen Israel’s isolation, and benefit Iran and Hamas.

After multiple trips to the Middle East and nearly 100 expert interviews, we and a group of former US national security officials who worked for presidents of both parties believe the most realistic option is to create a private International Trust for Gaza Relief and Reconstruction.

The Trust would be established as an independent entity dedicated to building a peaceful post-Hamas Gaza. In effect, it would act as a super-NGO. This mechanism would offer key states, particularly in the Arab world, a less politically-charged means of immediately aiding Gazans without directly putting their own prestige, diplomats or forces on the line in a high-risk environment where Israeli forces will remain active for months to come.

With US participation, the Trust ideally would be led by friendly Arab states like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates with the greatest legitimacy, resources and interests to build a better future for Gaza. The Trust would work with all those willing to contribute to its mission, including other donor states, partner NGOs and international bodies like competent United Nations agencies.

The Trust’s first priority would be to mobilise large-scale emergency relief, including food, water, medical care and rapid construction of prefabricated housing communities that could serve as humanitarian islands of stability.

These efforts could start in areas of northern and central Gaza where Hamas control is already unravelling. As the immediate humanitarian crisis is stabilised, the Trust would help Gazans restore essential services, repair critical infrastructure, launch economic reconstruction, and generate responsible new leadership and police.

These initiatives should include deradicalisation programs for Gaza’s media, schools and mosques that draw on the success of similar efforts in the Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

The Trust should include an advisory council of closely vetted local Gazans as well as Gazans from the West Bank and diaspora with relevant administrative, security and professional experience, and the best knowledge of Gazan society.

If such forces prove insufficient, the Trust should consider another option: hiring professional security contractors (PSC) with good reputations among Western militaries to undertake limited missions like preventing looting of aid supplies. Lessons learned from other conflicts have shown that with strict accountability regimes in place, PSCs are able to play valuable and effective roles.

Ultimately, the Trust would be an interim mechanism, focused on immediate humanitarian and governance priorities. As an Arab-led initiative, it would have unique credibility – both internationally and among Palestinians – to build a better future for Gaza and begin restoring it as a key component in an agreed-upon political horizon for Israel-Palestinian peace.

The Trust has clear advantages over the most-frequently discussed alternatives for Gaza’s “day after”.

Israel is a non-starter. It lacks the will, resources and above all legitimacy with Gazans to rebuild Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority has enormous trouble running the West Bank. It has no chance today of effectively addressing the much larger problem of Gaza. Its most useful contribution would be blessing the Trust’s efforts and undertaking the major reforms required to make it a suitable candidate for governing a future Palestinian state.

As for the UN, what more is there to say than “UNRWA”? The UN’s lead agency for assisting Palestinians has been fatally compromised by mounting evidence that

Hamas systematically infiltrated its operations in Gaza, including employees who participated in the October 7 massacres.

Friendly Arab states appear reticent to deploy their own national forces to Gaza and rightly so. It would quickly expose them to charges of doing Israel's bidding and could also lead to disastrous clashes with Israeli troops. Hamas and Iran would work hard to exacerbate such frictions, just as they would if Americans were deployed.

Weighed against the alternatives, the Trust offers a more realistic path to address Gaza's immediate crisis. It could also resurrect a degree of Israeli cooperation with its Arab neighbours that can jumpstart US-led efforts for creating a political horizon and countering the growing threat from Iran's "axis of resistance".

AIR

John Hannah is a senior fellow at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA) and previously served in senior foreign policy positions for both Democratic and Republican US administrations. Elliott Abrams is the chairman of The Vandenberg Coalition and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Lewis Libby served in senior positions at the White House, Pentagon, and State Department. The authors are members of the Gaza Futures Task Force, a joint project of the Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA) and The Vandenberg Coalition. Originally published on Fox News. © JINSA (www.JINSA.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

A GAZAN'S CALL FOR PEACE AND COEXISTENCE

Ohad Merlin

Born in Gaza in 1997 to a family with six children, Hamza grew up and lived his entire life in the Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City. He got his bachelor's degree in accounting at the Islamic University of Gaza in 2021 and then worked as an accountant for two years before escaping the enclave in August 2023. The *Jerusalem Post* interviewed him from his place in exile, where he continues to share and create pro-peace and anti-Hamas content.

Hamza participated in the 2019 demonstrations against Hamas rule that were violently quashed by the terrorist group and has written since then about his experiences in Hamas prisons, where he was accused of dissent and was subjected to various types of torture.

Can you describe the situation in Gaza right now?

"If there was a single word to describe the main con-

ditions in Gaza, it would be anarchy. The destruction of more than 70% of the infrastructure in Gaza resulted in more than 1.2 million people being displaced, most of them living in tents in southern Gaza in disastrous living conditions."

Hamza also pointed to an issue unknown to many in Israel: that convicts were released *en masse* from Gazan jails as a result of Israel's offensive. So now there is a lack of law enforcement in the enclave, on top of everything else. According to the peace activist, this paved the way for the establishment of several gangs, which work with Hamas to plunder humanitarian aid.

"Most people spend their days waiting for relief air-drops or in line to get food for their family. In the north (of the Strip), humanitarian conditions worsened along with the loss of connection to relatives in the south or outside of Gaza."

When asked about his family, Hamza said they live in a temporary tent in Rafah, burning wood to heat their food. When we need to communicate, they must go near Rafah Crossing for an internet connection. "I hope they can escape this nightmare and find a safer location soon," he said.

Hamza said Hamas had been losing support in Gaza before October for a variety of reasons, including social and economic conditions, as evidenced by the number of emigrants who fled Gaza before the war and the anti-Hamas riots that took place in July. "Hamas' leadership couldn't find a better solution other than turning this anger to another enemy – Israel," he said.

"I was eight years old when the Disengagement [evacuation of Israeli settlements and soldiers from the Gaza strip] was implemented [in 2005]," he said. "It was the most significant step toward an independent Palestinian state in decades. I still remember how people in Gaza welcomed it and the ceasefire that ended more than five years of enmity between the Palestinian Authority and Israel," Hamza reminisced, referring to the Second Intifada and Israeli Operation Defensive Shield that followed.

However, Hamza stressed that Hamas succeeded in branding the Disengagement as a "victory" for the resistance rather than a result of peace efforts or at least a push toward peace, which he attributes to a lack of a clear strategy and coordination.

Hamas then won the enclave's 2006 elections and took control after the bloody coup against Fatah that followed. "Hamas' revolution was unavoidable given the Palestinian Authority's corruption and how they turned a blind eye to Hamas' acts while recruiting, arming, and managing various organisations in Gazan society," he said.

"Many of this war's most significant hurdles, including the Hamas tunnels, are the result of postponing the solution by closing Gaza [off]. Hamas reintroduced the idea of creating tunnels, not only for smuggling goods and weapons, but also as a military tactic."

Hamza also expressed criticism of Israel. “The problem with past Israeli operations is that they weren’t serious enough to put an end to Hamas. That gave Hamas 17 years to expand their tunnels under almost every house and every street in Gaza; they became like cancer. Now, both Palestinians and Israelis are paying for this,” he said.

“I witnessed multiple Hamas crimes in Gaza, but what occurred on October 7 was far worse than any of them. I can’t see it as anything but a cruel attack on humanity,” the exiled peace activist said, adding that while he supports the goal of removing Hamas, “I am opposed to many of the IDF’s actions that [if they weren’t carried out] could save many lives, as well as statements made by some Israeli authorities. Eliminating Hamas is crucial, but saving the lives of both innocent Gazans and Israeli hostages is also critical.

“None of what has happened or is happening would be relevant without a plan for the day after,” he stressed, adding that it should be “developed by Israel, the restructured Palestinian Authority, the United States, and some Arab countries – to avoid the mistakes made in the 2005 Disengagement plan.”

How do you view a path to a solution for the conflict in general?

“It’s not easy to answer a question like this, but I believe that peace and coexistence won’t be applicable by [just] one party,” Hamza answered thoughtfully. “For that to happen, the Palestinian side should take significant steps to deradicalise by reforming the educational system, renewing religious discourse, and investing their budget in providing jobs for their people. On the other hand, the Israeli Government must be committed to withdraw from Gaza, the West Bank, and east Jerusalem.”

Deradicalisation is a massive undertaking, but history has shown it is possible, he suggested, “If you told anyone that Germany would be de-Nazified 90 years ago or the UAE would be deradicalised ten years ago, they wouldn’t believe you. With the proper reforming of education and the renewal of religious discourse, I believe it can be accomplished.

“In my opinion, we should learn from the UAE’s experience on that and start making genuine efforts for rehabilitation, producing counter-content against terrorism, and providing them with more jobs to not be exploited by terrorists for money,” he said.

Are your views unique to your environment? Or do you think they represent a consensus?

“Feeding my people jihadist propaganda for 17 years was enough to influence their thoughts about peace to the point that calling for cohabitation seemed strange

and undesirable. Still, many people believed in it, but the consequences and Hamas’ accusation of treason contributed to the silence and terrorisation of many others,” Hamza said.

There have been multiple reports of Gazan civilians looting and being woven very closely in with the horrific acts Hamas committed, including holding hostages and beating kidnapped Israelis in the streets. Video footage has circulated, showing scenes of celebration of the massacre and videos of Gazans still rooting for the genocidal terrorist group.

“There is no doubt that Hamas managed to build a base of supporters in Gaza who were radicalised by listening, reading, and watching its agenda for years and to believe its leaders’ narrative that ‘there are no innocents in Israel.’ I feel ashamed because of them; I’m afraid to return to Gaza because of them,” he said.

“I want the people of Israel to know that there are many individuals in Gaza, including myself, who are opposed to these atrocities; if I were in Gaza, I would not talk about it – and many others would die if they did. Do not lose your hope for peace because of Hamas; it’s exactly what they want.”

What would be your final message to our readers?

“First and foremost, I’d like to express my heartfelt sympathies to the families of those killed, as well as my solidarity with all of the victims and hostage families. Unlike what the Arabic media portrays, not all Gazans are Hamas or support their crimes; we are all victims of hate ideology. If there was only one motive to advocate for peace, it would be to deny these terrorists a chance to destroy Israelis’ and Palestinians’ hopes for peace and their shared future “and to put an end to the conflict within our generation.”



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The best single word to describe Gaza today is “anarchy” (Image: Shutterstock)

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THE ENDLESS CRUSADE BEHIND FOUR CORNERS’ “FOREVER WAR”

Ahron Shapiro

“The Forever War,” screened March 11, was an ABC-TV “Four Corners” episode that focused on the current Israel-Hamas war which began with Hamas’ October 7 massacre, rape, pillaging and hostage-taking spree. It was created and narrated by ABC Global Affairs Editor John Lyons.

Like Lyons’ previous Four Corners offering on the Israel-Palestinian conflict – the Walkley Award winning “Stone Cold Justice” (2014) – this piece blends elements of investigative journalism with an activist political agenda, with the former deployed in an apparent attempt to give more credibility to the latter.

This article is not a chapter and verse deconstruction of the 45-minute program – that will be published later – but rather an overview that will make a few key observations that serve to demonstrate that the program is the work of an experienced storyteller, nothing less and nothing more. Lyons set out with a preconceived plan of the ideas he wanted to give air to and conclusions he wanted the viewers to reach, with interviewees carefully chosen and their contributions then edited as needed to get the desired result.



John Lyons in “The Forever War” (Screenshot)

YEHUDA SHAUL: THE ODD “COMMANDER” OUT

Lyons provides what is called the “nut graph” in journalism, or the context of the story in a nutshell, at 1:45 into the piece. It is here that we understand from Lyons where he plans to take this story, with what substance:

In this Four Corners we go head-to-head with insiders at the

centre of Israel’s defence and intelligence establishment – a former Prime Minister, two ex-intelligence chiefs, a current cabinet minister, and a one-time Israeli army commander. We challenge them about one of the most controversial wars in modern times.

Sounds great, but who are these stellar interview subjects – literally in Lyons’ words “insiders at the centre of Israel’s defence and intelligence establishment”?

Former Prime Minister: Ehud Barak (1999-2001), as head of the Labor party. Former IDF Chief of Staff (1991-95), Former Defence Minister under Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Ex-intelligence Chief #1: Ami Ayalon (Head of Israel’s internal security agency Shin Bet 1995-2000) and former peace activist and Labor MK. Former head of the Israeli Navy who retired with the rank of General.

Ex-intelligence Chief #2: Avi Dichter (Ayalon’s successor as head of the Shin Bet, 2000-2005). Current cabinet minister with the Likud party and a former Minister of Internal Security, Dichter served in the elite *Sayeret Matkal* commando unit under Ehud Barak.

“One-time Israeli Army commander”: Yehuda Shaul, head of the far-left wing NGO Breaking the Silence. At one point in his mandatory military service was an IDF “*Sarsap*” – an NCO in the 50th Battalion of the Nahal Infantry corps during the Second Intifada (2001-2004). Completed his IDF

service with the rank of First Sergeant.

Lyons is on solid ground describing Barak, Ayalon and Dichter as credible authorities on matters of defence and intelligence, though Dichter is the only one of those three that could be described as an insider in the current war.

But to place Shaul – a favourite subject of Lyons, interviewed at length in “Stone Cold Justice” – on the list of “insiders at the centre of Israel’s defence and intelligence establishment” and give him about five minutes of airtime – over 10% of the overall episode – is frankly an embarrassment to journalism.

What important military service did Shaul once perform, and what has he done recently, to be included on this distinguished list of interviewees about the current military with the lofty title of “former West Bank military commander”?

Having served in the IDF and having done my basic training on a Nahal-run base, I know firsthand what I am talking about.

Shaul’s specific title was “*Sarsap*”, an acronym for “*Sgan rav samal plugati*”, which means the assistant to the “*Rasap*” or Company Sergeant Major. Mostly that meant being responsible (as an assistant, mind you) for mostly logistical operations for a maximum of 120 soldiers. To put things in perspective, according to the *Times of Israel*, during the height of the current Gaza War, the IDF had “five maneuvering divisions... fighting simultaneously... with around 10,000 to 20,000 soldiers each”!

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But, again, what really did Shaul do in his army service? Shortly after his discharge in 2004, when Shaul first caught the interest of the left-wing newspaper *Ha'aretz*, he described an occasion when he “brought food to a position set up by the IDF inside a Palestinian house overlooking the al-Sheikh neighborhood” of Hebron during the Second Intifada. Shaul told *Ha'aretz* he spent 14 months in Hebron, though it's unclear whether he served as a *Sarsap* the entire time.



Yehuda Shaul: Former junior NCO billed as a defence authority (Screenshot)

Shaul wasn't an officer. He didn't lead battles. He wasn't a company commander. He did some logistical support work. He was discharged from the IDF, as stated, in 2004, and I've never located any account of his

having served in the reserves after that.

What he did do straight out of the army is form a political NGO called “Breaking the Silence” (BtS) comprised of former IDF soldiers who anonymously criticise Israel's occupation of the West Bank (Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, so BtS has therefore had almost nothing to say about Gaza until now).

That means Shaul has nothing of value to contribute to the current conversation besides his own opinionated viewpoint as an Israeli political activist far removed from army service.

THE FOREVER WAR: THE PALESTINIANS VS ISRAEL OR LYONS VS ISRAEL?

Lyons' overselling of Shaul's credentials is emblematic of the false bill of goods that he sells to the viewer from his other interviewees. Lyons, as the storyteller, gets to choose who we hear the story from.

Of all the interviewees, only Dichter can be described as espousing the views of the governing coalition and those who voted for it. The aforementioned Barak and Ayalon are identified with the political left.

Another interviewee, former Foreign Minister and former head of the Kadima Party Tzipi Livni, is centre left. Shaul is far-left, as is *Ha'aretz* reporter Amira Hass, who is so completely in agreement with the Palestinian narrative that she has lived in Ramallah since 1997 – she is the only prominent Israeli who is accepted as a resident in the Palestinian Authority's seat of government, where Israeli Jews are generally forbidden to even visit.

Besides these interviewees, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Minister of Internal Security Itamar Ben-Gvir appear in brief sound bites.

Representing the Palestinians are two academics: Dalal Iriqat, Associate Prof. of Diplomacy at the Arab American

University Palestine in Ramallah, and Abdaljawad Omar, a PhD student and part-time lecturer in the Philosophy and Cultural Studies Department at Birzeit University.

Having the Palestinians represented by a couple of academics is a puzzling decision by Lyons. The Palestinians have their own recognised government – the Palestinian Authority. Not to invite any of their leaders to be interviewed in a documentary about the intractability of the conflict raises obvious questions.

Could it be that Lyons didn't want to muddy the waters by having to then discuss Israeli peace offers extended to the PA's leaders by Barak in 2000 and 2001 and Livni's part in the 2008 Annapolis peace offer under then Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, as well as the advanced negotiations led by Livni on behalf of the Netanyahu Government in 2014? Because his program ignored all these negotiations as if they never happened, even while quoting both of these leading figures in them.

CAPTAIN'S CALL: ONE OUTSIDE EXPERT

In constructing “The Forever War”, Lyons chose to include exactly one outside “expert” voice with experience discussing the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel: the far-left, Jewish, US and Jerusalem-based journalist and author Nathan Thrall.

Thrall is the former director of the Arab-Israeli project at the International Crisis Group and an author of, among other things, *The only language they understand* – a book calling for an imposed solution in favour of the Palestinians.

I'll explore Thrall's specific comments from “The Forever War” in the upcoming larger deconstruction but what I find revealing is what Thrall had to say at the time of the Hamas attack itself.

On Oct. 8, 2023, the day after Hamas' massacre, Thrall gave an interview to the *New Yorker* that was highly critical – not of Hamas, but of himself for not doing more to draw attention to what he called the “root causes” which drove Hamas to carry out its massacre. And make no mistake, he places the blame almost entirely on Israel for creating the “root causes” of October 7. Thrall said:

[When I left the ICG, what I thought] I needed to do was to bring more attention to the root causes, which are ignored and we are just guaranteed to see more and more of these sporadic outbursts of violence, with civilians killed on both sides, because we refuse to focus on the actual causes of the violence.

I leave it to the reader's own judgement whether or not Lyons chose Thrall as his sole outside expert because he reflected Lyons' own belief regarding where to place the blame for the atrocities of October 7, a belief which Lyons wanted ABC viewers to absorb.

For more, see Media Microscope on p. 39. Plus a longer, more detailed deconstruction of “Forever War” will be published on the AIJAC website in coming weeks.





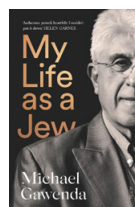
THE BIBLIO FILE

The Education of an Editor

My Life as a Jew

by Michael Gawenda

Scribe, October 2023, 288 pp., \$35.00



Allon Lee

Former Melbourne *Age* editor Michael Gawenda's memoir, *My Life as a Jew*, is a case of cometh the hour, cometh the author.

The timeliness and importance of this new book cannot be overstated.

In the book, Gawenda documents his growing recent alienation from his ideological home on the Left, which has turned against Israel and Jews who support it, meaning most of world Jewry.

A three-time Walkley Award winner, he examines the historical processes that have led to this fissure and does so in an Australian context, which is a rarity.

Published mere days before October 7, it loses nothing from its release on the cusp of this horrific event.

Denied the advantage of 20-20 hindsight, Gawenda's analysis of the direction the cultural, political, social and ideological winds were blowing came to be tested more or less in real time – and proved prescient.

The book covers the length and breadth of Australian stakeholders who involve themselves in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including politicians, journalists and academics.

Among those it locks horns with are high profile anti-Zionist Jewish publisher Louise Adler, crusading

ABC journalist John Lyons, and the Israel lobby obsessed former Australian foreign minister Bob Carr. Many of these same individuals have been prominent in public debate since October 7.

The corrosive effect activist journalists are having on balanced and professional coverage of the Middle East is also canvassed.

By interweaving his personal experiences with the political, Gawenda, a skilled writer and keen observer, never lets the reader's attention flag.

A child of Holocaust survivors, Gawenda was born in a displaced person's camp in Linz, Austria two years after WWII ended.

His parents were Bundists – a Jewish movement that believed Jews would be better off in a world built on socialism, secularism, internationalism and opposition to Zionism.

Yet even when antisemitism appeared to be in retreat after the Holocaust and Jews exercised sovereignty for the first time in 2,000 years, Gawenda appears to have intuited that the world remained a cold place for Jews.

Early on, he declares, "I spent a lifetime determined not to be a Jew-

ish journalist. I now think that was a mistake. It was as if I were hiding the fact that I was a Jew."

This epiphany arrived rather late in his long career, during his seven-year stint as editor of the *Age* (1997-2004).

It didn't matter if non-Jewish colleagues agreed or disagreed with his editorial choices regarding Israel, there was always a perception that his decisions were not informed by decades of journalistic experience, but instead by his Jewishness. The primary example he gives comes from 2002, when he blocked publication of Michael Leunig's cartoon that compared Israel's counterterrorism operation in the Palestinian city of Jenin during the Second Intifada with Auschwitz.

Gawenda bristles at being pigeonholed this way, adamant that there is no contradiction between being Jewish and following the principles of professional journalism.

This speaks to one of the book's major themes: the contortions and compromises Jews make to fit in – both on the left and the right – and

"In a world flooded with anti-Israel polemics, *My Life as A Jew* is a much-needed and long overdue corrective"

how they frequently still result in rejection. As he notes, "in Stalin's purges – Jews who had given up their Jewishness... were murdered because they were Jews."

It also speaks to his frustration with the blind spot of anti-Zionists, particularly Jews, who he sees as remaining indifferent to the reality that "the virus of anti-Semitism is loose in the world." Exhibit A is Louise Adler.

The collapse of his friendship with Louise Adler kickstarts the book.

This is not merely because the story is so dramatic – it is also the reason Gawenda ended up writing his book in the first place. Once he started to analyse the fallout from that event, he couldn't stop.

The backstory to his decision to terminate his contact with Adler was their discussion of the “dobetteron-palestine” open letter from May 2021 that called for journalists to prioritise the Palestinian narrative and to also be able to express solidarity with the Palestinians without being professionally penalised.

He comments that the letter does not say which “Palestinian perspectives should be prioritised” and asks if that would include Hamas, “which advocates the violent elimination of Israel.”

He was also unsettled by “journalism academics, people who train journalists” signing the letter and chides the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, which represents the interests of media professionals, for endorsing the rights of its members to act as advocates for the Palestinian cause.

Gawenda says he pointed all this out to Adler and was stunned to learn she subsequently commissioned former Middle East correspondent and now ABC Global Affairs Editor John Lyons to write his pamphlet *Dateline Jerusalem: Journalism’s toughest assignment*.

The central theme of Lyons’ short monograph is the claim that the Israel lobby, which he falsely claims is far-right, pro-settlement, pro-occupation and against the two-state formula for peace, intimidates journalists and editors to adopt a pro-Israel editorial line and self-censor.

According to Lyons, the lobby does this to prevent Australians from learning the truth about the worst excesses of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank.

Gawenda is having none of this. He ridicules Lyons’ claims that journalists are so supine that simply sending them on all expenses paid trips to Israel where they drink booze will make them comply. Failing that, the Israel lobby threatens, Lyons suggests, and Gawenda asks

with “what – violence? Damnation? Cancellation? – [it] is never clear.”

Gawenda asserts Lyons’ “thesis about powerful Jews making cowards of virtually every editor and executive producer in the country was a conspiracy theory that did not stand up to any real scrutiny.”



Former Age editor Michael Gawenda

Lyons, he says, claimed to have interviewed 23 “editors and senior journalists” on the record but failed to name all but a few and was essentially asking to “be taken at his word. Frankly, I am not prepared to do that.” Gawenda asks why Lyons did not interview him, considering “I was the only Jewish editor” of a major metropolitan paper in Australia during the late Oslo period and Second Intifada.

“Why would Lyons not have spoken to me? Perhaps he thought he might have discovered that I was not a fellow traveller of the Israel Lobby,” he says.

Gawenda was aghast that Adler would endorse Lyons’ agenda, even after they had talked it over, which is why he chose to end decades of friendship with her.

Elsewhere, Gawenda’s account for why the sensible left, i.e. social democrats, “fell out of love” with Israel is well-written but breaks little new ground.

Israel’s territorial gains during its overwhelming victory in the Six Day War proved it was not “just a vulner-

able little nation of socialist pioneers surrounded by enemies. It was powerful and flawed.” The process accelerated when the Likud broke the left’s stranglehold on power in 1977 and continued through the 1980s as the Israeli right became “ascendant”.

The two Bobs – Hawke and Carr – are prime examples of two centre left figures who started off as strong supporters of Israel but grew disillusioned, he writes.

Both men “came to understand, painfully, with regret, and, in Carr’s case, with hostility and bitterness, that Israel ... could never be, the nation that embodied their socialist dreams.”

There is much more that comes under Gawenda’s steely gaze, including the left’s campaign to whittle away at how antisemitism is defined, so the term can only refer to anti-Jewish hate that originates on the right.

Concomitant with this is the attempts made to remove the Jewish specificity of the Nazi’s genocide of six million Jews in the Holocaust, something both the left and right are complicit in. As Gawenda writes, the Holocaust has become “universalised”, as though it “could have happened to anyone, and it was random bad luck that it happened to Jews.”

Ahead of the book’s publication, Nine Newspapers excerpted parts of the Adler chapter.

Since its publication, Gawenda has contributed many analyses, but all bar one has run in what Gawenda would once have regarded as the ideological competition – the *Australian*.

Thankfully Gawenda has not been a lone voice in the wilderness holding the media’s feet to the fire.

Other Jewish journalists, including former *Age* columnist Julie Szego and former ABC journalist Ramona Koval, have raised their heads above the parapet too.

In a world flooded with anti-Israel polemics, *My Life as A Jew* is a much-needed and long overdue corrective from a lucid, highly-experienced and impeccable source.



ESSAY

The Face of Hamas

Spokesperson “Abu Obaida” resonates across the Arab world

Rany Ballout

“Abu Obaida” is the *nom de guerre* of the military spokesman of the al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas. Clad in a green military uniform and a red keffiyeh, he has regularly appeared on TV screens throughout the Middle East, providing updates on Hamas’ war effort and related political developments since October 7. In short speeches delivered with a defiant tone, he announces Hamas’ purported tactical achievements and consequential losses for Israel while promising an imminent victory.

According to media reports, the persona’s first public appearance as al-Qassam’s military spokesman can be traced back to the 2006 Gaza-Israel conflict. The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) said in October 2023 that his real name is Hudhayfah Kahlout, with Israeli media further reporting that his hometown is the village of Naliya in Gaza. Neither Hamas nor al-Qassam has commented on the matter.

Since October 7, Abu Obaida has gained massive popularity and traction across the Arab and Muslim



Hamas spokesperson Abu Obaida: A hero across the Arab world (Screenshot)

world. The hype around Abu Obaida’s broadcast speeches is vast, with prolific commentary and reactions largely praising him as a saviour, with thousands of captions across the web. Arab social media depicts people, including children, glued to TV screens awaiting his speeches.

Large banners featuring his picture appear in many Arab and Muslim states and cities, such as Beirut, Turkey, and Jordan. His banners have also appeared in soccer stadiums in Tunisia and Libya, and his image has even been featured in a tifo display [A choreographed display in which large groups of sports fans hold up signs or banners in the stands of a stadium-Ed.] by a prominent soccer team in Algeria. As a result, large segments of the Arab and Muslim population embraced Hamas’ information war against Israel, celebrating the October 7 assault as a major military breakthrough.

Remarkably, Arab and Muslim artists, actors, and even academics have expressed their admiration and support for Abu Obaida as a symbol

of Palestinian resistance. One Syrian actress described how she preferred to listen to Abu Obaida’s voice in the morning over Lebanese singing icon Fairuz. Egyptian actor Mohamed Ramadan said he would be featuring the character of Abu Obaida in a future drama in response to Israeli media’s call to boycott his dramatic work.

On X, a post showing an exam paper with questions regarding him and Hamas’ purported achievements in the Gaza war went viral. More seriously, news media reporting on his popularity included coverage of children in Algeria and Palestinian camps in Lebanon emulating him as a role model, impersonating his gestures while wearing military outfits and keffiyehs.

ARAB MEDIA COVERAGE

In the first hours and days after the October 7 attacks, recorded statements, posts, or videos of Abu Obaida started appearing on several TV channels, networks of pro-Hamas online news media, and Telegram channels, underscoring Hamas’ focus on reaching a mass audience and controlling the narrative of the war with Israel through social media. Abu Obaida’s statements have since been accompanied by highly sophisticated footage released on Telegram showing Hamas combatants battling Israeli forces in Gaza. Abu Obaida’s recordings first appeared on Gaza-based Hamas-affiliated *Al-Aqsa TV* and several Hamas-linked Telegram channels. These Telegram channels have played a significant role in propagating Hamas’ narrative. Although *Al-Aqsa TV* and several Hamas-linked Telegram channels have been banned, research highlights the role it has played in propagating Hamas’ war narrative, helping to foster audience engagement.

Not surprisingly, Al Jazeera has been the leading Arabic mainstream media in promoting Abu Obaida’s campaign. It has picked up Abu Obaida’s recorded statements aired simultaneously by *Al-Aqsa TV* and has

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also been broadcasting his speeches in their entirety. Beyond live broadcasting, Abu Obaida's series of recorded videos often appear with sensational headlines designed to glorify him as a resistance hero. Al Jazeera's broadcasting is also compounded by press coverage exalting Obaida. For instance, one flattering article titled "Abu Obaida: the true voice in an era marked by false images," depicted him as a selfless figure with unprecedented popularity in the Arab world as a result of not only his communication skills but also his objectivity in accounting for developments on the field.

Other Arabic mainstream news channels, such as the Qatari-based *Al Araby TV* and Lebanon-based, Iranian-aligned *Al Mayadeen*, also propagate Abu Obaida's speeches and Hamas' war narrative. In addition to regularly broadcasting his speeches accom-

"Despite the immense destruction, human toll, and suffering in Gaza, Hamas depicts an effective and victorious battle against Israel"

panied by favourable press articles, *Al Araby* journalists have produced several promotional videos of Abu Obaida, describing him as a resistance symbol.

Al Mayadeen, for its part, has seized the opportunity to engage in pro-Hamas psychological warfare since the early hours of Hamas' operation. This includes fully broadcasting Abu Obaida's speeches and propagandistic press articles. A highly sophisticated propagandistic video titled "who is Abu Obaida?" glorifies him as the voice of resistance and the inspirer of Arabs' hearts, deploying highly charged Arabic poetic prose against the backdrop of dramatic soundtracks.

Generally speaking, Hamas' war narrative has found a home in much of Arabic news media, and its messaging has been readily amplified to reach a large audience in the Middle East.

ILLUSORY HOPES OF VICTORY

Most notably, the speeches themselves remain fundamentally religious. The speeches predominantly frame the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis as a historical and perennial conflict between Islam and Judaism, situating it in the context of what Abu Obaida calls the "law of the jungle" (a reference to the Western-led world order) that is oblivious to the Palestinian cause and rife with antagonism towards Arabs and Muslims. Its strongest arguments often refer to the purportedly imminent demise of the Jewish state, with the "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation of October 7 beginning the decisive era of Israeli defeats.

The speeches relentlessly call on Arabs and Muslims in neighbouring countries to wage total war against Israel in support of Hamas or to mobilise in regionwide protests against Israel's war. The speeches weave familiar Palestinian national resistance vocabulary with religious concepts such as "the Arabic and Islamic *Umma* [nation]," "*Mujahidin*," and "jihad until the judgment day," among others. In particular, Obaida extensively quotes martial verses from the Quran. The speeches are also part of Hamas' media campaign to cope with real-time developments on the field, reflecting their awareness that their media campaign is no less important than their military effort.

Despite the immense destruction, human toll, and suffering in Gaza, Hamas depicts an effective and victorious battle against Israel. While it is true that Hamas has succeeded in sustaining combat operations, strategically speaking, there exists no balance of power between Hamas and Israel, given Israel's unmatched military superiority backed by a highly developed economic power.

More consequential is the enormous and long-lasting deterioration of the Palestinians' living conditions

caused by the war, with large swaths of Gaza becoming uninhabitable and the displacement of the vast majority of Palestinians.

As argued above, most Arabic media and a majority of the Arab public appear to have subscribed to Hamas' war narrative against Israel. With the absence of constructive discussions and debate over the strategic state of the war, the conflict is incorrectly described as one between equal powers. Claims include Hamas having killed substantial numbers of Israeli forces, destroying hundreds of tanks and weapons, an Israeli economy suffering as a result of reservist mobilisation, and a political divide tearing Israeli society apart.

Israel's massive military response to the Hamas assault and the ensuing large-scale war destruction has not deterred a majority of Arabs from across various political currents from entertaining sentimental appeals to illusory promises of victory. Yet, the Arabic media's focus on Hamas' purported warfare is hardly surprising and replicates similar delusional portrayals of the previous Arab-Israeli conflicts since the 1950s, ensuring Arab defeats create public despair and anger.

Instead of engaging and presenting a sound assessment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the broad Arab-Israeli conflict, most of the Arabic media contributes to feeding a distorted view of the current conflict – except for the conveying of the suffering of Gazan civilians – at the expense of sound political and strategic assessments. AIR

Rany Ballout is a New York-based political risk and due diligence analyst with extensive experience in the Middle East. He holds a master's degree in International Studies from the University of Montreal in Canada and a bachelor's degree in Linguistics from Uppsala University in Sweden. © The National Interest (www.nationalinterest.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.



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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

GOING IN REVERSE

In the *Daily Telegraph* and *Advertiser* (March 20), AIJAC's Colin Rubenstein called the Federal Government's decision to unfreeze its funding for UNRWA a "serious error given the mounting evidence of UNRWA's strong complicity with Hamas – the terrorist entity that has ruled the Gaza territory since 2007 and orchestrated the October 7 massacre."

According to Dr Rubenstein, UNRWA undermines Australia's bipartisan goal of a two-state peace outcome to the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

"It is a refugee organisation that has developed and applied a unique set of conditions and policies applicable only to Palestinians. These conditions include... declaring anyone with refugee status can pass that status on to all descendants in perpetuity, even if they obtain citizenship of another country. This is the reason the number of Palestinian 'refugees' has exploded from about 700,000 in 1948 to almost 6 million today," he wrote.

In the *Daily Telegraph* (March 19), Tim Blair scoffed at the Government's statement that UNRWA is not a "terrorist organisation", saying, "declining to offer a formal declaration of one's terrorist inclinations is obviously good enough for our current government despite the UNRWA's obvious terrorist sympathies."

In the same paper (March 16), Piers Akerman wrote that "The Albanese government... has now renewed funding to UNRWA, the... UN body which Hamas successfully infiltrated to the point that it installed a command base under an UNRWA office while UNRWA staff participated in the October 7 carnage. It may as well have handed the money to Hamas directly."

On Feb. 29, the paper ran AIJAC policy analyst Alana Schetzer's article on UNRWA, which noted that "In recent years, there have been many reports of UNRWA facilities found to contain weapons or other military infrastructure from terrorist groups; stories of UNRWA employees engaging in blatant antisemitism or incitement to violence; and scandals involving the teaching of anti-semitism, incitement to violence and glorification of terrorism in materials used in UNRWA schools – which the European Parliament condemned in 2022 and 2023."

ABC ENTHRALLED

The ABC couldn't get enough of Israel-bashing American Jewish writer Nathan Thrall during his recent visit to Australia.

On *ABC TV* "Q&A" (March 4), Thrall accused "the US and its allies" of being "complicit" in "what is happening in Gaza right now" and predicted Israel would not defeat Hamas.

Thrall put the onus of ending the war on the US which has the "leverage" because "those are US bombs that are being used in Gaza."

Israel was blamed by Thrall for the violence in the conflict. He accused Israel of practising apartheid, calling it the "sole sovereign between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea" which oversees a "system of gross injustice" that has "lasted for more than half a century." He had nothing to say about the Palestinian Authority's appalling human rights record or the fact that its leaders have spent the past 25 years rejecting Israeli peace offers and invitations to negotiate.

On *ABC Radio National* "Blueprint for Living" (Feb. 29) Thrall placed all the onus on Israel to kickstart peace

talks, saying it is "going to take a real momentous shift... from Israel's allies... in Israeli public opinion and, in Israeli basic motivations."

On *ABC Radio National* "Late Night Live" (Feb. 26), Thrall talked about how difficult and unfair life is for Palestinians who live in the area of Jerusalem beyond the security fence that stops terrorists crossing from the West Bank into Israel.

Of course, Thrall never explained that Palestinian terror during the Second Intifada forced Israel to reluctantly erect security fences, build bypass roads for Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis to use in the West Bank and install checkpoints.

Meanwhile, on March 12, "Late Night Live" devoted 35 minutes to far-left Israeli journalist Gideon Levy, who called for, amongst other things, a one-state solution. On Feb. 28, the program interviewed the director and the producer of a documentary about convicted Palestinian terrorist Marwan Barghouti who they billed as the Palestinian Nelson Mandela. The producer denied Barghouti was responsible for terror bombings against civilian targets and insisted that "you are allowed to resist an occupier."

MILLER TIME

Speaking to *ABC Radio National* "Drive" host Andy Park (March 1), veteran US State Department Middle East adviser Aaron David Miller cautioned that the Hamas-Israel war will end when "there has been a sufficient amount of pain inflicted on one or more of the parties."

Miller was clearly irked by Park's persistent line of questioning predicated on the notion that the only way to end the war is for the Biden Administration to put pressure on Israel.



“In an existential conflict, in which both parties are trying to inflict grievous harm on the other, it’s the two parties that control... the trajectory of the conflict,” Miller said, adding that it “infantilises the parties” to “assume that some external force” will “swoop down” and “make it all better.”

Hamas, he said, benefits from the international community’s impatience

with Israel as the death toll mounts in Gaza. However, he noted, “I wouldn’t even be having this conversation if Hamas hadn’t launched their terror surge on October 7.”

ARTLESS POINT SCORING

For the second year in a row, the *Advertiser* (March 8) sharply criticised

the guest list of Adelaide Writers Week, calling it “a pro-Palestinian cheer squad.”

The paper cited the inclusion of Tareq Baconi, who has “essentially give[n] the Hamas terror group a free pass on the atrocities it committed on October 7.”

Earlier (Feb. 24), *Australian* columnist Caroline Overington ripped



IN PARLIAMENT

Prime Minister **Anthony Albanese** (ALP, Grayndler) asked by **Kylea Tink** (Ind., North Sydney) when the Government would reinstate UNRWA funding – Feb. 28 – “We suspended the additional funding to UNRWA whilst allegations were being dealt with... because that is the principled and right thing to do.”

Deputy Prime Minister **Richard Marles** (ALP, Corio), Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) and Minister for International Development **Pat Conroy** (ALP, Shortland) Joint Media Release – March 15 – “Australia will lift its temporary pause on funding for... (UNRWA), following steps to strengthen the integrity of UNRWA operations.”

On Feb. 26 and March 18, Greens Leader **Adam Bandt** (Melbourne) moved two motions to suspend standing orders to debate a motion that condemns Israel and “calls on the Government to end its support for... Israel’s invasion of Gaza” while Greens Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Senator **Jordon Steele-John** moved similar motions in the Senate.

Max Chandler-Mather (Greens, Griffith) – Feb. 26 – “There is an engineered famine... 10,000 children... have been murdered by the Israeli genocidal actions in Gaza.”

Adam Bandt – March 18 – “The Israeli government... is not even letting aid in.”

Andrew Wallace (Lib., Fisher) – March 18 – “It is irrefutable that Hamas are using Palestinian civilians as human shields... because they know that they will garner support from the international community.”

Shadow Foreign Minister Senator **Simon Birmingham** (Lib., SA) – Feb. 26 – “Hamas doesn’t just target, kill and brutalise Israeli citizens... but is also shameless in its use of Palestinians and residents of Gaza as human shields.”

Senator **Steele-John** – March 18 – “The children of Gaza are being starved to death by the policies of... Israel.”

Senator **Lidia Thorpe** (Ind., Vic.) – March 18 – “It’s been 163 days of genocidal horrors and barbaric destruction brought upon innocent children, women, queers, men, the elderly, animals and trees.”

All the Greens motions were defeated with only the Greens and independents **Andrew Wilkie** and **Helen Haines** in support in the House and Greens and Thorpe in support in the Senate.

Senator **Paul Scarr** (Lib., QLD) – Feb. 27 – “It is unacceptable that children going to schools in Australia should be suffering from vile antisemitic attacks.”

Assistant Minister for Indigenous Australians Senator **Malarndirri McCarthy** (ALP, NT) – Feb. 27 – “The price of defeating Hamas cannot be the continuous suffering of all Palestinian civilians. Some wars are just a cover for genocide.”

Julian Hill (ALP, Bruce) – Feb. 27 – “Mass starvation is not a proportionate response to Hamas’ horror show.”

Shadow Assistant Foreign Affairs Minister Senator **Claire Chandler** (Lib., Tas.) – Feb. 27 – “It is the terrorist organisation Hamas that is responsible for the death and conflict in Gaza.”

Scott Morrison (Lib., Cook) Valedictory speech – Feb. 27 – “There can be no equivocation on where we stand as a representative democracy when another [Israel], who has been such a great friend of Australia, is under attack. There also can be no equivocation in calling out the antisemitism that has now occurred in this country, to our shame.”

Senator **David Shoebridge** (Greens, NSW) – Feb. 28 – “[Israeli defence company] Elbit is using the brutal assault on Palestinians to sell its weapons, actively experimenting on – and then working with the Israeli military to celebrate – how effectively they kill Palestinians.”

Senator **Andrew Bragg** (Lib., NSW) – Feb. 28 – “If Israel were not to defend itself against this threat, there would not be a Jewish state.”

Deputy Greens Leader Senator **Mehreen Faruqi** (NSW) – Feb. 28 – “Israel is deliberately starving Palestinians.”

Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians Senator **Jacinta Nampijinpa Price** (CLP, NT) – Feb. 28 – “the troubling increase in antisemitism in our nation... saddens me that this sort of hatred has been perpetuated and, in some horrible cases, accepted.”

Elizabeth Watson-Brown (Greens, Ryan) – March 18 – “12,000 children have been murdered by Israel... Labor is complicit in this genocide.”

Anne Stanley (ALP, Werriwa) – March 18 – “There are tonnes of supplies sitting at crossings being denied access by the Israeli government.”

Senator **Dave Sharma** (Lib., NSW) First Speech – March 20 – “Australia must insist that a durable peace in the Middle East is only possible with the removal of Hamas... the Australian Jewish community [is] being made to feel unwelcome in their own country... This is utterly unacceptable.”

into the festival organisers, saying, “They aren’t interested in trying to bring people together. The conflict in the Middle East is an absolute tragedy, and all they want to do is point score.”

On March 2, the paper condemned pro-Palestinian activists who demanded WOMADelaide music festival organisers cancel reggae artist Ziggy Marley’s participation because he supports Israel. The editorial said, “South Australia has avoided the worst of the anti-Semitism experienced in the eastern states, but now faces growing attempts to invoke civil unrest... There is no place in Australian society for anti-Semitism.”

GIVING BACK

On March 6, News Corp columnist Jeff Kennett said when he was “Arts Minister and Premier of Victoria, I saw how much the health, education and arts sectors thrived from the philanthropic contribution of the Jewish community.”

But Kennett expressed “disappoint[ment] that our community, which has benefited from this generosity, is not standing up and saying that it is unacceptable our Melbourne Jewish community is feeling threatened by rising anti-Semitic sentiment as well as hostile and, on occasion, violent protests.”

Meanwhile, in the *Age* (March 6), AIJAC’s Rabbi Ralph Genende wrote of the “need to lower the heightened temperature of our discourse and reduce the outrage on social media. The intimidation of Jews and those who support them should be totally unacceptable for any civil society.”

RIVER DANCE

Debate continued over whether the popular pro-Palestinian chant “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free” means Israel’s destruction.

On March 14, the *Advertiser* re-

ported that pro-Palestinian protesters in Adelaide vehemently denied this. The article quoted protest organiser Briana Symonds-Manne saying, “It’s about saying that Palestinians should be allowed to live in their homeland and the Israel-occupied territories should be freed from the siege.”

Symonds-Manne insisted the slogan was a call for a two-state solution but didn’t explain how.

On March 3, News Corp columnist James Campbell praised British PM Rishi Sunak’s speech condemning growing antisemitism. Campbell contrasted Sunak’s candour with how, “speakers at rallies [in Australia] praise Palestinian ‘martyrs’ while their crowds chant ‘From the river to the sea Palestine will be free’. And our leaders say little.”

Herald Sun columnist Steve Price (March 2) criticised Victoria Police for “standing idly by allowing daily protests by pro-Palestinian mobs chanting anti-Jewish slogans waving banners like ‘from the river to the sea’ – a sentiment signifying their desire to obliterate Israel.”

RALLYING AGAINST ANTISEMITISM

Writing in the *Advertiser* (Feb. 20), Liberal Senator Hollie Hughes spoke of attending the “Never Again is Now” rally in Sydney held to show solidarity with the Australian Jewish community.

Senator Hughes wrote there have been “a slew of disturbing incidents against the Australian Jewish community... from death and bomb threats to verbal and physical abuse, racist signs, placards and graffiti... these incidents have exposed an undercurrent of anti-Semitism that exists on Australia’s shores... Jewish people deserve to feel as safe and as welcome in our nation as any other group.”

Earlier, rally organiser Mark Leach wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*

(Feb. 14) of being chased by a pro-Palestinian mob through Sydney’s CBD in October because he dared to wave an Israeli flag.

Reverend Leach said he felt compelled to organise the rally because “while the Jewish community is the primary target at the moment, as my experience showed... this hatred and persecution” won’t stop with them.

MARK OF SHAME

Canberra Times columnist Mark Kenny (March 17) accused Western countries of having “double standards” for supposedly ignoring the International Court of Justice’s (ICJ) preliminary ruling that there could be a plausible case Israel is carrying out acts of genocide in Gaza, while freezing funds for UNRWA based on “unverified” claims 12 of its employees were involved in Hamas’ October 7 massacre. Of course, UNRWA has basically conceded these claims are accurate.

Earlier (Feb. 18), Kenny naively asked why Western countries do not recognise a Palestinian state. Probably because they know such a state does not actually exist in law, and Palestinian leaders have refused generous Israeli offers to create one so recognition would reward their intransigence. Kenny also compared Israeli PM Netanyahu to Adolf Hitler.

Writing in the *Australian* (Feb. 19), academic Ramesh Thakur criticised the ICJ ruling, arguing Israel had demonstrated it had no genocidal intent.

Thakur wrote, “The 15 majority judges have contributed to normalising the Hamas standard of mass atrocities [and] encouraged future bad-faith abuses of international judicial processes by politically motivated governments. Should the court return a final verdict of not guilty after years of litigation, it will be too late to repair the damage.”

LESER IS LESSER

Calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war, writer David Leser's *Age/Sydney Morning Herald* (March 5) article seemed to hold everyone but the Islamist terror group responsible for the failure to reach one.

Leser wrote, "I spent nights thinking about those people with deadened hearts and the governments – our own included – who had failed to call for a ceasefire in Gaza and then suspended payments to UNRWA, the main provider of aid to the stricken region, after Israel had accused a dozen of its staff members of involvement in the October 7 slaughter."

World leaders understand that Hamas needs to be sufficiently degraded before a permanent ceasefire can be enforced or else it will simply regroup and carry out further massacres.

He also claimed, "Jewish people" had not condemned "an Israeli government so utterly hijacked by right-wing extremists, messianic radicals, hooligan settlers and a morally bankrupt prime minister."

PARKE AVENUE

Melissa Parke's interview with Nine Newspaper's Latika Bourke (March 2) proved the former federal Labor MP is the hard-line anti-Israel activist her critics have always claimed her to be.

Parke admitted that "Palestine [w]as the primary issue... she cared about as an MP."

Bourke said Parke told her that "Hamas' attack, which, while not justified, was not unprovoked as it occurred within the context of a decades-long occupation."

Parke also refused to label Hamas – a proscribed terrorist organisation in Australia – "extremist," because "there are different wings of Hamas. There's a political wing, there's a social wing."

NO CHOICE

On the *Australian's* website (March 15), AIJAC Executive Director Colin Rubenstein explained Israel needs to implement its planned operation in Gaza's southern city of Rafah.

Dr Rubenstein wrote, "In addition to being Hamas' final bastion, Rafah, along the Egyptian border, is also the key to preventing Hamas from continuing to siphon off aid flows into Gaza, and rearming through cross-border tunnels."

He also challenged "the mantra" that 1.2 million Palestinian refugees in Rafah "have no safe place left to go," explaining "the IDF has put forward plans for large numbers of tent encampments to be set up for Rafah's refugees along the Gazan coastline, with aid from the US, and some Gulf States."

Furthermore, without Hamas' removal from power in Gaza, there is no feasible path towards a two-state peace, he argued.

WATCH OUT

ABC TV "Media Watch" – which has a long history of anti-Israel bias and dislike for News Corp – overreached in its claim that the public broadcaster was the only news organisation covering both sides equally in the current war.

Relying on an analysis from academic Susan Carland for the Islamophobia Register, Media Watch host Paul Barry (Feb. 19) said it proved that the *Australian* and Nine News "all humanised Israeli victims but not Palestinians."

Barry said the *Australian* had failed in "spectacular fashion", Nine Newspapers was "not too bad" and praised Al Jazeera's coverage.

But as the *Australian's* James Madden noted on Feb. 21, when he contacted Dr Carland, she said her study "should not be taken as a definitive analysis of Australian media bias against Palestinians" because the research was limited to only Instagram

posts of six organisations and excluded what was on other platforms.

Madden quoted AIJAC's Colin Rubenstein saying "It's no surprise that an ABC program like Media Watch finds *The Australian's* coverage of the Israel/Hamas war to be appalling, given that much of the ABC seems to think the story of the war should be told overwhelmingly from a Palestinian perspective. It's also predictable that Media Watch neglected to mention failings by much of the Australian media to the detriment of Israel, such as the failures to cover the links between journalists and Hamas, or UNRWA and Hamas, (stories) that were highlighted by *The Australian*." Media Watch denied it had misused Carland's report.

IF ONLY

An article in Nine Newspapers by former AP journalist Dan Perry and former Israeli government adviser Gilead Sher (March 18) called for a ceasefire to be followed by a reformed Palestinian Authority (PA) taking control of Gaza, and a resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

They claimed this would create "pressure... on Hamas to surrender" and if it doesn't then "Israel will be allowed to finish off the group... with international legitimacy restored."

Perry and Sher claimed Israeli PM Netanyahu only opposes such plans because "he fears extreme right parties will bring down his coalition."

Yet most Israelis would question such a plan, not least because Perry and Sher's claims about it are unrealistic fantasy – there is no chance Hamas is going to surrender because Israel offered to turn Gaza over to the PA, and there is no chance Israel would be allowed to resume its war against Hamas after such an offer, either. Furthermore, the PA has shown no interest in returning to peace talks since Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas abandoned them in 2014.

Allon Lee

CROSSED LYONS

ABC Global Affairs Editor John Lyons' episode of *ABC TV* "Four Corners", "The Forever War" (March 11), had the veneer of balance, but this barely disguised Lyons' overarching message – Hamas' October 7 massacre happened because Israel has refused to create a Palestinian state and denies Palestinians a decent future (see also pp. 28-29).

Lyons almost said as much in his introduction, asking: "would the war jolt the international community into pushing for something that Israel's leadership had for so long resisted: a Palestinian state?"

Lyons went into minute detail about Israel's counter-terrorism infrastructure on the West Bank that restricts millions of Palestinians who live there. He said, "Israel says it's for security", but offered absolutely no detail about the decades of terrorist violence which Israel says forced it to put these systems in place.

Lyons said of Gaza that "Israel's [16 year] siege condemned... 2.3 million Palestinians to slow suffocation in what many describe as the world's largest open-air prison. Every so often, Gaza would erupt – with public protest or barrages of rockets – and Israel would come down even harder."

That this was the proximate cause for the October 7 massacre was a message that was repeated over and over.

Former Shin Bet heads Ami Ayalon and Avi Dichter both said if they were in the same situation they would fight against Israel.

Israeli far left activist Yehuda Shaul said, "what did we think is going to happen after 16 years of siege?" while far-left Israeli journalist Amira Haas said, "I kept warning that... somehow there will be an explosion."

Palestinian academic Dalal Iriqat said, "As long as Israel continues to occupy the Palestinians and deprive them and suffocate them... they should not expect, but for more violence." Another Palestinian academic, Abdaljawad Omar said, "What was the choice of Palestinians?"

The alternative proposition – October 7 happened because Hamas is a genocidal terrorist organisation openly committed to the destruction of Israel and the expulsion of its Jewish population which Israel has had no choice but to try to contain – was never even broached.

The question of whether Israel's military operation in Gaza to degrade Hamas and its terror infrastructure was

proportionate was not addressed by any expert on military practice or International Humanitarian Law (IHL) but solely by Yehuda Shaul, who is neither a lawyer nor an expert in military strategy, yet was given the longest commentary of the episode. He predictably said the claim "that the IDF is doing everything to avoid civilian casualties is a ... straight lie."

"The last section of the program saw Lyons present a bleak future, implying that 'Netanyahu's war', as Lyons called it, is all part of a long-term plan to expel Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank"

The last section of the program saw Lyons present a bleak future, implying that "Netanyahu's war," as Lyons called it, is all part of a long-term plan to expel Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank in pursuit of the dream of Greater Israel.

Lyons asserted the far-right Israeli ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich are "driving Netanyahu's Gaza policy, pushing an agenda that would force Palestinians off their lands."

The last word went to Lyons himself who repeated what he said at the beginning, "If Israel agreed to end its occupation and Palestinians guaranteed Israeli security, then this most intractable of all conflicts could end."

But Lyons' conclusion explaining why the conflict persists was totally manipulative because of the context he deliberately omitted

Former Israeli PM Ehud Barak was interviewed and could have explained how Palestinian President Yasser Arafat rejected his offers in 2000 and 2001 to create a Palestinian state that included most of the West Bank, all of Gaza and a capital in east Jerusalem. But the subject never appears in the program.

Likewise, former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni was interviewed and could have talked about former Israeli PM Ehud Olmert's offer to create a Palestinian state in 2008 which was even more generous, as well as her role in US efforts to broker a deal under Netanyahu in 2014.

But these events contradicted Lyons' thesis that Israel has never offered the Palestinians a reasonable future, leading to October 7, so the program pretended they never happened.

The omission of this vital information made a mockery of *ABC Radio National's* "Breakfast" host Patricia Karvelas' claim on March 7, when she ended her interview with Lyons by saluting ABC reporters who, she said, do their job without "without fear or favour." No one who looks dispassionately and in detail at Lyons' work since October 7 can possibly say he does any such thing.

THE LAST WORD

Rabbi Ralph Genende

WORDS – HOLY AND HATEFUL

Words, words, words. Every day we are assailed by words, not just those we speak or hear directly from others, but the torrent of words pouring out of our social media.

Words shape our world. They can connect, heal and inspire us. They can damage, harm and injure us. Words in the command of a wordsmith can be gorgeous, clarifying and elevating. Words in the armoury of an extremist can be gangrenous, confounding and devastating.

Since October 7, words have been supersonorically weaponised against Israel and the Jewish people. A barrage of words charged with venomous lies, propaganda and misinformation continues to target us daily. We have moved from truth being a casualty of war to what the late cartoonist Bill Leak called Chronic Truth Aversion Disorder.

Philosophy professor Greg Elsoff refers to it as humanity's capacity for self-deception, an unnerving ability to deny what you don't like. Jewish tradition noted this centuries ago – King David despairingly cried out “All humans are liars.” From outrageous accusations of genocide (while calling for Jews to be obliterated and driven into the sea) to blatant denial of the horrors of October 7, we are in a twilight zone of untruth.

Among the most grievous and egregious purveyors of toxic words in Australia are a number of radical imams. Calls for the Almighty to count the Jewish Zionists and then “kill them one by one” are preached in some Sydney mosques, as well as descriptions of Jews as “monsters” who “love to shed blood.” These preachers usually don't even pretend to distinguish between their hatred of Israel and revulsion against Jews.

The failure to confront these extremists is a stain on our country. It's easy to dismiss these sermonisers as unrepresentative of Islamic teachings, but it's dangerous to ignore their influence on the naive and especially disaffected young men they attract.

Former PM Bob Hawke correctly noted that “Muslims have no monopoly on fanaticism,” yet

at the moment, they appear to have largely cornered the market, franchising it and promoting it more effectively than other religious extremists. They make our Judaism's violent settler zealots (and occasionally unwise Israeli Chief Rabbi) look like kindergarten kids.

Despite this, we know too well the toxicity of holy words and texts used in unholy ways – Baruch Goldstein invoked the Purim and Amalek stories in his murderous attack on Muslims. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a religious zealot was preceded by vile and violent words.

Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein presciently spoke of the young West Bank ideologues as full of idealism of the wrong ideals.

All religions have their difficult texts – narratives that are puzzling and ethically challenging. Texts that deride other religions and, when read by fundamentalists who take them literally, can be downright dangerous. We have them in the Torah (see the passages about Amalek); Christians have them (see reference for example to the “synagogues of Satan”); and Muslims have them (Jews are descendants of apes and swine).

Texts command attention but they also demand interpretation. Zealots of all faiths have little respect for a nuanced and in-depth understanding.

It's time for moderate Muslim imams and leaders to call out the radical preachers. It's time for our politicians and security agencies to challenge and, where possible, prosecute them. And if our law against prosecuting vilifying speech directed at fomenting hatred of entire groups needs tightening, what are our politicians waiting for?

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his brilliant analysis of religious violence (*Not in God's Name*) notes: “Never say I hate, I kill, because my religion says so. Every text needs interpretation. Every interpretation needs wisdom. Every wisdom needs careful negotiation... Fundamentalism reads texts as if God were as simple as we are. That is unlikely to be true.”

It's time to rein in the word assassins, and for all of us to treat our sacred words with the respect and perspicuity they require.



A barrage of words charged with venomous lies targets Australian Jews daily (Image: Shutterstock)



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