



FREE AT LAST

Joy as Israeli hostages released in
ceasefire deal, yet major perils loom

TRUMP VERSUS TEHERAN?

The fateful decisions the new US
President will have to make regarding
Iran PAGE 21

UNRWA CONUNDRUMS

Ideas for marginalising
the problematic
UN agency for the
Palestinians ... PAGE 23

JENIN TO GAZA?

Palestinian Authority
makes some moves
apparently designed
to restore its
relevancePAGE 26

LEGACY OF A FASCIST

Reflections on the
life of French ex-
tremist Jean-Marie
Le Pen PAGE 9

With compliments

CENTURY PLAZA TRADING

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EDITOR'S NOTE

February's *AIR* centres on the breakthrough ceasefire-for-hostages agreement between Israel and Hamas that came into effect, after months of negotiations, on Jan. 19.

Among other stories, David Horovitz expresses the overwhelming emotions that suffused Israel following the release of the first three of 33 hostages to be freed under the agreement's six-week first phase, while Amy Spiro explores the difficult politics of the next six weeks for Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu – especially as negotiations on the still amorphous second phase of the arrangement begin.

Also featured this month is Ilan Evyatar on the Middle East agenda of and opportunities for the newly inaugurated US President Donald Trump's second term, and especially the fateful choices his Administration will face regarding Iran. Plus, Washington Institute head Dr Robert Satloff discusses what Trump can do about UNRWA, the extremely problematic UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

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

Tzvi Fleischer

CONTENTS

FEATURE STORIES

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

DAVID HOROVITZ

In a few frenzied seconds, it was done: Doron, Emily and Romi scrambled the five or so paces from one vehicle to another, one reality to another **PAGE 12**



A SLIVER OF HOPE, AN ABYSS OF HATRED
FIAMMA NIRENSTEIN **PAGE 14**

SIX CRITICAL WEEKS FOR NETANYAHU
AMY SPIRO **PAGE 15**

HOW HAMAS SEES THE CEASEFIRE DEAL
KHALED ABU TOAMEH **PAGE 17**

HOW HAMAS SURVIVED THE WAR
SETH FRANTZMAN **PAGE 18**

TRUMP VS TEHERAN
All eyes on the new administration's Iran policy
ILAN EVYATAR **PAGE 21**

TRUMP'S UNRWA CONUNDRUM
ROBERT SATLOFF **PAGE 23**

CAN THE PA REFORM TO RULE GAZA?
NEOMI NEUMANN **PAGE 26**

ISRAEL & TURKEY: A NEW BATTLEGROUND?
ALANA SCHETZER **PAGE 27**

LAMENTATIONS OF ASSAD'S ADMIRERS
RAN PORAT **PAGE 29**

BIBLIO FILE: IRAN'S "SECRET SOLDIERS"
Iran's Ministry of Intelligence: A history
COLIN SCHINDLER **PAGE 32**

ON THE COVER

Released hostage Emily Damari (right) embracing her mother Mandy at a reception point near Kibbutz Reim, southern Israel, January 19, 2025 (Image: EPA/IDF Spokesperson handout/AAP)



AIJAC proudly extends a heartfelt Mazel Tov to both our National Chairman **Mark Leibler AC**, and prominent Jewish community leader **Sir Frank Lowy AC**, on the occasion of their being awarded the prestigious Presidential Medal of Honor by Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Jan. 8. The two Australians were among seven distinguished leaders from around the globe celebrated for their outstanding contributions to the State of Israel and the Jewish people.

REGULAR COLUMNS

FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN **PAGE 4**

WORD FOR WORD **PAGE 5**

SCRIBBLINGS

TZVI FLEISCHER **PAGE 6**

DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

ALAN DERSHOWITZ **PAGE 7**

ASIA WATCH

MICHAEL SHANNON **PAGE 8**

EUROPA EUROPA

ALEX BENJAMIN **PAGE 9**

BEHIND THE NEWS **PAGE 10**

NOTED AND QUOTED **PAGE 35**

OUT OF PARLIAMENT **PAGE 36**


MEDIA MICROSCOPE

ALLON LEE **PAGE 39**

THE LAST WORD

RABBI RALPH GENENDE **PAGE 40**

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FROM THE EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN

COLIN RUBENSTEIN

CEASEFIRES AND THEIR PURPOSE

By any measure, the six-week mediated ceasefire and lopsided terrorists-for-hostage swap deal between Israel and Hamas that went into effect on January 19, and the 60-day mediated ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon (standing in for Hezbollah) that started on Nov. 27, were hard-earned achievements for the Israeli military.

Over the past 15 months, during Israel's longest sustained war ever, more than 800 IDF soldiers have paid the ultimate price to arrive at the current situation, even as Israel inflicted many times more casualties on Hamas and Hezbollah combatants.

Meanwhile, according to experts like West Point's John Spencer, the IDF's urban battlefield ratio of combatant to non-combatant casualties was another stand-out accomplishment, comparing favourably to those achieved by Western armies fighting jihadist forces in similar situations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Hezbollah's aerial offensive, which began a day after Hamas' attack on October 7, was the first step in an outrageously aggressive and audacious Iranian campaign against the Jewish state, involving no less than seven active fronts. On top of proxies like the Houthis of Yemen and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, by April 2024, Iran dropped its mask entirely and attacked Israel directly, an act it repeated in October.

Today, all elements of the Iranian-sponsored "axis of resistance" have been substantially degraded. Recent face-saving efforts by the terror groups to strut around with weapons and declare on social media that they beat the IDF into submission shouldn't fool anyone.

Both Hezbollah and Hamas – which saw Israel eliminate their respective top leaders in Hassan Nasrallah and Yahya Sinwar, along with practically all their commanders and best trained fighters – have received blows from the IDF that will take years to recover from.

Yet these military achievements have not yet been converted into lasting Israeli strategic victories off the battlefield.

What this means is that if these ceasefires were to become permanent as they stand now – without toppling Hamas rule over Gaza or allowing for continued freedom of action by Israel against emerging threats in the north – there is no doubt that both terror groups would soon recover, and seek to come back stronger and better prepared for yet another, even costlier round of war.

In the case of Hezbollah, as the initial ceasefire time frame was approaching its Jan. 26 endpoint at press time, the Lebanese Armed Forces had yet to deploy to most of south Lebanon and had hardly confiscated any Hezbollah arms. Understandably, Israel has been asking for an extension of the original deadline to pull out of Lebanon in order to prevent Hezbollah rushing into the vacuum and returning to Israel's borders before the Lebanese army fulfils its promised role.

Australia should add its voice to the countries that support this request.

Regarding the Gaza ceasefire, analysts identify a potential pressure point arising just 16 days into the 42-day deal, when the agreement says the two sides should begin negotiating the deal's murky "second stage". Many believe Hamas will likely start finding excuses to delay further hostage releases, in hopes that international pressure will prevent Israel from resuming the war no matter what Hamas does.

Both Israeli and world leaders must remain clear-eyed and continue thinking strategically, despite the strong emotions that have been inevitably stirred by recent events surrounding the ceasefires.

Joyful emotions flooded Israel on seeing the first handful of Israeli captives returned to



their families after the deal with Hamas. Everyone wants this to continue.

Similarly, images of residents of northern Israel returning to rebuild their lives after the IDF ended Hezbollah's lengthy air assault are also deeply gratifying.

Yet both Israel and the world must never lose sight of the fact that negotiating with unscrupulous terrorists, while unavoidable in the case of the October 7 hostages, is still a Faustian bargain. It rarely goes according to plan and tilts the playing field in favour of jihadists who have absolutely no moral qualms about waging endless war, regardless of how many innocents – Israeli, Palestinian, Lebanese or others – are hurt or killed.

History teaches that Iranian-backed terror proxies like Hezbollah and Hamas have always viewed ceasefires as nothing more than temporary and tactical pauses.

For this reason, Israel can't afford to forget or gloss over the risks inherent in the release of convicted terrorists, or squander any of the leverage it currently has – especially the ability to resume war if necessary. Otherwise, it will never liberate the dozens of hostages not slated to be freed in this stage of the deal and will almost certainly see Hamas resume its despotic grip over the Gazan population, putting it back on the path to planning a repeat of October 7, as it has promised to do.


Here at home, all too often in recent months we've heard Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Foreign Min-

ister Penny Wong urge an immediate ceasefire, as if this were an end in itself.

This ignores the fact that every war that Hamas has initiated against Israel has been launched from the state of a mediated ceasefire, while UN Security Council Resolution 1701 – which codified the ceasefire that ended the Hezbollah-instigated 2006 war by imposing tight restrictions on the terror group – instead paved the way for the largest military buildup by any terrorist group in the world, along Israel's northern border.

Now more than ever, it must be remembered that a ceasefire is merely a means to an end – that end being sustainable stability, or better yet, true peace. An end to fighting and dying is of course desirable – but not if it prepares the ground for even more severe future conflagrations.

Any ceasefire that leaves Hamas in power in Gaza, militarily or politically, and holding even a single Israeli hostage, or allows Hezbollah to rebuild its terror forces and missile array under the nose of a feckless Lebanese army, would not only be farcical, it would light the fuse on an even more terrible war in years to come.

On the other hand, achieving the comprehensive military and political dismantlement of both Hamas and Hezbollah is an absolutely indispensable precondition for any serious hope of advancing toward any meaningful and lasting Israeli-Palestinian or Israeli-Lebanese peace. 

“Both Israel and the world must never lose sight of the fact that negotiating with unscrupulous terrorists, while unavoidable in the case of the October 7 hostages, is still a Faustian bargain”

“” WORD FOR WORD

“Any agreement with a terror organisation is a bad event. Releasing terrorists from our jails is a heavy price, with risks... But we are doing it because of our commitment to our brothers and sisters who are under captivity for more than 15 months already.”

Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar on the ceasefire with Hamas (BBC, Jan. 20).

“Today, after many months of intensive diplomacy by the United States, along with Egypt and Qatar, Israel and Hamas have reached a ceasefire and hostage deal... It is the result not only of the extreme pressure that Hamas has been under and the changed regional equation after a ceasefire in Lebanon and weakening of Iran – but also of dogged and painstaking American diplomacy... I am thrilled that those who have been held hostage are being reunited with their families.”

Then-US President Joe Biden announces the ceasefire and hostage release deal (White House, Jan. 15).

“This EPIC ceasefire agreement could have only happened as a result of our Historic Victory in November, as it signalled to the

entire World that my Administration would seek Peace and negotiate deals to ensure the safety of all Americans, and our Allies.”

US President Donald Trump takes credit for the ceasefire deal (Truth Social, Jan. 16).

“Ahead of the next stages of the agreement, we retain significant assets in order to return all of our hostages, and in order to meet the objectives of the war. Both President Trump and President Biden have given full backing to Israel's right to return to the fighting, if Israel reaches the conclusion that the second stage negotiations are ineffectual... If we need to go back to the fighting, we will do so in new ways and with great force.”

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu announces the ceasefire deal (Prime Minister's Office, Jan. 18).

“People of Gaza are standing like a mountain, and the Resistance Front will not falter the least with the martyrdom of eminent figures such as #YahyaSinwar. Hamas is alive and will stay alive.”

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (X, Jan. 21).

“Rising antisemitism in Australia is deeply concerning, with attacks on synagogues and Jewish communities as recently as this week. There is no place for such acts of hate in Australia or anywhere across the globe.”

US Office of International Religious Freedom (X, Jan. 16).





SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

HOLLYWOOD IN GAZA

When Hamas released the first three Israeli hostages – Romi Gonen, Emily Damari and Doron Steinbrecher – on January 19, it certainly made a major spectacle of its handover to the Red Cross at a ceremony in Gaza city. Videos and photos showed serried ranks of masked, uniformed Hamas fighters, weapons in hand – apparently thousands of them – surrounding the three women in what appeared to be a relatively intact Gaza square. If that wasn't intimidating enough, the Hamas fighters appeared to be holding back hundreds of civilian Palestinians intent on harming the hostages.

The picture below is an example of what the world saw.



In the photos and videos, Hamas certainly looked powerful and triumphant, ready to exhibit its supposed “victory” over Israel to the Arab and Muslim world.

Indeed, there was a lot of commentary, both in Israel and internationally, that despite Israeli efforts over the last 15 months, Hamas did not look very defeated in these images. Some suggested that perhaps Israeli army claims about having destroyed almost all of Hamas' organised battalions were exaggerated.

But have a look at the two aerial photos below of the same scene.



These photos make it clear it was effectively all Hollywood-style camera tricks. There were actually only a few hundred people, and even fewer Hamas fighters – probably only a few dozen. And what looked like a vast crowd filling a huge square was actually a small number of people deliberately confined into a small area to make it look

much bigger – and filmed against the backdrop of a few intact buildings when there was actually empty devastation on the other side.

The lesson of these images is that Hamas is waging a highly sophisticated war of propaganda and public relations as much as one with guns, rockets, IEDs and bullets. Moreover, it is worth recalling that virtually all media reporting, imagery and video that has been coming out of Gaza during this war – except from Israeli sources – has been the product of local Palestinian journalists who are operating under the authority and scrutiny of Hamas as it wages this propaganda war.

Contrary to the cliché that “The camera doesn't lie,” imagery absolutely can be made to distort and mislead – as the photos above show. Yet many journalists and news outlets continue to treat material coming out of Gaza as something approaching gospel – even while being highly sceptical of Israeli claims. Is it any wonder Hamas has had such a “good war”, propaganda-wise, even while losing comprehensively, militarily?

“DAYLIGHT”

I want to call attention to a vitally important quote from then-US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in an interview with the *New York Times* (Jan. 4):

[W]henver there has been public daylight between the United States and Israel and the perception that pressure was growing on Israel, we've seen it: Hamas has pulled back from agreeing to a cease-fire and the release of hostages. And so there are times when what we say in private to Israel where we have a disagreement is one thing, and what we're doing or saying in public may be another. But that's in no small measure because with this daylight, the prospects of getting the hostage and cease-fire deal over the finish line become more distant.

There are a lot of people in Australia who need to hear this. Why? Because it illustrates the bizarre blind spot of the many sincere but misguided people who insist that the key to achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace is greater pressure on Israel.

I am not talking here about the haters for whom everything Israel does is obviously evil. I am talking about those who are willing to recognise, at least in principle, that both sides have legitimate claims, sincerely want a two-state resolution and are perhaps impatient that it hasn't happened yet.

Too many of them imagine that pressure on Israel would create concessions and changes in policy in Jerusalem, break the deadlock and finally bring peace.

But here's the thing: pressure on Israel can indeed sometimes lead to concessions and changes in policy in Jerusalem. But as Blinken makes clear – and too many people are too blind to see – it also has effects on the Palestinian side as well. And the major effect it has is to make them dig in their heels, viewing history as going their way, and demand more.

US President Obama famously made “daylight” with Israel a core of his Middle East policy, as he announced

in 2009. Without it, “Israel just sits on the sidelines, and that erodes our credibility with the Arab states,” he said.

Yet this claim was absurd given the recent history at the time. The Bush Administration (prior to Obama) had not sought any such “daylight”, and Israel absolutely did not “sit on the sidelines.” It unilaterally withdrew from both Gaza and part of the West Bank in 2005 under Ariel Sharon, and then in 2007-08, participated in the Annapolis peace process under PM Ehud Olmert, offering the most generous and comprehensive two-state peace deal to the Palestinians that has ever been seriously proposed.

The Palestinians walked away, with Mahmoud Abbas later saying he rejected the deal “out of hand”.

Would “daylight” have made Abbas more likely to say yes? No, of course not – it would have made him even more likely to hold out for more.

All too many advocates of daylight or one-sided pressure seem not to believe the Palestinians have any agency at all. They are seen simply as passive victims, and thus there is no need to worry about how they will respond to various incentive structures such as one-sided pressure on Israel.

But this worldview not only infantilises Palestinians, it actually harms them. As Blinken notes regarding the ceasefire, it makes creating the conditions for a two-state peace – and genuine democratic self-determination with an end to destructive bloodshed – vastly harder to achieve.

AIR



DECONSTRUCTION ZONE

Alan Dershowitz

IT'S NOT A “DEAL”!

The decision by the Israeli Government to make significant concessions to the Hamas kidnappers should never be called a “deal”. It was an extortion. Would you call it a deal if somebody kidnapped your child and you “agreed” to pay ransom to get her back? Of course not. The kidnapping was a crime. And the extortionate demand was an additional crime.

So the proper description of what occurred is that Israel capitulated to the unlawful and extortionate demands of Hamas as the only way of saving the lives of kidnapped babies, mothers and other innocent, mostly civilian, hostages.

This was not the result of a negotiation between equals. If an armed robber puts a gun to your head and says, “your money or your life,” your decision to give him your money would not be described as a deal. Nor should the extorted

arrangement agreed to by Israel be considered a deal. So let's stop using that term.

When a terrorist group “negotiates” with a democracy, it always has the upper hand. The terrorists are not constrained by morality, law or truth. They can murder at will, rape at will, torture at will and threaten to do worse. The democracy, on the other hand, must comply with the rules of law and must listen to the pleas of the hostage families. The result of this exertion was bad for Israel's security, but good for the hostages who remain alive and their families. The heart rules the brain, as it often does in moral democracies that value the immediate saving of the lives of known people over the future deaths of hypothetical people whose identities we do not know. This trade-off is understandable as compassionate, even if not compelling as policy.

If every democratic nation adopted a policy of never negotiating with terrorists, it might discourage terrorism. But every nation submits to the demands of kidnappers and extortionists, so terrorism and hostage-taking have become a primary tactic of the worst people in the world. And the rest of us are complicit.

Especially complicit, with blood on their hands, are supporters of Hamas on university campuses who chant for intifada and revolution. Also complicit are international organisations, such as the International Criminal Court, that treat Israel and Hamas as equals. These supporters of terrorism encouraged Hamas to hold out for many months in the belief that their support would pressure Israel into making more concessions.

The students of terror – the university students who are encouraging Hamas into continuing their murderous ways – must be held accountable for their complicity in evil. Though they may have the same free speech rights as Jews do, they should be treated with the same contempt that Nazis, the KKK and racist supporters of violence are treated. “Free speech” does not give them the right to be hired by decent employers.

American law [*and Australian law ed.*] criminalises giving material support to designated terrorist groups, which include Hamas and Hezbollah. Morality, as distinguished from law, should deem immoral providing any support – material, political, economic or demonstrative – to any terrorist group such as Hamas. Yet some politicians urged people to listen to the messages of these protestors. They would never say that about demonstrators who favoured lynching blacks or raping women. But Hamas does lynch Jews and rape Jewish women. There is no moral difference.

Let us welcome the news that perhaps 33 of the 98 hostages may be released, some of them alive, with the realisation that what Hamas extorted from Israel in return for these releases may well endanger Israel's security in the future and cost still more innocent lives.



And let us put the blame for ALL the deaths in Gaza where it belongs: on Hamas and the useful idiots and useless bigots who support murderous terrorists. AIR

Alan M. Dershowitz is the Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law, Emeritus, at Harvard Law School, and the author most recently of War Against the Jews: How to End Hamas Barbarism. He is the Jack Roth Charitable Foundation Fellow at the Gatestone Institute. © The Gatestone Institute (gatestoneinstitute.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

AN UPHILL BATTLE

The growing prevalence worldwide of antisemitic and anti-Israel sentiment has been impossible to ignore in recent years, particularly in the wake of the October 7 atrocities and the ensuing war in Gaza. The release in January of the Anti-Defamation League's latest report, the ADL Global 100 survey, makes for unsettling reading.

More than 58,000 adults from 103 countries, along with the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, were posed a series of questions related to common antisemitic tropes, as well as the Holocaust, Israel, the Palestinians and Hamas.

Where Asia is concerned, minimal Jewish presence in the region has not prevented the widespread adoption of antisemitic beliefs, although there is significant variation by country due to historical, political and cultural factors.

Indonesia has earned the dishonour of being ranked 101st out of 103, with 96% of respondents answering "definitely true" or "probably true" to statements including "Jews have too much control over the media" (89%), "Jews' loyalty is only to Israel" (92%), "Jews don't care what happens to anyone but their own kind" (95%).

Most Indonesians (92%) hold unfavourable views of Israel, while a large majority have favourable views of both Palestine (96%) and Hamas (76%) – significantly higher than the shares across Asia and around most of the world. Only 5% believe that Indonesia should welcome tourists or have diplomatic relations with Israel, and most (87%) believe that Indonesia should boycott Israeli products and businesses.

Malaysia had an index score of 75% overall and a high level of agreement (75%) with propositions that Jews have too much control over global affairs and mass media, compared with the Asian average of 48%. This is particularly interesting, given the propensity of Malaysian politicians to invoke Jewish or Israel-related conspiracy theories for domestic political purposes.

A plurality of Malaysians (41%) say they have not

heard of the Holocaust, while those that have are split on whether it has been accurately described by history (48%) or exaggerated (45%). A majority (62%) believe that Jews still talk too much about the Holocaust.

The vast majority (82%) feel unfavourable toward Israel and a similar number feel favourable toward Palestine; while over half of Malaysians feel the same about Hamas (58%), particularly among 18-34 years old, those with right-wing attitudes or unfavourable views of Jews.

As the main Muslim-majority nations in the region, the results for Indonesia and Malaysia are not surprising, given their historic identification with the Palestinian cause, framing it as a struggle against colonialism and oppression. This, in turn, frequently blurs the line between political criticism of Israel and antisemitic tropes.

In countries like China and Japan, views on Jews and Israel are more complex, although imported stereotypes and conspiracy theories retain influence via translations of texts like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

In China, there is a mix of fascination with Jewish culture and stereotypes of Jewish success, alongside official government criticism of Israel due to China's ties with the Arab world. The survey gave China an index score of 58%, and fewer than one-third say they view Jews favourably. Furthermore, two-thirds (67%) believe that "Jews have too much power in the business world" – a view particularly pronounced in men (73%) and those aged 18-49 (76%).


Separately, just over a quarter of Chinese feel favourable toward Israel (27%), while more are favourable toward Palestine (58%), and one in five feel the same about Hamas. Yet, most (82%) believe China should maintain diplomatic relations with Israel.

Japan has limited historical interaction with Jews, but antisemitic stereotypes have infiltrated fringe publications. With a survey index score of 26%, Japanese respondents were less likely to believe that "a small group [Jews] secretly control world events" and fewer than half (39%) believe that "Jews have too much power in the business world."

Additionally, most Japanese adults (54%) believe that the Holocaust is described accurately (compared to the regional average of 32%), although one in five say they have not heard about the Holocaust. Favourability ratings toward Jews (30%), Israel (16%), Palestine (26%), and Hamas (7%) are lower than the regional average, primarily due to higher than average "don't know" responses.

Among other Asian countries, the Philippines' (index score 42%) respondents were split in their opinions of Jews, and more than half of Filipino adults agree that "Jews have a lot of irritating faults" (52% vs 45% of Asia). However, a majority (57%) feel favourable toward Israel. In Vietnam (index score 27%), the most widely believed trope (around half) is that "Jews' loyalty is only to Israel," yet nearly nine in ten (88%) think Vietnam should welcome Israeli tourists, including large majorities of those

who feel unfavourable towards Israel or Jews.

Honourable mention goes to Singapore, top rated in the region with an index score of 20%. For local comparison, Australia was also rated at 20%, while New Zealand was scored at 16%. 



Alex Benjamin

THE LEGACY OF A FASCIST

“The last breaths of the Devil” was the title of one of the less generous obituaries published in France about Jean-Marie Le Pen. On January 7, the 96-year-old shuffled off his mortal coils – including the ones imposed upon him by his own daughter, who had effectively bestowed pariah status on him within the party he had founded, and she now leads.

France, and indeed Europe, will now be looking at his legacy.

Just as the last survivors of the Holocaust dwindle away, making the death camps and attempted genocide of the Jewish people as distant as Agincourt to the current European generation, so too does Le Pen’s passing mean that the original party he founded – made up of former Vichy members, of French Algeria nostalgics, of virulent antisemites and racists – may now fade from memory. The National Front is dead. Long live the *Rassemblement National*.

Baudelaire once famously wrote that the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist. Nobody can deny the existence of Monsieur Le Pen, but following his burial, his daughter Marine will now likely attempt to complete a similar trick.

This process of convincing the French public to forget and discount his existence actually began many years ago. And credit where credit is due: nobody can say that Marine Le Pen’s party today has the same discourse, image or transparent agenda as that of the party created in 1972 by her father.

The troubling reckoning now facing European politics, as it looks at the life of Jean-Marie, is one of appropriation rather than repudiation.

It would be disingenuous in the extreme, after all, to excoriate the man and everything he stood for when most centre-right parties now have platforms and policies relating to migrants, refugees and multiculturalism that riff off those that Le Pen Senior started – albeit mainstreamed with the hard edges smoothed off.

It would be wrong to put Marine Le Pen in the same box as Donald Trump. He is a populist railing against the establishment and saying whatever comes to mind, the conquest of Greenland being just the latest in a long litany of odd obsessions. Madame Le Pen is far more calculated,

measured and scripted

A much more useful comparison is to Giorgia Meloni, Italy’s Prime Minister, whose move from the political fringes to the centres of national power doubtless makes Marine salivate.

Meloni, after all, has managed the appropriation process so well that hardly anyone even mentions her past links today. In 1992, Meloni joined the Youth Front, the youth wing of the Italian Social Movement, a neo-fascist political party founded in 1946 by followers of Italian fascism after Mussolini’s demise.

Observers and historians have noted that Meloni and her party have been ambiguous about their fascist past – at times rejecting it and at other times minimising it – which has helped to rebrand both of them.

This sounds very much like what the *Rassemblement National* seeks to achieve in France.

But what has made the crucial difference for Meloni and propelled her to the top job? Lauded as the third most powerful woman in the world? Photographed beside world leaders, who smile happily, without flinching? Good friends with European Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen?

One could forgive Mme Le Pen for asking that age-old question of unrequited love: “What’s she got that I haven’t got?”


To answer this important question is not difficult; Meloni’s acceptance into the metaphorical political country club came down largely to one man: former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. It was he who brought her in from the cold.

After all, Berlusconi’s Forza Italia party and its later incarnation as the “People of Freedom” had a remarkably, let us say, vague position, with regards to the “liberal conservatism” it claimed to profess.

Consider this pre-ambule to its constitution: “Forza Italia is a liberal party although not an elitist one, indeed a popular liberal-democratic party; it is a Catholic party although not a confessional one; it is a secular party, although not an intolerant and secularist one; it is a national party, although not a centralist one.”

By any yardstick that is a fantastically broad, catch all description – plenty of room there for a Meloni, with her neo-fascist roots, in that broadest of tents.

Marine on the other hand is still on the country club waiting list, devoid of a mainstream sponsor to complete her political rehabilitation.

But the day will surely come, especially given the current disarray of French politics. To put the French political system back together again, she could well be ushered in at the next presidential election scheduled for 2027. If and when that happens, it will doubtless prompt wry smiles emanating from beyond the grave – from both her father and from Baudelaire himself. 



BEHIND THE NEWS

ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

At least 22 projectiles have been launched from Gaza since Dec. 13, including two long-range rockets fired at Jerusalem on Dec. 28 and a drone attack on Dec. 19. At least 410 Israeli soldiers have been killed in and around Gaza since October 7, 2023.

The IDF announced the recovery of the body of hostage Youssef Ziyadne on Jan. 9, along with evidence of the death of his son and fellow hostage Hamza.

There were several attempted and successful terrorist attacks throughout the West Bank and Israel in December and early January, including a stabbing in Herzliya on Dec. 29 that killed an 83-year-old Israeli woman. Two Israeli civilians and a police officer were killed and eight wounded in a shooting in the West Bank on Jan. 7. A roadside bombing in the northern West Bank on Jan. 19 killed one soldier and wounded four others.

Sweeping counterterrorism operations throughout the West Bank continue to result in the death or detention of terrorists. Israeli forces launched a major operation, dubbed “Iron Wall”, against terror groups in Jenin on Jan. 21, in the wake of a month-long Palestinian Authority (PA) counter-terror campaign there (see page 26).

PA FORCED TO CUT ‘PAY-FOR-SLAY’ PAYMENTS

Payments in the PA’s notorious “pay-for-slay” scheme, which gives generous lifetime pensions to terrorists imprisoned by Israel and to the families of those killed in attacks, decreased by around 40% in 2024 from the previous year. This was despite many of the imprisoned perpetrators of the October 7 terrorist attacks be-

ing added to the rolls. New data from the Jerusalem Centre for Security and Foreign Affairs revealed that the factors behind the “significant decline” included the Israeli Government’s decision to withhold approximately NIS 3 billion (A\$ 1.35 billion) from the PA to pay back a decade-old debt owed for electricity, and the war in Gaza causing significant difficulties in the logistics of receiving payouts there.

HAMAS FINANCING ITSELF WITH STOLEN AID, RECRUITING NEW FIGHTERS

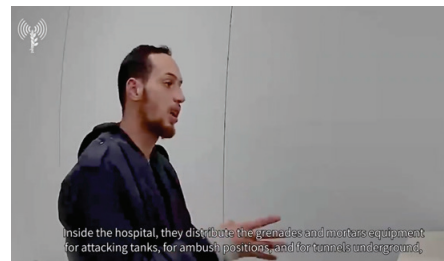
After 15 months of war in Gaza, Hamas is still paying its operatives regularly and recruiting more fighters by intercepting humanitarian aid shipments intended for Gaza residents.

Armed Hamas operatives seize supply trucks carrying internationally funded cargo and then resell these essential products to the local population at top prices, undermining humanitarian efforts intended to assist civilians. Reports say the resale of international aid has become Hamas’ dominant revenue stream and a means by which to recruit youths, with some 4,000 new fighters recruited over December.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has estimated that, of the 2,892 aid trucks that entered Gaza in December, 2,230 were “intercepted” by Hamas or other Palestinian groups.

DETAINEES ADMIT HAMAS OPERATES OUT OF GAZA HOSPITAL

In the face of international condemnation of its arrest in December of Dr Hussam Abu Safiya, chief of Kamal Adwan Hospital in Gaza



Hamas member and hospital employee Anas Muhammed Faiz Al-Sharif (Image: X/ screenshot)

and a Hamas colonel, Israel on Jan. 7 released footage from an interrogation of a captured 21-year-old Hamas Nukhba Force member, Anas Muhammad Faiz Al-Sharif, who was employed at the hospital. He confirmed that the hospital was used by Hamas as a command centre to launch attacks and to distribute weapons to Hamas fighters, saying that Hamas fighters believed the hospital was a safe haven because the Israeli military could not directly target it.

Other detainees also reportedly revealed that Israelis hostages had been held at the hospital.

In the operation conducted at the hospital in December, IDF commandos discovered some weaponry and arrested approximately 240 suspects in the hospital compound, the largest number of terrorists caught in one location in Gaza since the war began.

ESCALATING ATTACKS BY THE HOUTHIS

The Houthis continued to attack Israel since mid-December on a near-daily basis, although the Iranian proxy announced on Jan. 18 it would halt firing at international shipping and Israel if a ceasefire comes into effect.

In December, the Houthis launched 17 projectiles, including drones and ballistic missiles, at Israel.

Between Jan. 1 and Jan. 20, the Houthis launched at least six ballistic missiles and ten drones.

The IDF has struck Houthi targets five times since the start of the war in retaliation, including on Dec. 19 and 26 and on Jan. 10. The US has increased airstrikes against the Houthis in retaliation for attacks on shipping and the US Navy, including on Dec. 16, 21, 30 and 31 and Jan. 8 and 10.

ISRAEL ENFORCING LEBANON CEASEFIRE

Israel has claimed that Hezbollah has been consistently violating the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon, which began on Nov. 27, leading to a number of Israeli actions against Hezbollah sites in southern Lebanon. Israel says it notified the US-led ceasefire monitoring committee about the breaches and only took action after nothing was done. In December, the IDF noted 120 Hezbollah violations, struck Lebanon 25 times and killed 44 Hezbollah operatives.

This continued in January, when the IDF targeted terrorists loading weapons in the village of Kunin in south Lebanon, fired at Hezbollah operatives at the Har Dov area and struck a rocket launch site, a military installation and weapons-smuggling routes near the border with Syria.

NEW LEBANESE PRESIDENT, PM IN BLOW TO HEZBOLLAH

On Jan. 9, after two years of deadlock caused by Hezbollah's representatives in parliament, Lebanon finally chose a new president, Gen. Joseph Aoun, Chief of Staff of the Lebanese Armed Forces, in a development seen as signifying the weakening influence of Iran and its proxy in Lebanon.

Aoun, who was backed by the US, France and the Saudis, said after his victory that the state must have a monopoly on possessing arms – apparently a message to Hezbollah to disarm.

Aoun nominated Nawaf Salam, President of the International Court

of Justice and former Lebanese Ambassador to the UN, as Prime Minister. Salam was also elected despite objections from Hezbollah politicians. After taking office, Salam vowed to “extend” the state's authority over all its territory and implement UN Security Council resolution 1701, which requires Hezbollah to vacate South Lebanon.

IRAN EXPANDS VENEZUELA PRESENCE

Iran has reportedly established a drone production facility at El Libertador Air Base in Venezuela, where it also helps train Venezuelan military personnel on several models being locally manufactured.

Iran and its proxies, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as its former client regime in Syria, have had a very close and cooperative relationship with the Venezuelan regime for decades.



STRANGER THAN FICTION

YOU'RE FIRED

It was predictable that Islamist extremists and terrorists would rejoice in the wildfires devastating Los Angeles and portray them as Allah's punishment for the US arming Israel to attack Gaza, or alleged crimes against Islam generally. And that was certainly the case, with a wide range of jihadist publishing statements to that effect across social media, including members of al-Qaeda, Islamic State, Hamas, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Yemen's Houthis.

However, it is a little more surprising when it comes from regimes trying to portray themselves as responsible. Take Fatah, the party that rules the Palestinian Authority, which is currently trying to convince the international community in general and the US specifically that it is ready to take over governing Gaza.

Despite this, an official Fatah website published a cartoon on Jan. 10 portraying

US PREPARING ICC SANCTIONS

New US President Donald Trump reportedly plans sanctions against the International Criminal Court (ICC), targeting its staff and operations over arrest warrants for Israeli leaders PM Binyamin Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, as well as threats to the sovereignty of the US.

In one of the executive orders Trump signed immediately following his inauguration, he also renewed past sanctions against any ICC officer who investigates US troops.

Earlier, on Jan. 9, the Republican-led US House of Representatives passed the “Illegitimate Court Counteraction Act” (243-140) to counter the ICC, sending it to the Senate. The sanctions in it would freeze ICC assets and pressure global banks to sever ties.

the fires as punishment for US President Donald Trump. The cartoon shows Trump saying, “I will open the gates of hell on the Middle East” – likely a reference to his threat that ‘all hell would break loose’ if the hostages weren't released.

Behind him, the Los Angeles fires rage, and below is a verse from the Koran that states that just when people think they control the earth, Allah will “mow it down as if it never flourished,” insinuating the fires were divine punishment (Translation from Palestinian Media Watch).

Meanwhile, Qatar hosts the largest US base in the Middle East. Yet on Jan. 12, the Qatari daily *Al-Arab*, known to be pro-government, included a piece by Najat Ali referring to the fires as “a divine warning to Washington due to the unlimited military aid it extends to Israel,” and “a divine warning” to Trump for his threats. Furthermore, numerous other Qatari journalists expressed similar sentiments on social media (Translations from the Middle East Media Research Institute).

COVER STORY

TREPIDATION AMIDST ELATION

OUT OF THE DARKNESS

David Horovitz

Four hundred and seventy-one days. *Four hundred and seventy-one days* after they were dragged away into the dark underworld of Hamas captivity, where nobody knows what hell they endured, Romi Gonen, 24, Emily Damari, 28, and Doron Steinbrecher, 31, emerged into the light on the afternoon of Sunday, January 19.

And they were not merely standing and walking but also, incredibly, in some of the very first clips and pictures, smiling.

Emily's beaming face as she and her mother phoned their family, her bandaged left hand waving – two fingers missing from where she was shot on that worst of all days, October 7, 2023 – took the national breath away. (Hamas gunmen who burst into her home at Kibbutz Kfar Aza shot her dog, she has reportedly told her family and friends in her first conversations with them, and she was hit, too, as she tried to comfort her dying pet.)

And then, minutes later, the pictures of all three of



Doron Steinbrecher, Romi Gonen and Emily Damari are united with their mothers after 471 days in captivity (Images: IDF)



these young women embracing their mothers surely moved many Israelis, and others all over the world who love this country and its people, to tears of joy and relief.

Romi cradled by her mother Meirav, a gracious, noble presence in innumerable television interviews through the many awful months.

Emily and *her* mother, Mandy, during that first phone call with the rest of the family.

And Doron, her face not visible, hand covering her eyes, her cheek against her mother Simona's, hugging each other like they'll never let go.

Fourteen months since the last deal with Hamas, fears had mounted inexorably for the almost 100 hostages still captive in Gaza.

The nation waited, month after month after month – blaming Hamas, blaming Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, blaming both – for the agreement that never came.

It held its breath, after this new deal was finally reached, signed, approved and supposed to take effect, when Hamas delayed the release of the names of these



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first three to be freed.

And it watched with no little dread on that Sunday afternoon when dozens of Hamas gunmen, hailed by a large cheering crowd, commandeered Gaza City's Saraya Square for a wild, self-aggrandising daylight ceremony before a vast global audience.

But in a few frenzied seconds, it was done: Doron, Emily and Romi scrambled the five or so paces from one vehicle to another, one reality to another – from Hamas to the International Committee of the Red Cross, and thence to merciful Israeli safety.

The joy and relief are heartfelt and deep, but no, not overwhelming.

Because nobody can forget for a second that this first, six-week phase of the deal has only just begun. And given that not all of the 33 women, children and men to be freed in this so-called humanitarian phase are alive, there

will be much that is terrible before it is over.

Because nobody can forget that the agreement comes at the price of the release of hundreds of the most dangerous terrorists, many, likely most, of whom have every intention of killing again.

Because nobody can forget that Hamas aims to use this deal, as it has always intended to use the hostages it seized, to enable its revival.

Because nobody can forget that 94 hostages are, unthinkably, still held captive in Gaza. 

David Horowitz is the founding editor of the Times of Israel. He is the author of Still Life with Bombers (2004) and A Little Too Close to God (2000), and co-author of Shalom Friend: The Life and Legacy of Yitzhak Rabin (1996). © Times of Israel (timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

KEY PROVISIONS OF THE HAMAS-ISRAEL ARRANGEMENT

BICOM

Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani announced at a press conference in Doha on January 15 that a ceasefire and hostage-release agreement had been reached between Israel and Hamas.


After some hitches caused by last-minute Hamas demands and a Hamas delay in handing over a list of hostages to be released, the agreement was ratified by the Israeli Cabinet on Jan. 18.

It went into effect the following day, Jan. 19, which saw the release of three female hostages, Romi Gonen, 24, Emily Damari, 28, and Doron Steinbrecher, 31. In exchange Israel released 90 female and minor Palestinian prisoners the following day.

The key details of the agreement are:

- The agreement will secure the release of 33 hostages in the first stage, which will last 42 days.
- The hostages to be freed in the first stage include female civilians, female soldiers, wounded hostages and male civilians over the age of 50. Most of the hostages are reportedly alive.
- Three hostages are to be released on the first day of the deal. Another four will be released on the seventh day. Thereafter, three hostages will be released every week. The living hostages will be released before the dead.
- On the seventh day, after seven Israeli hostages have been freed, Israel will carry out its first withdrawals from Gaza, and residents of the northern Gaza Strip will be allowed to return to their homes. Cars will be allowed to travel north of the Netzarim Corridor, an Israeli controlled strip which bisects Gaza, after undergoing inspection (though details of the inspection mechanism remain unclear).
- Israel will release roughly 1,000 terrorists in exchange for the hostages. Nukhba (Hamas elite force) terrorists will not be released in the deal. Terrorists from Gaza will return to

the Strip. Murderers from the West Bank will be exiled overseas, but those who were not convicted of murder will be allowed to return to their homes.

- In addition to the terrorists who will be released, Israel will also release 1,000 Gazans arrested since Oct. 8th, 2023 who were not directly involved in the Hamas attacks the day before.
- Negotiations over the second stage of the deal are to begin on the 16th day of the agreement's implementation. The remaining hostages – men under the age of 50, male soldiers and the bodies of those killed – are to be released in the second stage of the deal.
- During the sixth week of the ceasefire, Hamas is supposed to release two civilians, Avera Mengistu and Hisham al-Sayed, who entered Gaza back in 2014 and 2015 respectively and have been held by Hamas since then. Both are considered to be suffering from mental illnesses.
- Fifty wounded Hamas members per day will be allowed to enter Egypt through the Rafah Crossing. Each one must be approved by Israel and Egypt. Similarly, any number of wounded civilians will be permitted to leave Gaza through the Rafah Crossing.
- Israel will allow 600 trucks transporting humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip every day. This is more than double the daily average prior to the ceasefire.
- During the 42-day ceasefire, Israel will retain a 700-metre security zone inside Gaza, except for several specified places where Israel will be allowed to remain 1,000 metres inside the Strip.
- The IDF will gradually withdraw forces from Gaza, including from the Philadelphi Corridor – the strip along Gaza's border with Egypt – in keeping with agreed maps. The IDF will complete withdrawing from the Philadelphi Corridor by the 50th day of the ceasefire. 

(Additional reporting by AIJAC staff)



A SLIVER OF HOPE; AN ABYSS OF HATRED

Fiamma Nirenstein

In the realm of cinema, where the boundaries between good and evil are sharply drawn and the villains are unmistakably monstrous, one might imagine a collision as stark and tragic as the one currently unfolding in the Middle East. The reality, however, is far from fiction.

The contrast between two societies – one fighting to protect its citizens and the other entrenched in a culture of violence – is painfully evident. The fragile ceasefire brokered to exchange hostages and prisoners has exposed not just a sliver of hope, but also the enduring abyss of hatred that fuels Hamas.

The scenes of joy accompanying the release of Israeli hostages like Emily Damari, Doron Steinbrecher and Romi Gonen – imprisoned for over a year in the brutal confines of Hamas' regime – were a bittersweet reminder of human resilience. These young women, held captive in a

society that thrives on terror, were finally returned to their families. Yet, their liberation only underscores the broader tragedy. More than 90 other hostages remain in captivity, their fate uncertain as negotiations continue.

In southern Israel, the rescue helicopters landed on the same grounds where Hamas committed atrocities during the Nova music festival massacre. The joy of the moment could not mask the persistent tension. Israeli soldiers, medical teams and journalists bore witness to the sobering reality: the war is far from over and the ceasefire remains

tenuous. Political fractures within Israel, including the resignation of figures like far-right Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, reveal a nation grappling with its democratic values while prioritising the immediate goal of saving lives.

Meanwhile, in Gaza, the atmosphere is chillingly different. The "liberation" of prisoners by Hamas is accompanied by triumphant rallies, orchestrated with the preci-

sion of a military parade. Men, armed and jubilant, crowd the streets, chanting slogans of defiance and displaying the ethos of an organisation committed to perpetuating violence. The release of Palestinian prisoners – some of them hardened militants – signals Hamas' intent to regroup and continue its so-called holy war against Israel.

Hamas' celebrations are not a prelude to peace, but a calculated effort to rearm and reorganise. Despite agreements aimed at demilitarising Gaza, evidence suggests that humanitarian aid, including truckloads of food and supplies, is being diverted to bolster Hamas' infrastructure. The militant group has reinstated its control, complete with armed guards, green headbands and military-style parades.

The ongoing release of prisoners – 700 in the first phase, potentially rising to 1,900 – raises grave concerns. Many of these individuals have been convicted of terrorism, and their return to Gaza risks further inflaming the region. Among them are young men likely to embrace the path of martyrdom, perpetuating the cycle of violence that has plagued the area for decades.

The ethos of Hamas, marked by hatred, violence, and the subjugation of dissent, continues to dominate Gaza. Reports of ideological purges and the brutal silencing of opposition underscore the regime's stranglehold on the territory. A lone woman protesting against the celebratory distribution of sweets is a stark reminder of the oppressive environment that stifles even the smallest acts of defiance.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas' rule in Gaza, but the path forward is fraught with uncertainty. While the international community has called for peace, meaningful pressure to liberate Gaza from the Hamas grip remains



Hamas' stage-managed, deliberately intimidating handover of the three hostages to the Red Cross in Gaza City on Jan. 19 (Image: X)

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elusive. Without global intervention, the people of Gaza risk being perpetually trapped under the shadow of an organisation that thrives on war and oppression.

As Israel navigates the challenges ahead, the smiles of its rescued daughters serve as a poignant reminder of what is at stake. These moments of joy, though fleeting, embody the resilience of a nation determined to protect its people and uphold its values. Yet, the broader question remains: Can the world muster the resolve to address the root causes of this conflict and bring lasting peace to a region that has seen too much suffering? For now, Israel braces for an uncertain future, holding tightly to the hope embodied in the faces of those it has saved. AIR

Fiamma Nirenstein is an Italian-Israeli author, journalist and Senior Research Fellow at the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs. © Jewish News Syndicate (JNS.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

SIX CRITICAL WEEKS FOR NETANYAHU

Amy Spiro

By March 3, 2025, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu will likely be faced with a choice – move ahead with the next stage of the ceasefire-hostage release

THE TERRORISTS ISRAEL IS RELEASING UNDER THE AGREEMENT

Foundation for Defense of Democracies

On Jan. 20, Israel released 90 imprisoned Palestinians, most of them women and minors, following the release of three Israeli hostages.

Among the Palestinian prisoners released by Israel in that group were:

- Khalida Jarrar, a convicted member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); Jarrar was involved in several plane hijackings and the 2019 bombing attack that killed an Israeli teenager in the West Bank;
- Dalal Khaseeb, the sister of former Hamas commander Saleh al-Aroui;
- Nawal Abed Fatiha, who stabbed a 70-year-old Israeli man in a 2020 attack in Jerusalem; and
- Ibrahim Zamar, who shot two people near Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in 2023 when he was 15-years-old.

Other notorious terrorists convicted of bloody attacks slated for release later as part of the agreement include:

deal, and face the collapse of his coalition and an election that could potentially end his time in office, or go back to war and risk the lives of hostages and the wrath of the US President.

And the prime minister has a history of waiting until the last minute to make major decisions.

The hostages for ceasefire and prisoner release deal inked in Qatar in mid-January was ostensibly designed to end the gruelling 15-month war between Hamas and Israel in Gaza. Negotiations on the next stage are slated to start on day 16 of the truce – Feb. 5.

Former US President Joe Biden said the second phase would bring “a permanent end to the war,” Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani said he hoped the deal would spell “the last page of the war,” and US President Donald Trump, called it “a first step toward lasting peace in the Middle East.”

In his public comments and behind-the-scenes promises, Netanyahu has expressed a fairly different sentiment.

Netanyahu has vowed, since the start of the war, that fighting will not end until Hamas no longer rules the Strip. If there was any doubt that the terror group still exercises power, video from the streets of Gaza on Jan. 20 – where armed and masked Hamas gunmen put on a show of force

“Netanyahu... can hope that during the next stages of talks, Hamas agrees to end its military and political rule of the Strip. That appears to be a pipe dream, however”

- Zakaria Zubeidi, a senior member of Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade who was involved in a 2002 attack that killed six people in Beit She'an;
- Sami Jaradat, a Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist who sent the suicide bomber who killed 21 Israelis at Maxim restaurant in Haifa in 2003;
- Mohammad Abu Warda, serving 48 life sentences for his involvement in two Jerusalem bus bombings in 1996 which killed 45 people;
- Tabet Mardawi, involved in the murder of 20 Israelis during the Second Intifada;
- Arafat Irfaiya, who raped and murdered Israeli teenager Ori Ansbacher in 2019;
- Mohammed Naifeh, responsible for planning a 2002 attack in Kibbutz Metzger which killed five Israelis and a separate attack in Hermesh where three Israeli women were killed; and
- Wael Qassem, a former Hamas leader from Silwan, east Jerusalem, who is serving 35 life sentences for his involvement in the 2002 attacks at Café Moment in Jerusalem, the Sheffield Club in Rishon LeZion, and Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Hundreds of additional convicted Palestinian terrorists will be released as part of the hostage recovery and ceasefire deal. AIR



for war-weary Gazans as the first three hostages were released – put that to rest.

Netanyahu has also promised to bring every last hostage – the living and the dead – home to Israel, something most defence officials see as an impossible task without some sort of agreement.

In his first public comments on the deal, the Prime Minister termed it on Jan. 19 a “temporary ceasefire”, proclaiming that both Biden and Trump “have given full backing to Israel’s right to return to the fighting” if the negotiations do not advance.

“If we need to go back to the fighting,” said Netanyahu, “we will do so in new ways and with great force.”

Netanyahu has denied that the IDF will decrease the number of troops in the Philadelphi Corridor along the border with Egypt throughout the six-week ceasefire, though the text of the deal says Israel will “gradually reduce the forces in the corridor area during stage 1.”

The deal also states that the IDF must complete its withdrawal from the corridor by day 50, regardless of any future stages, but a “senior diplomatic official” – generally code for a representative of the Prime Minister’s Office – proclaimed that “If Hamas does not agree to Israeli demands to end the war, Israel will remain in the Philadelphi Corridor also on the 42nd day and also the 50th day,” effectively leaving the IDF there “until further notice”.

March 3, day 42 – on which the remaining 14 hostages of the 33 to be released are slated to be freed – could prove a particularly critical day for the deal. If the IDF shows no sign of leaving Philadelphi, Hamas could easily argue that this is a violation of the agreement and halt the release of the hostages.

Netanyahu also proclaimed in his statement that “terrorists who committed murder” will not be released to the West Bank or Jerusalem, but sent to Gaza or abroad. That is true of convicted Palestinian murderers, although a number of prisoners serving serious time for terror convictions who were not found guilty of murder will be released to the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

BETWEEN A ROCK AND HARD PLACE

With the exit of Itamar Ben-Gvir and his far-right Otzma Yehudit party in protest over the deal, Netanyahu’s governing coalition is down to 62 seats, a razor-thin 2-seat majority in the 120-member Knesset. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has sworn that he will quit the Government if Israel does not return to fighting Hamas in Gaza, which would end the ceasefire and make the release of the remaining 64 hostages increasingly unlikely.

Both Ben-Gvir and Opposition Leader Yair Lapid have vowed to provide outside support to the Netanyahu Government, with very different motivations. Lapid – in the short term – to allow a hostage deal to go through, and Ben-Gvir to prevent toppling a right-wing government and



Even after the departure of Itamar Ben-Gvir’s far-right faction, Netanyahu’s cabinet is divided over what should happen at the end of the first six-week stage of the ceasefire (Image: IGPO/ Flickr)

causing an election.

Netanyahu is faced with a limited set of options. He can, of course, hope that during the next stages of talks, Hamas agrees to end its military and political rule of the Strip. That appears to be a pipe dream, however. And Netanyahu has adamantly refused to entertain the idea of the Palestinian Authority assuming control, which some had seen as the most likely and stable alternative.

The Prime Minister could also torpedo the second stage of talks, and return to full-scale fighting in the Gaza Strip after the end of the ceasefire’s six-week first stage, endangering the remaining hostages and returning Israel to a state of war, with an unknown outcome.

But Netanyahu is likely to be facing extraordinary pressure from Trump. The new US President is a man who likes to be known as a dealmaker, has boasted of managing to clinch the current deal “in less than three months, without being president,” and reportedly has his eyes on a Nobel Prize.

In an interview on Jan. 18, Trump said the deal “better hold... This has to end.” And in his inauguration speech two days later, he proclaimed, “We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end and perhaps most importantly the wars we never get into. My proudest legacy will be that of a peacemaker.”

Though he clashed repeatedly with the Biden Administration, Netanyahu is less likely to want to annoy Trump – a man known for holding petty grudges and making politics as personal as possible, who also, as US President, could likely otherwise provide Netanyahu with many other things on his wish list.

Netanyahu has a lot of decisions to make in the next six weeks – and he might want to consider picking up a copy of Trump’s *The Art of the Deal*. AIR

Amy Spiro is a reporter and writer with the Times of Israel. © Times of Israel (www.timesofisrael.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

HOW HAMAS SEES THE CEASEFIRE DEAL

Khaled Abu Toameh

Those who think that the Iran-backed Palestinian terrorist group Hamas will abandon its *jihād* (holy war) to murder more Jews and destroy Israel in the aftermath of the recent ceasefire-hostage agreement are mistaken.

Although the agreement may put an end to the current conflict between Israel and Hamas, it does not, in any way, reflect a shift in the radical and dangerous ideology of the Islamist group, as outlined in its 1988 Covenant. The document quotes Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood organisation (of which Hamas is an offshoot), as saying, “Israel will arise and continue to exist until Islam abolishes it, as it abolished what went before.”

The main points of the Hamas Covenant state:

- The Palestinian issue is a religious-political Muslim problem, and the conflict with Israel is between Muslims and the Jewish “infidels”.
- All Palestine is Muslim land and no one has the right to give it up.
- An uncompromising jihad must be waged against Israel, and any agreement recognising its right to exist must be totally opposed.

The ceasefire-hostage deal does not require Hamas to disarm or cede control over the Gaza Strip. As far as Hamas is concerned, this is just another deal similar to ceasefire agreements reached with Israel after previous rounds of fighting over the past 20 years. The terrorist group seems to be convinced that the deal will enable it to keep control of the Gaza Strip and prepare for more massacres of Jews.

Shortly after the ceasefire-hostage deal was announced on January 15, Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya made it clear that his group intends to pursue its jihad against Israel.

Referring to the Hamas-led October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, resulting in the murder of 1,200 Israelis and the wounding of thousands, al-Hayya said:

The al-Aqsa Flood [the name Hamas uses to describe the October 7 atrocities] constitutes a significant turning point in the history of the Palestinian cause [and] the resistance, and its repercussions won't stop until the liberation of occupied Jerusalem.

He went on to hail the October 7 massacres as “a military and security achievement that will remain a source

of pride for the Palestinian people,” and praised Iran for supporting the Palestinian “resistance” and firing missiles at Israel during the war.

In response to the ceasefire-hostage agreement, a Hamas statement said:

This is an achievement for our people, our resistance, our nation, and the free people of the world. It is a turning point in the conflict with the [Israeli] enemy, on the path to achieving our people's goals of liberation and return.

“Liberation” refers to Hamas’ declared goal of eliminating Israel and replacing it with an Islamist state. “Return” refers to the Palestinian demand to flood Israel with millions of “refugees” so that Jews would become a minority in their own homeland.

In yet another sign of Hamas’ intention to continue



Hamas’ Khalil al-Hayya (Image: Khamenei.ir/ Wikimedia Commons)

the fight against Israel, supporters of the terrorist group took to the streets of the city of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip to celebrate the ceasefire-hostage deal and chanted: “We will go to Jerusalem, we will sacrifice millions of martyrs!”

Members of Hamas’ military wing, the Izz a-Din al-Qassam Brigades, also joined the celebration and declared, “We are on the battlefield and we will remain on

the battlefield.”

The celebrations spread to the West Bank, where Hamas supporters in Ramallah, the de facto capital of the Palestinian Authority, chanted slogans in support of slain Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar and Muhammad Deif, the masterminds of the October 7 carnage.

Ahmad Fouad Al-Khatib, a former resident of the Gaza Strip and Senior Fellow with the Atlantic Council, wrote on Jan. 14:

The reality is that the Islamist terrorism of Hamas, masquerading as ‘resistance,’ has achieved nothing for the Palestinian people except for billions of dollars in wasted resources and tens of thousands of needless deaths, with Gaza in ruins after 20 years

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following the [Israeli] withdrawal of settlements [from the Gaza Strip] in 2005. Indeed, there will be a reckoning with Hamas after the war is over, and the group must be put on metaphoric, intellectual, and literal trials for its crimes against the Palestinian people's aspirations and national project...

Hamas's propaganda machine, run by Qatari-state media, Aljazeera [sic] Arabic, will work overtime to help the terror group turn a catastrophic disaster into a victory akin to the battles of Stalingrad and Leningrad, desperately seeking to promote terrorism and the armed resistance narrative as one that is heroic and valiant when it is cowardly, [and] ineffective...

A ceasefire-hostage deal that allows Hamas to remain in power means that it is only a matter of time before the terrorist groups attempts to launch another October 7-style attack on Israel. The new US Administration, to avoid more violence and bloodshed, must insist that Hamas be removed from power.

This can only be accomplished by applying pressure and sanctions on Hamas' Qatari and Iranian sponsors. Hamas must be totally defeated and eliminated, not rewarded for committing the biggest crime against Jews since the Holocaust.

Hamas' defiant statements after the ceasefire-hostage agreement was reached demonstrate the terrorist group's resolve to carry on attacking Israel. The statements also show that Hamas' leadership is willing to sacrifice more of its people to fulfill its objective of destroying Israel. Clearly, it has not learned any lesson from bringing disaster upon the Palestinians. Hamas leaders do not care if tens of thousands of Palestinians are killed as part of its jihad against Israel. Furthermore, Hamas leaders apparently are not interested in rebuilding the Gaza Strip and providing its residents with safety, stability and prosperity. Rather, their primary goal, evidently, is still to murder as many Jews as possible.

The only deal that will actually bring peace is a ceasefire where Hamas ceases to exist.

AIR

Khaled Abu Toameh is an award-winning Arab Israeli journalist based in Jerusalem. Reprinted from the Gatestone Institute (gatestoneinstitute.org). © Khaled Abu Toameh, reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

HOW HAMAS SURVIVED 15 MONTHS OF WAR

Seth Frantzman

The war against Hamas, which began in the wake of its attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, was the longest sustained war that Hamas has had to face in its almost 40-year history. The group was prepared to face this challenge. Now that Hamas appears to be emerging in Gaza, it is worth asking some initial questions about how it survived.

When the war began, Hamas sent several thousand of its fighters to attack Israel. Hamas was estimated after October 7 to have around 24 battalions – around 30,000 fighters. There were other terrorist groups in Gaza, primarily Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which had thousands of fighters as well.

This means that, when the war began, the terrorists may have been able to muster up to 40,000 men. The terrorists faced an Israeli army that called up 300,000 reservists and deployed around five divisions to fight in Gaza.

The main IDF divisions that fought in Gaza included the 36th Armoured Division, the 162nd Division, the 98th Division of paratroopers and commandos, as well as the Gaza Division, the 99th Division, and the 252nd Division. After the initial attack on Israel, in which Hamas had lost some fighters, Hamas retreated into tunnels in Gaza. Estimates say thousands of Palestinians were killed in the attack on Israel, but it's unclear if those estimates are correct.

What matters is that Hamas waited in Gaza for the IDF attack. The IDF also waited from October 7 to 27 to launch the ground campaign. This gave Hamas a lot of time to prepare and recover from the October 7 attack. Of course, it was Israel that truly had to recover, but Hamas also had to deal with an unprecedented number of hostages and face the Israeli airstrikes that followed October 7.



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HAMAS GAINS AND LOSSES

The initial IDF advance targeted northern Gaza and was designed to cut it off from the south. Most initial advances were not in urban areas. Instead, the 162nd Division moved from Zikim south along the coast, while the 36th crossed south of Gaza in the Netzarim Corridor, seizing the Salah a-Din Road and other key areas.

Once the divisions linked up, the IDF launched attacks into northern Gaza. The IDF and the Defence Ministry estimated that these initial attacks defeated the ten or 12 Hamas battalions in northern Gaza. This later proved to be false. However, Hamas did lose thousands of fighters in the north. The IDF never entered many neighbourhoods around Gaza City, and even when the IDF went into places like Jabalya or Beit Hanun, it didn't fully clear these areas. Hamas moved away, mixed with civilians, and waited. In many cases, the IDF didn't check civilians fleeing Gaza City for the south, and it's clear Hamas was able to leave if it wanted. In January and February 2024, the IDF's campaign became less intense. The IDF shifted focus to Khan Yunis, and the 98th Division spent months clearing this key area of Hamas. By April, the 98th was done, and left. Then the IDF decided to go into Rafah, after a long pause.

In essence, Hamas was given a kind of de facto ceasefire in Gaza in March and April, which enabled it to regroup. This was the era when the US was pressing to build a floating pier attached to the Netzarim Corridor. The pier failed, but the time all this took mattered. When the IDF finally went into Rafah and the Philadelphi Corridor on the border with Egypt in May 2024, Hamas was able to move back to Khan Yunis because the 98th Division had left. Now it was the job of the 162nd Division to remove Hamas from Rafah, a process that took three months. Possibly 1,000 Hamas fighters were eliminated and hundreds detained. Hamas regrouped in northern Gaza in Shejaia and Jabalya and settled down in central Gaza in Nuseirat, Al-Bureij, Deir al-Balah, and Maghazi. In these areas, Hamas created a mini-state and kept governing. It also controlled the Al-Mawasi humanitarian area, and from there it projected influence and power by profiting off aid coming into Gaza.

In September, the IDF shifted focus to Hezbollah. The 98th Division went north, leaving few troops in Gaza. The IDF expanded the Netzarim Corridor and also killed Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, but a lack of troops meant this

could not be exploited. Hamas waited and watched.

By this time, Hamas only operated on the surface in small groups. It had moved most of its command and control into schools, and many of its members had relocated to hospitals to hide. It suffered losses but kept up the practice of using civilian areas to hide. It also began using more booby traps against the IDF. By October, the IDF was ready for a new offensive in northern Gaza. The 162nd Division was sent into Jabalya, and eventually into areas in Beit Hanun and Beit Lahiya. In Jabalya, 70,000 civilians had to be evacuated, and the IDF found thousands of Hamas fighters. This proved to be a difficult battle, and dozens of IDF troops became casualties. Hamas showed that it had not been defeated and had actually recruited



Hamas has managed to create “mini-states” in areas vacated by the IDF (Image: Anas Mohammed/ Shutterstock)

and possibly grown in strength in Jabalya. By the time the IDF was done clearing this area, the hostage deal was being signed. Now the IDF has withdrawn from northern Gaza and is redeploying from Netzarim.

Hamas has survived because it was never defeated in central Gaza or Gaza City. When Hamas lost units, it rebuilt them. When it lost commanders, it replaced them. Hamas has lost many

commanders and leaders in the past, such as Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Abdel Aziz a-Rantisi, and Salah Shehade. Palestinian Islamic Jihad has also lost commanders in the past, such as Baha Abu al-Ata.

Losing fighters and commanders is a way of life for these groups. During the May 2021 war, the IDF claimed to have eliminated 25 top Hamas commanders. It's possible this was an exaggeration, but even if it wasn't, Hamas replaced them. Hamas controls the two million people of Gaza. It recruits from a pool of around 300,000 young men. All Hamas has to do is recruit a small percent of these men and it can continue to replenish its ranks.

The population of Gaza is young, more than half under age 18. Hamas has a ready pool of recruits.

Each generation grows up under Hamas rule. They know nothing else. They don't recall a time without wars every year or two. They are used to Israel's airstrikes and walking amongst the rubble. They don't see an alternative, and Hamas preys on their misery.

AIR

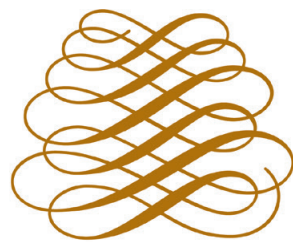
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Trump versus Teheran?

All eyes on the new Administration's Iran policy

Ilan Evyatar

Donald Trump was sworn in on Monday, January 20, a day after a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas came into effect and the first three Israeli hostages returned home after 471 days in captivity. Trump claimed credit for the deal even before he entered the White House and will likely be hoping to leverage the ceasefire for further gains in the region, in particular, progress on Israel-Saudi normalisation.

But there is another pressing issue that looms in the background: Iran's race towards nuclear breakout.

All eyes should be on the President's Iran policy. Will

he opt to ramp up economic sanctions on the Iranian regime – as he did in his first term – in order to push for a new nuclear deal to replace the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by President Obama in 2015 and from which Trump withdrew in 2018? Or will he greenlight an Israeli military strike on Teheran's nuclear program – or even launch an American strike against a regime that stands accused of plotting to assassinate him?

According to reports, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is expected to visit Trump shortly after the inauguration to coordinate next steps on the pressing issues in the region, including: post-war plans for Gaza, assuming the ceasefire holds and progresses to its next steps; Lebanon, where the initial implementation phase of the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire reached in late November is due to be completed by Jan. 26; and Syria following the fall of the Assad regime.

However, the bigger issues of Iran's nuclear program and Israel's potential normalisation of ties with Saudi Arabia, accompanied by an American defence treaty with the Kingdom, will likely dominate any discussions.

Both Trump and Netanyahu desperately want to see a Saudi deal materialise – the US President to earn his place in history and perhaps gain a Nobel Peace Prize, and the

Israeli PM to try to improve both his future political prospects and burnish his legacy. However, they could differ on the path there. Trump is likely to push for concessions from Netanyahu on both an end to the Gaza war and a political horizon for the Palestinians that will be palatable to the Saudis. This is something that the current Israeli Government will find hard to swallow, even given the departure of Itamar Ben-Gvir and his far-right "Jewish Power" party, which left the coalition in protest at the hostage deal. On that basis, though, agreement to the hostage deal is already seen by some observers as an act of deference by Netanyahu to the incoming President.

But if the two leaders could differ on the path, if not the destination, when it comes to Saudi Arabia, on Iran, things are more complicated. Trump has made bellicose statements regarding Iran, but behind the scenes is also said to have reached out to the new regime to raise the possibility of talks.

TRUMP'S CONFUSING MESSAGING

In October, after Iran's massive but mostly unsuccessful ballistic missile strike on Israel, Trump lashed out at President Joe Biden for saying Israel should not target Iran's

nuclear facilities in response.

Speaking at a campaign event in North Carolina, Trump said, "I think he's got that one wrong. Isn't that what you're supposed to hit?"

Just a couple of weeks earlier, however, he had suggested at a press conference in New York that he would be open to talks on a revamped version of the nuclear accords from which he withdrew. "Sure, I would do that," he said. "We have to make a deal, because the conse-

quences are impossible."

In an interview with *Time* magazine after his election win, when asked what were the chances of the US going to war with Iran under his presidency, he responded, "Anything can happen. It's a very volatile situation."

While the new US President is keeping his cards close to his chest, Israel has reportedly been sending out feelers regarding the possibility of the Trump Administration supporting an Israeli strike on the Iranian nuclear program. Israel's Minister for Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer met unofficially with Trump at Mar-a-Lago in November to discuss the issue, but there have been contradictory reports regarding the outcome of that meeting.

One version has it that Dermer came away thinking there was a high likelihood Trump would either support an Israeli military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities or



Trump and Netanyahu are expected to meet soon and many issues will be on the table, but Iran is expected to supersede them all (Image: Flickr)

even prepare a US strike – which would likely be more militarily effective. Yet other stories said Dermer returned empty-handed.

Other reports claim that Trump reached out to Iran via Oman prior to taking office, expressing readiness to reach a new nuclear deal different from the one reached in 2015. Oman played an important role in back-channel negotiations that eventually led to the JCPOA.

Trump's appointee as Middle East advisor, Massad Boulos – a Lebanese-American businessman and the President's daughter Tiffany's father-in-law – gave an interview which is perhaps illustrative of the ways in which the needle might swing.

Speaking with the French magazine *Le Point*, Boulos stated that Trump would renew his “maximum pressure” policy from his first term but would also be willing to negotiate with the Iranian regime. Boulos said:

...There are three very important points for [Donald Trump]: Iran must absolutely not have nuclear power; Iran's ballistic missiles pose a risk not only to Israel but also to the Gulf countries; and finally, the problem posed by Iranian proxies in the region, whether in Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, or Yemen. Apart from these three axes, Trump did not talk about regime change.

A SENSE OF URGENCY

Time to make a decision one way or another is likely to be short.

Since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, Iran has significantly reduced the time it would need to achieve nuclear breakout. The agreement limited Iran to uranium enrichment of 3.67%, but since then, it has amassed sufficient stockpiles of uranium enriched to 60% U-235 enough for at least five nuclear warheads if further enriched to 90%, the level required for nuclear weapons. This is a relatively quick and easy process, and it is believed that Iran could complete this enrichment process within just a few weeks if it made a decision to do so.

However, to produce a nuclear bomb, Iran would need to take additional steps: converting uranium from its gaseous form (uranium hexafluoride) into metal, casting and machining the metal into weapons components, master-

ing weaponisation and integrating the components into a missile warhead for delivery. This process could add several months to a couple of years to the process. Iran is known to have conducted computer simulations to advance this process, but it is not clear exactly where it stands or how long this would take it.

While Iran has reached 60% enrichment and stopped there for now, other factors also impose time constraints on decision-makers. One significant factor is the snapback provision of the JCPOA, as formalised in a UN Security Council resolution. This mechanism allows any signatory of the agreement – comprising the P5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany) – to file a complaint about Iranian violations and trigger the reinstatement of previous Security Council resolutions. These resolutions would reinstate an arms embargo, prohibit Teheran from exporting missiles and drones, restrict ballistic missile activities capable of delivering nuclear weapons and impose financial controls. Moreover, the snapback mechanism does not require consensus among Security Council members – any one signatory can trigger it. However, this provision is set to expire on October 18, 2025. Iran has warned it may withdraw from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if snapback is invoked.

Meanwhile, several Iranian officials have made statements over the past year suggesting that Iran could soon change its “peaceful” nuclear policy and has the know-how to build nuclear weapons.

A WEAKENED IRAN

On the other hand, regardless of whether Trump opts to ramp up pressure on Iran and negotiate with the regime, or instead greenlights an Israeli strike or even American military action, it is clear that each of these paths has been made easier by recent events, which have severely weakened Iran both militarily and geopolitically.

On Oct. 26 last year, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) hit Iran in response to the regime's massive ballistic missile attack on Israel earlier that month. The strikes crippled Iran's missile production capabilities, took out all its primary aerial defences, and damaged what Netanyahu described, without elaborating, as a “component” of Iran's nuclear program. Media reports suggest the strike targeted a top-secret nuclear weapons research facility at Parchin, near Teheran, destroying advanced equipment used in designing plastic explosives critical for detonating nuclear devices. A US official described the operation as a clear signal of Israel's deep intelligence capabilities, even regarding highly classified aspects of Iran's nuclear program.

The route to a military strike on Iran's nuclear program was further eased when the IAF conducted hundreds of strikes, decimating Syria's air defences after the fall of Bashar al-Assad in early December.

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Iran's nuclear program is currently highly vulnerable to an Israeli airstrike (Image: Wikimedia Commons)

With Hezbollah and Hamas severely weakened, Iran is now exposed, with its aerial defences neutralised and only very limited capacity to retaliate through its proxies. Despite efforts to increase the flow of weapons to the West Bank via Jordan, its ability to mount a significant response has been substantially curtailed, with only the Houthis in Yemen remaining willing and able to offer retaliation if Teheran orders it. However, Houthi missile attacks on Israel – such as the one a day before the Gaza ceasefire – almost always fail to cause major damage. Direct Iranian strikes on Israel in April and October also fell short, resulting in minimal damage and only one fatality.

Israel has also made both covert and explicit threats against Iran. Days after striking the Teheran-backed Houthis, a distance of almost 2,000 kilometres from Israel, a squadron commander involved in the mission told *Channel 12 TV*: “Yemen is further away than Iran... if I were sitting in Iran, I wouldn't sit calmly. The air force is ready to attack Iran now.”

The question is, will Israel be given that chance or will Trump use the threat of an Israeli strike solely as a means to ramp up the pressure on Iran to coerce it into agreeing to a new nuclear deal that will address widespread concerns about the JCPOA? At the very least, this would likely entail instituting stricter limits on Iran's uranium enrichment, the removal of all but low-level enriched uranium from Iran, cancelling the sunset clauses of the JCPOA – which effectively allow Iran to escape all limits on its program in a couple of years – and much stricter international monitoring. Agreement would also be needed to address Iran's proxy terrorism, which the JCPOA ignored completely.

If Iran's ruling clerics feel that the regime is in danger if it fails to comply – and for this the credible threat of airstrikes will be essential – and if Israel is persuaded that a deal provides cast-iron guarantees, such an approach might just work.

If Trump can somehow overcome the myriad challenges and deliver on both a stronger nuclear deal with Iran and a historic normalisation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, it would reshape the Middle East for decades to come.

TRUMP'S UNRWA CONUNDRUM

Robert Satloff

The announcement of a Hamas-Israel ceasefire agreement was a huge early success for the incoming Trump Administration as much as a final achievement for the outgoing Biden team – especially given the President-elect's warning that there would be “hell to pay” if the remaining hostages in the Gaza Strip were not released before he took office. But following his inauguration, Trump will now face an early diplomatic showdown over another hot-button Middle East issue: the fate of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the controversial body tasked with providing aid and services to Palestinian refugees.

THE RESETTLEMENT DIFFERENCE

UNRWA was established by a UN General Assembly resolution in December 1949 to provide “direct relief and work programmes” for the hundreds of thousands of civilians displaced by the just-ended regional war, which Arab states and local Palestinian militias had launched to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state authorised by the UN two years earlier. Originally, the “displaced” included Arabs and Jews; although Israel soon took care of the latter, no Arab state wanted responsibility for the 700,000 Arabs.

In its early years, UNRWA's mandate included resettlement as an objective, but this provision was deleted by the late 1950s under pressure from Arab states. Ever since, UNRWA has operated on the principle that Palestinian descendants of those original refugees are refugees too, with the “right of return” to present-day Israel – even generations after their original displacement, and regardless of whether they started a new life elsewhere or became citizens of another country. In practice, this means UNRWA now counts some 5.9 million Palestinians as registered refugees, though only one-third still live in refugee camps, mostly in Gaza. This inherited refugee status plays a huge role in perpetuating the mentality of victimhood that partly drives the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is important to underscore how differently UNRWA operates from the body established to address the fate of all other refugees across the world, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Beyond providing emergency relief, UNHCR's core mission includes promoting the resettlement and integration of refugees into countries where they have sought refuge. For the past seven decades, however, UNRWA's mission has been the exact opposite – to oppose their resettlement and integration. Indeed, there is an inherent contradiction in support



UNRWA provides aid, but it also cooperates with Hamas, and tells Palestinians that their rightful home is inside Israel (Image: Anas Mohammed/ Shutterstock)

for UNRWA (given its anti-resettlement posture) and support for a two-state solution (or any negotiated resolution) to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Providing relief to millions of Palestinians based on the argument that their rightful home lies inside Israel is deeply counterproductive to the search for peace.

In line with this posture, UNRWA long ago shed its identity as an impartial provider of emergency relief to become a Palestinian advocacy agency – and a sometimes hostile one at that. For example, according to numerous independent assessments, UNRWA schools that serve hundreds of thousands of children have often taught curricula suffused with anti-Israel, even antisemitic, messages that have no place in UN institutions.

Under the first Trump Administration, these problems were enough to convince the US government – traditionally the world’s largest contributor to UNRWA – that the agency was “irredeemably flawed”. US support was therefore suspended in 2018 – only to be restored in 2021 by the Biden Administration, which promised to seek substantial reforms. Yet UNRWA’s fundamentally problematic mandate is controlled by the UN General Assembly, where an automatic anti-Israel majority makes reforming said mandate a Sisyphean task. The Biden team evidently believed that UNRWA’s provision of basic services (especially in impoverished Gaza) was so vital that it was worth swallowing the mandate problem.

UNRWA IN THE HAMAS-ISRAEL WAR

On October 7, 2023, another major UNRWA problem emerged in all its ugliness – the participation of agency personnel in the heinous Hamas assault that left more than 1,200 dead in Israel, thousands wounded, and 250 taken hostage.

UNRWA acknowledges that at least nine of its staff likely took part in the attack, but their punishment was apparently limited to termination of their work contracts.

This horrific discovery was only the tip of the iceberg. Over the course of the war, it became clear that Hamas

terrorists were operating with impunity inside, near, or beneath numerous UNRWA facilities, storing weapons, assembling rockets, and organising their forces in the agency’s schools, shelters, hospitals, and clinics. The idea that UNRWA’s 30,000 officials and staff – nearly all of whom are Palestinian – were ignorant of this activity strains credulity. Indeed, numerous wartime reports emerged of UNRWA staff supporting, assisting, or even serving as officials of Hamas.

That is when Israel had enough. Even Israel’s military – which had long held its nose at UNRWA’s virulently anti-Israel advocacy and defended the agency’s operational role as a necessary evil – joined the chorus of condemnation. Last October, the Israeli Parliament voted overwhelmingly to pass two laws that will come into effect on Jan. 30: a ban on UNRWA operations in sovereign Israeli territory and the severing of all Israeli ties with the agency. This includes cancellation of a post-1967 agreement that allowed UNRWA to operate freely in what was then newly occupied territory.

The territorial ban will have relatively little practical impact, since UNRWA operates only seven schools inside Israel (mainly in Jerusalem), and the state can pick up the slack. But the severing of ties has more significant implications.

The problem lies mainly in Gaza, not UNRWA’s other areas of operation. In the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority runs an autonomous administration under Israeli security control and, despite endemic problems with service delivery, seems capable of taking over the agency’s responsibilities. In neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, UNRWA operations will not be directly affected by the new Israeli legislation. In war-torn Gaza, however, Israel – along with Egypt – has principal responsibility for the entry and distribution of food and medical aid, much of which is distributed to residents by UNRWA. (It is important to note that all outside parties only bear these responsibilities because Hamas has been grossly derelict in providing for the people of Gaza.) Hence, implementing Israel’s new policy of severing ties with UNRWA could worsen an already terrible humanitarian situation.

A WIN-WIN FOR TRUMP

In recent weeks, with Israel’s Jan. 30 legislative deadline looming, the Biden Administration reportedly approached other UN agencies operating in Gaza – including UNHCR, the World Food Program (WFP), the World Health Organisation, and others – to gauge their ability to take over UNRWA’s tasks. They all said no, insisting that only UNRWA can do the job. In response to Israel’s new laws, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared, “There is no alternative to UNRWA,” while Philippe Lazarini, the agency’s Commissioner-General, said “UNRWA is not replaceable.” In other words, the UN system essen-

tially said it would rather Gazans starve than be complicit in sidelining UNRWA.

Since then, voices within the US State Department have called on Israel not to implement its new laws. With Trump now President, however, that is precisely the wrong approach. The political winds are all blowing in the opposite direction – with Trump having already cut off UNRWA funding once, his likely inclination to cut it off again will only be reinforced by the complicity of agency personnel in the horrors of the past 15 months. There is no way his first major initiative in the Middle East will be to twist Israel's arm to save UNRWA.

To the contrary, the new Administration's path of least resistance will be to cut off US support to UNRWA and let Israel manage the fallout of the new laws. Yet the record of Trump's previous UNRWA cutoff is that donors in Europe and elsewhere filled in much of the gap, and the agency carried on unreformed.

A more ambitious US approach could score a win-win achievement that advances American interests in Middle East peace whilst saving millions of taxpayer dollars. Namely, Washington could take advantage of Israel's new laws to create an alternative support mechanism that eases UNRWA out of Gaza. This would entail raising the stakes with other specialised UN agencies operating in the area. Instead of politely asking them if they can assume UNRWA's job in Gaza, the Trump Administration should put them on notice that continued US funding of their own global operations is contingent on them taking over those tasks. Only such a dramatic step is likely to produce results.

Specifically, President Trump should do the following:

- Announce the suspension of all US support to UNRWA.
- Authorise his new UN ambassador to threaten specialised agencies with an across-the-board funding cut of 40% if they refuse to assume UNRWA's Gaza responsibilities (matching the percentage of UNRWA's budget that Washington currently provides).

For example, the United States is the largest donor to the WFP, providing 46% of its 2024 budget of US\$9.67 billion, and to UNHCR, providing around 44% of its US\$4.7 billion budget. (In comparison, UNRWA's budget is under US\$1.5 billion.) Faced with losing a large chunk of this aid, these agencies would no doubt discover that they are suddenly quite capable of doing UNRWA's job – especially since the countries that made up the agency's multi-million dollar shortfall in 2018 are unlikely to fill a multi-billion dollar shortfall today.

To be sure, this shift would not be a panacea, since these agencies would likely still rely on many of the same local Gaza staff that currently fill UNRWA's ranks. Substituting one set of UN agencies for another also does nothing to advance the important objective of building effective, responsible, non-Hamas Palestinian self-governance.

Yet switching from UNRWA to a combination of WFP, UNHCR, and other specialised agencies would be more than just a shuffling of deck chairs. Having UN bodies provide needed services outside UNRWA's highly politicised mandate would be a significant step toward ending the agency's grip on the Palestinian refugee issue, thereby boosting the long-term prospects for peace.

And what if the UN agencies refuse Trump's request? In that case, Israel would be left responsible for the provision and distribution of aid and services after Jan. 30 (the default alternative embedded in the logic of its anti-UNRWA legislation), and Washington would need to back these efforts, recognising that Israel would be hard-pressed to fulfill all of UNRWA's current functions by itself.

There would be daily real-life consequences for Palestinian civilians, who would suffer needlessly if UN officials continue to prioritise allegiance to UNRWA over the fate of the people the agency was designed to serve. To ease this problem, Washington could direct some of the money it cuts from UN agencies to a special humanitarian support fund for Gazans. For example, zeroing out US support to UNRWA and cutting 40% from just two agencies (WFP and UNHCR) would yield nearly US\$3 billion per year in windfall savings.

In sum, President Trump has an immediate opportunity to fix a huge obstacle to Arab-Israeli peace. The most straightforward route is to cut UNRWA funding and move

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on to other issues, but that would result in other complications for Washington while doing nothing to eliminate the agency’s pernicious effects on the longer-term pursuit of peace. A much better approach is to leverage US support for other UN agencies to create a practical alternative to UNRWA. Let’s hope he takes it.

AIR

Dr Robert Satloff is the Segal Executive Director and Howard P. Berkowitz Chair in US Middle East Policy at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. © Washington Institute (www.washingtoninstitute.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

CAN THE PA REFORM ENOUGH TO RULE GAZA?

Neomi Neumann

For the first time in years, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been stepping up its activities in various areas of governance. This includes increasing its counterterrorism operations in the West Bank, appointing a temporary replacement for President Mahmoud Abbas in the event he is incapacitated, and signalling willingness to reform the mechanism for payments to prisoners.

This unusual surge in activity appears to be aimed primarily at demonstrating the PA’s governance and enforcement capabilities against opposition forces challenging its authority. This is particularly important at a time when Hamas is already challenging the PA in the West Bank and could do so even more energetically now that Israel is releasing Hamas prisoners as part of the new deal to free hostages in Gaza. Their release could strengthen Hamas politically and militarily, reinvigorating the idea of victory through “resistance”.



PA security forces in Jenin (Image: Shutterstock)

The PA’s current activity also serves as a message to Israel and the incoming US Administration that it can address internal challenges in the West Bank, implement necessary reforms, and be an alternative to Hamas in Gaza on the “day after” the war.

At this stage, the scope and effectiveness of the PA’s measures in the West Bank remain unclear, partly because it is making greater efforts in some areas, particularly security initiatives, and less on political and social issues. Given the PA’s poor functionality and low public standing, these measures are unlikely to represent a profound change, nor are they expected to transform the PA – certainly not during Abbas’ tenure.

Nevertheless, given the complex situation Israel faces and the challenges it will likely encounter in the near future, it would do well to continue supporting the PA, particularly in security and governance.

PA SECURITY OPERATIONS IN THE NORTHERN WEST BANK

Over late December to early January, PA security forces carried out intensive operations for the first time in a decade, acting with determination to eliminate pockets of terrorism and lawlessness in the Jenin area, particularly the Jenin refugee camp. Dubbed “Homeland Defence”, the operation began on Dec. 14 and has targeted the terrorist groups (“battalions”) that emerged in the northern West Bank (Jenin, Tulkarim, and Nablus) in recent years and began spreading to other areas, like Ramallah.

These groups – which often clash with Israeli forces – are funded by Iran and also receive

support from established organisations, particularly Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). They also oppose the PA and undermine its authority. In recent months, an increasing number of images and videos have been circulating online showing armed militants conducting marches and parades in various West Bank locations. At these events, they express support for Hamas and opposition to the PA, accusing it of collaborating with Israel.

As part of its efforts in Jenin and beyond to prevent terrorism and chaos, the PA has deployed special forces and utilised advanced measures against wanted individuals, such as firing rocket-propelled grenades at their residences. Security forces arrested 700 Palestinians, seized and destroyed dozens of booby-trapped vehicles, and uncovered significant quantities of weapons and ammunition.

The PA security apparatus is also cracking down on those expressing support for Hamas or PIJ or promoting

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protests against the PA. The measures taken include economic penalties, border crossing restrictions, and arrests.

Despite the PA's operation in Jenin, Palestinian terrorism in the West Bank continues to exact a bloody price. The four weeks after Dec. 14 saw eight terrorist attacks categorised as "significant" by the Israel Security Agency (killing four Israelis), along with 45 other attacks. In all of them, the perpetrators came from the northern West Bank.

ABBAS' TEMPORARY REPLACEMENT

In the political realm, there appears to be a change, though some perceive it as superficial. For over a decade, the 89-year-old Abbas has faced external and internal pressure to appoint a successor who could lead the Palestinians after his departure. The primary concern is that his absence could spark a power struggle among competing candidates for the presidency. The war in Gaza has added urgency to these discussions as Arab states and Washington explore alternatives to Hamas rule, including proposals to reinvigorate and reorganise the PA.

Abbas avoided appointing a successor, possibly because he lacked a preferred candidate or feared that a nominee might act against him during his lifetime. Nevertheless, in a surprising move, he recently announced that, if he is incapacitated, Rawhi Fattouh will become president for 90 days until general elections can be held.

Fattouh is not a candidate for PA chairman in future elections. After Yasser Arafat's death in November 2004, he served as interim chairman until Abbas was elected in January 2005. His appointment is apparently intended to address external pressures and ensure immediate stability post-Abbas.

REFORMING THE PRISONER PAYMENT SYSTEM

For many years, Israeli and international officials have pressured Abbas to reform the policy of paying Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails and the families of Palestinians killed by Israel. The current system is based on the length of the prisoner's sentence, essentially rewarding individuals who kill more Israelis with higher payments. The United States, European countries, and Israel have asked the PA to adopt a system based on social welfare criteria instead, but Abbas has resisted such changes, likely because the prisoners have symbolic significance in Palestinian society.

Recently, a PA legal representative indicated that current discussions on this issue may lead to a shift in this longstanding policy.


CONCLUSION

The fragile security situation has underscored to President Abbas that he cannot remain passive and must address the centres of terrorism and chaos in the West Bank to

avoid losing control. Additionally, the hostage-prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas and attendant release of Palestinian prisoners could strengthen Hamas' military, political, and public standing in the West Bank.

Accordingly, while Abbas boycotted Trump during his first term, he is now signalling a willingness to cooperate with Washington and is taking steps to demonstrate his control over the West Bank.

These actions might also demonstrate the PA's ability to govern postwar Gaza if given the opportunity. While the current security operations and political changes may not represent a deep transformation – certainly not one that will alter the military, political, and social system under Abbas' leadership – they underscore the importance of continued US and Israeli support for the PA in various areas, particularly security.

Further, it is important to encourage the PA to implement profound changes in a number of areas – security, political, economic, and social – to strengthen its status and foster stability in the West Bank, and to prevent Fatah from being weakened as Hamas grows stronger after the hostage deal. In the longer term, it is important to bolster the PA so that it can serve as an alternative to Hamas in Gaza – not the optimal scenario, but better than all the other options currently available. 

Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency ("Shin Bet"). © Washington Institute (washingtoninstitute.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.

ISRAEL AND TURKEY – A NEW BATTLEGROUND?

Alana Schetzer

For decades, Turkey and Israel had amicable – sometimes even warm – diplomatic, political and economic ties. But since Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan – who has been in power for 22 years – turned Ankara away from Europe and the United States during the early 2010s, that relationship has been cooling radically. Since late last year, Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Israel and embargoes all trade with the Jewish state.

Turkey's position in the Middle East has also changed dramatically over the past decade-and-a-half. Ankara has been making strategic decisions – politically and militarily – designed to spread Turkish influence and power across the region, as well as in Africa.

Following the October 7 terror attacks, Erdogan's anti-Israel rhetoric escalated to new heights; Turkey was the





Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan: How seriously should Israel take his threats to attack the Jewish state? (Image: Shutterstock)

only NATO member to support Hamas during the current war, repeatedly hosting Hamas leaders and increasing both logistical and diplomatic support for the terrorist organisation. There is even evidence that Ankara helped smuggle weapons and explosives to Hamas terror operatives in the West Bank, and allowed Hamas to orchestrate terror attacks against Israel from Turkey.

Bizarrely, Erdogan accused Israel of intending to invade Turkey and start a war last year, claiming that Israel wanted to capture Anatolia (which makes up the majority of Turkey's land mass) in order to create "Greater Israel" – antisemitic conspiratorial claims that experts describe as "not rooted in reality." The claim was even met with backlash from within Erdogan's own party.

This odd claim was likely part of Erdogan's well-practised "neo-Ottoman" rhetoric designed to stir up ultra-nationalism at home. He's done this before, arguing that Turkey should have taken the Iraqi city of Mosul, whilst continuing to emphasise Ankara's long-standing dispute with Greece regarding islands in the Aegean Sea.

In a speech several years ago, Erdogan named himself among the greatest of all Turkish rulers, including Osman Ghazi, founder of the Ottoman Empire in the 14th century.

In July 2024, Erdogan threatened war against Israel in direct response to its conflict against Hamas in Gaza. "[We]

must be very strong so that Israel can't do these ridiculous things to Palestine," Erdogan said. "Just like we entered Karabakh [the disputed territory between Armenia and Azerbaijan], just like we entered Libya, we will do [something] similar exactly to them."

Since then, a new nexus has been added to the threat of physical confrontation between Israel and Turkey – Syria. Following the overthrow of the Assad regime on Dec. 8 last year, Turkey supplanted Teheran as the major foreign power and dominating influence there. It has long backed the formerly Al-Qaeda-affiliated group Hayat Tahrir a-Sham (HTS), which toppled the Assad regime. Turkey has also long occupied northern Syria as part of its policy of trying to subdue Kurdish militias in the region.

There is speculation that Erdogan could even turn Syria into Turkey's own satellite state, which would be of great concern to Israel. Meanwhile, HTS leader Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani), while currently trying to dampen international concern over his new regime, has spoken multiple times in the past of attacking and conquering Israel as part of his jihadist ideology.

In January 2025, the Israeli Government's Nagel Commission released a report stating that the IDF needs to rebuild and prepare for possible conflict with Turkey, probably in Syria. It also highlighted wider regional instability and possible changes, such as the prospect of Jordan's monarchy being destabilised.

The report states, "The problem will escalate if Syrian forces effectively become a 'Turkish proxy,' as part of Turkey's ambition to restore Ottoman-era influence. The presence of Turkish forces or their proxies in Syria could heighten the risk of a direct Israel-Turkey confrontation."

David Tittensor, Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Melbourne, says the chances of Erdogan acting on his war threats or direct Israel-Turkey military clashes erupting are "probably unlikely. It might just be rhetoric for domestic consumption."

However, Dr Michael Rubin, Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a specialist in Iran and Turkey, is more alarmed.

"The longer the West and Jerusalem remain in denial about Erdogan and the changes wrought by two decades of 'Erdoganism', the more likely [direct conflict] becomes. Remember, Iran was once an ally of Israel as well and Western leaders believed Ayatollah Khomeini's [initial] rhetoric about peace and tolerance. That Turkey now has its own nuclear program and has a major indigenous military industry reflects a major threat," Rubin explains. "So too does the fact that the biggest difference between Iran and Turkey is that Turkey can hide behind NATO while it prepares for any offence."

Rubin compares Turkey's relationship with HTS to that of Iran's relationship with Hezbollah.

"Turkey is to Hayat Tahrir a-Sham what Iran is to Hez-

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ollah. Ankara – or, rather, the Turkish intelligence service – calls the shots. That said, what the West isn't talking enough about is how Ahmed a-Sharaa's charm offensive is motivated less by sincere reform and more to gain early recognition so that international reconstruction aid gets channelled through him. Erdogan underwrote Hayat Tahrir a-Sham and now wants payback in terms of construction contracts," Rubin says.

In mid-January 2025, Erdogan threatened Israel with "unfavorable outcomes for everyone" if the IDF doesn't withdraw its troops from a buffer zone in Syria it took over soon after the fall of al-Assad as a temporary defensive measure. Erdogan said this even as he himself threatened further Turkish military action across Syria, beyond the northern regions that Turkey has controlled since 2016.

Of course, despite Ankara and Jerusalem being at loggerheads in an unprecedented way, they do have some things in common, such as a shared interest in keeping Iran out of Syria. Given the state of their relationship, would this be enough for them to work together, at least in limited ways?

Rubin says no. "Israel understands Iran is an existential threat. Turkey's problem with Iran is not that Iran poses a threat to it, but rather that Turkey is jealous and wants to replace Iran as the centre point of Islamic resistance," he says.

Gallia Lindenstrauss, Senior Researcher at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, adds that both countries have a "significantly different approach to their relationship with Iran."

"Iran denies Israel's right to exist, resulting in a relationship that is entirely negative. In contrast, Turkey and Iran maintain diplomatic relations and have numerous opportunities for dialogue."

While Ankara wants to continue to nullify Teheran's influence in Syria, it apparently continues to work with the Iranian regime when it comes to Lebanon. It has been reported that Ankara is allowing Teheran to use its airspace to resupply and rearm Hezbollah, which would be a major problem for Israel.

There have been some brief periods of temporary reprieve from the ever-building tension in the Turkey-Israel relationship, including in June 2022, when then-Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid thanked Turkey's intelligence agency MIT for working with Mossad to help foil an Iranian plot to kill Israeli tourists on Turkish soil.

However, there are also fears that Ankara's current hostile approach toward Israel, severe as it is, could worsen further. For example, Turkey could choose not to allow the passage of oil coming from Azerbaijan destined for Israel through its territory – a move that hasn't been implemented so far, despite the Turkish trade boycott.

Lindenstrauss says as Turkey's regional power increases, Israel must adapt to the new political landscape. "Israel needs to learn how to operate vis-à-vis the new actors in power in Syria and their backers," she says. "However, there are many unknowns regarding Syria's future, and some level of dialogue with Turkey will be necessary to address potential developments."

Lindenstrauss adds that the Gaza ceasefire and Donald Trump's presidency could potentially improve Ankara and Jerusalem's relationship, despite the many barriers between them.

"Such a ceasefire might lead Turkey to lift the complete trade ban it imposed on Israel [in May 2024], thereby repairing some of the personal and business-to-business relations that have been negatively affected by the trade ban. Additionally, the entrance of President Trump into office may assist both sides in lowering the level of tension between them."

AIR

THE LAMENTATIONS OF ASSAD'S AUSTRALIAN ADMIRERS

Ran Porat

On December 8, 2024, the oppressive dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad fell, to the cheers of most of the Syrian nation. Just like his father Hafez before him, Bashar had been responsible for countless war crimes and massacres, and caused the death, torture, displacement, hunger and deprivation of millions of his own countrymen. Assad authorised the use of chemical weapons in Syria multiple times while enjoying a lavish and corrupt lifestyle, even as most of his subjects lived in poverty. In addition, for many years, he enabled weapons deliveries from Iran via Damascus to Hezbollah, Iran's terror proxy in Lebanon.

It is still unclear if the new government in Damascus, under the jihadist faction Hayat Tahrir a-Sham (HTS), will offer a better future for the Syrian people. In any case, unlike the joy and hope most Syrians feel following Assad's overthrow, Bashar has some die-hard fans internationally, including in Australia, who are in despair.

Unsurprisingly, these Australia-based fans of the 'Butcher of Damascus' also tend to be supporters of other autocratic regimes, such as Iran, China, Russia and North Korea. It is also no shock to learn that these people pin the blame for Assad's fall on Israel, since most have records as serial proliferators of antisemitic tropes and wild conspiracy theories.



US AND ISRAEL'S 'EMERGENCY PLAN' TO TOPPLE ASSAD

Formerly an academic at the University of Sydney, Tim Anderson has achieved a dubious reputation as a leading Australian supporter of the Russian regime in Australia, and has also worked for the Iranian regime in spreading Teheran's propaganda.

Tim Anderson seemingly could not reconcile the cognitive dissonance of the overthrow of the Assad regime – whom Anderson portrayed as a popular hero fighting international imperialism on behalf of all Syrians – by the Syrian people, so he looked for alternative explanations for it. Anderson posted an article entitled “Genocide rewarded: US backed al-Qaeda takeover of Syria follows Israeli retreat from Lebanon” on Dec. 8 – the day the rebels took over Damascus and Assad fled to Moscow – on the website of his pseudo-academic outfit, the Centre for Counter Hegemonic Studies (CCHS).

In the article, Anderson quotes from a panel interview featuring “Palestinian journalist in Washington Saeed Arikat” of the extremist terrorism-supporting website Electronic Intifada. Arikat, according to the CCHS piece, claimed that Israel and the US executed a pre-planned plot to take down the Assad regime: “The HTS attack was coordinated by the Biden administration with Türkiye and Israel and ‘came as a result of American-Israeli emergency plan’ ... in light of the failure of the Israelis to achieve a decisive victory’ against Hezbollah... The plan was a tremendous success.”



Not happy! Australian Assad fan and conspiracy theorist Tim Anderson

The article goes on to say that the US and NATO are the real powers behind HTS, the group which led the overthrow of Assad, which Anderson describes as “the successor to Jabhat al Nusra, the al-Qaeda franchise in Syria which has been semi-covertly backed by Washington and other NATO regimes.” He also said, “The HTS regime was also supported by the three foreign states which still militarily occupy Syria: Türkiye, Israel and the USA.”

In fact, if you believe Anderson, HTS are actually ‘friends’ of Israel: “Friendly relations between HTS ‘rebels’ (many of whom are non-Syrians) and Israel are well known.”

“Clearly some sort of deal was made... but details are unclear. We do know who gained. The Israelis have been rewarded, probably beyond their expectations, by removal of the key link between Iran and the Palestinian and Lebanese resistance. Netanyahu has been more than compensated for the Israeli defeat in south Lebanon and effectively rewarded for his genocide in Gaza,” Anderson concludes.

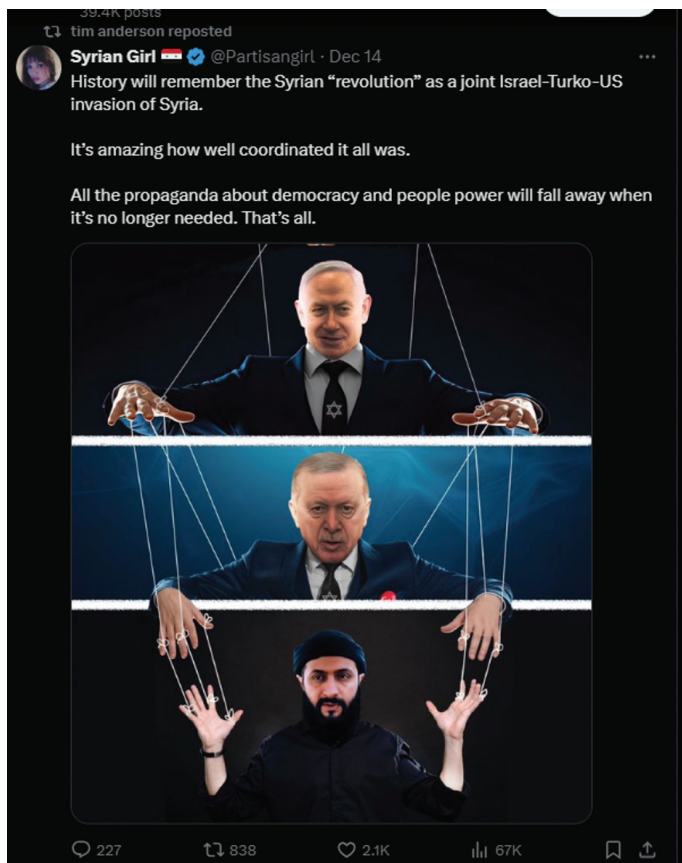
Anderson continued to pursue a similar conspiracy theory in his personal X account, which has close to 200,000 followers, hinting that Israel is behind both ISIS and al-Qaeda (and hence HTS). On Dec. 15, he posted, “Daddy, why do ISIS and al-Qaeda never attack #Israel?” (Of course, ISIS-linked terrorist have in reality attacked or attempted to attack Israel on several occasions.)

THE ISRAELIS ARE “HTS’ PAYMASTERS”

One of Anderson’s closest associates is Perth-based Maram Susli – also known as “Syrian Girl”. Susli manages a successful X account under the nickname Partisan Girl, with close to 500,000 followers. A promoter of extreme anti-Israeli and antisemitic content, as well as fake news, Susli is also a fan of Russia and Iran, and a great admirer of Bashar al-Assad.

Imagine Susli’s shock when her hero fled to Moscow with his family, where they could enjoy the dirty money earned from the illegal Captagon narcotic industry his regime ran. To her ‘credit’, it should be noted Susli has been consistent over many years in falsely claiming Israel and the US are responsible for orchestrating all the opposition to Assad. She continued with this line after the dictator was removed, responding to a photo taken on Dec. 15 of HTS members rejoicing over the retreat of Russian forces from Syria with a middle finger. Susli argued that HTS people will “never do this [rude gesture] to their Israeli paymasters.”

Her post a few days earlier (Dec. 14) was even clearer. “History will remember the Syrian ‘revolution’ as a joint Israel-Turko-US invasion of Syria. It’s amazing how well coordinated it all was. All the propaganda about democ-





Iranian terror proxy, Hezbollah. The removal of Assad threatens Iran’s ability to use Syria as the platform to re-arm Hezbollah, which Israel defeated in Lebanon, destroying most of its military capabilities, and forcing the group to accept a humiliating ceasefire.

To express her concern, Susli posted (Dec. 16) a caricature by Houthi supporter Yemeni Kamal Sharaf, featuring a bleeding arm representing Hezbollah, extended to allegedly assist the Palestinians. The Hezbollah arm is bleeding as it is being stabbed by ISIS, Israel and the US, while Syrian Girl asks, “Who will arm Hezbollah now? #Syria.”

“Unlike the joy and hope most Syrians feel following Assad’s overthrow, Bashar has some die-hard fans internationally, including in Australia, who are in despair”

Both Anderson and Susli are heavily involved in a pro-Assad group called “Hands off Syria”. In that group’s Facebook account, a screenshot

posted on Dec. 20 of a social media entry by an Israeli named Yigal Levin noting past assistance by Israel, primarily medical and humanitarian but also possibly including some weapons, to local (non-al-Qaeda linked) anti-Assad elements along the Golan border in Syria during the civil war last decade. “Hands off Syria” comments: “Don’t worry, Yigal. We always knew Israel was Al-Qaeda’s Air Force in Syria.”

Instead of accusing Israel, Australians like Anderson and Susli who cheer for authoritarian murderous regimes like Assad’s – responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths during the civil war – should take a good look in the mirror. The people of Syria, about whom they claim to care so much, need help to heal from years of a brutal dictatorship and horrendously bloody civil war – not lies and antisemitic conspiracy theories.

AIR

Dr Ran Porat is an AIJAC Research Associate. He is also a Research Associate at the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University and a Research Fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Reichman University in Herzliya.

racy and people power will fall away when it’s no longer needed...”

The image accompanying the post was of Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu as a puppet master of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is in turn controlling HTS leader, and now Syria’s interim President Ahmad al Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani) – a narrative directly derived from the antisemitic trope that Jewish puppet masters secretly control the world.

Susli posted another caricature making the same point on Dec. 15, depicting Netanyahu (in a style reminiscent of the Nazi *Der Stürmer* propaganda) riding Jolani, labelling this image as “The treason revolution. #Syria.”

Syrian Girl is especially anxious about the fate of the

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THE BIBLIO FILE

Secret soldiers of the Hidden Imam

Iran's Ministry of Intelligence: A Concise History

by **Steven R. Ward**

Georgetown University Press, 2024, 232 pp., A\$52.30



Colin Schindler

Iran has been in our eyes and ears throughout the last year. Its direct and open confrontation with Israel has marked a substantial change from the clandestine shadow war that has been ongoing since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Steven R. Ward's book *Iran's Ministry of Intelligence: A Concise History* provides the background to the events of 2024. It is a systematic retelling of Iran's intelligence operations over four decades, concluding with the beginning of the war against Hamas.

Its author, a CIA analyst for 35 years, presents a factual and unemotional account, based on open-source material, of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS).

Formally founded in August 1983, MOIS was estimated to employ up to 30,000 personnel in 2012 and to operate through a probable eight directorates. Many of its operatives studied at Imam Baqir University before entering its service.

The Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, referred to MOIS as "the unknown soldiers of the Hidden Imam." This referred to the 12th Imam, concealed in the present,

but who would return as a messiah to lead the final battle between "good" and "evil".

Its predecessor, the Shah's SAVAK, was disbanded on the eve of Khomeini's return to Iran. Yet Khomeini in exile had been insightful enough to cultivate quiet contacts with SAVAK officers in preparation for the new regime's determination to ruthlessly destroy its ideological opposition both within and abroad. Within a few months of Khomeini's return, revolutionary tribunals had passed death sentences on 83 former SAVAK officers.

By the end of 1979, Khomeini's operatives had assassinated the Shah's nephew in Paris. In the summer of 1980, Daoud Salahuddin, formerly known as David Belfield, posing as a postman, fired three bullets into Ali Akbar Tabatabaei, a known critic of Khomeini, at his home in Bethesda, Maryland. Allegedly paid \$5,000 to kill Tabatabaei, Belfield, an American convert to Islam, arrived in Teheran a week later.

This set the pattern for the Iranian

regime's global campaign to ensure its survival and its arena of influence. The author notes MOIS's complicity in human rights abuses in Bashar al-Assad's Syria a decade ago. Morality was never a consideration.

As the author notes, at the end of the decade-long Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and shortly before his death, Khomeini issued a fatwa resulting in the execution of thousands of his domestic opponents. The far Left in Europe looked the other way as Iranian socialists were pushed into Khomeini's meat grinder.

Free of conflict, Teheran immediately struck up a friendship with Hamas – despite its being a Sunni organisation rather than a Shi'ite one.

THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

The author notes that in February 1999, the Palestinian Authority police discovered documents that indicated a MOIS transfer of US\$35 million to Hamas, allegedly to finance terrorist activities against Israeli targets. The setting up of its 'axis of resistance' – Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Shi'ite militias in Iraq, and Assad's Alawite dictatorship in Syria – was not only designed to hedge in

"To achieve its ends, MOIS has employed Turkish crime bosses, Hell's Angels in Canada, and those with expertise in setting honey traps"

Israel but also to be the first line of defence of the Islamic Republic.

Regardless of the political complexion of its government, Israel perceived the ayatollahs' Iran to be an existential threat. It proceeded to take the shadow war to Iran itself. The Iranian regime had enough internal enemies who would willingly act to bring about an end to its unending repression.

The MEK (Mujahedin-e Khalq) has long regarded itself as a rival of Khomeini's regime. Self-defined as rooted in Islam but imbued with "revolutionary Marxism", it had staged coups and

uprisings in Iran. Designated by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union as a terrorist organisation in the late 1990s, MEK was fortuitously delisted during the past decade. The author attributes many of the attacks on the Iranian regime to the MEK.

Ward significantly notes that the



assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, “the father of the Iranian nuclear program,” in November 2020, was carried out on a rural road 40 miles outside Teheran – and was the work of a Mossad team comprising “more than 20 Israelis and Iranians.”

There are also Iranian ethnic groups, namely the Kurds, Arabs, and Sunni inhabitants of Baluchistan province, that have been victimised by the ayatollahs’ regime.

MOIS, often operating out of Iranian embassies, has been involved in abductions of opponents from the UAE, Turkey, and other states. Sometimes such operations have been farmed out to criminals, such as in the killing of Ahmad Mola Nissi in the Netherlands in 2017.

To achieve its ends, MOIS has employed Turkish crime bosses, Hell’s Angels in Canada, and those with expertise in setting honey traps.

The cyber domain has also been a battleground between Israel and Iran, which has employed operatives using the names “refined kitten”, “charming kitten”, and “remix kitten”. In 2020, there were Iranian cyber-attacks on Israel’s water facilities in response to an Israeli cyber-attack on Iranian fuel infrastructure.

While the FBI arrested dual national citizens who were surveilling Jewish centres in the US in 2018, a few years later five Iranian Jewish immigrants to Israel were discovered to be receiving funds from the Iranian regime. Their families in Iran received the payment, which was then transferred to them in Israel.

Gonen Segev, a one-time energy minister in Yitzhak Rabin’s government, remarkably fell from grace when it was revealed that he was smuggling ecstasy tablets from the Netherlands into Israel. He told police that he thought they were M&Ms!

Losing his medical licence, he then went to practise in Nigeria, where he was recruited by MOIS, and travelled twice to Iran to meet his handlers. In February 2019, he was sentenced to 11 years in prison.

During the past couple of years, there has been closer cooperation between Russia and Iran. Both try to eliminate critics abroad and at home. The author argues that Russia helped Iran locate British-Iranian citizen Ali-reza Akbari, who was then accused of being a spy and was hanged last year.

Vladimir Putin visited Teheran a few months after the invasion of Ukraine – and Iran’s leaders fully support Russia. Since then, Iranian drones have been used to turn Ukrainian


buildings into rubble. China has also signed an economic and defence agreement with Iran – and the author believes that Iran may have helped China uncover a CIA network in its country.

Ironically, the clerical regime’s approach is uncannily similar to that of Stalin’s devoutly atheistic dictatorship in eliminating opponents, real and imagined, in the Soviet Union of the 1930s.

The author omits the Israeli supply of arms to Khomeini at the beginning of the war with Iraq – this has been documented by several Israeli academics. Former Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin’s government feared Saddam Hussein’s armies more than those of the Islamic Republic.

The connection between Iran and North Korea is also not mentioned.

However, this is an absorbing book because it is not peppered with clichés, slogans, or inflating denunciations. It is effective because it just presents the cold, hard facts. It is not a polemic. It gives outsiders a peek into a murky, subterranean world, removed from everyday life.

It is a good read. But even so, this account still leaves any reader with a sense of smoke and mirrors. 

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NOTED AND QUOTED

THE MONTH IN MEDIA

WHY NOW?

The question of whether US President Joe Biden or President-elect Trump deserved credit for Hamas and Israel signing a ceasefire agreement was a subject of contention.

In the *West Australian* (Jan. 17), former UK *Jewish Chronicle* editor Stephen Pollard wrote, “The deal should be seen not as the final hurrah of the Biden administration but, rather, as the first foreign policy success of Mr Trump’s second term.”

Pollard argued that Trump’s extensive achievements in the Middle East during his first term as President showed why both sides signed the deal, explaining, “Trump gets that the single most important factor in succeeding in the Middle East is showing strength and being seen to mean it.”

On *ABC TV* “7.30” (Jan. 16), US-based analyst Ghaith al-Omari said, “The turning point was last October when Israel killed Hamas’ leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza,” strengthening the more “amenable wing of Hamas... the guys who understood... time is not on their side.”

On the same program Tal Schneider of the *Times of Israel* added, “Hamas was weakened by the fact that the other terror organisation in Lebanon, Hezbollah... was also... hit, quite hard. The Syrians’ events [resulted in] Iranian detachment from their axis. So, all these things weakened Hamas in Gaza.”

In News Corp papers (Jan. 17), former Australia Ambassador to Israel and current Liberal Senator Dave Sharma wrote, “It’s a good thing Israel did not listen to the Albanese government. If it had there would be no ceasefire deal and no release of hostages.”

ALWAYS ISRAEL’S FAULT

On *ABC TV* “News” (Jan. 14), Global Affairs Editor John Lyons blamed Israel for the length of time it has taken to get the ceasefire-hostage deal signed.

Lyons said, “The outgoing American Ambassador to Israel has given a fascinating interview to the *Times of Israel*, where he talks about this and says that there were so many points at which the Government of Israel, they were close to a ceasefire. This is what the outgoing Ambassador said. He said that there were points at which the Government of Israel took private and small differences and widened them and made them public, essentially to say that therefore we can’t do a ceasefire deal.”

Actually, in that interview, Ambassador Jack Lew mentions the ceasefire exactly once, and that was in reference to March 2024, when the UN Security Council was considering voting on a resolution calling for a ceasefire.

The fact is that, starting in May 2024, Hamas refused to agree to any ceasefire proposal, and Biden Administration officials have said as much many times. Hamas only shifted its position because of the deterioration in its strategic position.

NOTHING TO SEE HERE

The hostage-ceasefire deal raised the question of how successful Israel has been in degrading Hamas’ terror capabilities and its capacity to rule over Gaza.

On *ABC TV* “News” (Jan. 16), the Palestinian Authority’s representative in Australia Izzat Abdulhadi expressed confidence that Hamas’ military capabilities have been “reduced to the minimum” and the group exercises

“no governance now in Gaza. The only governance is Israelis, because they control also Gaza military.”

However, in an interview with the *Weekend Australian* (Jan. 18), lawyer ‘Mazen’ in Gaza, who established the ‘We Want to Live’ anti-Hamas protest movement in 2019, said, “I’m feel very disappointed about the ceasefire deal... I was hoping that the war would result in the ending of Hamas rule, but as we see now, Hamas is back, and Hamas now, when the ceasefire is signed, they will come back and kill all those who were in opposition to Hamas, a dissident to Hamas, including myself.”

In the *Age/SMH* (Jan. 17), Rodger Shanahan suggested that while Hamas has suffered a “grievous defeat”, unless there is meaningful progress toward a two-state solution and reforms addressing the conditions in Gaza, the same environment that allowed Hamas to rise could lead to the emergence of a successor organisation.

The *Australian* on Jan. 21 said, “It is hardly a surprise that [Israel] has struggled to eliminate Hamas completely or to break its control over the Gazan population. For 15 months Hamas has been able to callously use the hapless population of two million people as human shields to forestall Israel’s strategy. So, too, with the precarious situation of the hostages being held by the terrorists.

Hamas forces have regrouped in one city after another as Israeli forces pummelled them, then moved on. By the start of 2025, Israeli troops had cleared Hamas out of some neighbourhoods three times, only to see the jihadists return. Israel has had to fight a war (one it did not start) with more than just one arm tied behind its back.”



HOW LONG?

On Jan. 19, *Sky News* quoted Strategic Analysis Australia’s Peter Jennings’ opinion that the ceasefire is “not permanent”.

“It’s just a ceasefire — it’s not a permanent peace deal, it can’t be a permanent peace deal... ceasefires are made to be broken, and I expect that’s what I think is going to happen because, ultimately, Israel will continue fighting for its own survival,” he said.

On *SBS* “News in Depth” podcast (Jan. 16), AIJAC Research Associate Dr Ran Porat said, “The concern is about the longer term, the future.

Will [the ceasefire] lead to a better future between Israel and Palestinians, Israel and the Middle East? These are questions very much still open.”

HOSPITAL BLUES

On Jan. 2, News Corp columnist Andrew Bolt slammed the slanted coverage by the ABC, SBS and BBC of Israel’s efforts to eject terrorists based in Gaza’s Kamal Adwan Hospital.

Bolt accused the media of pretending it was a civilian hospital, when “unlike most Gaza hospitals [it’s] run by the General Directorate of Military Medical Services.”

In the *Daily Telegraph* and *Courier Mail* (Jan. 15), AIJAC’s Oved Lobel argued that a new UN report on damage caused to Gaza hospitals whitewashed Hamas’ illegal use of medical facilities for terror purposes. The report “left unmentioned... why there has been ‘sustained combat in and around many hospitals,’ in Gaza, with the implication being that the Israel military may be intentionally attacking hospitals,” he wrote.

TRUTH AND UNTRUTHS

Talking about the imminent cease-



IN PARLIAMENT

Prime Minister **Anthony Albanese** (ALP, Grayndler) and Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) – Jan. 16 – Media statement on the ceasefire deal: “Our thoughts are with all the civilians killed, displaced and taken hostage in this conflict, and the many humanitarian workers who lost their lives... Australia will continue working with the international community towards a two-state solution... Australia remains unequivocal in our condemnation of Hamas’ atrocities on 7 October, and its ongoing acts of terror. There must be no role for Hamas in the future governance of Gaza. Any future Palestinian state must not be in a position to threaten Israel’s security.”

Anthony Albanese, NSW Acting Premier **Penny Sharpe** MLC (ALP) and Victorian Premier **Jacinta Allan** (ALP, Bendigo) – Jan. 14 – Media statement: “The rise of antisemitism is abhorrent and there is no place for the kind of hate speech and attacks we have seen recently in our country. It’s why we’re taking action to stamp out the scourge of antisemitism.”

Anthony Albanese – December – Chanukah message: “We condemn the poison of antisemitism and are steadfast in our determination to combat it. Jewish Australians are an intrinsic and valued part of the Australian story and, like all Australians, you should feel safe and secure in our modern multicultural nation. The strongest way to reject hate is to continue living as proud Australian Jews. As you light the Menorah with pride, you send a message to all Australians that hate does not win.”

Opposition Leader **Peter Dutton** (Lib., Dickson) – December – Chanukah message: “This Chanukah, there is much that will weigh heavily on the minds of Jewish people... There’s the plight of the hostages... There’s the chilling reality that in Israel’s hours of need since 7 October 2023, some of its allies have shamefully behaved more like adversaries and demanded

standards of Israel which they would never expect of themselves in similar circumstances... the sheer magnitude of anti-Semitic incidents that have plagued Western democracies, including here in Australia... Chanukah... is a story of victory over oppression and the importance of hope... may the ordeals of the last 14 months be all the more reason for Australia’s Jewish community to commemorate Chanukah as a confident statement of your solidarity, strength, faith and hope.”

Peter Dutton, Shadow Attorney-General **Michaelia Cash** (Lib., WA) and Shadow Home Affairs Minister **James Patterson** (Lib., Vic.) – Jan. 20 – Media release: “Today, the Coalition has announced new action to combat rising anti-Semitism... The shocking rise in anti-Semitism in our country is a national crisis which requires a national response... A campaign of terror has been unleashed on the Australian Jewish community... Only strong action and real consequences for the perpetrators will bring this to an end.”

Greens – Jan. 16 – Media statement: “The reports of a ceasefire deal between the State of Israel and Hamas are welcome and overdue, but the invasion of Gaza is something that should never have occurred, and has resulted in genocide... The Greens [call] on the Labor government to do its part in upholding international law by:...

Sanctioning members of the Israeli government directly involved in war crimes.

Having Australia formally intervene on behalf of South Africa at the International Court of Justice and the commitment to uphold International Criminal Court warrants.”

Attorney-General **Mark Dreyfus** (ALP, Isaacs) – Jan. 14 – Media statement regarding his imminent trip to Israel: “In my meetings with Israeli officials I will convey Australia’s support for Israel’s security and its right to defend itself in the face of terrorism. I will also visit the Occupied Palestinian Territories and make clear Australia’s support for Palestinians’ right to self-determination and commitment to meeting humanitarian needs in Gaza and the West Bank.”



fire-hostage deal to *ABC TV* “News” (Jan. 17), Palestinian academic Rami Khouri dispelled the accusation that Israelis are war mongers.

Most Israelis, he said, “want the hostages to be released” in exchange for Palestinian prisoners and for the IDF to “stop attacking Gaza and pull out of the Gaza Strip.”

In addition, Khouri said, “The vast majority of citizens in Israel and in Palestine want the ceasefire to happen and the exchange, hoping that it would possibly open the door months and months down the road to a negotiation for a permanent resolution of this conflict.”

Unfortunately, Khouri also claimed that 150,000 Palestinians had died since Hamas’ October 7 massacre, which is more than three times the official estimate.

Elsewhere, on *ABC TV* “News” (Jan. 16), pro-Palestinian lobbyist Nasser Mashni claimed 250,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza.

EXPOSING THE CRACKS

Media reporting of the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) decision to suspend Al Jazeera from operating in the West Bank briefly opened a window into the rarely covered area of internal Palestinian disputes.

On Jan. 2, an ABC online report noted that the Qatari-owned broadcaster was accused by the PA of spreading disinformation, glorifying violence and inciting armed mutiny. The suspension followed its reporting of a young Palestinian journalist in Jenin refugee camp shot in the head by a PA sniper.

SBS’ online report the same day said Al Jazeera attributed the suspension to its coverage “of clashes between Palestinian security forces and resistance fighters in Jenin.”

ABC NewsRadio (Jan. 3) noted that “in recent weeks the broadcaster has published criticism of the Palestinian security services and their actions in cracking down on unrest in the West

Bank city of Jenin.”

On Jan. 6, the ABC website noted that PA security forces had “moved into Jenin” in December to “suppress armed groups of ‘outlaws’ who have built up a power base in the city and its... refugee camp.”

The *Guardian Australia* (Jan. 7) explained that the PA is trying to prove it is capable of governing in Gaza after the war there ends. The *Guardian* quoted a hospital worker who “asked not to be named so he could speak freely” saying, “When the Israelis come it is tough, but we know what to expect. In this [Palestinian Authority] raid, this kind of fighting we haven’t seen before. It’s like there are no rules.”

UNSERIOUS ON SYRIA

After the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December, John Lyons chided Israel in an online article (Dec. 12) for “using this opportunity to hit weapons supplies or military facilities that may pose a threat to it and has seized land to make Israel safer.”

Naively, Lyons complained that at any time during the last 50 years, Israel could have struck “any target that it deemed as a threat” and insisted Israel would be “better off talking to Türkiye about the nature of the incoming regime and how to ensure it was moderate rather than radical.” Never mind that the Turkish regime is itself not moderate and today has no diplomatic relations with Israel.

Bizarrely, Lyons seemed to suggest that while Israel had the right to “respond harshly to the horrors committed by Hamas” after October 7, its decision to operate in the West Bank, southern Lebanon and Beirut and “now Syria” was overreach – even though Israel came under attack from all those places.

But as Cameron Stewart explained on the *Australian’s* “The Front” podcast (Jan. 21), “Israel has really tamed its borders, and we’ve had the fall

of the Syrian regime as well, where Israel has gone and destroyed military equipment just to prevent any future threat arising from Syria.”

TALKING TURKEY

On *ABC RN* “Breakfast” (Dec. 19), Deakin University’s Shahram Akbarzadeh said Israel’s move into Syria’s demilitarised zone “is not justified by any measure. No other country can just send their troops to the Syrian territory and claim that they want to act to defend themselves as a security measure.”

Maybe Akbarzadeh should tell this to Turkey, which has controlled what it calls “safe zones” in parts of northern Syria since 2016.

His claim that Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights is “contested by all international actors,” is wrong. In 2019, the US Trump Administration recognised Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

WAR OF THE WORDS

In the *Daily Telegraph* (Dec. 18), AI-JAC’s Justin Amler said the Australian Government’s decision to keep voting for UN resolutions that ignore Hamas was “irresponsible”, while the argument that most of the world community does so too, was an “abdication of its moral authority.”

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong’s comment in her December Hawke Lecture that Australia expects all nations, including Israel, Russia, and China, to adhere to international law met with a fierce response from former army officer and Labor Minister for Defence Materiel Mike Kelly.

In the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* (Dec. 16), Kelly wrote, “In terms of the laws of armed conflict, Israel’s methods have to be viewed in the context of its fight for survival. This is the ‘military necessity’ and ‘direct military advantage’ underpinning its operations. Israel is half the

size of my former electorate of Eden Monaro, facing threats from multiple directions.”

Both papers (Dec. 19) printed Lowy analyst Rodger Shanahan’s response dismissing Kelly’s claim that Israel is engaged in an “existential conflict”, on the basis that it has technological superiority over its adversaries and the backing of the US.

IMPLAUSIBLE CLAIMS

In the *Canberra Times* (Jan. 18), ANU academic Ian Parmeter claimed, “the International Court of Justice said that there is a ‘plausible’ case that Israel’s retaliation for the Hamas attacks has been genocidal.”

The Court never found that. As the Court’s President Joan Donoghue explained to *BBC TV* in late May, “the shorthand that often appears, which is that there’s a plausible case of genocide, isn’t what the Court decided.” It decided that the argument that Palestinians were entitled to make a case asking for protection under the genocide convention was “plausible”.

Elsewhere in the same edition, the paper’s former editor Jack Waterford’s weekly column was riddled with errors – far too many to cover here, including inflating the number of children killed during the conflict in Gaza by 53%.

Absurdly, he suggested the only reason why a Palestinian state was never created at any time since Israel was “granted nationhood 75 years ago” was because Israel didn’t “respect... Palestinians’ rights and a two-

state solution.”

The “power” of the “Jewish lobby” explains why US President Joe Biden supported Israel’s war against Hamas, he claimed, rather than the reality that his Administration understood Israel was in a multi-front regional war against Iran and its regional proxies.

Even if Hamas “troops” were hiding among the “civilian milieu”, Israel had no right to target schools, hospitals and dwellings, Waterford said. Yet international law unequivocally says the opposite, although action must be proportional as the term is used in the Law of Armed Conflict and civilians given sufficient warning. Israel abides by both conditions.

DÉJÀ JOHN

It was a case of déjà vu on Jan. 20, when John Lyons discussed the ceasefire-hostage deal.

Lyons said, “I don’t know how they’re going to rebuild Gaza... it’s just non-functioning. You only need to look at pictures of it. And it struck me the other day of all the pictures, video and stills and film that I’ve looked at from Gaza over the last few months. It struck me that I’ve never seen in any of those images, anybody eating, child, adult, anybody, no one eating any food at all, because of course, there’s not much there at all.”

It only just “struck” Lyons?

That’s funny, because on June 7, 2024, Lyons said the same exact thing, almost word for word: “Of all the pictures that you see, this struck me the other day... I’ve noticed I’ll never see a child eating or drinking.”

It was nonsense then and is non-

sense now. There is ample footage of both children and adults eating in Gaza if you care to look.

PRISONERS’ BASE-LESS

An article on the hostage exchange/ceasefire deal, published on the ABC website (Jan. 21), focused on four Palestinian prisoners.

The article was not only highly sympathetic to the Palestinian prisoners, but frequently factually wrong.

Readers are introduced to a Palestinian woman Hadeel Hijaz who was in an Israeli jail “with no charges and no answers” under administrative detention which, it said, Israel uses “on the grounds [someone] plan[s] to break the law in the future.”

In fact, an independent Israeli military court must approve the detention on the basis that the detainee is suspected of preparing terrorist acts, not simply “planning to break the law.”

Detainees have legal representation and even a right of appeal, and the detention must be reviewed by a court every few months. None of this was noted.

Meanwhile, the piece said Nael Barghouti “was first jailed in 1978 for taking part in an attack that killed an Israeli soldier in Jerusalem and spent 33 years in jail, before his release as part of a prisoner-hostage exchange in 2011. Israel rearrested him in 2014 and he’s been in prison ever since.”

In fact, Barghouti was jailed for murdering Mordechai Yekuel, a civilian bus driver, not a soldier. The claim his target was a soldier came from Barghouti himself.

The article also mentioned famous Palestinian prisoner Marwan Barghouti, saying he’s “been charged with orchestrating gun ambushes and suicide bombings.”

Barghouti was not merely “charged” with these crimes, he was convicted by an Israeli court more than 20 years ago, in 2004. He is currently serving five life sentences for the murder of four Israelis.

With compliments from

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HOSTAGETO HAMAS

In the Australian media, the temporary hostage-for-cessfire deal between Israel and Hamas was almost universally welcomed as a positive start, while, with one or two exceptions, Hamas, not Israel, was identified as the main impediment to progressing peace.

The *Herald Sun* (Jan. 17) said, “there is no evidence the terror group has any longer-term desire for peace... it is clear Hamas... will never accept the legitimacy of Israel and its right to exist.”

The *Australian Financial Review* (Jan. 17) recognised that Israel has “no true peace partner among the Palestinian leadership,” meaning “there is little hope that the end of the Gaza war will lay the foundation for a genuine peace deal based on a two-state solution.”

The *Canberra Times* (Jan. 17) was also pessimistic about the prospects for peace, saying a “lasting peace” requires “Hamas no longer rul[ing] in Gaza.”

Meanwhile, in the *Australian Financial Review* (Jan. 17), AIJAC’s Jamie Hyams argued that despite Israel clearly winning the military battle, Hamas’ “abhorrent human shield tactics” resulted in thousands of Palestinian civilians being killed. Hyams said the only way to prevent a recurrence is by ensuring Hamas “must never again be allowed to devote Gaza’s resources and people to terrorism... If it does, it wins, and we all lose – especially Gaza’s civilians.”

The *Age* (Jan. 18) said the problem with the ceasefire deal is it “does not detail how the Gaza Strip will be governed... Israel is strident in declaring Hamas should not be involved again.” The paper did note this was the position of Australia’s Government too, but said how to “prevent this from happening is the question.”

A truncated version of this editorial ran in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Jan. 20) which, unlike in the *Age*, explicitly ruled out Hamas’ governance of Gaza.

The *Australian* (Jan. 20) asserted that the “world, not just Israel, has an overwhelming responsibility to ensure that when the last Jewish troops eventually leave Gaza, it does not return to being dominated by Hamas.”

In the same edition, Strategic Analysis Australia’s Anthony Bergin cautioned that foreign aid for rebuilding Gaza must not be misappropriated by Hamas.

In News Corp papers (Jan. 20), AIJAC’s Ahron Shapiro said Hamas must not be allowed to turn this hostage deal

into a “victory” for terrorism.

The Adelaide *Advertiser* editorialised (Jan. 21), “The blame for every single life lost in the conflict lies with Hamas. They could have given up their captives at any moment. Instead, how must they have basked in Foreign Minister Penny Wong splitting from our US ally to side with two-state solution resolutions Australia had previously abstained from at the UN. That’s not to say there shouldn’t be a two-state solution. It just shouldn’t be proffered as a reward for terrorism and the worst slaughter of Jews since the holocaust [sic].”

“The Australian (Jan. 20) asserted that ‘The world, not just Israel, has an overwhelming responsibility to ensure that when the last Jewish troops eventually leave Gaza, it does not return to being dominated by Hamas.’”

A UK *Observer* editorial in the

Guardian Australia (Jan. 20) seemed

to envisage an ongoing political role for Hamas, saying the group “must recognise that the 7 October atrocities produced even greater, counter-productive violence.”

The ABC’s Global Affairs Editor John Lyons told *ABC TV “News”* (Jan. 16) that the deal was a “band aid” that “ignores the fundamental reality at the centre of all of this, that as the Palestinian population grows, they are living under, in the West Bank, Israeli occupation, where they are inferior citizens to the Jewish settlers who live next door to them.”

His online analysis (Jan. 16) asserted that “Israel is led by Benjamin Netanyahu, who has through his career made clear his determination that the Palestinians will never have their own state.”

Appearing on *ABC TV* (Jan. 19), Lyons seemed to suggest peace was hostage to Israel’s “government [which is] opposed to a Palestinian state,” without mentioning Hamas’ genocidal agenda or rejection of two states. Lyons’ solution involved “the US, the Europeans and Australia pressur[ing] both sides.”

Lyons did not tell ABC readers and viewers that, since 2000, Palestinian leaders have rejected several generous Israeli offers that would have created a Palestinian state. Nor that Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu supported a Palestinian state and even negotiated for seven months to create one in 2014, but Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas broke off talks. Since then, Abbas has refused to negotiate. Yet, Lyons says, Israel needs to be pressured.

Asked on *ABC TV “News”* (Jan. 16) about longer term peace, pro-Palestinian lobbyist Nasser Mashni ignored the question and railed against Israel, falsely claiming that “accounts” from the *Lancet* medical journal suggest 250,000 Palestinians have been killed since October 7.

THE LAST WORD

Rabbi Ralph Genende

MIXED EMOTIONS

The renowned Israeli novelist Amos Oz once wrote: “I have mixed feelings about Jerusalem... it is beautiful, it is tragic, and it is extremely attractive to all kinds of fanatics... I find this fascinating, but I don’t think I would like to live in the middle of this.”

Oz was speaking about Jerusalem, but he could have been referring to the current emotional state of the Jewish people. If there is a phrase that encapsulates our existential position it’s “mixed feelings” – we are uneasy, conflicted, uncomfortable or simply discombobulated!

We are rejoicing that some of our people are coming home, relieved that the terrible war is ceasing – even if it may only be a pause. Our hearts lifted to see Noa Argamani and the sweep of yellow sashes in honour of the hostages at the Trump inauguration. However, we are also filled with apprehension – fearful for the remaining hostages, especially those not included in the agreement’s first phase, and worried about the support for Hamas and triumphalism on the streets of Gaza and the West Bank.

More than anything, we are sorrowful that nothing is the same anymore. It’s no joy to live in the middle of this juncture of our history.

Since October 7, tragedy and a deep melancholy have invaded the once irrepressible Israeli spirit. When Zohar Palti, who served in a senior role at the Mossad, was recently asked: “What’s changed in Israel?” he responded with great simplicity: “We’re sad”. Israel was close to the top of the Global Happiness scale for many years. It’s hard to imagine that is still the case – despite the remarkably resilient spirit of this nation at war and under constant attack.

In Australia, we Jews are bewildered, disquieted, angry and ineffably saddened by the ugly and pervasive antisemitism in this country we have always called home. We are as befuddled as the first generation of Hebrews who, according

to Genesis, enjoyed warm acceptance as part of Egyptian society and participated in enhancing it (“the land of Egypt was filled” with their contributions). Then they woke up one day to find they were regarded as dangerous interlopers by the new administration: “And there arose a new King in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.”

It may sound all but impossible for the Egyptians to have forgotten about Joseph the Jew – who had a meteoric rise from slave to Viceroy and became the economic “czar” who saved the country from drought and destitution! Yet Sir Frank Lowy recently expressed perplexity that the Australia that so warmly welcomed him as a 21-year-old immigrant after surviving the Shoah, is witnessing such naked and vile antisemitism, seemingly oblivious of the contribution he and countless other Jews made to this country – in business, politics, defence, the arts and medicine.

Yet alongside this toxically tragic mix, hope is still to be found. I meet it every day in the words and actions of my fellow Australians; Christians, Hindus, First Peoples, and ordinary Aussies who reach out in empathy and kindness.

Here is just one example – an Anglican minister at Darling Point sent this message to all his congregants and friends regarding the current wave of antisemitism:

This is a moment when we, as their neighbours, must not turn a blind eye... First, pray that these attacks stop and that our neighbours be able to worship in peace. Pray that the perpetrators be brought to justice and pray that our governments take a strong stance against these acts. Pray for the friends and colleagues that you know who might be feeling afraid at this time.

Secondly, reach out to your friends, neighbours, and colleagues and let them know that you are praying for them. Let them know that you are standing alongside them...

Friends like these provide us with hope that we may yet be able to move beyond this era of mixed feelings to unequivocal expressions of joy and celebration we have not experienced for the last 15 months!



Apprehension over the remaining hostages has cast a melancholy pall over Israeli society (Image: Shutterstock)



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