



# BACK INTO GAZA

Where Israel’s new “Strength and Sword” operation against Hamas may lead

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

**A**pril's *AIR* features news, analysis and opinion regarding "Operation Strength and Sword" – the renewed Israeli campaign against Hamas following a two-month ceasefire – and where it could lead.

A BICOM backgrounder gives all the essential facts and context, while veteran Israeli security reporter Ron Ben-Yishai explains the Israeli Government's goals in renewing the war. Erez Linn reports on rumblings that the IDF is weighing up instituting a temporary occupation of Gaza's cities to root out Hamas, while columnist Melanie Phillips discusses the agonising dilemmas in the current fighting *vis-à-vis* the remaining living hostages still in Gaza.

Also featured this month is Ilan Evyatar on the intensifying political controversies in Israel over the Government's renewed push for judicial reforms – which led to major discord in 2023 – and efforts to fire two senior public servants. Plus, noted Australian intellectual Henry Ergas offers his original thoughts about the changes to Australian society over recent years that made possible the wave of antisemitism that has occurred since October 7, 2023.

Finally, don't miss Iranian-Australian negotiation specialist Mehran Mossadegh on the pitfalls of nuclear talks with Iran, Israeli Druze activist Mendi Safadi on the plight of Syria's minorities, or the heartfelt plea of freed Israeli hostage Eli Sharabi.

Please share with us any thoughts you may have regarding this edition at [editorial@aijac.org.au](mailto:editorial@aijac.org.au).

**Tzvi Fleischer**

## ON THE COVER

Israel Defence Forces soldiers in operation in the Gaza Strip, March 2025 (Image: IDF)



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EDITORIAL CHAIRMAN****COLIN RUBENSTEIN**

# DISRUPTION, UNCERTAINTY & OPPORTUNITY

**A**s the US-brokered ceasefire between Israel and Hamas came to an end on March 1, the Middle East region entered into a time of great uncertainty.

Yet that climate of uncertainty also contains elements of opportunity for positive changes in the region that previously appeared impossible.

For over two weeks after the ceasefire lapsed, even in the absence of further agreement, Israel kept negotiating. It essentially gave Hamas a goodwill grace period without receiving anything in return, even as the terror group was clearly using the time to rebuild, rearm and prepare for future attacks. That restraint ended starting on March 18, when Israel resumed targeted airstrikes on Hamas commanders and officials.

Accusations that floated in the media that Israel somehow “violated the ceasefire” are nonsense. The ceasefire had lapsed. Hamas could have extended the first phase and continued to receive benefits from releasing hostages, but refused to do so.

Criticism of Israel that it failed to enter “phase two” of the January ceasefire ignores the fact that the details of that phase were always to be negotiated, and the ceasefire agreement made it clear that the war could be resumed if negotiations broke down – as they clearly had in this case.

Israel had accepted a US proposal for a two-month ceasefire in exchange for ten living hostages. Hamas rejected it, insultingly offered just one living hostage and four bodies for the same period, and then appeared to simply stall for time.

Moreover, the first phase of the agreement saw Hamas delaying some hostage releases while also grotesquely subjecting emaciated, desperate hostages to humiliating pre-handover “ceremonies” where they were forced to wade through hostile crowds and ingratiate themselves with their captors on stage while surrounded by armed terrorists. Even the bodies of the murdered Bibas children were not spared such “celebrations”.

Israel is thus wholly justified in resuming the war, though there naturally exists a great deal of disagreement within Israel over how renewed fighting will affect the 24 hostages believed to be alive, and in a desperate plight if the horrifying experiences of the hostages that have been released is any guide.

Cynics pointed out that resuming the war benefitted Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu politically by keeping far-right ministers in his coalition. Yet all of Israel’s top security officials, even including Ronen Bar – the head of Israel’s internal security agency Shin Bet whom the Prime Minister is trying to fire – agreed that, given Hamas’ complete intransigence on another hostage deal, renewed military pressure had to be applied. So the military/security case for Israel’s actions seems clear, whatever their political effects.

Meanwhile, there is good reason to believe the current round of fighting can lead to a more decisive outcome than the fighting over the previous 16 months did – if Hamas does not relent and agree to a more reasonable hostage deal in the face of that military pressure.

The IDF’s highly regarded new Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir has introduced new tactical and strategic methods to further weaken Hamas – including targeting those organising its governance and finance as well as the military wing, while expressing a new willingness to take and hold Gaza neighbourhoods for extended periods, directly distribute aid and launch operations on multiple fronts at once. The evidence so far suggests these methods appear highly effective, with Hamas looking stunned and disorganised, and



facing opposition demonstrations from Gazans.

Also shaking up the situation in the region have been the Trump Administration's new policies, not only regarding Israel and the Palestinians, but Iran as well.

Setting aside President Trump's very controversial domestic and foreign policies unrelated to these spheres, the steps he has taken so far regarding Israel and Iran have created important opportunities that did not exist under the Biden Administration.

Trump has rightly removed all obstacles to Israel's weapons resupply from US stocks, including, for example, quadrupling Israel's fleet of lifesaving D9 bulldozers – essential for safely detonating massive IEDs and booby-trapped houses ahead of advancing troops. And the Administration has backed tough Israeli action against Hamas following the negotiations impasse in a way it is hard to imagine the Biden Administration doing, including both the military attacks and Israel's temporary aid cut off to Gaza. The latter appears critical, as the evidence is overwhelming that Hamas has been using aid flows as a vital lifeline to rebuild its military capabilities and authority over Gazans, even as there is ample food stockpiled inside Gaza.

Meanwhile, the US began launching sustained and serious attacks against the Houthis of Yemen in order to end their blockade of the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which has cost the world billions of dollars in shipping expenses.

Importantly, Trump has rightly called out Iran's respon-


sibility for the Houthis' piratical behaviour in very strong language. This is part of a suite of measures on Iran that offers new hope that the promises from successive US Administrations that Iran will never be allowed to build nuclear weapons may under Trump actually lead to serious action, rather than just kicking the can down the road – which we have often seen in the past.

By setting a two-month deadline for Iran to agree to

a longer and stronger nuclear deal, Trump has signalled both the urgency the US has placed on stopping Iran's nuclear weapons program and that Washington is determined not to allow Teheran to string out negotiations as a way to stall for time as it has done so often in the past.

At the same time, the US has given Israel all the bunker-busting bombs it needs to carry out a strike

on Iran's nuclear sites, and is signalling its own openness to possible US military action in the near future if Teheran refuses to make a nuclear deal, or attempts a breakout.

So while the Trump Administration is disruptive and unpredictable, with possible negative global effects in some areas, in the Middle East that disruption of past tradition and thinking may be creating new opportunities, as well as risks. The next few months will be crucial in determining whether these opportunities – in Gaza, in Lebanon, in Yemen and elsewhere, and especially in terms of Iran's accelerating rush to the bomb – can be successfully exploited. If so, the results could be genuinely transformative. 

## “WORD FOR WORD

“Hamas is responsible for this war. It invaded our towns, murdered our people, raped our women and kidnapped our loved ones. Hamas refused offer after offer to release our hostages. In the past two weeks, Israel did not initiate any military action in the hope that Hamas would change course. Well, that didn't happen... This is why I authorised yesterday the renewal of military action against Hamas.”

**Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu announces a renewed campaign against Hamas (Israeli Prime Minister's Office, March 18).**

“This is on Hamas. The United States stands with the State of Israel. That's a 100% commitment. We've expressed that Hamas had every opportunity to demilitarise, to accept the bridging proposal that would have given us a 40- or 50-day ceasefire where we could have discussed demilitarisation and a final truce. There were all kinds of opportunities to do that, and they elected not to.”

**US Middle East Special Envoy Steve Witkoff (Times of Israel, March 23).**

“Every shot fired by the Houthis will be looked upon, from this point forward, as being a shot fired from the weapons and leadership of IRAN, and IRAN will be held responsible, and suffer the consequences, and those consequences will be dire!”

**US President Donald Trump (Truth Social, March 17).**

“Hamas must show compassion for Gaza, its children, women and men... [It must] step aside from governing and fully recognise that the battle ahead will lead to the end of Palestinians' existence.”

**Fatah spokesman Monther al-Hayek calls on Hamas to surrender and cede power in Gaza (Australian, March 23).**

“The Americans should know threats will get them nowhere when confronting Iran... They will get a hard slap.”

**Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (CBS, March 21).**

“In terms of threats to life, [antisemitism is] my agency's No. 1 priority because of the weight of incidents we're seeing play out in this country.”

**ASIO Director-General Mike Burgess in Senate Estimates (Hansard, Feb 25).**







# SCRIBBLINGS

Tzvi Fleischer

## 75 YEARS

To sum up the fundamentals of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli intellectual and author Dr Einat Wilf likes to cite a quote from Britain's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's speech to the British Parliament on February 18, 1947. Explaining the reasons for his Government's decision to return the British Mandate for Palestine to the UN, Bevin lists the considerable efforts British authorities had made to find arrangements agreeable to both the Jewish and Arab communities in the territory, and the conclusion that was reached from them:

*His Majesty's Government have thus been faced with an irconcilable conflict of principles... For the Jews, the essential point of principle is the creation of a sovereign Jewish state. For the Arabs, the essential point of principle is to resist to the last the establishment of Jewish sovereignty in any part of Palestine.*

That last sentence summarises the Palestinian ethos to this day (even if many Arab countries no longer back it): "to resist to the last the establishment of Jewish sovereignty in any part of Palestine." Not to establish Palestinian statehood. Not to achieve self-determination. And it's nothing to do with the policies of any Israeli government. The "essential point" is to reject any Jewish state or sovereignty on even one centimetre of what they regard as "Palestine".

In this column, I have brought evidence time and again – using both official Palestinian speeches and media, and credible opinion polls – that this "essential point" remains the Palestinian nationalist goal for both the PA and Hamas, and is reflected in majority public opinion. Indeed, there is a lot of evidence, also previously cited in this column, that a substantial proportion of Palestinians do not merely reject any Jewish sovereignty in the land; they reject any Jewish presence there whatsoever – hoping or expecting that Israel's seven million plus Jewish citizens can be ethnically cleansed from it.

But here's my point. The rejection of any Jewish sovereignty was sort of understandable – even if immoral and short-sighted – in the context of 1947. The argument by Arab leaders in Mandate Palestine (they were not generally called Palestinians at the time) as explained in Bevin's speech is as follows:

*For the Arabs, the fundamental point is that Palestine should no longer be denied the independence which has now been attained by every other Arab State and that in accordance with the accepted principles of democracy the elected majority should be free to determine the future destiny of the country... they are therefore unwilling to contemplate further Jewish immigration into Palestine.*

In other words, their demand in 1947 was that Palestine should be treated the same as the other Arab states then being created by the former colonial powers in the Middle East, regardless of any Jewish claims or the terms of the Mandate calling for a Jewish National Home. That majority Arab state would then have the right to bar all Jewish immigration.

As I said, this view is understandable to some degree, given the context at the time.

Yet it is now more than 75 years later – at least two full generations of Israeli Jews and Palestinians have grown up in a land with Jewish sovereignty in place, while all the dozens of ancient Jewish communities across the Middle East have been almost completely obliterated by Arab hostility. It is simply bonkers to today still assert the same demand of no Jewish sovereignty whatsoever anywhere. Even if you believe Israel's creation was fundamentally unjust, demanding that history be rewound and the past 80 years undone – regardless of the human cost – is extreme nationalism on steroids. Historically, it is hard to think of many other modern nationalist movements dominated by such extremist views.

It is this reactionary extremism in Palestinian nationalism – demanding that history be rewound to 1947, or even 1917, and then rerun to give them everything they feel they should have gotten at the time – that explains why Palestinian leaders have rejected three Israeli-supported two-state peace offers that would have given them everything the "international community" thinks they should want. And it is why a peace will not be possible until something alters Palestinian society enough to shift the core tenets around which Palestinian nationalism has been built since the 1930s.

## MOST GAZANS WANT TO LEAVE

After Feb. 6, when US President Donald Trump announced his controversial "Gaza Riviera" plan to rebuild the Strip as a tourist mecca full of hotels and resorts, including evacuating the population to facilitate reconstruction, many commentators were rightfully and understandably concerned about hints the President might be advocating forceful removal of people from the area. However, many others insisted even voluntary evacuations were unacceptable to Palestinians, maintaining they would demand to stay on "their land".

Well, Gazans don't agree with that at all. A majority of them say they would leave if given the chance, according to a recent Gallup survey published in the *UK Telegraph*. The poll of 532 Gaza residents aged 18 and older, conducted between March 2 and 13, found only 39% indicated they would remain in Gaza with no plans to leave, while 38% said they would consider temporary relocation with the intention to return later, and 14% saying they would leave permanently if possible. That's



52% ready to leave, at least temporarily.

This should be no surprise – many Gazans have already been doing so, both in the past and during the war.

For instance, a 2023 Palestinian research study noted regarding Gaza, “Since 2007, local reports have confirmed that over 250,000 youths migrated from the Gaza Strip in pursuit of a thriving life in Europe.”

Meanwhile, Israeli reports say at least 1,000 residents left Gaza permanently via Israel in the first half of March, while another 600 were expected to do so by the end of the month.

The whole “Palestinians will steadfastly stay on the land” theme in much media commentary on the Trump plan was actually part and parcel of abusive romanticisation of Palestinians as symbols of “resistance” and “steadfastness”, which has caused the world to keep Palestinians in refugee camps across multiple generations, rather than help them resettle and build normal lives.

AIR



Eli Sharabi

## “WHERE WAS THE WORLD?”

My name is Eli Sharabi. I am 53 years old. I’ve come back from hell. I’ve returned to tell my story. I used to live in Kibbutz Be’eri with my British-born wife, Lianne, and my daughters, Noiya and Yahel.

It was a beautiful community. We were all passionate about creating the best life for our children and for our neighbours.

On October 7, my heaven turned to hell. Sirens began. Hamas terrorists invaded. And I was ripped away from my family, never to see them again. For 491 days, I was kept mostly underground in Hamas terror tunnels, chained, starved, beaten and humiliated.

They took pleasure in our suffering. I survived on scraps of food with no medical attention and no mercy. When I was released, I weighed just 44 kilos. I had lost over 30 kilos, nearly half my body weight.

For 491 days, I held on to hope. I imagined the life we would rebuild. I dreamt of seeing my family again. Only when I returned home, I learned the truth. My wife and my daughters had been slaughtered by Hamas terrorists on October 7.

I’m here today, less than six weeks after my release. To speak for those still trapped in that nightmare. For my brother Yossi, murdered in Hamas captivity.

For the first 52 days, I was held in an apartment. I was tied up with ropes. My arms and legs were tied so tightly, the ropes tore into my flesh. I was given almost no food, no water and I couldn’t sleep. The pain was unbearable.

Sometimes I would just faint from the pain, only to wake up to that pain again and again.

Then, on Nov. 27, 2023, Hamas took me into a tunnel, 50 metres underground. Again, the chains were so tight, they ripped my skin. They never took them off. Not for a single moment. Those chains tore at me until the day I was released. Every step I took was no more than 10 centimetres. Every walk to the bathroom took an eternity. I cannot begin to describe the agony. It was hell.

I was fed a piece of pita a day, maybe a sip of tea. Hunger consumed everything. They beat me, they broke my ribs. I didn’t care. I just wanted a piece of bread.

We had to beg for food, beg to use the bathroom. Begging was our existence.

Psychological terror was constant. Every day they told us, “The world has abandoned you. No one is coming.”

One day, a terrorist took his anger out on me. He stormed in and beat me so badly that he broke my ribs. I couldn’t properly breathe for months.

On Feb. 8, 2025, I was released. I weighed 44 kilograms. This is less than the body weight of my youngest daughter, Yahel, may her memory be a blessing. I was a shell of my former self. I still am.

I stood at that sick Hamas ceremony, surrounded by terrorists, and the crowd of so-called uninvolved civilians, hoping my wife and daughters were waiting for me.

At the end of the day, I met a representative from the Red Cross. She told me, “Don’t worry, you are safe now.” Safe? How could they feel safe surrounded by terrorist monsters? Where had the Red Cross been for the past 491 days?

Then I arrived home. They told me my mother and sister were waiting for me. I said, “Get me my wife and daughters.” And that was when I knew they were gone. They had been murdered.

I’m here today because I survived and I prevailed. But that is not enough.

I will not leave anyone behind. Their time has almost run out. I’m here before you now to give my testimony and to ask, where was the United Nations? Where was the Red Cross? Where was the world?

I saw Hamas terrorists carrying boxes with the UN and UNRWA emblems on them into the tunnel. Dozens and dozens of boxes paid by your governments. Feeding terrorists who tortured me and murdered my family. They would eat many meals a day from the UN aid in front of us and we never received any of it.

When you speak of humanitarian aid, remember this: Hamas eats like kings while hostages starve. Hamas steals from civilians. Hamas blocks aid from reaching those who truly need it.

Four hundred and ninety-one days. That is how long I starved. How long I was chained. How long I begged for humanity. And in all that time, no one came.





My name is Eli Sharabi. I am not a diplomat. I am a survivor. Bring them all home, now.

AIR

*The above is excerpted from the March 20, 2025 address by former hostage Eli Sharabi at the UN Security Council in New York.*

# ASIA WATCH

Michael Shannon

## A FEUD AND ITS FALLOUT

The sight of former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte in the dock at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands, facing charges of crimes against humanity, offered stark evidence of the bitter enmity between President Ferdinand Marcos Jr and his predecessor.

The alliance between the two powerful families helped deliver the presidency to Marcos and the vice presidency to Duterte's daughter Sara in the 2022 elections. The unravelling of this partnership is more than just a political realignment – it is a blood feud in the Philippines tradition, characterised by perceived betrayal, dishonour and a thirst for violent revenge. In turn, the patronage networks of powerful clans are activated, accessing illicit financial networks and mobilising private armies to settle the score.

With the alliance structure between northern Luzon (Marcos' stronghold) and Mindanao (Duterte's base) breaking down, the country is facing deeper instability that could spill over in numerous ways, as local warlords, drug cartels and insurgent groups seek to take advantage.

In particular, the fragile gains of the peace process in the country's south are at risk from renewed Islamist militant activity – ranging from targeted attacks on government installations and civilian infrastructure to aggressive recruitment drives in impoverished communities. Although government security forces have intensified operations to disrupt these networks, the complex terrain and deeply rooted local support in certain areas have allowed these groups to maintain a foothold.

Active since the early 1990s, the Abu Sayyaf Group has been infamous for high-profile kidnappings, bombings and extortion schemes. In recent months, remnants of the group have continued to engage in sporadic violent incidents. These include targeted kidnappings of local businessmen and occasional ambushes aimed at security forces operating in less accessible regions. Their ability to exploit the rugged geography of the Sulu archipelago in the deep south enables them to evade sustained military pressure.

Emerging as a formidable force in the wake of its 2017 siege of Marawi City, the Maute Group quickly gained notoriety for its explicit ties to Islamic State. Although the scale of their operations has since diminished, recent intel-

ligence suggests that small factions remain active in certain parts of Mindanao. Over the past months, these groups have reportedly engaged in low-level guerrilla tactics, including hit-and-run attacks on local checkpoints and government installations.

A hardline splinter faction that broke away from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters' (BIFF) activities have fluctuated over time, but recent months have seen an uptick in their localised operations. BIFF members have been implicated in isolated incidents of arson, road blockades and ambushes on security personnel, particularly in rural and border areas.

The political rivalry between Marcos and Duterte supporters has significant implications for Muslim Mindanao. Proponents of Duterte's methods argue that an uncompromising approach is the only viable way to deter extremist violence. They maintain that military operations, enhanced surveillance and aggressive counterterrorism measures are indispensable in the face of groups that refuse to be swayed by negotiation. Conversely, advocates for the Marcos-aligned policies emphasise that sustainable peace can only be achieved through a hybrid strategy that combines targeted security operations with community engagement and economic development.

Local leaders in the region are increasingly wary of the uncertainty that this political discord has generated. Co-ordination between national forces and local government units is critical in a region where geographical and social complexities require tailored approaches. A polarised political environment could affect the sharing of intelligence and the execution of integrated security measures.

The Philippines military, which has historically played kingmaker during leadership crises, is also showing signs of division. Duterte loyalists remain embedded in the ranks, and if the political crisis escalates, factions within the armed forces could move to protect their interests – whether through internal coups, selective defiance of orders or outright intervention in governance.

Likewise, the Philippines National Police, notorious for its role in Duterte's drug war, remains a wildcard. If Duterte's allies in the security forces begin operating independently, extrajudicial violence could return, fuelling further unrest.

While the Marcos-Duterte power struggle is rooted in the Philippines, its consequences could spill over to neighbouring countries. The Malaysian state of Sabah has long been vulnerable to cross-border crime – from human trafficking and kidnapping to smuggling and piracy – particularly from Abu Sayyaf's stronghold in nearby Sulu. Likewise, an uptick in jihadist violence could reignite radical Indonesian jihadist networks in Sulawesi and Kalimantan.

With Rodrigo Duterte in a jail cell in the Netherlands, it's hard to see how the Marcos-Duterte conflict will

be defused. Philippines history suggests it will not end peacefully.

AIR



Alex Benjamin

## GOING TO EXTREMES

“The world works better when the US and the EU stand together,” then-British PM Tony Blair said in 2002.

Those words, to my British-born ears, sound as distant in memory as paying in shillings.

Today, from Brussels, the Transatlantic gap feels unfathomably wide. Ukraine, Russia, tariffs, bombastic rhetoric on migrants, the list of rifts goes on. Europe is scrambling to find answers to an American president who cares little about how he is perceived abroad, much less about the established American and European-led international system that has existed for the past 80 years.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the remarks of Vice President JD Vance in Munich, where he lambasted European governments for, as he saw it, retreating from their values and ignoring voter concerns on migration and free speech. Vance’s speech went down very badly. It was, even for a Trump cheerleader, extraordinarily poorly judged.

The irony of the venue – Munich – was not lost on the participants being hectored about Ukraine, given the famous “I have in my hand a piece of paper” promising “peace for our time” remarks by Chamberlain in 1938, even as the Czechs were thrown under the Nazi bus.

Then we have Trump Administration Department of Government Efficiency head Elon Musk’s comments: “Move beyond Nazi guilt,” he exhorted the German population, before adding that the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party represented “Germany’s last hope”.

After the German election on February 23, Musk called Alice Weidel, the co-leader of the AfD, to congratulate her on the party’s performance after it doubled its support from the last election.

The cosyng up by elements of the Trump Administration to the European far right has really rankled the European mainstream. The vast majority of European governments are trying to hold back the tide of populism, building *cordons sanitaires* in parliaments and assemblies across the continent to exclude these extremist parties from government posts and decision-making. This, of course, plays into the populist hands and reinforces their talking points about elite domination and democratic deficits. But nobody wants to risk being the modern equivalent of Paul von Hindenburg – who inadvertently facilitated Hitler’s rise to power.

The Trump-led Republican Party is today dominated by populists who have made it to the top of the heap. They have railed against the mainstream media and elites and tilted at liberal windmills incessantly – sometimes with some factual basis, but often not. Little wonder, then, that they find common cause with European far-right populists like Weidel, France’s Le Pen and Hungary’s Orban.

This brings us to a very thorny issue for Jewish communities here in Europe.

Many Jewish communities also have *cordons sanitaires* of their own. The French CRIF and Germany’s Zentralrat, the umbrella organisations for their respective countries, are a case in point, refusing to engage with France’s *Rassemblement National* (“National Rally”, or RN) or the AfD. There was therefore much gnashing of teeth in some European Jewish quarters when Gideon Saar, Israel’s Foreign Minister, announced he was opening dialogue with the RN, the Swedish Democrats and Abascal’s Vox in Spain.

Adding insult to injury, Israel’s Minister for Diaspora Affairs Amichai Chikli invited Le Pen’s deputy Jordan Bardella – and some other right-wing populists from Spain, Sweden and Hungary – to Jerusalem for a major antisemitism conference in late March.

The rationale here is simple from an Israeli perspective: most mainstream European parties have been ambiguous at best about Israel post-October 7. Meanwhile, the far right and populists have been unequivocal in both their support of Israel, and in their revulsion at the pro-Hamas protests on Europe’s streets.

Decision time is therefore drawing closer for European Jewry. As populists get ever closer to the levers of power, we are actively debating whether to remain on the outside or seek a place inside the proverbial “tent”.

I was in Germany recently for a major conference of police chiefs. Sitting on one panel, I was amazed by the number of questions from the floor to the German panellists about the inexorable rise of the AfD. Yet, given the German experience of National Socialism within living memory, such an obsessive focus is completely understandable.

Then it was my turn to tell them what I thought. I told them that, when I go to sleep at night, I’m not overly worried about the far right. It’s people like far-left French politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his fellow travellers who keep me up at night.

The far right are trying to wash themselves clean. They must not be allowed to conceal their ugly roots, but at least they are trying to distance themselves from them. Meanwhile, the far left are happily rolling in the anti-Zionist and antisemitic mud, yet still appear to come up smelling of roses. The debate over populism and the far right is an important one, but it shouldn’t come at the expense of identifying where the real problem lies for European Jewry. And that’s on the other end of the spectrum.

AIR

9



# BEHIND THE NEWS

## ROCKET AND TERROR REPORT

In the eight days following the March 18 resumption of hostilities in Gaza, at least ten rockets were launched at Israel from Gaza, all of which were intercepted or fell in open areas. Israel's renewed strikes in Gaza killed several senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials and commanders (see cover story for more details), and the IDF began to re-engage in ground operations.

Fourteen people were injured in a car ramming at the Karkur Junction on Feb. 27. On March 4, one Israeli was killed and four injured in a stabbing attack in Haifa. On March 25, one elderly civilian was killed and a soldier badly wounded in a ramming, stabbing and shooting attack in northern Israel.

An ongoing Israeli counterterrorism operation throughout the cities of the northern West Bank continues to result in the killing or capture of numerous terrorists and suspects.

## ISRAEL REPORTEDLY PREPARING TO CONTROL ALL GAZA AID

In the last week of February, Israeli authorities briefed aid agencies that Israel planned to take direct control of all humanitarian aid to Gaza, with all items screened and organised through several new logistics hubs, to prevent Hamas stealing it. However, several agencies said they would likely not cooperate with such a plan.

With the support of the US Government, Israel then halted humanitarian aid entering Gaza on March 1 due to Hamas' refusal to negotiate a continued ceasefire, and its stockpiling and selling aid rather than allowing it to be distributed for free as intended. Israeli authorities believe

sufficient aid has entered Gaza since January to last about five months.

## HAMAS' OCTOBER 7 ATTACKS AIMED TO DESTROY ISRAEL

A new analysis of Hamas documents captured in Gaza reveals more details about the beliefs of its leaders and the goals of the campaign launched on October 7, 2023.

They show that terrorist leader Yahya Sinwar and others in Hamas wholeheartedly believed that the destruction of Israel was possible, especially after the 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict ("Operation Guardian of the Walls"). Soon after that conflict, Hamas began working on practical plans to that end, which were shared with Iran (disproving Iranian denials of involvement in planning the attacks) and its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, involving a "unification of the fronts" to simultaneously attack Israel at the right moment – with a Jewish holiday specifically mentioned.

## ISRAEL AIDS SYRIAN DRUZE

On March 1, Israel's Government instructed the IDF to prepare plans to defend the Druze-majority city of Jaramana, on the outskirts of Damascus in Syria, following reports of clashes between Druze locals and the new Syrian interim Government.

During February and March, Israel also sent 10,000 food packages to Syrian Druze communities.

In mid-March, a delegation of more than 150 Syrian Druze dignitaries visited Israel, the first such visit since 1974. They visited holy sites, including the Tomb of Jethro (Nabi Shu'ayb) and met with their Israeli brethren.

## ISRAELI RAIDS IN SYRIA

In early March, the IDF conducted several targeted raids in southern Syria, seizing and destroying weapons, including rifles, ammunition and rockets. The IDF also launched airstrikes on former Syrian regime sites, including a military site in Qardaha, where weapons belonging to the previous regime were stored. On March 13, Israel targeted a Palestinian Islamic Jihad command centre in Damascus that, according to the IDF, had been used to orchestrate terrorist attacks against Israel.

Israel says it aims to demilitarise southern Syria near the Israeli border.

Meanwhile, on March 16, violence erupted on the Lebanon-Syria border after Syria accused Hezbollah of kidnapping and killing three Syrian soldiers near the border. Hezbollah denied involvement. Tensions escalated further when Syrian rockets struck Lebanon's Qasr village.

## AS US STRIKES, HOUTHIS RESUME FIRING ON ISRAEL

The US began an ongoing wave of intensive strikes against the Houthis in Yemen on March 16 to restore freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. The Trump Administration redesignated the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation on March 4.

Meanwhile, between the end of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and March 25, the Houthis fired at least six missiles at Israel – most occurring in the middle of the night, with some allegedly targeting Ben Gurion International Airport. All were intercepted or disintegrated.

## LEBANON UPDATE

On March 22, six rockets were launched from southern Lebanon toward Metula, Israel, with some intercepted and others landing in Lebanon. This was the third such attack since the November 2024 Israel-Lebanon ceasefire. In response, the IDF conducted airstrikes on terror infrastructure in Hezbollah-controlled areas in southern Lebanon and the Beqa'a region.

The IDF continues operations to enforce the ceasefire by curbing Hezbollah's military buildup, while Lebanon's Government has called for international pressure on Israel to withdraw from five strategic border points it still holds inside Lebanon. Israel continues to occupy the border sites pending the completion of the Lebanese Army's deployment to southern Lebanon as promised under the ceasefire agreement.

On March 15, the IDF eliminated two Hezbollah operatives in a drone strike on their vehicle in southern Lebanon.

## SPIKE IN IRAN'S HIGHLY ENRICHED URANIUM

Analysis of the February 2025 report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) shows Iran now stocks enough enriched uranium in various purities to produce a single atomic warhead's worth of weapons-grade uranium in about a week, seven warheads worth in three weeks and 17 in four months. Teheran's stockpile of 60% enriched uranium increased to 275kg, almost 50% more than what it had in November 2024.

Following the report, IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi warned that "Iran is the only non-nuclear weapon state enriching to this level [60%], causing me serious concern."

## BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY REPORT DOCUMENTS OCTOBER 7 ATROCITIES

A new 318-page report pre-

pared by a committee of the British Parliament and presented on March 18 documents Hamas' brutal attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The report says around 6,000 terrorists, including Hamas' elite Nukhba forces, invaded southern Israel, killing 1,182 people, wounding more than 4,000 and taking 251 hostages. The report documents in detail mass executions, mutilations and sexual violence, calling the attack the deadliest massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust.

Meanwhile, the US Justice Department launched a Joint Task Force October 7 (JTF 10-7) to use legal methods to pursue justice for victims and combat Hamas' threats.

## BRITISH REVIEW DEBUNKS GAZA FAMINE CLAIMS

A detailed review conducted by UK Lawyers for Israel (UKLFI) in

February found that UN claims of actual or imminent famine in Gaza during the Israel-Hamas war last year were inaccurate, and based on flawed data and methodology. Reports from famine monitoring organisations, including the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) and Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), were used as evidence in legal cases against Israel, influencing the International Criminal Court's decision to charge Israeli leaders with war crimes. However, using these bodies' own data, UKLFI found that famine was never close to occurring, and malnutrition levels were only slightly higher than pre-war levels.

The study highlighted various methodological errors by the UN bodies, such as reliance on incomplete data, misclassification, failure to update projections, failure to include all available food sources and inflated population estimates.

## STRANGER THAN FICTION

### THERE'S SNOW ROLE FOR ISRAELIS

The obsessiveness with which Israel's haters seek to boycott and cancel any Israeli was epitomised by a reaction to the new Disney movie "Snow White", starring Israeli actress Gal Gadot as the evil Queen, opposite Rachel Zegler's Snow White.

While Gadot proudly supports her home country, Zegler is outspokenly anti-Israel. But this did not stop the "Campaign to boycott Israel's supporters in Lebanon" demanding on March 18 that the movie not be shown in that country. We would have thought a movie where an evil villain played by an Israeli is vanquished by a sweet heroine played by a strong critic of Israel would lend itself to anti-Israel propaganda and have been enjoyed by the Jewish state's detractors. However, it was apparently more important to limit "the efforts to penetrate the

Zionist narrative into our culture" by excluding any Israeli actors than to support the pro-Palestinian Zegler, even when the movie matches the Palestinian narrative far better than the Zionist one.

The Feb. 11 premiere of the Marvel movie "Captain America: Brave New World" similarly attracted several dozen protestors calling for a boycott of the film because of the character Ruth Bat-Seraph and her superhero alter-ego Sabra, played by Israeli actress Shira Haas.

In the original comics, Bat-Seraph was a Mossad agent, but in the movie, she's a US government employee. However, just the fact that she's Israeli was enough to set off the haters. And of course, a ceremony to unveil a star for Gadot on Hollywood's Walk of Fame was also disrupted by protesters.

Apparently for some, Israelis should only be allowed to appear in movies as real-life villains in depictions of the Palestinian narrative. However, such movies would have about as much relationship with the truth as those about superheroes or fairy tales.



## COVER STORY

## BACK INTO GAZA?

## “OPERATION STRENGTH AND SWORD”: A BACKGROUNDER

BICOM

On March 18 and 19, the IDF launched a series of what it termed pre-emptive strikes in Gaza, targeting leadership officials, mid-ranking military Hamas commanders and terrorist infrastructure. The IDF termed the operation “Strength and Sword”.

An Israeli official said that the strikes were based on Hamas’ readiness to execute terror attacks, build up force and re-arm.

The Prime Minister’s Office announced that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Israel Katz instructed the IDF “to act with strength against the Hamas terrorist organisation in the Gaza Strip.” This follows Hamas’ repeated refusal to release the hostages and its rejection of all the proposals it received from the US President’s envoy, Steve Witkoff, and other mediators.

The statement added, “The IDF is currently attacking targets of the Hamas terrorist organisation across the Gaza Strip, with the goal of achieving the war objectives as determined by the political leadership, including the release of all our hostages – both the living and the fallen.”

Defence Minister Katz said, “If Hamas does not release all the hostages, the gates of hell will be opened on Gaza and Hamas’ murderers and rapists will encounter the IDF at an intensity they haven’t known until today.”

Israel has stated that at least five prominent Hamas officials were eliminated in the first night’s air strikes. These were:

- Issam al-Da’alis, considered to be one of Hamas’ chief administrators, who effectively served as Hamas’ prime minister in Gaza.
- Bahjat Abu Sultan, who held a rank equivalent to brigadier-general, was responsible for domestic operations in Gaza and was considered to be a prominent Hamas leader.
- Ahmad Omar al-Taha, who served as the Director-Ge-



Intense bombing during the first stages of Operation “Strength and Sword” (Image: X)

- neral of Hamas’ Justice Ministry in the Gaza Strip.
  - Mahmoud Abu Watfeh, who held the rank of major-general and served as the Director-General of Hamas’ Interior Ministry in Gaza (commander of Hamas’ security services).
  - Hamas politburo member Abu Obaida al-Jimasi, who was a Hamas leader who oversaw the administration of the southern Gaza Strip.
- Subsequent strikes reportedly killed addition top Hamas officials:
- On March 19, the IDF claimed to have eliminated Yasser Muhammad Harb Musa, a close ally of eliminated Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, whom it said oversaw security affairs for Hamas’ political bureau.
  - On March 23, an Israeli strike on Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis killed Hamas political bureau member Ismail Barhoum, whom Israeli officials described as “the new Hamas Prime Minister in Gaza, who replaced Issam Da’alis.”
  - Earlier that day, an Israeli airstrike near Khan Younis killed Salah al-Bardawil, another senior member of the Hamas political bureau.

The Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry has said that 700 Palestinians had been killed in the fighting between March 18 and 24, but IDF sources disputed these figures.

Hamas said that Israel would bear “full responsibility for the repercussions of its treacherous aggression in Gaza,” which it said has “exposed the hostages in Gaza to an un-

**“The renewed strikes take place in a different context to the past war against Hamas: Hezbollah has been decimated in the north, which allows the IDF greater capacity to focus its forces on Gaza”**

known fate. We hold the criminal Netanyahu and the Nazi Zionist occupation fully responsible for the consequences of the treacherous aggression against Gaza and the defenceless civilians.”

The IDF attacks were approved at a security consultation on March 17 attended by Prime

Minister Netanyahu, Defence Minister Katz, Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir, Shin Bet Director Ronen Bar, the director of the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate and other high-ranking officials.

According to reports, they unanimously supported the attack after the hostage release negotiations reached an impasse.

The pre-emptive offensive plan was kept in closed circles in the IDF to create an element of surprise and deception.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said that the Trump Administration was consulted by the Israelis prior to the strikes. “As President Trump has made clear, Hamas, the Houthis, Iran – all those who seek to terrorise not just Israel but the US – will see a price to pay, and all hell will break loose.”

The hostage family forum has expressed its concern that the offensive could endanger the lives of the remaining hostages in Gaza and has demanded a meeting with the Prime Minister, the Defence Minister and the head of the negotiating team “in which [the officials] will clarify how they can guarantee that hostages won’t be affected by the military pressure and how they are planning to get them home.”

Israeli forces followed up the initial aerial attack with ground operations beginning on March 19. Different prongs of the ground operations included:

- On March 19, IDF troops retook part of the Netzarim corridor dividing northern and southern Gaza, and gained control of the Salah a-Din road, one of the two major north-south routes in Gaza.
- On March 21, troops entered the Shabura area in the southern city of Rafah, and later surrounded the Tel Sultan neighbourhood of Rafah. Israel had always retained control over the Philadelphi corridor along the Egyptian border.

- The IDF has also been operating on the ground in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahiya. On March 24, the IDF issued evacuation orders for residents of Beit Lahiya and neighbouring Beit Hanoun areas, presumably prior to expanded operations planned for the area after rockets were launched from there.

## CONTEXT

The Israel offensive comes against the background of negotiations that took place in Qatar in mid-March between a delegation from Israel and the Egyptian, Jordanian, Qatari and UAE foreign ministers, in which the parties reportedly discussed a version of the ‘Witkoff Plan’.

This plan included:

- Hamas releasing ten hostages (presumably all alive).
- In exchange, Israel releasing hundreds of Palestinian prisoners (at a higher ratio than earlier deals) including convicted terrorists serving long sentences.
- Israel resuming the entrance of humanitarian aid and amenities, potentially at a greater volume than before.
- The ceasefire extending for a couple of months that will include Passover and Israel’s Independence Day (May 1).

However, little to no progress had been made on this proposal.

It also comes against the background of the IDF detecting an irregular development in the Gaza Strip in recent days, which might point to Hamas preparations either to launch an attack or to raid Israeli territory. Over the last few weeks, the IDF has tracked preparations being made by Hamas and others for a resumption of hostilities in the Gaza Strip. This included the recruitment of hundreds of new terrorists, the distribution of arms, and repairs being made to the command-and-control mechanisms in Hamas’ various battalions.

Despite the tension between the Prime Minister and Shin Bet Director Ronen Bar (Netanyahu has announced his intention to fire Bar), the latter was present alongside the Chief-of-Staff during the operation, and reportedly supported its adoption.



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The renewed strikes take place in a different context to the past war against Hamas: Hezbollah has been decimated in the north, which allows the IDF greater capacity to focus its forces on Gaza; and the Trump Administration will likely give the IDF more leeway than did the Biden Administration.

## LOOKING AHEAD

If Israel were to re-take Gaza, it may adopt a different approach to the delivery of humanitarian aid. New IDF Chief-of-Staff Zamir has proposed that the IDF will take over the delivery of aid to Gazans as the only way to ensure Hamas does not profit from the aid. The previous chief-of-staff was reluctant to take this on, out of concern that it be perceived as military responsibility for the civilian population.

AIR

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## ISRAEL'S THREE OBJECTIVES

Ron Ben-Yishai

According to all indications, the IDF's surprise strikes in Gaza on March 18, later followed by limited ground operations, had three primary objectives.

The first was to apply military pressure that could break the deadlock in negotiations over hostage releases. Experience within the IDF and Israeli intelligence has shown that such pressure is the most effective way to push Hamas toward flexibility in negotiations.

However, using military force as leverage is a gamble with the hostages' lives. In any case, the airstrikes targeted locations that did not pose a direct threat to the hostages' safety, according to military and intelligence assessments.

The second objective was to signal to Hamas that Israel is not only targeting its military wing – the terror army that was the focus of previous phases of the war up until the last ceasefire – but also its governance structure.

This was demonstrated by the killing of five senior officials from Hamas' political and civilian administration, reinforcing the message that Israel makes no distinction between the terror group's military and political leadership.



Israeli forces just inside the Gaza perimeter (Image: IDF/ screenshot)

More importantly, Israel wanted to warn Hamas that it would not allow the group to rebuild its military infrastructure using funds looted from humanitarian aid. The strikes also served as a message to mediators, particularly Egypt, that Israel opposes Hamas remaining in any governing or military capacity in post-war Gaza.

The third objective was to create intense military pressure, coordinated with the US, on all remaining elements of the "Axis of Resistance", including Yemen's Houthis, Hamas and Iran.

This coordination stems, in part, from the US Administration's desire to show regional and global actors that President Donald Trump's threat to "open the gates of hell" was not empty rhetoric but part of a broader strategy that aims to exact a heavy price from Hamas, the Houthis and Iran itself.

The US-Israeli axis is pursuing several goals: securing the hostages' release, expelling Hamas from Gaza, exacting a price from the Houthis and significantly degrading their ability to disrupt shipping in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, and pressuring Iran into negotiations for a new nuclear deal that both Trump and Israel could support – one that would block Teheran from rapidly advancing toward nuclear weapons.

There have also been unconfirmed reports regarding the sinking of an Iranian intelligence vessel operating in the Arabian Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. If confirmed, this would mark a direct attack against Iran. In the past, Israel was reported to have sunk the Iranian intelligence and attack ship *MV Saviz*, which patrolled off the coast of east Africa and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

There is also a fourth reason for the IDF's attack. According to official statements issued by government sources and the IDF Spokesperson's Unit on Monday, Hamas has been intensely rebuilding its forces.

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Reports indicate the terror group has already reconstituted a fighting force of 20,000 terrorists and is planning further attacks. In the absence of further details, this rationale appears secondary to the first three and likely serves as an additional justification for resuming hostilities in the eyes of the international community.

Reports of Hamas' rebuilding efforts and attack preparations have been known to the IDF for some time. As long as there was hope for a hostage deal, Israel refrained from pre-emptive strikes, instead maintaining high alert among its air defence and southern border security forces.

The fact that it began with an aerial strike suggests a strategy of gradual escalation, giving Hamas opportunities to de-escalate at each stage. However, the aim is for every phase to be executed with maximum surprise – through location, timing, tactics and speed – so that Hamas is unable to regroup.

The campaign is being carried out under the assumption that Hamas will not harm the hostages, as they remain a strategic asset and a form of insurance for the terror group, especially as Israel resumes fighting – likely with increasing intensity, potentially including a rapid ground operation.

However, former hostages have testified that their conditions deteriorated severely, including reports of torture, following major Israeli strikes or the collapse of negotiations. The operation is undoubtedly a high-stakes gamble for the hostages.

AIR

*Ron Ben-Yishai is a veteran Israeli military reporter and National Security correspondent for the Israeli daily newspaper Yediot Ahronot and Israeli TV's Channel 1. ©Yediot Ahronot (Ynet-news.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

## ISRAEL WEIGHING TEMPORARY OCCUPATION OF GAZA

Erez Linn

Israel's political and military leaders are considering plans for an expanded ground campaign in Gaza that could include a military occupation of the entire enclave for months or longer, according to the *Washington Post* and other sources

Current and former Israeli officials briefed on the matter told the *Post* that the new tactics would likely include direct military control of humanitarian aid, targeting Hamas' civilian leadership and evacuating women, children and vetted noncombatants to "humanitarian bubbles" while laying siege to those who remain.

Israeli officials emphasised to the *Post* that Jerusalem is still waiting for the outcome of ceasefire talks and no decisions have been made on whether – or how – to escalate the current phase of the offensive, which has so far consisted mostly of aerial bombardment.

According to people familiar with the planning, a full-scale invasion and occupation would require up to five army divisions, potentially stretching the Israel Defence Forces thin as reservists increasingly voice scepticism about an open-ended conflict.

Amir Avivi, a former deputy commander of the military's Gaza division, told the *Post* that the IDF's campaign last year was constrained by disagreements between political and military leaders over tactics and strategy, and by the Biden Administration's concerns about harm to Palestinian civilians.

"Now there is new [IDF] leadership, there is the backup from the US, there is the fact that we have enough munitions, and the fact that we finished our main missions in the north and can concentrate on Gaza," said Avivi. "The plans are decisive. There will be a full-scale attack and they will not stop until Hamas is eradicated completely. We'll see."

Israeli officials indicate they remain willing to negotiate with Hamas through mediators before launching any large-scale invasion.

Beginning on March 18, Israel carried out extensive aerial attacks targeting Hamas leaders and fighters while conducting limited ground raids. Hamas responded by launching rockets at Tel Aviv.

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive negotiations, denied that Israel broke the ceasefire agreement. The official stated that Israeli authorities had presented their conditions for entering the second phase of the agreement on the 16th day of the truce, but Hamas rejected them.

According to the official, Hamas then declined a "bridge" proposal by United States Special Envoy to the Middle East Steve Witkoff to extend the ceasefire by 40 days in exchange for 11 living hostages. Instead, Hamas offered to release one American-Israeli hostage, after which Israel decided to resume hostilities – which the official claimed was permitted under a clause of the ceasefire agreement if talks were deemed to have broken down.

The official told the *Post* that Witkoff's proposal "is still on the table," but "we're back to negotiating by different means: under fire." Hamas said on March 22 that it was still considering Witkoff's proposal.

Israel claims it has destroyed nearly all of Hamas' 24 fighting battalions, leaving only a few thousand fighters in Gaza. However, completely eradicating these remnants would require holding the territory – which some analysts suggest carries significant risks.

Supporters of a more intensive and prolonged opera-







Israeli PM Netanyahu, Defence Minister Israel Katz and the new IDF Chief-of-Staff, Lt. Gen. Eyal Zamir (Image: IGPO/ Flickr)

tion argue that last year's campaign only resulted in Hamas reemerging from tunnels when the fighting subsided. They believe current political conditions favour increased military pressure and, if necessary, temporary occupation of Gaza.

While the Biden Administration previously restricted weapons shipments to Israel unless more humanitarian aid was allowed into Gaza, President Donald Trump has approved the sale of 2,000-pound bombs and officials have said Israel consulted with the Trump Administration before cutting off all aid to Gaza in early March.

In February, Israeli officials had informed international aid agencies that future humanitarian assistance would be screened and directed to new "logistics hubs" established by Israeli authorities, agency officials told the *Post*.

Another point of contention was that former defence minister Yoav Gallant and IDF Chief-of-Staff Herzi Hal-levi favoured targeting Hamas' military capabilities, while Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu wanted to also strike the organisation's civilian officials who dominate Gaza's government positions.

After Gallant was dismissed in November, Israeli media reported that he told families of hostages that Israel had achieved all its military objectives and cautioned against attempting to control Gaza.

In the latest attacks, Israel appears to have adopted a new approach, launching airstrikes that Katz likened to "opening the gates of hell." The strikes targeted not only members of Hamas armed wing but also civilian officials, including the Director-General of Gaza's Interior Ministry, the Director-General of the Justice Ministry and members of the Hamas political bureau.

On March 21, Katz threatened to not only temporarily occupy Gazan territory but to annex it if Hamas did not make concessions regarding hostages. "The more Hamas persists in its refusal, the more territory it will lose, which will be annexed to Israel," he said.

"There is less opposition now with Zamir and Katz. They are more ready" for a more aggressive approach, said

Brig. (res) Yossi Kuperwasser, a former senior IDF intelligence official and head of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security. "The Government was committed to removing Hamas from power. The security establishment was not happy with this idea. They were trying to focus more on military assets and less on civilian assets. Because once you remove Hamas from Gaza, the IDF would have to rule Gaza."

AIR

*Erez Linn is the managing editor of the Israel Hayom English newsroom. Originally published by Israel Hayom (israelhayom.com), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

## THE AGONISING HOSTAGE DILEMMA

Melanie Phillips

**T**he resumption of Israel's war in Gaza has produced a predictable reaction in a world that remains determined to malign the Jewish state.

Western media declared that Israel had ended the ceasefire. In fact, the ceasefire had ended more than two weeks earlier. Although Israel had agreed to a further US-brokered deal, Hamas rejected it and refused to release any more hostages.

Hamas left Israel with no option but to resume the war, which it did with an aerial bombardment of Gaza.

The terror group instantly stated that the bombardment had killed 400 Gazan civilians. This was absurd because Hamas couldn't have known the number of casualties so fast and, as usual, it omitted any Hamas operatives in the total. Yet, in typically reflexive fashion, the Western media parroted this incredible figure without questioning it.

No less predictable have been the Israeli protests that by resuming the war Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has abandoned the hostages – of whom 24 are said still to be alive.

The most bitter and agonising reproach has been voiced by some of the former hostages, who have accused Netanyahu of ignoring everything they've been telling the world about the horrific conditions in which the captives are being held.

There can hardly be a single person in Israel who doesn't desperately want the hostages back home. And there's no denying the genuine anguish at the failure to get them all back. Their plight is beyond horrific, and the profound emotionalism of the public response is entirely understandable.

Unfortunately, such emotion is a barrier to clear and unavoidably brutal thinking. The *only* way Hamas will

return all the hostages is if Israel surrenders and leaves it in power. The reason it took the hostages in the first place was to ensure that Israel could never win against it.

If it gives up all the hostages, Hamas will be left with no means of holding off the Israelis. It will be finished. By keeping hold of its captives, Hamas doesn't just have the upper hand; it holds all the cards because it knows Israel feels under a sacred duty to retrieve them. While Hamas keeps them under its brutal imprisonment, it will continue to spin out negotiations over releasing them to paralyse Israel's military options.

The Israel Defence Forces have known in general for some time where many, if not most of the hostages were being held, but they couldn't reach them because if they did Hamas would murder them.

The released hostages say that a deal is the only way to bring the rest of them back. The terrible truth is that no deal will bring them all back. Only Israel's total capitulation will do that.

So, now, Israel is out to destroy Hamas as a military and governing force. This second stage of the war is different from the first because Israel no longer has to fight America, too.

Unlike the Biden Administration, the Trump Administration is backing Israel to win this war. US President Donald Trump is not only providing Israel with the weapons to do so, but he is also supporting Israel's ban on further humanitarian aid supplies going to Gaza, which was how Hamas was able to keep going.

Indeed, a key reason this war has lasted for 17 months, why so many IDF soldiers have fallen, why the hostages have been incarcerated for so long in such lethal conditions, and why so many Gazan civilians have been killed, is because, by insisting on aid supplies continuing throughout the war, the Biden Administration and Western governments provided Hamas with the means to continue to fight.

Israel says the only way to get the hostages back is through military pressure. According to Israeli Brig. Gen. (res.) Amir Avivi, head of the Israel Defence and Security Forum, this pressure will be ramped up in stages.

The first stage was the aerial bombardment, which was stunningly successful in killing many of Hamas' top commanders along with hundreds of its troops.

If Hamas still refuses to release the hostages, says Avivi, the next stage will be the ground war, which has now started. This, he states, will be a decisive attack of a type not seen before to force the release of all the hostages and "create a new reality" in Gaza.

But the great dread is that, if Hamas feels its back is to the wall, it will murder all the living hostages. It can't be denied that this is a very real possibility. So, to some people, doing a deal to get all the hostages back seems a no-brainer.

In Israel, a majority of the public strongly favours this option. The redemption of captives is viewed as an absolute obligation of the state, rooted in Jewish principles.

But those Jewish principles also hold that, while the redemption of hostages is a sacred duty, this must not be achieved if the price to be paid is the capture and killing of more innocents.

This is the terrible dilemma Israel has faced from the start of this war. How does a nation balance the imperative to save some of its citizens from captivity, torture and death with the imperative not to sentence even more of its citizens to the same fate and, instead, ensure their security?

Taking Israeli hostages was a diabolically brilliant tactic through which Hamas is, even now, controlling the agenda – not least by whipping up overwhelming and uncontrollable emotion among Israel's deeply traumatised population.

From the start of the war, however, Netanyahu has made a bad mistake in not being honest with the public. He has consistently declared that he will deliver the twin goals of destroying Hamas and returning the hostages.

He should have said that while no effort would be spared to return the hostages, it might not be possible to achieve both those goals; and that if a terrible choice had to be made, it would have to be to win the war and protect Israel's population of 10 million people.

Maybe, precisely because Hamas knows that if it kills the remaining hostages it will lose its only leverage, it won't murder those who remain under its vicious thumb. Maybe the IDF will get to them before Hamas can do so. Maybe the increased military pressure will force them to release their captives. With no realistic alternative to the war, we can only hope and pray.

AIR

*Melanie Phillips is a British journalist, broadcaster and author, who writes a weekly column for the Jewish News Syndicate (JNS). Currently a columnist for the Times of London, her latest book is The Builder's Stone: How Jews and Christians Built the West and Why Only They Can Save It (Wicked Son). © Jewish News Syndicate (JNS.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

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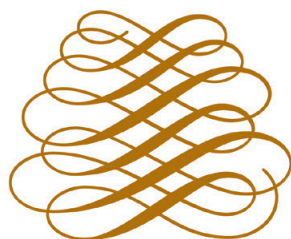
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# Marching toward Controversy and Division

## Israel's judicial reform dispute boils over again

Ilan Evyatar

Mass protests returned to Israel's streets in March as the country's simmering judicial reform crisis resurfaced with renewed intensity in the wake of new government efforts to fire two key officials and the passage of a controversial law to increase political control over judicial appointments.

The crisis had been simmering anew since the start of the year with renewed attempts to restructure the Judicial Selection Committee, which appoints judges, and the dramatic boycott by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, Justice Minister Yariv Levin and Knesset Speaker Amir Ohana of the swearing-in ceremony of the new Supreme Court President Isaac Amit. Now, the situation threatens to boil over following the Government's decision to dismiss Ronen Bar, Director of the Shin Bet internal security service, and moves to oust Attorney-General Gali Baharav-Miara.

Since Amit's inauguration on February 13, the judicial reform debate has intensified and many fear it is rapidly heading to a full-blown constitutional crisis. Just days before Amit's swearing-in, reports surfaced claiming that advisers within the Prime Minister's Office were moonlighting as paid lobbyists serving the interests of the Qatari Government. Opposition politicians seized on the reports, calling for an investigation. On Feb. 27, Baharav-Miara ordered the Shin Bet and Israeli Police to launch a criminal investigation into the alleged Qatari connections of Netanyahu's aides. The affair was soon dubbed "Qatargate".

Amid mounting tensions, on March 16, Netanyahu announced his intention to dismiss Shin Bet Director Bar, citing a "loss of confidence" in him. Behind the scenes, Netanyahu had been pressing Bar to resign, which Bar said he would do only after completing "sensitive investigations" and securing the release of the remaining hostages held in Gaza. Baharav-Miara – an appointee of the previous Naftali Bennett–Yair Lapid Government, who has always had a strained relationship with the current administration, issued a legal opinion declaring the dismissal attempt invalid due to a direct conflict of interest, given Bar's role in investigating Netanyahu's office.

Israelis poured onto the streets in large numbers, protesting what they claim is an assault on Israel's democracy. On March 21, the crisis escalated further after an early Friday morning session where the Cabinet voted to dismiss Bar, ignoring the A-G's recommendations. No Shin Bet head has previously been dismissed, although two have resigned.

Bar declined to attend the cabinet session, instead

choosing to write a long and detailed letter to the Cabinet setting out his claims. In the letter, Bar strongly criticised the Government's attempt to dismiss him as procedurally flawed and legally questionable, arguing that the claims against him were "vague, superficial, and unfounded," and appeared fabricated to disguise "entirely different, improper, and illegitimate motives." He further asserted that his removal at this critical moment, while overseeing sensitive investigations involving the Prime Minister's Office and Qatar, represented "a severe conflict of interest" and posed "a direct threat to Israel's security."

Bar emphasised that, despite disagreements, he always implemented govern-

ment policies faithfully and professionally, citing effective collaboration acknowledged by the Prime Minister himself. He warned that dismissing him due to his insistence on independent professional judgement "reflects a distorted view of loyalty – personal loyalty instead of loyalty to the public."

Netanyahu issued a video following the Cabinet vote in which he stated defiantly, "Ronen Bar will not remain head of the Shin Bet. There will not be a civil war, and Israel



Israeli PM Netanyahu (top) controversially says he needs to fire Ronen Bar (bottom), head of the Shin Bet internal security service, because of a "loss of trust" (Images: Screenshot/ X)



will remain a democratic state.” The “civil war” comment was an apparent response to an interview given by former Supreme Court President Aharon Barak in which he said that he feared Israel was “on the brink” of such a civil war. Netanyahu also claimed that there was no connection between Bar’s dismissal and the ongoing Qatargate investigation.

The High Court, meanwhile, issued a temporary injunction in the wake of the Cabinet vote blocking Bar’s dismissal, pending further judicial review, with hearings scheduled for April 8.

On March 22, Israel saw its largest demonstrations since the 2023 mass protests that came to a halt after October 7. Some 200,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv and around the country. Many of them were not only protesting the dismissal of Bar and the moves against the Attorney-General, but also the situation in Gaza, where the ceasefire collapsed on March 18 with 59 hostages still in captivity, 24 of whom are still believed to be alive.

Despite the protests, the Cabinet unanimously passed a no-confidence vote against Baharav-Miara the next day, formally initiating steps for her dismissal – a process that must go through an inquiry process, according to Israeli law. Justice Minister Yariv Levin accused her of actively undermining government policy by frequently giving legal opinions disallowing planned government initiatives. The Attorney-General, like Bar, declined to attend the cabinet vote and stated that the Government was seeking “power without limits, as part of a broader move to weaken the judiciary and deter all professional officials.” She added, “The Government seeks to be above the law and act without checks and balances.”

In a series of articles, experts from the Israel Democracy Institute have explained the issues and legal and constitutional flashpoints presented by the moves to dismiss Bar and Baharav-Miara, as well as the proposed changes to

the Judicial Selection Committee.

Under Israeli law, the head of the Shin Bet is appointed and can be dismissed by the government – but any dismissal must follow clear, legally-defined guidelines, including providing grounds for the dismissal. Prime Minister Netanyahu’s decision to fire Bar citing a “loss of trust” has triggered significant legal pushback because the reasons given appear so subjective – on top of the alleged conflict of interest involving Qatargate.

The controversy around Attorney-General Baharav-Miara’s dismissal similarly revolves around conflicts of interest. As Attorney-General, Baharav-Miara is responsible for overseeing Netanyahu’s ongoing criminal trials and prosecutions as well as providing legal advice to the government. This places Netanyahu in a legally complex position. Under a conflict-of-interest arrangement reached when he returned to office, Netanyahu must refrain from involvement in any decision relating to legal or prosecution authorities. Thus, the Cabinet’s decision to initiate Baharav-Miara’s dismissal is viewed by many legal experts as fundamentally compromised (even though Netanyahu himself did not attend the Cabinet vote).



Also targeted for dismissal: Israeli Attorney-General Gali Baharav-Miara (Image: X)

Finally, the Government’s passage of a law restructuring the Judicial Selection Committee on March 27 – replacing two professional Bar Association representatives with politicians,

and giving politicians a majority on the Committee for the first time – has been criticised by many opponents as politicising Israel’s judiciary. While proponents argue these changes will increase ideological diversity, critics see it as undermining the courts’ independence by making judicial appointments contingent on political loyalty rather than professional qualifications. This shift, legal critics argue, risks eroding the fundamental checks and balances necessary for a functioning democracy.

However, conservative voices, including legal experts, view these developments very differently. From their perspective, the dismissals of Bar and Baharav-Miara, as well as the reforms to the Judicial Selection Committee, reflect a legitimate effort to rebalance Israel’s democratic system. Legal experts aligned with the Israeli right, such as the analysts at the Kohelet Policy Forum, have long argued that unelected officials, particularly in the judicial and legal systems, have acquired excessive power at the expense of democratically elected leaders in Israel, thus distorting its democratic framework.

Supporters of Bar’s dismissal argue that the Prime Minister must maintain absolute confidence in senior

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security officials, especially during an ongoing conflict. They contend that Bar's stance and actions demonstrated an erosion of the necessary trust between the Shin Bet chief and political leadership, making his replacement not only justified but essential. Similarly, conservatives defend the move to oust Baharav-Miara as an overdue correction. They argue that the Attorney-General's position has expanded beyond its advisory role, becoming an obstacle to policy implementation rather than a facilitator of the elected government's agenda.

Regarding the Judicial Selection Committee, conservative analysts advocate greater democratic accountability in appointing judges. They claim the current system, which

**“Opponents of the dismissals and judicial reforms argue these moves represent a dangerous assault on democratic norms and checks on political power, while supporters maintain they correct a longstanding imbalance between elected officials and powerful unelected institutions”**

grants sitting judges significant influence in selecting their successors, perpetuates ideological homogeneity. By restructuring the committee to include stronger representation from elected officials, they assert the judiciary would better reflect the diverse viewpoints of Israeli society. And they point to other democratic nations where elected politicians are entitled to directly appoint judges.

Ultimately, conservatives frame these actions

not as a threat to democracy, but as measures essential for restoring balance between elected officials and Israel's powerful judicial and security institutions. In their view, democratic legitimacy requires accountability to voters, with little role for unelected gatekeepers.

At its core, Israel's current crisis reflects a profound clash of competing democratic visions. Each side frames the crisis differently: opponents of the dismissals and judicial reforms argue these moves represent a dangerous assault on democratic norms and checks on political power, while supporters maintain they correct a longstanding imbalance between elected officials and powerful unelected institutions. Both claim to defend democracy – yet their definitions diverge so starkly that coexistence and compromise is looking more and more difficult.

If these tensions remain unresolved, Israel risks sliding into a full-blown constitutional crisis. The bitter divisions that paralysed the country in the months leading up to October 7 serve as a clear warning of what happens when internal discord blinds a nation to external threats. The signs were there, but they were dismissed, downplayed or ignored while most Israelis were focused on the unprecedented, divisive domestic disagreements.

AIR

## IRAN'S UNLOVED REVOLUTION AND THE BOMB

Reuel Marc Gerecht and Ray Takeyh

This February, Iran's revolution turned 46. Middle age usually brings a measure of wisdom, as people cast aside aspirations of youth and come to terms with hard truths. But Iran's Islamists are forever young. Too attached to their ideological verities to accept history's verdict, they press on with their mission to redeem. The Islamic Republic is at an impasse. Its leaders cannot change; its public already has.

The mullahs promised much in 1979. A new polity that would somehow reconcile democratic norms with religious convictions. An economy that would lift up the working class in whose name the revolution was waged. The revolution was supposed to be borderless: Through spontaneous combustion and Iranian clandestine activity, Muslims everywhere were supposed to accept the Islamic Republic as the vanguard of God's message.

There was real genius at the heart of the Islamic Republic's constitution. Power rested with the unelected few, such as the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, which vets candidates for public office and ensures that all laws conform to Islamic standards. But there were elections to the presidency, Parliament and city councils.

For years, the Islamic Republic's elections could be boisterous affairs, as candidates from different political camps offered the public real choices. Mohammad Khatami, who had long wrestled with Western thought and the conundrum that Western states had created more wealth and apparent happiness than any Muslim realm, promised an Islamic democracy.

The Islamic Republic's first, cleric-doubting populist, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, spoke of economic justice. And Hassan Rouhani, a serious revolutionary who nonetheless understood that faith alone isn't sufficient to win great ideological struggles, claimed that he could revive the economy by transacting an arms control agreement with America.

This diversity was the indispensable safety valve for the theocracy, allowing the disgruntled citizen a way of influencing the deliberations of government. This all came to nought.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has himself to blame for the regime's current predicament. At every step of the way, he has thwarted his presidents and parliaments. He has emasculated the electoral process by ensuring that only those who are completely subservient to him are allowed to run for office. This was as true for hardline Ibrahim



Raisi, who died in a helicopter crash last year, as it is for the less harsh Masoud Pezeshkian. In the meantime, the Parliament has been reduced to a debating society that occasionally impeaches a minister but does little else.

Today, most Iranians do not participate in elections, and the institutions that once mediated between the ruling elite and the masses have lost their standing. Street protests are the only way for citizens to express their grievances.

Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, once quipped that the revolution is not about the price of melons. The mullahs never understood economics. Their attempt to reconcile the requirements of the private economy and the inequalities it produces with their pledge to raise the dispossessed has led to the creation of a massive welfare state and a bloated bureaucracy. The lower classes today get bad health care, poor education and cramped housing. State subsidies consume an ever-larger percentage of the country's GDP, and no one is happy.

And the government of God is drowning in corruption. The system is riddled with nepo babies, scions of influential mullahs who get lucrative state contracts, pay no taxes and adhere to no regulations. The Revolutionary Guards have followed the model of other corrupt Third World dictatorships by taking control of key industries such as telecommunications, construction and even banking. At a time when about 30% of Iranians live below the poverty line, the class cleavages resemble the last days of the decadent monarchy. All this is particularly galling to Iranians, as the clerical leaders routinely call on the masses to sacrifice and endure hardship for the sake of the regime and the faith.

Iran's revolution succeeded best beyond its borders. The Islamic Republic has always sought to subvert its neighbours. It has supported a variety of militants and terrorists and has made the destruction of Israel its leading cause. America, the Great Satan, is an affront to the



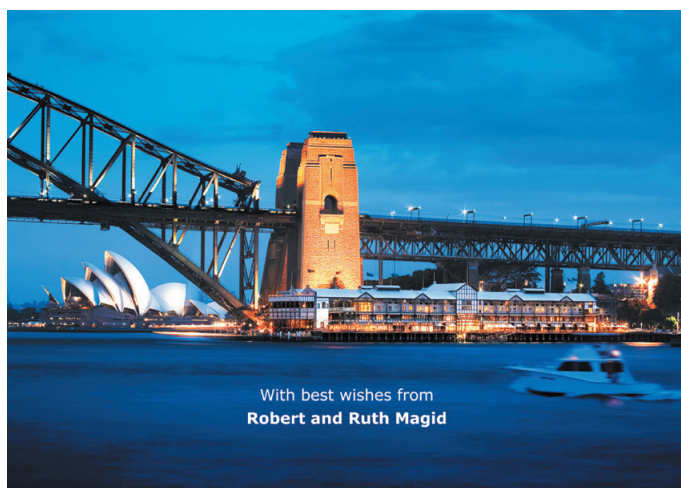
Despite the ubiquitous public iconography, the majority of Iranians despise the corrupt, autocratic leaders and institutions put in place by the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Image: BalkansCat/ Shutterstock)

mullahs. Its culture, which has gone global, entices Iranian youth while its armada patrols Iran's coastline.

No Middle Eastern country has killed more Americans than the Islamic Republic. The Lebanon Marine and embassy bombings of 1983, the attack on a US base in Saudi Arabia in 1996 and the relentless assault on American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan killed and wounded thousands. Washington has responded with sanctions that have helped to debilitate Iran's economy and stretch its resources.

The mullahs remain unrepentant. In the early decades of this century, they created the most successful imperial enterprise – most bang for the buck – in the Middle East since the British Empire. In the aftermath of the 9/11 wars and the Arab Spring, the region's state system essentially collapsed. Civil wars and ungoverned spaces provided plenty of opportunities for Teheran to create the so-called Axis of Resistance, a concatenation of Shi'ite militias and Arab militants that did Iran's bidding. The Islamic Republic helped to evict America from Iraq, harassed Saudi Arabia directly and via proxies in Yemen and, for a while, preserved the Assad regime in Syria.

And then came October 7 and the great undoing. The Islamic Republic's imperial strategy succeeded only because there was little pushback. Successive American administrations did not want to tangle with Teheran for fear of widening conflicts. But then Jerusalem flipped the script. It rejected Washington's calls for restraint as it destroyed Hamas and decapitated Hezbollah. All this presaged the collapse of the Syrian regime, which happened so rapidly that its Iranian and Russians patrons had no chance to save it. As baleful, in its own scrimmage with Iran, Israel demonstrated its military prowess by easily penetrating the Islamic Republic's air defences.



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Suddenly Teheran was exposed and its imperial reach limited to parts of Iraq and the Gulf.

All this has not sat well with the Iranian people. Since 1979, the revolution has steadily shed constituents. The liberals, the first to be excised, soon realised they had no place in the new theocratic order. Students, always the backbone of all protest movements in Iran, made their exit in the riots of 1999. In 2009, a fraudulent presidential election led to the rise of the pro-democracy Green Movement, which shook the regime's foundations. Even more disturbing for the mullahs were the riots of 2019, as the lower classes took to the streets. They were supposed to be the mainstay of the theocracy, tied to the regime by piety and patronage.

And, in 2023, the “Women, Life, Freedom” movement came to embody the totality of the Iranian people's grievances. From classical times onward, Islamic theologians have often worried about the disruptive potential of women in society. Their claim on men can rival that of God's. Women had an outsized role in fuelling the now-dead reform movements inside the Islamic Republic – Khatami's election in 1997, which many in the ruling elite see as the beginning of the threatening domestic upheavals, wouldn't have happened if women hadn't locked onto the candidate as a vehicle to express their discontent. After the Women, Life, Freedom eruption, it's probably fair to say that Khamenei views women as a group as hopelessly infected with Western ideology.

The 85-year-old Khamenei surely is deeply concerned about his legacy. His record looks bad: The Islamic Republic has been humbled in the region by Jews. The sullen citizenry now routinely mocks the theocracy. Iran's defensive and offensive strategies are in ruins – except the nuclear-weapons program. The bomb is now more essential than it was before – and Khamenei hasn't spent tens of billions of dollars on its development, and weathered all the sanctions, to go Japanese. A nuke would ensure the awe elicited by the Islamic Republic in the region. Proxies and militias were always unreliable instruments of power projection; a nuclear arsenal would offer permanent advantage. And the international community could be counted on eventually to accept an Iranian bomb and embrace a regime that was too dangerous to fail.

Nuclear weapons may not save the Islamic Republic, since the rot is too deep and popular disaffection too widespread. But as Khamenei takes account of his revolution, the bomb may be the last thing he can do to sustain the government of God.

AIR

*Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former Iranian-targets officer in the Central Intelligence Agency, is a resident scholar at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Ray Takeyh is a senior fellow at the US Council on Foreign Relations. © National Review (nationalreview.org), reprinted by permission, all rights reserved.*

## IRAN: MOVING BEYOND DIPLOMATIC DELUSIONS

Mehran Mossadegh

US President Donald Trump's two-month ultimatum to reach a nuclear deal with Iran is being watched closely across the Middle East and beyond. Rather than triggering serious negotiations, this deadline exposed the enduring flaw in the West's approach to the Islamic Republic – the persistent fantasy that Iran can be a genuine negotiating partner. Trump reinforced this stance in a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader, warning that time is running out and signalling that the US will not tolerate further stalling.

Since the 1979 revolution, Teheran's theocratic regime has demonstrated time and again that what the West views as negotiations, Iran treats as tactical delay and calibrated deception. This is not a regime that seeks compromise; it views diplomacy as a battlefield, another front on which to wage its revolutionary campaign.

As Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has often argued, reasoning with Iran's regime is futile. Expecting Iran's leadership to negotiate in good faith is as unrealistic as “asking a fish to climb a tree”.

### TACTICAL STALLING, NOT GENUINE DIPLOMACY

Iran's response to Trump's deadline has been predictable – blaming the US for escalating tensions while signalling, through more moderate voices, a willingness to talk. But this is not diplomacy – it is stalling.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian might voice a readiness to negotiate – albeit only if the US treats Iran as fully “equal” – but it is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who makes the decisions. His goal is clear: delay negotiations until the October 2025 deadline set by a UN Security Council resolution passes, after which the “snapback” of all UN sanctions on Iran is no longer possible.

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Iran has routinely deployed such tactics to avoid consequences while advancing its nuclear program. The *Wall Street Journal* recently made a similar observation in an editorial, warning that Teheran is playing a “good cop, bad cop” game to stall Trump until the October deadline passes and the snapback sanctions are off the table.

## TIME AS A WEAPON – CLOCK IS TICKING

For Iran, time itself is a strategic weapon. Each diplomatic round buys Teheran space to further its nuclear ambitions. Veteran nuclear expert David Albright warned that Iran is already converting its 20% enriched uranium stockpile to 60%, a short step away from weapons-grade material.

Trump’s deadline reflects a rare understanding in Washington that endless diplomatic manoeuvring benefits only Iran. As Trump might say, Iran “doesn’t have the cards” and is in no position to dictate preconditions – unless the world lets it by blindly insisting on pursuing negotiations at all costs.

## HOLDING IRAN ACCOUNTABLE FOR ITS PROXIES

A significant policy shift under Trump has been the decision to explicitly (though, for now, just rhetorically) hold Iran directly responsible for its proxies – such as the recent attacks by the Houthis on shipping. For decades, Iran fuelled conflicts through Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis while denying direct involvement, and the world largely allowed this.

October 7 was a turning point. Hamas’ brutal attack on Israel, on which it consulted and planned with Iran, shattered the illusion that these groups operate fully independently (and documents from Gaza now prove that Iran helped plan October 7, even if the regime did not know the exact date it would be launched – see BTN, pp. 10-11). Washington now understands that Teheran is the architect of this regional chaos.

As US policy evolves, Israel has relentlessly degraded Iran’s regional assets. Israeli strikes have left Hamas in ruins, Hezbollah weakened and Syria’s Assad regime some-

thing that will only be written about in history books.

Recent reporting confirms that Israeli operations even destroyed Iran’s most advanced air defences, once thought to shield its nuclear facilities. Simultaneously, Iran’s economy is collapsing: inflation is surging, the currency is in freefall, there are terrible water and electricity shortages in many parts of Iran, and sanctions continue to bite.

Adding to Teheran’s woes, Saudi Arabia’s potential US\$1 trillion investment and the UAE’s US\$1.4 trillion plans are reshaping the region, signalling a future beyond Iran’s influence.



Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian (left) may hint at agreeing to nuclear negotiations, but it is Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (right) who will ultimately make the decision (Image: Khamenei.ir)

## TRUMP THE DEAL MAKER – NOT A NEGOTIATOR

It is notable that Trump rarely speaks of “negotiating” with Iran. Instead, he talks about “making a deal” – an important distinction. Trump’s approach is transactional; the deal happens on his terms or not at all. Given Iran’s current weakness, Trump likely believes he can impose terms – not find a “middle ground”.

Iran, however, continues to play for time. History shows Teheran will likely escalate just enough to stoke Western fears of wider conflict, thus forcing policymakers into concessions or new talks on Iran’s terms. Simultaneously, Teheran will hope to outlast this US administration, betting that a change in leadership could bring a more favourable policy environment.

## A NARROWING RANGE OF OPTIONS

Yet, as the two-month deadline approaches, the West faces some stark choices. Iran’s tactics – escalation, delay and nuclear advancement – have left policymakers cornered.

The failure to recognise that negotiation was never a viable tool to stop Iran’s nuclear plans has cost and continues to cost the West precious time. By clinging to the fantasy of diplomacy, alternative strategies were neglected. Now, with Iran edging ever closer to nuclear capability, available

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responses are shrinking.

Targeted military strikes, covert operations, cyber-attacks like the Stuxnet virus (which damaged Iran's uranium enrichment capabilities in 2010), or eliminating key IRGC leaders may soon be the only options left to halt Teheran's ambitions. This is not merely about nuclear weapons; it is also about Iran's support for proxies, its expanding missile program and its persistent threats and violence against Israel.

This raises a final strategic question: who should lead the next phase – Trump or Netanyahu?

Trump may see himself as the ultimate dealmaker. However, it is Israel's actions that have truly weakened Iran over the past year-and-a-half. Israel, driven by existential necessity, has led a campaign to which the US is only now catching up.

The wiser path for Trump might be to recognise this dynamic. A successful outcome – forcing Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions and curbing its regional aggression – might come not from deal-making bravado but from allowing Israel to remain at the forefront, while offering substantive US support for Israel's efforts.

## ENDING THE MIRAGE OF NEGOTIATION

For too long, the West has operated under the illusion that Iran's regime is capable of entering genuine negotiation aimed at finding common ground and arrangements that allow both parties to meet their core interests. Decades of evidence and Teheran's current behaviour make it clear that the Iranian regime does not see negotiation in these terms – dialogue is merely a tactic, never a path to resolution.

Trump's short deadline is a necessary wake-up call, but it is unlikely to yield the desired result by itself. The West is rapidly running out of non-military options to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran – something all recent US administrations and most US allies have promised to prevent, for very good reasons. A decisive response – including economic warfare, cyber operations, and, if necessary, targeted military action – may soon be unavoidable.

The months ahead will reveal who truly understands the stakes – and who is best placed to act on that understanding. Whether it is Trump or Netanyahu leading the next phase, this year might see the last, best opportunity to shatter the negotiation delusion and finally confront Iran's regime using the only means that have any genuine chance of success. First and foremost, this requires recognising the realities regarding the deadlines, deterrence and deception that have defined this long-running crisis.

AIR

*Mehran Mossadegh is the founder of NegotiationWise, a Melbourne-based consultancy specialising in negotiation, decision-making and strategy, and is the author of numerous articles reviewing the various rounds of nuclear negotiations with Iran.*

# MINORITIES IN THE SHADOW OF SYRIA'S NEW ISLAMIST REGIME

Mendi Safadi

**A**fter 14 years of civil war in Syria, in December last year, the Assad regime fell, and is now being replaced by a regime dominated by formerly al-Qaeda-linked Sunni Islamists. This event plunged the Middle East into confusion and high alert.

Even new Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa (aka Abu Muhammad al-Julani, his *nom de guerre*) did not expect the road to Damascus to be so smooth, with almost no resistance, allowing him to take over the country within days.

Although Israel was not directly involved in these events, the timing of the attack was not coincidental. It was significantly influenced by events stemming from the war triggered by the October 7 massacre. Over recent months, Hay'at Tahrir a-Sham (HTS) – a former affiliate of al-Qaeda that had control of most of Syria's Idlib province – planned the attack under the guidance and close supervision of Turkish intelligence, redeploying forces along the borders of Idlib province and preparing militarily for the assault.

The element of surprise played a crucial role. The attack commenced while the "Axis of Resistance", led by Iran, was critically weak. Hezbollah and other Shi'ite militias suffered heavy losses due to prolonged fighting with Israel, especially after Israel's Operation Northern Arrows in Lebanon in September 2024. The once-widespread presence of "Axis of Resistance" forces in Aleppo and other areas in Syria diminished significantly as some militants were redeployed to Lebanon, and many were eliminated by Israeli strikes. The rebels, in coordination with Turkish security and political decision-makers, recognised an opportunity and received the Turkish green light to launch an offensive.

Throughout most of the Syrian civil war, Islamist rebel factions received military, economic and logistical support from Ankara. Turkey has two primary interests in Syria: first, to weaken the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and reduce Kurdish autonomous control in northeastern Syria, ideally to the point of ethnically cleansing the Kurds away from the border region, if possible. Second, to return a significant portion of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees who fled to Turkey due to the war.

Turkey's support for the Syrian rebels, particularly jihadist factions, aligns with Erdogan's broader goal of reinstating an Islamic, possibly neo-Ottoman-style dominance in the Middle East.

## THE DRUZE

One critical factor that HTS and its Turkish masters





did not account for was Syria's Druze minority. The Druze community's resilience and courage in defending their mountain redoubts reminded HTS of their past difficult confrontations with Kurdish fighters. Additionally, an Israeli ultimatum issued in February, warning the new regime against harming the Druze minority, played a substantive role in limiting any regime move to extend direct control over the Druze majority region of southern Syria. Israel even conducted pre-emptive strikes on military positions and stockpiles of heavy weapons that could threaten the Druze.

Israel appears to have several motivations for openly declaring its protection of Syria's Druze – based on the statements by the Prime Minister, Defence Minister, Foreign Minister and senior military officials. The primary security goal is the demilitarisation of southern Syria to remove any terrorist threat near Israel's borders. However, beyond security, there is the historic alliance between Jews and Druze, and the two religions are connected via the biblical figures of Jethro (Shu'ayb) [whom the Druze regard as their most important prophet] and Moses. This continues today via the strong bond between Druze and Jews in Israel – the most solid interethnic alliance in the region.

The Druze leadership in Israel closely monitors developments in Druze-populated areas of Syria. They are actively engaged with Israel's Government and military to ensure the safety of their brethren in Syria and to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian and medical aid into Druze regions. This is especially crucial given that the new regime in Damascus has significantly restricted the supply of basic goods to Druze areas – leading to unprecedented unemployment – and even cut off pensions and salaries that were paid under Assad's rule. Furthermore, the new regime shut down two key factories in a-Suwayda, the largest city in the majority Druze region of southern Syria, both of which employed many Druze residents.

The primary dispute between the new HTS-dominated regime and the Druze revolves around governance. The Druze demand a secular, decentralised government, in a federal or autonomous system where all regions remain under the Syrian state but with self-governance. However, the new government, supported by Turkey, insists on a centralised Islamic regime, mostly guided by Islamic Sharia law. This became even more concerning for minorities after the appointment of new ministers and officials – all of whom are loyalists of Jabhat a-Nusra, the original name of HTS, with some not even being Syrian. Some hail from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Egypt and other countries, having

come to Syria for jihad and gradually rising through the ranks of HTS before now assuming key positions in the new Syrian government.

The Syrian Druze militias refused to allow HTS forces to seize the Jabal a-Druze ("Mountain of the Druze") region and have rejected demands to disarm, noting that there is still no legitimate national government, constitution or army in place. Their decision proved correct, especially after what transpired in Homs, where the Alawites surrendered their weapons – only to then face retribution for being part of Assad's sect.

The Druze in Israel serve as a stronghold and a significant

pressure factor to ensure protection for their community in Syria. The spiritual leader of the Israeli Druze, Sheikh Muwafaq Tarif, has been holding meetings with Israeli government officials as well as key figures in the US, Russia and Europe for this purpose. I have also been actively engaged, both locally and internationally, along with other public figures.



"Soldiers" of the new Islamist Syrian regime (Image: Wassim NASR/ BSKy Social)

## THE ALAWITES: TEST CASE FOR MINORITY RIGHTS

Before granting international recognition to the new Government in Syria, it is important to examine the actual conduct of the regime and its agents in minority areas, not merely the statements of its leaders. On the ground, the new Government is gradually imposing Sharia law, and a policy that some argue could lead to ethnic cleansing of non-Sunni Muslim minorities.

The most threatened minority in Syria today is the Alawites, to which ousted President Bashar al-Assad belongs. Although more than 75% of the previous Syrian regime was from the Sunni majority, the prevailing opinion among Syrians is that it was essentially an Alawite regime. Moreover, the Alawite minority is blamed for the crimes committed by the ousted regime against the Syrian people over the past 14 years, during which more than half a million Syrians were killed, and nearly ten million Syrians were forced to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

On March 6, a brutal attack occurred in which (according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights) more than 1,383 Alawite were killed, most of them reportedly unarmed, after clashes broke out between HTS groups and forces affiliated with the former regime.

The origins of this latest escalation can be traced to when al-Sharaa announced a settlement with former soldiers of the former Assad regime's army: anyone who did not commit a crime against the people would be allowed to lay down their arms and return home unmolested.

Sunni soldiers overwhelmingly received settlement approvals and were released to their homes. However, up to 8,000 Alawite soldiers who fought ISIS went to the settlement points and were arrested and imprisoned, even though they had played no part in the crimes against innocent people. After that, weapons collection began in minority areas, and the Alawites mostly responded to the call and handed over their arms.

Tensions then erupted in a largely Alawite village in rural Latakia following the arrest by security forces of a 95-year-old man who, according to witnesses, was a junior civil servant with no influence on what was happening in the country during Bashar al-Assad's reign. Rumours also spread about systematic executions of young men and boys in front of their mothers by regime forces. In response, Alawite men tried to organise to defend themselves – and their clashes with HTS-affiliated forces fuelled acts of murder by the latter. *[Ed. Note: It should be acknowledged that there are also reports of Alawite attacks on civilians – including Alawite civilians viewed as “traitors”]*

On Wednesday, March 12, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported “field executions” of civilians, especially Alawites. Many were killed inside their homes or in the fields, according to the centre's director, Rami Abdel Rahman. He said the people were killed in “executions by the security forces and their affiliated groups” and noted that the death toll may still rise.

In an attempt to contain the situation, al-Sharaa announced the establishment of an investigative committee “to uncover the reasons and circumstances that led to these events, investigate violations against civilians, and identify those responsible.” Yet, ironically, al-Sharaa himself described the Alawites in a speech during the clashes as loyal to Assad.

The authorities later announced the arrest of at least seven people, who they said had committed “violations” against civilians on the Syrian coast. They were referred to the relevant military courts. However, no report on said investigation has been published since, and there is currently no tangible evidence that they were even detained. Needless to say, few Syrians believe the story presented by the regime, and videos filmed by soldiers in the regime's forces appear to document horrific crimes systematically committed on a wide scale.

The clear lesson is that, at least at this stage, minorities in Syria cannot be protected without significant international intervention.

AIR

*Mendi Safadi, head of the Safadi Centre for International Diplomacy, Research, Human Rights and Public Relations, is an Israeli Druze lecturer on Islamic affairs, terrorism, and the Middle East. Previously, he was Chief of Staff in the office of Israel's Deputy Minister for Development of the Negev and Galilee and Regional Cooperation.*

## QUANTIFYING THE JEWISH CAMPUS CALAMITY

Alana Schetzer

A new survey of Jewish and Israeli university staff and students in Australia has revealed how the explosion in antisemitism and anti-Israel protests, harassment and threats to their safety has impacted their capacity to work and study, as well as negatively affected their relationships with co-workers and fellow students.

In the new survey, conducted by the Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism (5A), 67% of all combined staff and student respondents said they had personally experienced antisemitic comments.

Meanwhile, 44% of students and staff from 30 universities across Australia reported they had suffered from feeling ignored or excluded since October 7, while 39% said they had been insulted or harassed via social media, 19% said they had been “cancelled” and four per cent reported being physically assaulted.

When asked how the dramatic increase in antisemitism and anti-Israel rhetoric had impacted their relationships with their non-Jewish fellow students and co-workers, 30% of students and staff combined surveyed stated that they had become “distant”, 13% reported they had become “disconnected”, while 47% reported their relationships had stayed “about the same”.

When it came to concern over antisemitism from the political aspect, 66% of students and staff combined were “very concerned” about the left, but only 14% said they felt the same about the right.

When asked if they were confident about lodging a complaint “without risking discrimination against you or other negative impacts” at their university, 48% of students said “no” and 26% said “not sure”; 46% of staff said “no” and 19% said “not sure”. Only 15% of staff and 26% of students thought their university's complaints procedures were fair and adequate.

WITH COMPLIMENTS

**SELWYN GROUP  
OF COMPANIES**



The 5A survey, conducted by veteran social scientists Andrew Markus and Efrat Eilam and released in early March, focused on four main issues: the experiences of antisemitism on campus, both physical and online; experiences of students in the classroom; experiences of academic and administrative staff in the workplace; and how universities responded.

As well as answering set survey questions, students and staff shared many personal experiences and emotions, including:

- Being afraid to have their Jewish identity revealed;
- Being afraid to attend class;
- Being unable to focus in class whilst protestors chanted for the deaths of Jews and Israelis;
- Constant bombardment of antisemitic and anti-Israel posters, flyers and graffiti;
- Student groups performing the Nazi salute and singing Nazi songs in front of Jewish students;
- One respondent reported that a colleague had said, “Jews caused all the problems in the world. If the Arabs wiped them out, they would be doing the world a favour”; and
- One respondent said they were spat upon for wearing a Star of David necklace.



Pro-Palestinian demonstrators dominated many campuses across Australia last year (Image: Screenshot)

The survey results reflect 18 months of anecdotal evidence and media reports from university staff and students. They also revealed similar findings to those of the Federal Government’s Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism Jillian Segal, who made a submission to the Senate inquiry into the *Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill 2024*, which sought to determine whether a full formal commission of inquiry should be established.

The Special Envoy’s submission stated: “Jewish students are traumatised and feel isolated and unsafe,” with the data she cited finding nearly 70% of university staff “experienced an antisemitic incident or discourse in their immediate workplace,” with students and staff “intimidated and unwilling to complain to universities because they lack trust... or they fear retribution in some form.”

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AIJAC’s submission to the same inquiry noted, “Antisemitism is growing at an alarming rate across the tertiary sector in Australia. Furthermore, beyond its intrinsically repugnant nature and the threats that it poses to student safety and wellbeing, we are concerned that antisemitism

on campus is also acting to curtail academic freedom.” AIJAC noted the disruption of classes, the display of hate symbols, the racial vilification and incitement, the encampments that restricted freedom of movement and the lack of disciplinary action against those who broke university rules.

According to the 5A report, overall, only 38% of Jewish students and 36% of academic staff said they felt safe on campus and just 36% of students and 30% of academic staff said they felt safe on virtual campus (online classes and conferences, for example).

The online survey was conducted between April and July 2024 and included Jewish and Israeli academics, adjunct and administrative staff and undergraduate and graduate students. Five hundred and forty-eight respondents from 30 universities took part in the survey. The majority of respondents were from Monash University, the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales and the University of Melbourne.

Report co-author Associate Professor Efrat Eilam of Victoria University said 5A hopes the report will be used to inform university policy-making and regulations relating to antisemitism.

In February 2025, 39 Australian universities adopted an antisemitism definition drafted by a working committee of the Group of Eight (GoE), Australia’s largest universities, following a recommendation from last year’s federal parliamentary inquiry into antisemitism at universities, which reported in February. The definition was not the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism, adopted by the Australian Government and numerous other countries, which disappointed some in the Jewish community. However, the new definition was developed following consultation with Ms Segal and other Jewish community representatives.

In response to the adoption of the new definition, 5A’s Efrat Eilam said, “it is early days.”

“We need to see changes in their disciplinary complaint systems, more transparency and more enforcement. It is too early to assess the extent to which universities are taking measurable actions to close the rhetoric-practice gap on antisemitism.”

She added that for long-term cultural change, policy enforcement must go hand-in-hand with education.

5A was formed following the October 7 terror attacks and is apolitical. Its members represent 31 Australian universities.



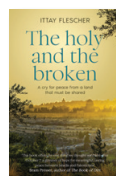


## Broken Dreams

**The Holy and the Broken: A cry for Israeli-Palestinian peace from a land that must be shared**

**Ittay Flescher**

*Harper Collins, Jan. 2025, 320 pp., A\$36.95*



**Allon Lee**

There's nothing worse than being labelled a *fraier* in Israel – that is, a 'sucker'.

Given Hamas' horrific bloodletting on October 7, 2023, many Israelis might feel that Flescher is treating them as *fairim* after reading his book, *The Holy and the Broken: A cry for Israeli-Palestinian peace from a land that must be shared*.

Journalist, interfaith activist and former teacher at Melbourne's Mt Scopus Jewish day school, Flescher moved to Jerusalem in 2018. He began writing this book three days after October 7, arguing that 30 years after the Oslo process began, both sides' leaders have failed to make peace, and a new approach is thus needed.

Flescher proposes a bottom-up, people-to-people peacemaking strategy informed by his work as educational director at Kids4Peace Jerusalem, which fosters trust-building between Israeli and Palestinian children.

His sections explaining how Kids4Peace breaks down barriers and encourages trust are very interesting.

Yet, as a reader, it's hard to ignore the fact that, for the past 100 years, Palestinian leaders have treated their own people as *fairim* – rejecting numerous opportunities to create an independent Palestinian state in favour of perpetual conflict. But Flescher effectively appears to do just that. The book is littered with historical

omissions and misrepresentations that minimise Israeli efforts for peaceful coexistence.

For example, Flescher states that “during the war of 1948, Israel conquered and forcibly relocated 200,000 Palestinians from the much larger Gaza district and pushed them into what became known as the Gaza Strip – as a result, there are now eight permanent refugee camps in Gaza.” Yet had Palestinian and regional Arab leaders accepted the 1947 UN Partition Plan instead of launching a “war of extermination”, no displacements would have occurred. And why, after 75 years, do these camps still exist, especially given Egypt ruled the Strip until 1967? Flescher doesn't ask.

Flescher writes that he “mourns the loss of life” for those killed in the January 1948 bombing of the Semiramis Hotel in Jerusalem by the Hagana – a precursor to the IDF – along with the 2002 Passover bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya, in which 30 Israeli civilians were killed. Many would argue no equivalence exists: The Semiramis was targeted because it was believed to be an important headquarters for Arab paramilitary activity when the Jews of Jerusalem were fighting for their survival. Nonetheless, the commander responsible was sacked. By contrast, the 2002 Park Hotel attack was a wanton act of terror targeting a

Passover seder, launched shortly after Israeli PM Ehud Barak's historic offer to create a Palestinian state.

Flescher's claim that “In Jerusalem... [we] are fighting over one land that we each want exclusively, in its entirety” ignores key historical realities and differences.

Since Israel took control of east Jerusalem in 1967, religious groups have maintained authority over their own holy sites. Moreover, Israeli prime ministers Barak and Olmert both proposed peace deals that included sharing the city – offers Palestinian leaders rejected. But Flescher doesn't seem interested in talking about this history. The Camp David Summit of July 2000, where Palestinian President Yasser Arafat rejected Barak's peace plan before launching the Second Intifada, is buried in an appendix.

Flescher's permanent solution is a shared homeland with two states based on 1967 borders, forming a confederation. Citizens could reside in either state as permanent residents, with free movement for all, Jerusalem as a shared capital, and security and economic matters jointly managed. He argues this model is superior because it fosters cooperation, while a traditional two-state solution would leave both nations deeply hostile.

But this shares the general flaw of the rest of the book – Flescher's naïve insistence that Israeli-Palestinian hostility could quickly vanish if only both peoples listen to each other and decide it should.

The book is also highly critical of the responses of Israelis to the rising death toll in Gaza, post-October 7, but to his credit, Flescher at least quotes Israelis explaining this is the price that must be paid to remove the threat posed by Hamas.

Even with its factual problems and flawed vision for peace, Flescher's book is thought provoking. Ultimately, however, after October 7, it is hard to imagine Israelis accepting any solution which seems destined to leave them feeling like *fairim* again.



# ESSAY

## The Politics of Hatred

### Explaining Australian antisemitism since October 7

Henry Ergas

**Y**ears ago, Saul Bellow published a book of essays called *There Is Simply Too Much to Think About*. Who among us has not felt, in the 17 months since October 7, overwhelmed by events that, until then, we would scarcely have credited, much less predicted? There is, indeed, simply too much to think about – but think about it we must, not merely so as to understand but so as to respond. I will therefore sketch, by way of introduction to a proper assessment, some preliminary elements – and they are no more than that – of an analysis.

It is useful to start from the obvious. And few things are more obvious than the role that significant elements in the Muslim community have played in the current wave of antisemitism. That Muslims in Australia are fully entitled to hold and express strong views about the Middle East scarcely needs to be said; but it is one thing to hold strong views and quite another to insult, intimidate and injure others – much less to call Jews, including Jewish Australians, vermin that deserve to be exterminated.

It is hard, if not impossible, to find any precedent in this country's history for that kind of behaviour, at least on the current scale. A question therefore naturally arises: why are we now observing phenomena that were previously marginal, if not largely unknown?

To ask that question is not to deny that Australia has experienced periods scarred by intense ethnic and religious antagonisms: the tensions between the Irish and the English in the decades leading up to and immediately following the Irish Civil War are a striking case in point.

That those tensions were acute is well-documented; so too is the durable harm they caused. They reflected the resentments Irish Catholics had developed over more than a century, resentments that exploded in periodic rebellions and that were heightened by the starvation, disease and mass immigration caused by the famine that devastated Ireland from 1845 to 1852. But while those tensions and resentments imposed real costs on the Australian polity, they were reasonably well contained and only infrequently boiled over into outright clashes.

Thus, in her historical survey of religious conflict in the countries of British settlement, Hilary Carey concludes that 19th century Australians “lived in a sectarian environment; however, the sectarian tensions remained a pale imitation of rival tensions in northern England, Ireland and Scotland or in other settler societies.”

That favourable assessment scarcely remains true today. The

reason for the difference between then and now is, I believe, simple: the pressures that made for integration and toleration were far stronger in the past while those that made for separation and intolerance were far weaker.

Sheer distance was an especially potent source of pressure to integrate. To come to Australia was to leave one's home country – and even one's home culture – behind, usually forever. The past was literally another country.

Moreover, in Australia, there was no choice but to mix with people who were radically different. What most shocked many English settlers, the historian John Hirst noted, was not the climate, the natural environment or even the presence of Indigenous Australians – it was the fact of having to live and work alongside Irishmen, Welshmen and the Scots. Adjusting to that fact imposed a profound change in lifestyle and attitudes: even



Irish pride: St Patrick's Day parade in 1950s Melbourne (Image: National Museum of Australia)

the most devout Irish Catholics soon discovered that one could not live in Melbourne as if one were still in County Cork.

There were, at the same time, strong and effective integrative institutions. No one has placed greater emphasis on the role of these institutions, and notably of the labour movement, than Patrick O'Farrell, the preeminent historian of Irish Catholicism in Australia. The ALP and the unions, he writes, were “the most powerful of anti-Irish solvents;” they “joined persons of all religions or none in common cause,” with their

mass membership broadening “Irish Catholic acquaintance and friendship outside their religion.” On top of that, while “the movement had factions and conflicting tendencies, it would not entertain sectarianism.” Reinforcing the integrative effect of those movements was a dense mesh of community organisations such as sporting clubs, which, John Hirst has shown, made it a rule to ensure their leadership spanned – and hence brought together – different religious and ethnic communities.

But if those integrative mechanisms worked, it was also because the antagonisms were less virulent and less deeply entrenched. Not even Archbishop Mannix, taken in his most extreme moments, ever suggested that non-Catholics were vermin; one simply cannot imagine him entertaining the thought that Protestants should be exterminated. Rather, the dominant attitude among Irish Catholics in this country – an attitude reinforced by pride in what they and Australia had achieved – was a genuine sense of common Australianness. “We shall champion the claims of Irish-Australians to perfect essential equality with their fellow citizens,” the Irish-Australian newspaper boldly declared in its first editorial in 1894; “but we shall advocate it on generous lines, offering a hearty welcome to all who would become Australian.”

And those sentiments of shared “Australianness” were repeated time and again both by Catholic prelates and by prominent politicians, such as Jim Scullin, who were intimately associated with Irish Catholicism in the public mind.

To say Australians naturally warned to others would be a gross exaggeration; but there was,

at least for those classed as “whites”, an acceptance that – despite being grudging and often superficial – was nonetheless real. Accompanying it was the expectation – superbly documented by Peter Medding’s early 1960s study of Jews in Melbourne – that recent arrivals would play by the rules, including the rule of not being too assertively different. In the end, says O’Farrell, “[with] the wish to belong together stronger than any impulse to grow apart, sectarian-

ism came to be regarded as profoundly un-Australian.”

The contrast to the present could not be starker. As anyone who has set foot in Lakemba knows, thanks partly to the miracles of modern communications, it is now entirely possible to live in separate communities, completely immersed in one’s culture of origin and hostile to the culture of the country in which one has chosen to actually live.

As the Productivity Commission put it a decade ago, “The ease of communicating with family and friends in the immigrant’s country of origin, and access to media in their home language through the internet, has made it much easier for people who have no desire to integrate.”

Noting that this development “raises an important issue about whether this provides scope for separatism that conflicts with, and/or has the ability to undermine, key norms and long-standing understandings that are important to the functioning of Australian society,” the Commission urged the government to “monitor social cohesion and integration trends (so as to take remedial action) if the proportion of the immigrant population not wishing to integrate rises.”

Unfortunately, nothing was done. On the contrary, the all-pervasive

rhetoric of multiculturalism, which makes ethnicity into destiny, not merely elevated separatism into a right; it increasingly hailed it as a virtue.

Nor did the pressures making for separatism end there. Rather, the centrifugal forces were strengthened by the collapse of the integrative institutions on which Hirst and O’Farrell had placed so much stress. Thus, membership in broadly based organisations – ranging from political parties to service clubs – has withered, leading many organisations to, and some beyond, the threshold of disappearance. So has the phenomenon the great sociologist Georg Simmel called “sociation” – in which individuals, by participating in a range of distinct groups, each with a somewhat different membership, continuously experience diversity and learn how to live together.

The issue is not that people are, to use the Harvard sociologist Robert Putman’s phrase, “bowling alone”; it is that, particularly as they congregate in social media’s echo chambers, they bowl only with others who are no different from themselves. And as Seymour Martin Lipset warned in his classic 1960 study of democracy’s structural preconditions, “Wherever the social structure operates so as to isolate individuals or groups from contact with those who hold different views, the isolated individuals or groups tend to back political extremists.”

To make things worse, the integrative force of national pride – pride in this country and its achievements, along with a genuine bond of common nationhood – has also weakened to the point of near extinction. It has, instead, become entirely acceptable to view Australia as a project that is reprehensible at best, genocidal at worst, forever scarred by the defects of its birth. Turning against that project is no longer to be dismissed as un-Australian; it is, on the contrary, to be “on the right side of history.”





A “deep well of hatred” in segments of the Muslim community contributed to the recent outburst of extremism and antisemitism in Australia (Image: Diana Zavaleta/ Shutterstock)

Those trends affect, or one might properly say afflict, our society as a whole; the problems they create are, however, especially strong in respect of parts of Australia’s Muslim communities. To say that is not to tar everyone with the same brush: like its global counterpart, there are significant differences, related to country of origin and to conflicting theologies, within those communities. But there are also commonalities – and more recently, common trends.

Those commonalities are, to at least some extent, inherent in the corpus of Muslim doctrine. Two facts stand out in that respect, each, in my view, undeniable.

The first is the stress Islamic doctrine places on the inherent value of warfare against, or more generally deep suspicion of and antagonism to, other faiths. As Michael Cook, the Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton, puts it, “an unambiguous endorsement of warfare against outsiders is not just older in Islam and more firmly built into its tradition than it appears to be in Western Christianity, it also bulks larger.”

Even more importantly, in Islam, unlike the other major faiths, “this heritage did not fall into oblivion

with the passing of the centuries.” On the contrary, for a whole complex of reasons, “it remained vivid and has retained its authority into modern times.”

The forms it now takes are varied, going from the extreme separatism preached by movements such as the Tablighi and the Muslim Brotherhood, which are highly influential in Australia, through to outright jihadism; but its reach and impact are pervasive.

The second fact, in this generalised hostility to other faiths, is the prominence and ever-growing centrality of antisemitism. The vituperative references to Jews in the Koran and the Hadith are well known; but what really distinguishes Islam from Catholicism, which also has a long and tragic tradition of Judeophobia, is that Islam has never had its Vatican II moment.

Indeed, two of the greatest historians of Vatican II – Piero Doria and Phillipe Chenaux – who both served as very senior Vatican archivists and advisers, have documented the intense opposition of Muslim leaders to *Nosstra Aetate*, the declaration the Vatican Council issued in 1965 repudiating the centuries-old “deicide” charge against Jews. As Sheikh Yusef al-Qaradawi, who served as the spiritual

leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, preached in categorically rejecting that declaration, “There is no doubt that the Jews played an extremely important role in the crucifixion of Jesus... a crime was committed and we believe that the Jews were the ones who committed it” – Qaradawi’s conclusion being that “There is not a decent man among them, may the curse of Allah be upon them.”

Since Qaradawi’s statement, the blatantly exterminationist, openly apocalyptic, version of Islamic anti-semitism has only grown stronger.

In short, there is, in substantial parts of Australia’s Muslim communities, a deep well of hatred. Far more extreme than any of its predecessors, less diminished by the integrative pressures that previously tamed ethnic and religious animosities and kept them firmly under control, it burst onto our public spaces after October 7.

It would, however, be a serious error to only focus on the Muslim component of those events. Rather, if the Muslim component was significant, it was in no small measure because of its wider resonance on, and confluence with, the political left.

Unfortunately, properly analysing the changes that have reshaped the left in recent decades would take too long. What can be said here is that the factors I mentioned above, which have reduced our society’s integrative ability, have also dramatically altered significant parts of the left’s outlook and complexion.

Thus, as we move to an ever more fragmented society, many of the mass organisations that once characterised the left have been replaced by a proliferation of identity groups whose entire *raison d’être* lies in being different. All these groups have in common is that they are defined by opposition – and that they perceive themselves as victims or “allies” of victims. What brings them together is not, as was the case with the left in the past, a shared project, much less shared

hopes and aspirations – they have none; what they share is enemies. To use a phrase coined by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, their dominant mode of action is, “common-enemy politics”, with the adversary being the basis for coalescence. And the movement as a whole only retains, and can only retain, its unity and its momentum by constantly having an enemy against which to mobilise.

This common-enemy form of politics is inherently Manichean: it divides the world into good and evil, the children of darkness and the children of light. It is, as a result, permeated by a sense that politics – instead of being the laborious, never-ending process of stitching together compromises and understandings – is a fight to the death, in which everything is permitted and nothing is forbidden. Its underlying emotion, which it uses to maintain its mobilising potential, is that of the lynch gang: pure, unadulterated hatred.

Many years ago, with the example of Nazism still fresh before her eyes, Anna Freud reflected on the distinctive nature of hatred. “A ‘good lover’”, she wrote, “is one who is faithful to his objects. In contrast, the ‘good hater’ is promiscuous” – dominated, indeed overwhelmed, by the “free aggression at his disposal, (he) is ready to discharge it on any object.”

That is precisely what we have seen in this country over the last decade: the rise of the politics of hatred. The hatred is constant; what changes is its target. The sequence will be well known to you: the crusade against Cardinal Pell, the excesses of #MeToo, the rise of extreme climate activism, the pathological responses to the COVID pandemic, the vituperative rhetoric during the referendum – and now, the demonisation of Israel

and the escalating attacks on Jews.

To list them in that way is not to suggest that the targets are purely random or opportunistic. There is a deep logic in their selection: they are, albeit in different ways, symbols of everything the far left rejects and detests – in the case of Jews, fidelity to faith and tradition, pride in achievement, commitment to excellence, enormous gratitude to this country and boundless attachment to its values, affection for Israel and admiration for its decades-long struggle for survival. All

that makes us an easy target.

Personally, I do not believe that the politics of hate will disappear, or even abate, any time soon. Nor do I think it will turn its attention elsewhere, leaving the Jews alone. Bringing together a broad base – that stretches from significant parts of the Muslim community to the vast bulk of the “progressive” left – its

impetus is too great not to endure. Its mindset now dominates large swathes of our major institutions, including the public broadcasters, the leading cultural organisations and the most vocal parts of the universities, allowing it to renew and expand.

Moreover, the underlying social forces that shape it, from fragmentation to tribalism, show no signs of weakening, much less going into reverse. The question then is how we deal with the consequences.

There is a great deal that could be said in that respect; but let me close by saying one thing alone. In the end, antisemitism is a moral failing, not an intellectual one – it arises not from ignorance of facts but from the inability to recognise and value a common, shared humanity. However, the flames of hatred, and especially of antisemitism, are invariably fanned by misinformation, bias and outright lies.

That, in my view, is why the work of organisations such as AIJAC, and of so many of my colleagues at the *Australian*, in meticulously rebutting the proliferating falsehoods, is so important. Continuing it is more than an ethical commandment. It is, as we say, a mitzvah, or good deed, which are, in difficult times, society’s shining source of hope.

AIR

*Henry Ergas AO served in a range of leading positions at the OECD and has also held appointments with the National University of Singapore, the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and Monash University. He is a regular columnist for the Australian newspaper. The above is adapted from a talk he gave for AIJAC in Melbourne on March 17.*

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# NOTED AND QUOTED

## THE MONTH IN MEDIA

### FOLLOW THE LEADERS

Discussing the end of the ceasefire on *Sky News* (March 19), Israeli academic and commentator Dr Gerald Steinberg said Hamas had been “over-confident”, banking on Israel being restrained, and believing “negotiations were going to continue according to Hamas’ rules.”

But, he explained, “Israel is very determined, they’ve said it very clearly, to destroy Hamas’ capability to wage war and to execute these types of attacks again in the future.”

In the latest round of fighting, Israel took out “some very specific names of Hamas leaders that escaped for the first, I guess it was 16 months of fighting after October 7th and thought that they were safe and therefore they surfaced,” he said.

Prof. Steinberg argued that at least half of those killed in Gaza since October 7 were Hamas fighters, which is “a very, very low number, relative to many other wars, of civilians that were killed.”

Speaking to *ABC Radio National* “Breakfast” (March 21), former IDF spokesperson Doron Spielman explained, “Our attacks and our strikes are happening simply against the Hamas leadership, many of whom are trying to hide in civilian areas, regrettably... of course, they don’t value the life of their civilian population, which is why they hide there. Israel has probably done more than any army in the history of the world to try to get civilians of its enemy out of the way... but there are limitations, and Hamas is trying to prevent civilians from leaving the area.”

### FERTILE GROUND

*SBS TV* “World News” (March 14) covered a new report by the UN’s Commission of Inquiry on the Oc-

cupied Palestinian Territories, which accused Israel of perpetrating systematic sexual and gender abuse against Palestinians in Gaza since October 7, 2023.

The bulletin focused on an allegation that Israel deliberately targeted Gaza’s main IVF clinic in December 2023, destroying 4,000 frozen embryos, as well as 1,000 unfertilised eggs and sperm samples.

Co-Commissioner Chris Sidoti was quoted calling the destruction “genocidal”.

In December 2023, Islamic Jihad and Hamas used mortars and anti-armour missiles near this clinic, leading to an Israeli strike causing damage to it. Gaza actually has nine IVF clinics, and the UN report only mentions one being affected. If all had been deliberately destroyed, that could indicate genocidal intent, but no such pattern is reported.

Responding to the allegations, former IDF spokesperson Jonathan Conricus told *ABC Radio National* “Breakfast” (March 18), “There hadn’t been any sexual violence, and that allegation is false. It is based on nothing but thin air and hatred of Israel and again we have to keep in mind who is the author of this report. Navi Pillay is a person who supports BDS, Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions on Israel. She is a person that has co-hosted public events with terror sympathisers, and she is a person who has continually advocated for the boycott of what she calls ‘Apartheid Israel’.”

Conricus also explained that images showing Palestinian men and boys dressed only in their underwear were not evidence of sexual abuse. “We need to do [this] in order to minimise the risk for Israeli soldiers that Hamas won’t be carrying bombs underneath their clothes and try to approach Israeli soldiers and then blow

themselves up, which has happened many times in the past. Unfortunately, it’s happened against Australian troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

### ROUGH CUT

In the *Spectator Australia* (March 22), New Zealand Jewish Council spokesperson Juliet Moses exposed the truth behind the documentary film “No Other Land”, which won the Academy Award for best documentary.

The film tells the story of the efforts to prevent the demolition of buildings in the illegally-built Palestinian hamlet of Masafer Yatta in the West Bank, which is in Area C. According to the Oslo Accords, Israel has full legal administrative and security control over Area C.

But what Moses particularly wanted to focus on was the fact that while the West was agog because the film was made by Palestinians and Israelis, Palestinian activists and organisations were livid.

“The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel released a statement declaring the film violates its ‘anti-normalisation guidelines’,” she noted.

Israeli co-director Yuval Abraham was denounced for suggesting October 7 was wrong and for not using the word “genocide” to describe Israel’s actions in Gaza, amongst other transgressions, she explained.

### TERRITORIAL BEHAVIOUR

On *ABC Radio Triple J* “Hack” (March 5), when asked to discuss US President Donald Trump’s plan to turn Gaza into the “Riviera of the Middle East”, UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territo-

ries Francesca Albanese spouted her usual ill-informed and extremist anti-Israel views.

Albanese said, “We cannot continue to discuss the question of Palestine without the Palestinians. The Palestinians have been controlled, dominated since the beginning of colonialism in their land. This plan has led to the creation of the State of Israel... Israel is repressing the right of self-determination of the Palestinians, which is recognised, including as a right to [an] independent state in what remains of Palestine; Gaza, east Jerusalem and the West Bank. So, it’s the Palestinians who need to decide.

This is the starting point. This is self-determination.”

No one has prevented Palestinians from exercising their right to self-determination, other than their own leaders who, since the late 1930s, have rejected numerous offers to establish an independent Palestinian state.

## SOFT SERVE

A human-interest story on *SBS TV* “World News” (March 16) reported on the impact Israel’s renewed blockade of aid and electricity was having on the operation of Gaza’s landmark Kazem ice cream parlour.

Owner Iyad Abu Shaaban said, “From the lack of resources, no place, no generators, no electricity, no water, the most basic and trivial things were not available.”

SBS reporter Hadil al-Swaiedi said that the “return of an ice cream shop offers a taste of one possible future. But Gazans say real recovery can’t begin until a permanent ceasefire is agreed and essential supplies start flowing again.”

The story did not query how an ice cream shop could exist in an area where Israel is accused of perpetuating starvation and a genocide.



## IN PARLIAMENT

The following comments and questions were given during various Senate Estimates hearings.

Senator **Dave Sharma** (Lib., NSW) – Feb. 27 – “At the UN... last year... did you have any meetings with Israel?”

Foreign Minister Senator **Penny Wong** (ALP, SA) responding: “My counterpart didn’t attend.”

Shadow Home Affairs Minister Senator **James Paterson** (Lib., Vic.) – Feb. 27 – “Minister... If Israel had... entered into a ceasefire when you first called on them to do so, Hassan Nasrallah and Yahya Sinwar would be alive today. The deaths of those terrorists is something your government has welcomed.”

Senator **Wong** responding: “Israel has a right to defend itself and it must do so in accordance with international law.”

Senator **Paterson**: “You have said that we should explore unilaterally recognising a Palestinian state prior to the conclusion of a peace negotiation between Israel and Palestine.”

Senator **Wong** responding: “Long-term peace... will require a pathway to Palestinian self-determination and recognition is an integral part... A Palestinian state needs a reformed Palestinian Authority... There is no role for Hamas in the future governance of Gaza... We want to engage in ways to build momentum, including the role of [the] Security Council, in setting a pathway for two states, including with a timeline for the international declaration of Palestinian statehood.”

Greens Deputy Leader Senator **Mehreen Faruqi** (NSW) – Feb. 27 – “Are you at all concerned that, by universities adopting this definition [of antisemitism]... academic freedom, critique of Israel and antiracist research will be stifled?”

Shadow Education Minister Senator **Sarah Henderson** (Lib., Vic.) – Feb. 27 – “For many, many months, particularly Jewish students and staff were cowering in the corners of universities, not even wanting to be there and feeling completely unsafe, and

nothing happened.”

Greens Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Senator **Jordon Steele-John** (WA) – Feb. 27 – “What action is Australia taking to place diplomatic pressure on... Israel to comply with these [ICC] arrest warrants [against Binyamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant]?”

Senator **Lidia Thorpe** (Ind., Vic.) – Feb. 27 – “[By opposing BDS], you’re supporting ... the businesses that are directly linked to the Israeli government, who are killing innocent children and other people, so does that make your department and your minister complicit in genocide?”

Senator **Henderson** – Feb. 25 – “I particularly want to raise concerns about the ABC’s repeated use of the Jewish Council of Australia as a spokesperson representing the broader Jewish community... They... are a fringe group... and they’re... very, very opposed to... Israel...”

Senator **Faruqi** – Feb. 25 – “In my opinion, the ABC’s Israel-Palestine coverage is heavily weighted towards covering up Israel’s culpability in genocide... [Are] ABC journalists... allowed to use [the term] ‘genocide’ in relation to Israel’s massacre of Palestinians in Gaza, or are you still insisting on calling it a conflict?”

Shadow Attorney-General Senator **Michaelia Cash** (Lib., WA) – Feb. 25 – “The coalition has a very clear position... Mr Netanyahu is welcome in Australia, and he would not be arrested. Will [he] be arrested... in Australia under the [current] government, as requested by the International Criminal Court?”

Senator **Paterson** – Feb. 25 – “Operation Ayalite was a very welcome response to the Adass Israel Synagogue bombing, but it should not have required the... firebombing of a synagogue to stand up a special taskforce. It was already clear that antisemitism was out of control.”

Senator **Wong** – Feb. 24 – “The rise of antisemitism in this country – which has been so shocking to those of us who have always argued for respect, inclusion, the observance of the rule of law, for people of all faiths and cultural backgrounds to be respected and for all of us to feel and be safe – has been abhorrent... It is antithetical to who we are as Australians.”

## UNDER PRESSURE

Discussing the resumption of hostilities in Gaza, Tahani Mustafa of the International Crisis Group told *ABC TV* “The World” (March 18) there isn’t much Arab states can do.

Tahani said, “Qatar has been quite a useful mediator, but in terms of being able to exert any substantial financial pressure, military pressure, you know, the Arab states simply don’t have that capacity. They are significantly dependent on US aid, on Western aid, and it’s precisely those states that are offering Israel the diplomatic and financial cover and, obviously, the security logistics to pursue its campaign in both Gaza and the West Bank.”

Tahani also exposed pro-Hamas sympathies, saying, “There are no other alternatives for Gazans to pursue other than resistance. And, unfortunately, Hamas is the last vestige of organised armed resistance that they have. And it’s really the only thing that is giving some level of pushback against Israel’s onslaught in Gaza.” Of course, “resistance” is only “needed” because of the war Hamas started

But, as AIJAC’s Bren Carlill explained in the *Canberra Times* (March 15), “How do we remove Hamas from Gaza? By leaning on Qatar and Egypt.”

He pointed out that “Qatar is Hamas’s primary Arab backer. It hosts most of Hamas’s external leadership and has helped bankroll its operations. It is in the strongest position to facilitate Hamas’s departure.”

The US also “has significant leverage over Qatar and should communicate that its continued support for Hamas comes with serious strategic consequences,” Carlill wrote.

Egypt shares a land border with Gaza, and “holds the keys as to who and what can enter or leave,” he added.

## NO RETURN

Writing on the resumption of hostilities in Gaza, Nine Newspapers

columnist Waleed Aly (March 21) said if Israel and the US “insist that any peace deal ultimately requires Hamas to forfeit control of Gaza,” this “naturally raises the question” of the role of the Palestinian Authority (PA), “which controls much of the West Bank.”

Aly wrote that the PA “says it is prepared to support a two-state solution, and is at this point the only Palestinian alternative... yet, the Netanyahu government outright refuses to countenance that it could replace Hamas in Gaza.”

He said Israeli PM Binyamin Netanyahu “shows no interest in a two-state solution, and regards a Palestinian state simply as a threat to Israel by its existence,” implying this is why he opposes a role for the PA in Gaza.

In March 2024, Netanyahu explained his opposition to the PA running Gaza, saying, it “educates its children in terrorism and finances terrorism... if we allow this to happen, we will return to the October 7 massacre.”

## SLIP UPS

On *ABC TV* “News” (March 19), *Medicins San Frontières*’ Claire Nicolet inadvertently let slip that, contrary to widespread accusations, Israeli strikes in Gaza are not indiscriminate.

Nicolet said, “I think it was a real surprise for all of us when it first started at 2am last night. Very heavy bombing, airstrikes all over the street, which is already quite unusual because even in the past months of war, it was very unusual that the whole street is really attacked fully. And obviously, yes, a lot of casualties.”

Similarly, on *ABC TV* “News” the previous day, Medical Aid for Palestinians’ Liz Allcock, was asked how the current intensity of IDF attacks compared to past operations. She said, “They were extremely intense throughout the conflict. I mean, it varies by geography, but there’s usually sporadic, very intense but sporadic attacks.”

## TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

On *ABC TV* “News” (Feb. 26), ABC US Editor John Lyons waxed lyrical about a full-page ad run in Nine Newspapers containing the names of hundreds of Australian Jews who said they objected to US President Donald Trump’s plan for Gaza if it involved forced transfers.

Lyons said, “It’s very powerful, and they are saying Australia must reject Trump’s call for the removal of Palestinians from Gaza. Jewish Australians Say No to Ethnic Cleansing. Now, clearly within the Jewish community, there’s now more and more discussion... they are taking quite a different attitude to some of the more traditional Jewish groups.”

In fact, they are not. All the mainstream Australian Jewish communal organisations have publicly opposed the forcible transfer of Palestinians out of Gaza. As this column noted in last month’s edition, on Feb. 6, AIJAC’s Colin Rubenstein said in the *Australian*, “The prospect of forcibly transferring them should be both legally and morally unthinkable.” On the same day, Nine Newspapers quoted Executive Council of Australian Jewry president Daniel Aghion, cautioning that “the question of [relocating] Gazans is ultimately a decision for those affected, most of all, Gaza’s civilian population.”

## CONSENSUS NONSENSUS

On *ABC TV* “News” (Feb. 19), former negotiator Oliver McTernan said his contacts in Israel had told him that Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu restarted hostilities because it’s in his “own interests to continue this war, at least until the end of March, because he has to get through the budget if his Government is going to survive.”

McTernan is ignoring the fact that Netanyahu did not make the decision by himself. All of Israel’s top mili-



tary and intelligence leaders recommended restarting the war in Gaza, particularly because Hamas proposed a laughable ceasefire-for-hostages deal that would have released only one living hostage, and then appeared to be stalling.

Moreover, as AIJAC's Justin Amler explained on the *Sky News* website (March 22), "Rather than using the ceasefire of the last few weeks to start rebuilding Gaza's infrastructure and services, Hamas had spent that time making preparations for further invasions into Israel. This includes the training of new recruits for combat against the IDF, boosting its ranks to a reported 25,000. Plus, there are also an estimated further 5,000 Islamic Jihad terrorists. The ceasefire the world naively clamoured for has predictably been exploited by Hamas to fortify its positions across Gaza, including rigging roads, tunnels and buildings with explosives."

## ACADEMIC OVERLOADING

On March 20, Nine Newspapers ran a disingenuous op-ed by A. Dirk Moses, Lana Tatour and Geoffrey Braham Levey attacking the adoption of a new definition of antisemitism by all of Australia's 39 universities.

The trio suggested that the definition was being pushed by supporters of Israel who wanted to stop students on campus protesting "the mass slaughter of civilians and utter destruction of Gaza by the Israeli military."

They also claimed that "Zionism is not elemental to Jewish identity" and opposing it is not antisemitic.

Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people, like all others, have the right to self-determination in their ancestral homeland where they have lived for thousands of years.

In fact, over 95% of Australian Jews identify as Zionists, with more than 90% considering Zionism an integral part of their Jewish identity,

according to a recent poll.

The adopted definition does not prevent criticism of Israel's policies or actions similar to that levelled at any other nation. But how can it not be considered antisemitic to affirm the right of self-determination for other groups but reject it for Jews?

## UNDERGRADUATE THINKING

In the *Weekend Australian* (Feb. 22), US Middle East expert Prof. Daniel Pipes accused pro-Hamas supporters of "engag[ing] in puzzling acts of aggression" in the West that seem to copy Hamas' tactics of "winning sympathy... through losing."

Hamas, Pipes wrote, knows that Israel's military will hit back hard and "Gazan misery translates into fervent support from anti-Semites of all persuasions – Islamists, Arab nationalists, Palestinian nationalists, far-leftists, and far-rightists."

But he pointed out that surveys show that the agitators' disruptive behaviour fails to win sympathy from the mainstream.

## UNFATHOMABLE LOSS

In the *Sunday Telegraph* (Feb. 23), National Council of Jewish Women Australia President Lynda Ben-Moshe wrote movingly of Shiri Bibas, 32, and her two young sons Ariel, 4, and Kfir, nine months, who returned in coffins after 16 months of captivity in Gaza.

"It's hard to describe the[ir] iconic status... in Israel and the Jewish world," Ben-Moshe wrote of the trio – their red hair making them instantly recognisable. The family had "symbolised to us every Jewish family through history torn apart by the forces of barbarism and hatred of our people."

In the *Weekend Australian* the previous day, commentator Gemma Tognini wrote, "They were [kidnapped] because they were Jewish. Stolen from their home and murdered for no other reason than they were

Jewish children." Tognini said Hamas killed them, but the West "loaded the gun", providing "the cover needed for the crime" by "spending more time cheering Palestinian statehood than it did demanding the freedom of a young mother and her babies."

## PUBLISH AND BE DAMNED

In Nine Newspapers (March 8), anti-Zionist writer Antony Loewenstein's review of the book "One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This" by Omar El Akkad regarding the Gaza war was an unhinged rant.

With no evidence, he claimed that "Palestinians have been so demonised that killing them is viewed as a necessary, even noble, act."

Continuing, he wrote, "I've lost count with the number of articles and opinion pieces in the mainstream Israeli and Western press that have claimed since October 7, 2023, that Palestinians are all guilty just by being born and living in Gaza. This genocidal thinking is often perpetrated by Jewish writers, yet another stain on our beleaguered religion and morality."

We're not aware of any mainstream articles that say anything like this. And if it were true, Israel would not have provided countless warnings to Palestinians ahead of military operations to vacate to safer areas nor would it have facilitated millions of tonnes of aid into Gaza since October 7.

Two weeks later in Nine Newspapers, high profile anti-Zionist publisher Louise Adler reviewed a book by Palestinian activist Mohammed El-Kurd – whom she controversially invited to attend the Adelaide Writers Festival in 2023 – portraying him as a bold truth teller. In fact, El-Kurd is a hateful extremist who has accused Zionists of eating the organs of Palestinians and of "lusting for Palestinian blood."

Allon Lee

## EXPLOSIVE REVELATIONS

On March 10, the Australian Federal Police and NSW Police made a joint announcement that a string of attacks aimed at Jewish targets across Sydney in December/January – including the discovery of a caravan packed with explosives – were not motivated by antisemitism and were in reality part of an elaborate ploy by an overseas-based criminal mastermind seeking to trade information for reduced jail terms, and divert police resources. This set off a firestorm.

The Adelaide *Advertiser* (March 11) said, “These disgraceful incidents struck enormous fear into Jewish communities around the nation and stoked fears of division. We

can only hope those responsible are brought to justice... It may not have been terrorism, but it was a crime of terror.”

The *Daily Telegraph* (March 11) said, “Any thought that this puts to rest the scourge of anti-Semitism is misguided. In fact, the case proves the opposite point, namely the Jewish community is indeed vulnerable. Because of this vulnerability, criminals have allegedly been able to parlay this fact into a business model. It suggests there are still segments of society that view Jews as perpetual targets, and hate as acceptable. It isn’t.”

The next day, the *Daily Telegraph* criticised federal Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke for accusing Opposition Leader Peter Dutton of politicising the incident: “If Peter Dutton is guilty of politicising the story, then what does that say about NSW Premier Chris Minns who described the plot as ‘terrorism’, or Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who agreed with that designation and said it was ‘designed to create fear in the community?’”

Writing in the *Australian* (March 15), Strategic Analysis Australia director Peter Jennings went further, noting that Prime Minister Anthony Albanese knew early in February that “the police viewed the caravan as a con job – not a genuine bomb threat. A political decision was taken not to put that information to the opposition... I have never seen a government deliberately withhold such a salient fact from an opposition on a domestic security issue.”

*Sydney Morning Herald* State Political Editor Alexandra Smith’s analysis (March 13) included NSW Jewish Board of Deputies president David Ossip’s observation that “this plot could only succeed by exploiting already-strained social cohesion and unprecedented levels of antisemitism in Sydney.”

A report by the *Australian Financial Review*’s Paul Karp (March 12), quoted Dr George Foster, President of Southern Sydney Synagogue, which was graffitied in January, saying, “I can’t see it in any other way than it was antisemitic... It seems rather bizarre that they’ve only targeted Jewish buildings.”

The *Australian* (March 14) called the Police “Keystone cops”, noted that the alleged mastermind came from a Middle Eastern country engaged in active hostilities with Israel, and said the attacks looked possibly like a “double-header of anti-Semitic revenge and criminal opportunity.” The editorial added, “Rejecting anti-Semitism as a possible motivation ... repeats

a big mistake that sends the wrong message that already is being eagerly exploited by bad actors, including some Greens politicians.”

The paper’s NSW editor Stephen Price (March 13) accused NSW Greens’ Sue Higginson of taking advantage of the “fake terror” label to attack the NSW Government. Price’s report included NSW Deputy Police Commissioner David Hudson’s admission that “the actual ideology behind the person that tasked [those who were hired to carry out the 15 attacks] is still under investigation.”

On March 17, AIJAC’s Joel Burnie, writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, expressed scorn for the flawed assertions by some that antisemitism has been “exaggerated” and the attacks on the Jewish community over the last year-and-a-half were “not motivated by anti-Semitism.”

“Some... pretend that organised crime’s involvement... somehow makes antisemitism less of a problem. The fact that a crime syndicate jumped on the bandwagon doesn’t change the reality – it only reinforces it,” he said.

The next day, AIJAC’s Colin Rubenstein warned in the *Australian* that Australia’s political leaders from both sides of politics must do more in the next Federal Parliament to counter the antisemitism crisis that has afflicted this country since the October 7 attacks.

Australia’s multicultural success story, he said, has never been under greater threat and both major parties need to explain how they will prioritise restoring it – especially by re-emphasising multicultural policy frameworks which highlight the over-riding responsibility “to respect and maintain core Australian values” and to exercise rights only within that context.



# THE LAST WORD

Rabbi Ralph Genende

## ONE STORY

The English writer Robert Graves put it best in one of his poems:

*There is one story and one story only  
That will prove worth your telling,  
Whether as learned bard or gifted child.*

Graves wasn't speaking about Pesach/Passover, but for the Jewish people, the Passover saga remains the oldest and most compelling story of who we are. The Passover seder night is not only the most celebrated Jewish festival - it is also the most profound distillation of Jewish dreams, aspirations and lived reality.

This tale of a slave people challenging the most powerful and enduring empire the world has ever known – already some 18 centuries old at the time of the Exodus – is startlingly relevant for our own times. It marks the formation of the Jewish nation, but is also perhaps the world's oldest known meditation on the politics of power, the scourge of slavery, the gift of freedom, the rigours of responsibility and the nature of identity.

It begins with the birth of Moses, his outrage at the abuse of his people on the construction sites of the great Egyptian empire, his epiphany at the burning bush and his chutzpah in challenging the greatest monarch in the world, Pharaoh.

Moses remains the model of a liberator, law giver and champion of social justice – the man “whose heart does not stop burning” with a fire ignited by God. In a world once again confronted with the might of determined autocracies, we should draw comfort and strength from the alternative vision offered by Moses – champion of a society built on defence of the powerless, respect for all human beings regardless of their wealth or social status and a conviction that freedom is necessary to feed the human spirit.

Moses is a giant of a man, but he is also the humblest of people – a telling rebuke in our age where hubris has replaced humility, and

leaders often exhibit the worst excesses.

In the telling of the story from the Haggadah on Passover evening, the name of Moses is strangely absent, perhaps emphasising not only the modesty of the man, but the responsibility of every one of us to advance the ideals of the Exodus story.

Whenever the Torah wants to convey the importance of compassion and ethical behaviour, it invokes the experience of the Egyptian exile:

*Remember you were a slave in Egypt, so do not pervert the justice due to a stranger, the orphan, the vulnerable.*

The rabbis also insist one must not rejoice even when

you have to retaliate against a deadly enemy (hence the custom on Seder evening of spilling drops of wine when we recount the plagues that befell the Egyptians).

The Exodus account continues to shape Jewish identity today. We not only read history, but we re-live it in the actions and rituals of the evening, imagining ourselves back on the banks of the Nile as we dip our food in saltwater tears and eat our bitter herbs.

Rabbi Soloveitchik says: “The battle to affirm the right of the State of Israel to live securely is a contemporary version of the Egyptian experience.”

The story of the liberation from tyranny and the fight for freedom is the story of Jewish history – and thus one key challenge for the State of Israel is to preserve and expand its democracy and strengthen the freedom of its institutions and citizens.

The Pesach saga is ultimately a story of human courage and hope – but also the story of the resilience and enduring optimism of the Jewish people.

Judaism has always taught that disasters and obstacles are temporary and that we have the power to overcome them. Echoing Martin Luther King's famous words that hatred is not beaten by hatred but by love, the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said we don't vanquish evil with hate, we vanquish it with faith in life. And that is why the story of Passover is one always worth both the telling and the retelling.



A statue of Moses holding the Ten Commandments  
(Image: Shutterstock)



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