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# Here's to a Year of American and Global Comeback

“**I**n the midst of death, we are in life.” With stoic resolve, the words of that medieval prayer point toward a path of hope in times of trial; they provide an example we may still benefit from, no less today than when they were first written seven centuries ago. Though we are now enduring the third winter of COVID-19—accentuated by a new variant bringing with it the specter of renewed lockdowns—I believe future historians will mark 2021 as the year we turned the tide against the pandemic. Fortified by new vaccines, new treatments, and a restored confidence in our purpose and ability to overcome, 2022 will be the year when we turn to new realities.

As we emerge onto the post-Covid landscape in 2022, the virus will still be with us. But it will have yielded center stage—both to pre-existing trends it accelerated, and to new realities it created.

Dominating the former camp is the intensifying wariness of China and its

unmanaged rise, now spreading across the Western world. Though storm clouds have been gathering for years, even the deepest China skeptics would not have predicted that it would give rise to a disease which has since killed over five million and infected nearly 300 million more. And while that might be dismissed as an accident of fate, the opacity with which Chinese authorities have responded to the outbreak, muzzling all attempts to unearth with certainty the truth of its origins, speaks to a sickness of a fundamentally different kind.

As 2022 dawns, it seems all but certain that China will lead the roster of the three major challenges likely to dominate the geopolitical map. Ever since President Xi Jinping's rise to power, his government has grown increasingly centralized, authoritarian, and brittle. From the repression of the Uyghurs and the social credit system, to the turn toward jingoistic expansionism in the South China Sea and across the Straits of Taiwan, China's borders are accumulating a growing list of hot spots. Managing these hot spots and preventing them from erupting into full-blown crises between

great powers is a task of the highest order.

Not far behind Beijing is Moscow. Ever mercurial, President Putin has recently turned Russian policy in a sharply revanchist direction. According to Ukraine, Russia has amassed roughly 90,000 troops at the border; according to US intelligence reports, a Russian invasion of Ukraine is possible. Putin has proved his willingness to test Western resolve and international norms on the Ukrainian front twice before, and with reason. As the old adage goes, “with Ukraine, Russia is an empire. Without it, it is just another country.”

Lastly and—from a Middle Eastern perspective—most menacingly, Tehran’s regional ambitions have not dimmed in the slightest, nor have its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Despite nearly a year of renewed negotiations with the P5+1 in Vienna, no discernible progress has been made, and even the European negotiators appear to have reached the limits of what good faith will bear. As a joint Anglo–French–German statement put it, “We are rapidly reaching the end of the road for this negotiation.”

Between them, these challenges constitute a test not only to the security of Europe and Asia, but to the resilience of democratic governance, the sanctity of individual rights, and the liberal faith that the arc of history bends toward progress. In a real sense, all these hang in the balance.

Yet, despite the challenges from without, the liberal order can only truly fall if it loses faith in itself. Its economic, technological, and cultural dynamism are all unprecedented in human history, unrivalled by any of their would-be challengers. Its might, when properly wielded, is still awe-inspiring. In some ways, this may be easier for an outsider to see from afar, unburdened as we are by partisan affiliations, than it is for many Americans and Europeans, focused as they are on the political contests of the hour.

President Biden, who began this year to such fanfare, has ended it a wounded figure. Yet, to this outsider’s eye, one fact of this year stands out, impossible to avoid. The turn in President Biden’s fortunes began after the withdrawal from Afghanistan. While no one would say that Americans have not sunk more than their fair share of blood and treasure into that troubled land, it is also true that the withdrawal’s execution was marked by a certain cavalier attitude toward

America’s global standing, and to the signal it would send to those who mean her ill.

The lesson for those who wish America and her allies well points to itself. The enemies of the liberal order can make headway only when the firmest defenders of that order lose their faith. Where the West stands firm, it cannot be moved. The challengers noted above are all beset by problems of their own far more severe than anything afflicting Washington or Brussels.

For all its aggressiveness, Russian power is sunsetting, weighed down by demographic erosion and an economy smaller than South Korea’s. For all its menace, the Chinese political system remains inherently brittle and weaker than it appears. In its drive to strengthen the Communist Party’s control over the country’s most successful technology firms, it evinces little understanding of the forces that have driven China’s economic miracle and risks all. And for all its ancient glory and modern ambition, Iran is a nation whose inherent greatness is sapped by crippling, endemic corruption and foreign adventurism seemingly without end.

And so, in the midst of despair, we are in hope. While some in America may adopt a dark view of their reality, I see an amazing and resilient country that remains the fulcrum of the world. Let the challenges of 2022 come; they will find their match in you, America.

Warm regards, Ahmed Charai

## — AHMED CHARAI

— Publisher

Ahmed Charai is the chairman and CEO of a media conglomerate and a Middle East adviser in the US and abroad. He is on the board of numerous think tanks and NGOs, including the Atlantic Council, the International Center for Journalists, International Crisis Group, and the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security. His articles have appeared in leading American and Israeli publications.



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#### Publisher

Ahmed Charai,  
Chairman & CEO  
World Herald Tribune, Inc.

#### Editor-in-chief

Dr. Eran Lerman

#### Managing editor

Robert Silverman

#### Deputy editor

Dr. Pnina Shuker

#### Copy editor

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USA: 2700 Woodley Road NW  
Washington DC 20008

ISRAEL: 9 Bar Kochva St. #4  
Jerusalem 978509

editor@jstribune.com

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# HOPEFUL PERSPECTIVES ON POWER, DIPLOMACY, AND PARTNERSHIP

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—and on the Cares of Diaspora Kith and Kin

*by Eran Lerman*

It is not easy to find a common thread running through the variety of essays, columns, facts, and opinions offered in the third issue of the *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*. But perhaps what marks many (albeit not all) of these contributions is a touch of hope, a reasoned argument in favor of the proposition that things may yet get better, even in the conflicted and troubled world we inhabit in 2022.

Our publisher, Ahmed Charai, looks upon the year that just ended as—perhaps—the turning point in the bitter battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, and an opportunity to build a better world. Two prominent Israeli public figures—former Minister of Justice Yossi Beilin, one of the architects of the Oslo process, and former Chairperson of the Foreign Affairs and Security Committee in the Knesset, Ofer Shelah, a leading defense intellectual, both suggest that Israel can, and should, endorse new strategies: seeking an alternative solution (a confederation?) with the Palestinians, and acting as a responsible regional power.

Moreover, amidst the turmoil and the very real dangers of our time, do we fail to detect a declining proclivity to go to war? For the third

issue in a row, the JST is proud to present a significant contribution to the general debate on where the world may be headed. In our first issue, the late Aharon Klieman left us a call for a return to strategic realism. In the second issue, alongside and in association with the detailed discussions of the challenge posed by Iran's ambitions, Efraim Inbar reminded us that war is still with us as a tool of policy. It will remain a basic aspect of human affairs, even after the US ended its "Forever War" in Afghanistan.

This time, it is another distinguished Israeli scholar—Azar Gat, a historian of military thought—who offers a long-term perspective on war as a political phenomenon. He argues that despite the horrifying slaughter in the wars of the previous century, the overall motivation to go to war is in distinct decline. The "long peace," in which the great powers have been able to avoid fighting each other directly, may prove to be the rule, not the exception.

Not all pieces here, however, point to the same hopeful conclusion. Steve Simon's sad dirge over the ruin of Syria (and over the failure of the US government to do much about it) offers little room for optimism. Much the same is true of Ksenia Svetlova's profile column, depicting the cost that Lebanon—teetering at the edge of becoming a failed state—is paying for Hassan Nasrallah's grip on

## The JST is proud to present in its third issue a significant contribution to the general debate on where the world may be headed.

the levers of power. Venturing far away from Middle Eastern concerns, we learn the fears of another nature (and magnitude) led Australia to opt for US-made nuclear submarines: The circumstances of this decision are related by a veteran Australian analyst, Paul Monk. And back in Washington, as Dov Zakheim explains, American politics have become deeply polarized and occasionally chaotic.

Nevertheless, military energies can and perhaps should be directed not only at preparing for the previous variation of a shooting war. As Reuven Ben-Shalom suggests, “military diplomacy” can also be a tool of establishing cooperation and understanding between nations. In her column, Pnina Shuker tells the story of the post-modern warfare role of the Israeli Defense Forces in assisting in the fight against COVID-19; Yaakov Falkov warns against western complacency in the ongoing battle of psychological operations; and Lev Topor cautions against Israeli complacency in the face of weaknesses in the country’s cyber defenses.

Joining the ongoing debate about Iran, veteran analyst and observer Edward Luttwak suggests that Tehran’s “performative” bark is probably worse than its bite. His discussion, in this context, of the challenges facing the Jewish community there is a useful segway to the views in this issue of the role of diasporic communities—one country’s kith and kin abroad—in shaping national policy and affecting the conduct of international relations.

Here, once again, a touch of optimism can be discerned. One of Israel’s more systematic researchers on American Jewry, Uzi Rebhun, finds the trans-Atlantic kinship still largely in place and hopes that the new Israeli government (open to the concerns of the non-Orthodox denominations) can undo some of the damage of recent years. Nadav Tamir offers a personal

note on this subject, while Dan Feferman argues that exposure to the Abraham Accords can renew the faith of the young in Israel’s role. As for my own Grand Strategy column, I suggest that Ben-Gurion’s realization that the US would lead the world after Pearl Harbor was colored also by the availability of US Jewry as a strategic ally.

Oshrit Birvadker and Shira Loewenberg offer parallel stories of the Jews, on one hand, who came to Israel (made aliyah) from India and struggled to find their place – and of America’s immigrants of Indian origins, on the other hand, who now meet with a troubling incidence of hate crimes and appreciate the solidarity of Jewish organizations. On a non-Jewish angle, Veysi Dag—a Kurdish scholar based in Germany—surveys the struggle in Europe to make the Kurds’ voice heard.

Finally, on another note, two of our regular columnists raise—from very different angles—the question of professionalism in intelligence work, military affairs, and diplomacy. Amir Oren takes note of the growing role of artificial intelligence in analyzing reams of data in the battlefield and in the face of dynamic challenges; yet he concludes that there is no substitute for the human mind when the most dramatic questions of war and peace are being asked. Meanwhile, Bob Silverman makes the case that diplomacy is a profession, and the common practice of appointing political favorites to key ambassadorial positions comes with a cost: This is not a field for would-be George Plimptons. We at JST plan to apply the same standard of professionalism as we begin to prepare for our next issues and their own takes on global, American, regional, and Israeli affairs. \*

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### ERAN LERMAN

Editor-in-chief

Col. (ret.) Dr. Eran Lerman is a former senior intelligence officer. He served as Israel’s deputy national security adviser (2009–2015), and prior to that as director, AJC Israel and ME office (2001–2009). He is currently the vice president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and a lecturer at Shalem College.



# IS WAR

A military helicopter takes off during the regional anti-insurgent Operation Barkhane in Mali, 2017.  
Photo credit: REUTERS/Benoit Tessier





# DECLINING?



*by Azar Gat*

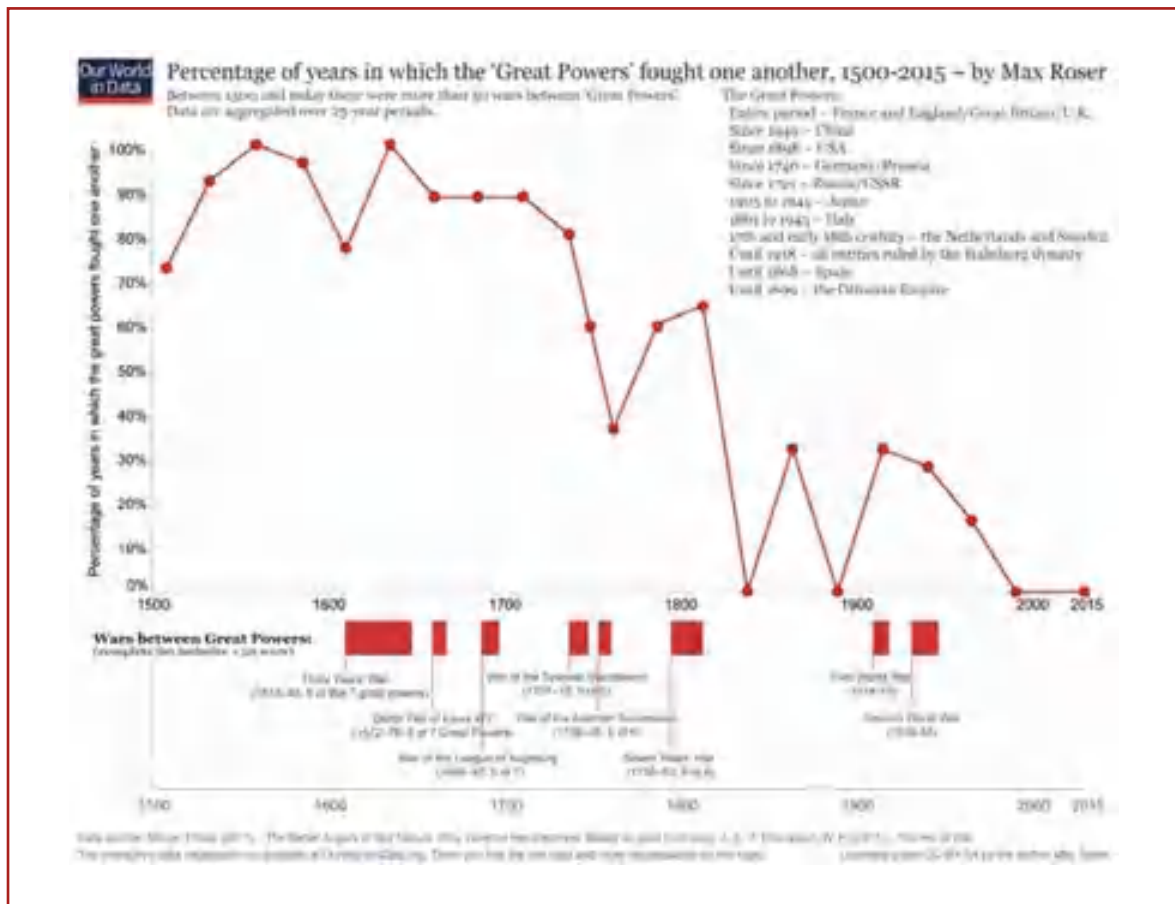
**I**s the world actually becoming more peaceful? This proposition encounters widespread disbelief. After all, the United States and its allies have been repeatedly involved in messy local wars over the last decades. Alternatively, the relative peacefulness of today's world may be attributable to a transient American hegemony, which has been manifest since the collapse of the Soviet Union but may not be there for long. Are we not tempted by a resurfacing of old illusions that will again be dispelled by the rise of China to a superpower status, by a resurgent Russia, or by vicious wars in South or Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa?

Thus, has war really been declining, and if so, why? Which of the various theories that have been aired explains the decline: a nuclear peace; the notion that war has become far too lethal, ruinous, and expensive to indulge in, or that it no longer promises rewards; a democratic peace; a capitalist peace, relying upon economic interdependence; or peace through international institutions? How valid is each of these explanations and how do they relate to, supplant, or complement one another?

Most people are surprised by the claim that we live in the most peaceful period in history. We are flooded, after all, with media reports and images of bloody conflicts around the world today. Furthermore, if there has been a decline in belligerency, when did it begin? With the end of the Cold War, or with the end of World War II, or perhaps earlier? And what caused it?

The so-called long peace among the great powers—no war since 1945—is widely recognized and is commonly attributed to the nuclear balance, a decisive factor to be sure, which concentrated the minds of all the protagonists. The absence of war between democracies has been equally recognized. The decrease in war, however, had been well marked even before the nuclear era and encompassed both democracies and nondemocracies. The occurrence of war and overall mortality rate in war has sharply decreased from 1815 onward, especially in the developed world. Between 1815 and 1914, wars among industrializing countries declined in frequency to about a third of what they had been in the previous centuries—an unprecedented change. For example, Austria and Prussia—neither of them a democracy—fought about a third to a quarter as many wars after 1815 as they did in the preceding century.

Indeed, the long peace since 1945—76 years to date and counting—was preceded by the second longest peace ever, without any wars occurring among the great powers between 1871 and 1914, or 43 years in all; and by the third longest peace, between 1815 and 1854, totaling 39 years. Thus, the three longest periods of peace by far in the modern great powers system all have occurred since 1815, with the first two taking place before the nuclear age. No similar long periods of peace occurred in the modern great power system before 1815. While the horrors of 1914–1945 tend to obscure it from sight, this striking phenomenon cannot be accidental. A decline in belligerency indeed began from 1815, and not from 1945 or 1989. Clearly, one needs to address the entire period of reduced belligerency since 1815, while accounting for the glaring Himalaya-size



exception to the trend: the two world wars.

It is tempting to assume that wars have declined in frequency during the past two centuries because they have become too lethal, too destructive, and too expensive, meaning fewer but more ruinous wars. This hypothesis barely holds, however, because relative to population and wealth, wars have not become more lethal and more costly than they were in earlier times. The wars from 1815 to 1914—the most peaceful 100 years in European history—were, in fact, particularly light in comparison. Prussia won the wars of German unification in short and decisive campaigns and at a remarkably low price, and yet Germany did not fight again for 43 years. True, the world wars, especially World War II, were certainly on the upper scale of the range in terms of casualties;

yet, contrary to widespread assumptions, they were far from being exceptional in history. We need to look at relative casualties, the percentage of those dying in wars in each society, rather than at the aggregate created by the fact that many states participated in the world wars.

For example, in the Peloponnesian War (431–403 BCE), it is estimated that Athens lost between a quarter and a third of its population, more than Germany in the two world wars combined. In the first three years of the Second Punic War (218–216 BCE), Rome lost some 50,000 male citizens between the ages of 17–46, out of about 200,000 total in these ages, or roughly 25% of the military age cohorts in only three years, the same range as the Russian military casualties and higher than the German rates in World War II. Similarly, in the 13th



**The simplest of technologies.** A genocide memorial inside the church at Ntarama, Rwanda, where some 5,000 people sought refuge in April 1994, but were massacred using grenades, clubs, and machetes. Photo credit: REUTERS/Finbarr O'Reilly

century, the Mongol conquests of China and Russia inflicted casualties and destruction that were among the highest ever suffered during historical times. Even by the lowest estimates, casualties were at least as high as—and in China almost definitely far higher—than the Soviet Union's horrific loss of about 15% of its population in World War II. And lastly, during the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), population loss in Germany was estimated at between a fifth and a third—again higher than the German casualties in the two world wars combined.

People often assume that more developed military technology must mean greater lethality and destructiveness, but, in fact, it also means greater protective power, as with mechanized armor, mechanized speed and agility, and defensive electronic measures. Offensive and

defensive advances generally rise in tandem and tend to offset each other. In addition, the vast majority of the many millions of noncombatants killed by Germany during World War II—Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, Soviet civilians—fell victim to intentional starvation, exposure to the elements, and mass executions rather than to any sophisticated military technology. Instances of genocide in general during the 20th century, as earlier, were carried out with the simplest of technologies, as the Rwanda genocide horrifically reminded us.

Nor is it true that wars during the past two centuries have become economically more costly than they were previously, again relative to overall wealth. War always involved massive economic exertion and was the single most expensive item of state spending. Both 16th

and 17th centuries Spain and 18th century France, for example, were economically ruined by war and staggering war debts, which in the French case brought about the Revolution. Furthermore, death by starvation in premodern wars was widespread.

The view that war is senseless, if not crazy and devoid of any rationale, is widespread in today's modern and affluent world. But this would have been a strange idea for ancient Romans, the Aztecs or Inca, the Ottomans, the Mughals, the Tokugawa shoguns, 18th century Britain, or for Genghis Khan, whose descendants, according to genetic studies, constitute 8% of all people in Eastern and Central Asia, evidence of staggering sexual opportunities enjoyed by his sons and grandsons whose houses ruled over that part of the world for centuries.

What then is the cause of the decline in belligerency? Even before the middle of the 19th century, during the first long peace, thinkers such as Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, and John Stuart Mill realized that it was caused by the advent of the industrial-commercial revolution, the most profound transformation of human society since the neolithic adoption of agriculture some 10,000 years ago. The industrial revolution led to explosive growth in per capita wealth, about 30 to 50-fold from the onset of the revolution to the present. Thus, the trap that had plagued premodern societies, famously described by the demographer and economist Thomas Malthus in 1799, whereby slow growth in wealth was absorbed by more children and more mouths to feed, had been broken. Wealth no longer constitutes a fundamentally finite quantity and a zero-sum game, when the only question is how it is divided, and with force functioning as a major means of attaining a larger share of the pie. The pie has been continuously growing, with wealth now derived predominantly from economic growth and investment at home, from which war tends to be a wasteful distraction.

Furthermore, the significance of economic trade has ballooned to entirely new dimensions precisely because of the new process of industrial growth. Greater freedom of trade has become more attractive in the industrial

age simply because the overwhelming share of fast-growing and diversifying production is now intended for sale in the marketplace rather than for direct consumption by the peasant producers themselves. Consequently, economies are no longer overwhelmingly autarkic, having become increasingly interconnected by specialization, scale, and exchange. Foreign devastation potentially depresses the entire system and is detrimental to a state's own wellbeing. What John Stewart Mill discerned in the abstract in the 1840s was repeated by Norman Angell during the first global age before World War I, and formed the cornerstone of economist John Maynard Keynes' criticism of the harsh reparations imposed on Germany after World War I. If the German economy was not allowed to revive, the global economy could not revive either. This was a matter of self-interest for the victors.

Greater economic openness has decreased the likelihood of war also by disassociating economic access from the confines of political borders and sovereignty. It is no longer necessary to politically possess a territory in order to benefit from it. Of all these factors, the scholarship has focused mostly on the commercial interdependence; but both the escape from Malthus with rapid industrial growth and open access are no less significant than what I call the "modernization peace." Thus, the greater the yield of competitive economic cooperation, the more counterproductive and less attractive conflict becomes. Rather than war becoming more costly, as is widely believed, it is, in fact, peace that has been growing more profitable.

If so, why have wars continued to occur during the past two centuries, albeit at a much lower frequency? In the first place, ethnic and nationalist tensions often overrode the logic of the new economic realities, accounting for most wars in Europe between 1815 and 1945. They continue to do so today, especially in the less developed parts of the globe. Moreover, the logic of the new economic realities receded during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the great powers resumed protectionist policies and expanded them to the undeveloped parts of the world with the age of New Imperialism. This



development signaled that the emergent global economy might become partitioned rather than open, with each imperial domain becoming closed to everybody else.

The size of a nation makes little difference in an open international economy. The citizens of little Luxembourg are as rich as, or rather richer than, the citizens of the US. By contrast, size becomes the key to economic success in a closed, neo-mercantilist international economy, because small countries cannot possibly produce everything by themselves. Moreover, in a partitioned global economy, economic power increases national strength, which in turn defends and increases economic power. It again becomes necessary to politically own a territory in order to profit from it.

Hence the heightened tensions between the great powers associated with the imperialist race before World War I. The change was completed in the 1930s, with the Great Depression, as the US, Britain, and France practically closed their territories and empires to imports by high tariffs. Britain, the former champion of free trade and the largest imperial power, reversed course and closed its borders to imports with the policy of “Imperial Preference.” For the territorially confined Germany and Japan, the need to break away into imperial lebensraum or “East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” seemed particularly pressing. Here lay the seeds of the two world wars. Furthermore, the retreat from economic liberalism in the first decades of the 20th century spurred, and was spurred by, the rise to power of anti-liberal and anti-democratic political ideologies and regimes, incorporating a creed of violence: communism and fascism.

Since 1945 the decline of major war has deepened further. Nuclear weapons have been a crucial factor in this process while the institutionalization of free trade and the closely related process of rapid and sustained economic growth have been equally significant. The spread of liberal democracy is often cited as another factor, although non-liberal and non-democratic states also became much less belligerent during the industrial age.

Relying on arbitrary coercive force at home, non-democratic countries have found it more natural to use force abroad. By contrast,

liberal democratic societies are socialized to peaceful, law-mediated relations at home, and their citizens have grown to expect that the same norms be applied internationally. Living in increasingly tolerant societies, they have grown more receptive to the other’s point of view. Domestically promoting freedom, legal equality, and political participation, liberal democratic powers—although once possessing vast empires—have found it increasingly difficult to justify ruling over foreign peoples without their consent, and by sanctifying life, liberty, and human rights, they have proven to be failures in forceful repression. Furthermore, with the elevation of the individual’s life and pursuit of happiness above group values, sacrificing life for war has increasingly lost legitimacy in liberal democratic societies. War retains legitimacy only under steadily narrowing conditions and is generally viewed as extremely abhorrent and undesirable.

Thus, modernization, most notably its liberal path, has sharply reduced the prevalence of war, as the violent option for fulfilling human desires has become much less rewarding than the peaceful option of competitive cooperation. Furthermore, people become risk-averse in societies of plenty. In liberal democratic societies, where sexuality is more open, young men now may well be more reluctant to leave behind the pleasures of life for the rigors and chastity of the battlefield. Notably, “make love, not war” was the slogan of the powerful anti-war youth campaign of the 1960s, which coincided with a far-reaching liberalization of sexual norms.

The fruits of these deepening trends and sensibilities have been miraculous. The probability of war between affluent democracies has practically vanished, where they no longer even see the need to prepare for the possibility of a militarized dispute with one another. The “security dilemma” between neighbors no longer exists most conspicuously in North America and Western Europe, the world’s most modernized and liberal democratic regions.

Thus, Holland and Belgium no longer fear—in the slightest—a German (or French) invasion; it would be an historically unprecedented situation. Similarly, Canada is not concerned



**War retains legitimacy only under steadily narrowing conditions.** Anti-war protesters in London, 2003.

Photo credit: REUTERS/Peter Macdiarmid

about the prospect of conquest by the US, although people find it difficult to explain why exactly this is so. In East Asia, the most developed countries, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—even though, for historical reasons, there is no love lost between them—do not fear war among themselves or with any of the other developed countries; however, they are deeply apprehensive of being attacked by less developed neighbors, such as China or North Korea.

War's geopolitical center of gravity has shifted radically. The modernized, economically developed parts of the world have become a "zone of peace." War now appears to be confined to the less developed parts of the globe, the "zone of war," where countries that have lagged behind in modernization and its pacifying spin-off effects occasionally still fight among

themselves, as well as with developed countries.

Much the same applies to civil wars. Modernized, economically developed, and liberal democratic countries have become practically free of civil wars on account of their stronger consensual nature, plurality, tolerance, and, indeed, a greater legitimacy for peaceful secession. By contrast, undeveloped and developing countries remain very susceptible to civil wars, and all the more so, as many of them are ethnically fragmented and possessing a weak central government.

The dramatic spread of peace, however, is far from being full-proof and free from shadows and challenges. Perhaps the most significant challenge is the return of capitalist non-democratic great powers, a regime type that has been absent from the international system since the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945. The

massive growth of formerly communist and fast industrializing authoritarian-capitalist China represents the greatest change in the global balance of power.

Russia, too, has retreated from its postcommunist liberalism and has assumed an increasingly authoritarian and nationalist character, coupled with a more aggressive stance, as in Crimea, Ukraine, and Syria. China's per capita production of around \$10,000 is still only one-fourth to one-sixth that of the developed world. Will China become more assertive and aggressive as its wealth and power increase during the coming decades, or will growing wealth and affluence make its people and government increasingly averse to military action, as is the case throughout the developed world? Furthermore, will China and Russia eventually democratize with development? These are the most crucial political questions of the 21st century.

The lessons of history are not as clear about the inevitability of the process as some progressivists tend to believe. Furthermore, since the outbreak of the economic crisis, the authoritarian great powers have gained in confidence, while the hegemony and prestige of democratic capitalism have suffered a massive blow, unparalleled since the 1930s and the rise of fascist and communist totalitarianism. One hopes that the current economic and political malaise will not be nearly as catastrophic. And yet the global allure of state-driven and nationalist capitalist authoritarianism may grow substantially. At the same time, American might, the main reason—not sufficiently appreciated—for the triumph of democracy in the 20th century, is undergoing relative decline, although perhaps not as steep as it is sometimes imagined.

Deeply integrated into the world economy, the new capitalist authoritarian powers partake of the development-open-trade-capitalist and affluent peace but not of the liberal democratic one. The democratic and non-democratic powers may coexist more or less peacefully, armed because of mutual fear and suspicion. There is also the prospect, however, of more antagonistic relations, accentuated ideological rivalry, potential and actual conflict, intensified arms races, and new cold wars. Furthermore,

the support that China and Russia offer for oppressive regimes around the world—most notably today, Syria and Iran—may be a foretaste of things to come.

Furthermore, the prospect of renewed protectionism increases the likelihood of armed confrontation, as production and trade are again linked to territory and direct rule. China has exploited the system of free trade, in directly stealing knowledge and in coercing foreign companies to cede their know-how. These vices must be corrected. On the other hand, if protectionism and trade blocks are going to reemerge, China's incentive to secure its control over vital resources, as in the South China Sea, might grow momentarily.

Finally, the 9/11 mega-terror attacks in the US turned attention to yet another shadow hanging over the decline of belligerency—unconventional terror, employing weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, biological, and chemical. Biological weapons have the greatest potential, as the biotechnological revolution is one of the spearheads of today's technological advance. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a mild demonstration of this horrendous potential.

At the root of the problem is the trickling down, to below the state level, of technologies and materials of mass killing. Nuclear proliferation in unstable parts of the world may be one of the greatest threats. When state authority collapses and anarchy takes hold, who is to guarantee such a country's nuclear arsenal? Pakistan, with its past sales of nuclear know-how and potential instability, is a much discussed case. The emergence of the so-called Caliphate of Iraq and Syria, with its virulent anti-modernist ideology and hideous practices, was another recent example. Scenarios of world-threatening individuals and organizations, previously reserved to fiction of the James Bond genre, suddenly have become real.

This is a baffling problem, which does not lend itself to easy or clear solutions. Defensive measures are almost as problematic as preemptive ones, especially in the democracies, because of their potential infringement on civil rights. Regarding both the offensive and defensive elements of the "war on terror," the

## Overlapping claims in the South China Sea

China claims 90% of the South China Sea as its sovereign territory, but is opposed by Southeast Asian states and Taiwan. The waterway is strategically vital: it has rich fishing stocks; likely oil and gas deposits; and is where \$3 trillion of trade transits annually.



debate in the democracies assumes a bitterly ideological and righteous character; yet the threat of unconventional terrorism is real, is here to stay, and it offers no easy solutions.

We are clearly experiencing the most peaceful times in history by far—a strikingly blissful and deeply grounded trend. It is also true that this is the most dangerous world ever, with people for the first time possessing the ability to destroy themselves completely and even individuals and small groups gaining the ability to cause mass death. The modernization peace is a very real phenomenon, but it is not immune to dangers and threats—some of them old, some new. \*

### — AZAR GAT

Prof. Azar Gat teaches national security at Tel Aviv University and is the author of nine books, including *War in Human Civilization* (2006), named one of the Times Literary Supplement Books of the Year. He earned his doctorate from the University of Oxford and held visiting positions at leading American and European institutions. Prof. Gat was awarded the 2019 EMET Prize in political science and strategy.





# AMERICA'S ON-AGAIN, OFF-AGAIN INVOLVEMENT IN THE SYRIAN TRAGEDY





A street lined with damaged buildings in Homs, 2014.  
Photo credit: REUTERS/Yazan Homsy



*by Steven Simon*

**T**he US was never much interested in Syria. Syria specialists tend to dispute this, and perhaps they are right, but the evidence seems meager. It is true that from time to time Washington's gaze has settled on Syria, like the beam of a slowly rotating lighthouse. In 1956 and 1957, as Syria was thought to be edging closer to the Soviet orbit, the US supported a succession of failed coup attempts intended to stop the trend. These gambits were half-hearted, and in the end, the plotters, and those mistaken for plotters, were rounded up and killed. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had apparently opposed US involvement, saying that "his people thought it would be a mistake to try and pull it off," but chose not to block it. (In 1959, he poured cold water on plans to meddle in Iraq because the US "was not sufficiently sophisticated to mix into this complicated situation.") His brother Allen, who ran the CIA, was cut from a different cloth. It was the golden era of covert operations, on the verge of a messy collapse imposed by Kim Philby's treachery. In Syria, the CIA's efforts came to naught, as first Nasser and then the Baath Party held Damascus.

The US engaged with Syria intensively during the disengagement talks following the 1973 war and again in the early 1980s when Washington tried quixotically to sever Hafez al-Assad's ties to Lebanon and to push through the May 17 Accord in 1983 between Israel and Lebanon. Assad put a bloody end to that fantasy. Although there is no declassified information suggesting that Syria was responsible for the deadly attacks on the

US Embassy in Beirut and then on the Marines' compound in 1983, the attacks served Syrian interests by hastening the American departure from Lebanon.

In 1991 American diplomacy and other inducements brought Syria into the anti-Iraq coalition, but in 1996 Iran staged a deadly attack against the US military in Saudi Arabia, which was coordinated by Iranian personnel in Damascus. After the Gulf War, the US worked to get Syria into George H.W. Bush's Madrid peace conference, but his successor, Bill Clinton failed to woo Assad into a deal with Israel. Ehud Barak, musing about Assad's insistence that Syria's border should extend to the Sea of Galilee because he had swum there as a child, remarked that it was a good thing he hadn't bathed in Lake Geneva. In the early 2000s, the US and Syria wrangled over the cross-border movement of Iraqi insurgents and the shelter that the Assad government apparently had provided them. The mid-2000s saw the US backing a multilateral push to eject Syrian forces from Lebanon following the assassination of Lebanese prime minister, Rafik Hariri, but neither the US nor the UN ever succeeded in bringing the perpetrators or masterminds of that crime to justice.

The Obama administration reached out to Damascus and quietly explored a deal that would lead to the return of the Golan Heights to Syrian control. Depending on whom one talks to in Washington about this episode, the response is either peals of laughter or a grim shake of the head. The civil war in Syria, which had erupted more or less simultaneously, wrecked the initiative, along with much else. More recently, the US carried out a massive effort to arm the Syrian opposition to Assad, but this too was largely unsuccessful and was brought to an end



**An unhappy compromise.** A Free Syrian Army fighter watches Obama's speech in Ghouta, 2013.  
Photo credit: REUTERS/Mohamed Abdullah

by Donald Trump in 2017. So, it's true that the US has not entirely disregarded Syria.

The US was Syria's first choice to train its army in 1946, but Washington demurred. Failure of the covert operations in 1956 and 1957 caused the US to take reasonable caution, especially after its erstwhile Syrian contacts went to the wall. President Kennedy was more interested in ties with Egypt and, until the latter's intervention in Yemen, had a cordial relationship with Nasser. There was neither compelling reason nor a receptive partner to warrant restoring relations with Syria, where, in any case, the Soviets were making themselves at home. In the mid-1960s, the Johnson administration was too preoccupied in southeast Asia to think much about the Middle East until the 1967 war, while Britain's decision that year to end its military presence east of Suez shook Johnson's tree. When the Cold War

warmed up in the 1980s, the military threat to the US Mediterranean fleet did not emanate from the Syrian port of Tartous but rather from Soviet air bases in southeast Europe. By then, the US had thrown in its strategic lot with Israel, further eroding whatever interest the US might have had in Syria. And with the end of the Cold War and Russia's withdrawal from the Middle East, despite a short-lived experiment with truncated versions of free speech and economic liberalization, did Syria really matter?

During this long period, most Americans knew little about Syria. To those who could find it on a map, or had even just heard of it, Syria was enemy territory, a tormentor of Israel, a dictatorship, and on the wrong side in the Cold War. Few Americans had traveled to Syria. If Americans knew any flesh-and-blood Syrians, they were likely to be the descendants of



immigrants who began to arrive in the Midwest in the 1860s, or perhaps Syrian Jews who arrived much later, clustering around Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn. One would not have expected a groundswell of interest in the Syrian Arab Republic itself. Bashar and Asma might have been a hit in Paris, but New Yorkers had other preoccupations. And at no point did the US see how American fortunes would rise or fall because of anything Syria did or did not do.

Thus, when the Arab Spring broke out, it was scarcely surprising that there wasn't a tidal wave of American popular support for US involvement. Obama—having just gotten involved on the margin in Libya—heaped the appropriate abuse on Assad but was careful to say that the US would not assist the rebels. This, he said, would be up to the Syrian people, although the US wished them well. Understandably perhaps, the opposition and its advocates in the US did not hear this crucial disclaimer and focused instead on another line in the 2011 speech, to the effect that Assad's rule and democracy were incompatible. This was a statement that Assad himself would have agreed to, but his adversaries heard it as an American declaration of war.

There was pressure from within the Obama administration to intervene militarily, but those in favor were unable to explain how such involvement would yield a new political dispensation in Syria that would align with US values and interests and appeared to deter Obama from taking their advice. In his classic work, *The American Way of War*, Russell Weigley dwells on the longstanding US tendency to view war as an alternative to politics, rather than a continuation of it; but, of course, American theorists were raised on Jomini, not Clausewitz. America and Israel are more alike in this regard than either is inclined to believe.

In the Syrian case, an unhappy compromise resulted in a program to arm the moderate opposition but without providing direct military support for it. As the moderate opposition faded in the face of jihadist pressure, the

costs began to overshadow the benefits of the program. Although arming the moderate opposition did contribute to the defeats that the regime suffered in the spring of 2015, they, in turn, prompted Russian intervention, which, alongside the radicalization of the armed opposition, undermined what little motivation Washington had to stay engaged. The emergence of ISIS in 2014 gave the American commitment a new lease on life in the form of cooperation between the US and its largely—but not exclusively—Kurdish allies against this unruly enemy. A small US force was inserted into eastern Syria. Its stated mission was to impede traffic of undesirables, either ISIS or Iranians, from entering Syria from Iraq via the al-Tanf crossing in southeast Syria. Since the troops were first inserted in Syria—and indeed ever since then—the US has made it clear that they were not there to fight Assad.

Trump continued in this vein by formally dropping support for the armed opposition to Assad while maintaining a US military presence in northeastern Syria. Policy coordination during Trump's term in office was uneven at best, in part because national security advisors came and went and partly because of Trump's limited attention span. Trump had wanted US troops out in 2018. They were still there a year later, much to his chagrin. Eventually Trump concluded that the US interest in Turkey outweighed its ties to Syrian Kurds and ordered US troops to step aside and allow Turkish forces into this sector of Syria, where they and their Syrian Arab allies went brutally after the Kurds. Trump also seized Syrian oil fields with the aim, he indicated, of benefiting American oil companies. An outcry in Congress, especially among Republicans, led Trump to temper his unsentimental approach to the US presence in Syria. As for the regime, Trump signed the Caesar Act (the code name of a person who brought to light horrifying evidence of the regime's brutality) under which Congress threatens non-American organizations, individuals, and governments doing business



**Turkey has taught the Kurds—and the US—a lesson.** A joint American and Turkish patrol in northeast Syria, 2019. Photo credit: US Army/SpC. Alec Dionne/Handout via REUTERS

in Syria with economic sanctions. Although one could impose a unitary rationale onto this confused and confusing welter of statements and actions, it, nonetheless, resists systematization.

The main elements of Biden's policy look familiar. His administration still supports the Caesar sanctions, although it is taking steps to discourage overcompliance and has unofficially said it would not oppose transshipment of Egyptian natural gas to Lebanon through Syria; rejects direct communication with Assad; and is committed to keeping a small US troop contingent in Syria. Although Secretary of State Antony Blinken has expressed regret for the absence of American intervention during the Obama administration, he has been careful

to avoid speculation about what the US might actually have done. He has also clearly rejected the prospect of a Biden effort to unseat Assad. Given the limited US strategic stake, this is to be expected.

For Israel, Syria has become a free-fire zone. The Israeli Air Force has attacked hundreds of targets linked directly or indirectly to Iran. The only constraint Israel faces is the need to avoid killing Russians and—under the tacit understanding with Putin—refrain from directly destabilizing the Assad regime. With the destruction of Syria's massive stockpile of chemical weapons by the UN and the depletion of its power projection capability in a grinding civil war, Damascus can no longer pose a



strategic threat to Israel. It can even be claimed that Israeli snipers pose a continuing threat to Syrian personnel on the Golan, one of whom was recently shot to death on an inspection tour of the border. During the civil war, Israelis and some American observers fretted about an Iranian land corridor to the Levant. As things turned out, the land corridor evolved into a buffer zone. On balance, the civil war and its outcome so far have served Israel's interests rather well.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have also experienced a reversal of fortune. Six years ago, the two states had suffered a serious setback in their attempt to topple Assad, their one-time comrade. Qatar had run circles around them. Working in concert with Turkey, Qatar had stacked the Syrian government in exile with Muslim Brotherhood activists and stoked the radical wing of the armed opposition. Now that the war is drawing to a close, Qatar has lost its purchase and Iran is struggling to demonstrate its continued utility to Assad, given the growing cost of its presence. The gas pipeline is a significant advance for Egypt but also for Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The UAE has now reestablished diplomatic relations with Assad's Syria, presaging its return to the Arab League. If the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt play their cards right, Arab capital might yet crowd Iran out of Syrian politics—and territory. Key regime members never liked Iran's presence, fearing that over time it would turn Syria into something like the subservient wreck in Lebanon. Assad's recent expulsion of the chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria might reflect this instinct. The decline of Iran's positions in Syria bodes well for Russia, and also for Israel and Jordan, the latter of which is repairing its ties to Assad. Turkey should be equally content, having exploited the civil war and its alliance with the US to establish a cordon sanitaire within Syria and gain control of a kind of game preserve for jihadists in northwest Syria that appears secure in the near term.

At this point, the players are mostly pleased, or should be. Assad is still there and poised to rejoin the Arab fold; Turkey has taught the Kurds—and the US—a lesson; Israel can raid Syrian territory with impunity and teach Iran a lesson; Iran hasn't found it necessary to learn this lesson, however, and continues to snout around; Russia saved its man in Damascus, averted what it worried would evolve into another Chechnya, got some military and intelligence benefits, a 50-year oil lease, and Arab backing for its commitment to Assad; the Gulf Arabs acquired a foothold in Syria that they had lost for a time during the civil war; and the remnant of the jihadi opposition has found safety in an enclave in the northwestern province of Idlib. The US, for its part, skirted a quagmire.

The only losers have been the Syrian people, who live on a pittance, have no infrastructure to rely on, face terrible public health challenges, are ground down by Western sanctions and the regime's lack of administrative capacity and resources, and will be devoured by climate change. But this is unlikely to disturb strategic calculations or consciences in the world's capitals. \*

#### STEVEN SIMON

Steven Simon is the Robert E. Wilhelm Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a research analyst at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. He served as the National Security Council's senior director for the Middle East in the Obama administration and in other US Government foreign policy positions.



A picture taken on March 7, 2020 shows a crater in a pedestrian bridge over the main Damascus-Aleppo (M5) highway near the town of Maaret al-Numan in Syria's northwestern Idlib province. Photo credit: AFP

# AMERICAN JEWRY AND ISRAEL: OLD BONDS, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

A girl at a pro-Israeli  
demonstration in New York  
City. Photo credit: REUTERS









*by Uzi Rebhun*

The two largest demographic anchors of Jewry today are Israel and the United States, together accounting for 85% of the world Jewish population—in basically equal portions. By successfully integrating into the American social mainstream, Jews have become important intermediaries on the axis of Israel–US relations. Israel, in turn, figures meaningfully within the group identity of American Jews in both the private and the public arenas. The close and long-standing attachment of American Jews to Israel, which some may call a symbiotic relationship, relies on solid strengths alongside complementary concerns that are more fluid and expose the nature and intensity of the ties to various changes.

American Jews, like Jews elsewhere outside of Israel, are a unique diaspora. They have no early personal or familial experience with life in Israel. Most have not visited Israel. Nor do they speak Hebrew, restricting their reading and learning about Israel to non-Hebrew sources. Yet they have a deep affinity for Israel, perceiving it as a historical, religious, or spiritual homeland. Israel and Jerusalem accompany the prayers of American Jews; they are the cradle of historical events, and around them they celebrate the main Jewish festivals. These places embody the sovereignty of the Jewish

people. Many American Jews have relatives and acquaintances in Israel and regard the country, consciously or unconsciously, as a protected space. For better or worse, even when they criticize it, Israel is a current component of American Jews' group identity and of their political and cultural interest.

The strong connection of American Jews to Israel rests, historically and contemporarily, on three main foundations that do not necessarily stand alone but are, in fact, interconnected. The first is the Holocaust, the unimaginable tragedy that occurred only 80 years ago, and the limited ability of American Jews to help Jews in danger—hence demonstrating the importance of an independent Jewish state that has military power and is open to free Jewish immigration. According to the 2020 Pew survey, 95% of American Jews consider remembrance of the Holocaust an essential or important part of what being Jewish means to them.

The second foundation is Israel's centrality as a symbol of ethnic and religious belonging. The land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem are, for instance, the focus of three of the 18 silent prayers recited daily by observant Jews. Israel is an inspiration for a full Jewish life—be it religious or secular—and for the flourishing of Jewish culture and creation, a place where Jewish exiles gather and merge, and a source of Jewish pride for its scientific and technological achievements. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which does not seem to be heading toward a solution, as well as the new existential nuclear



threat from Iran, raise concern for Israel's resilience and security. In the latest Pew survey, eight out of ten American Jews indicated that caring about Israel is a key component of being Jewish.

The third foundation is antisemitism. Although American Jews are firmly planted in the US, American society in general exhibits prejudice against Jews. Nine out of ten American Jews think there is "a lot" or "some" antisemitism in their country today. Moreover, 75% of American Jews believe the scope of antisemitism has grown in recent years. While experiencing antisemitism at varying levels characterizes Jewish life in other countries, it is not the case in Israel, which under such circumstances may be viewed as a shelter. Notably, antisemitism reinforces Jewish identification. These three foundations are stable and ongoing, ensuring the robustness of American Jews' affinity with Israel.

This strong relationship with Israel is also both a cause and a consequence of extensive informal-education activities, especially those involving visits to Israel. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tens of thousands of Jews, mostly from the US, traveled to Israel each year with Taglit (Birthright), Masa, and as part of study-programs in Israel. Others did so under the auspices of youth movements, volunteer organizations, and more. Many of these programs are aimed at young people, who are in

the formative stages of the life cycle that shape their group identity. Indeed, studies show that participation in these programs strengthens the long-term relationship with Israel—including follow-up participation in other programs—and Jewish identification more generally, including the tendency to marry within the faith.

American Jews' familiarity with and understanding of life in Israel is also enhanced by the many Israeli émigrés who increasingly have joined local Jewish communities. According to various estimates, about half a million Israelis and family members live in the US today. Not only has the Israeli establishment tempered its rejectionist approach to citizens who emigrate, American Jewish communities are also more sympathetic and welcoming than before to new Israeli arrivals. These Israelis bring their local Jewish friends into an unmediated relationship with Israel, take part in organized activities—including on university campuses, often the frontier of the debate about Israel's legitimacy—and strengthen the Israel connection of all members of the Jewish community. This is facilitated by the liberal or moderately conservative worldviews of most Israelis in the US, which coincide with those of the majority of American Jews.

Changes in the general American political and cultural narrative have increasingly legitimized the opportunities for close contact with Israel. American society has moved from an ethos of conformity or melting pot to recognizing the desire of immigrants and religious minorities to demonstrate group particularity: The hyphen (as in "African-American"), once denigrated, has become a source of pride. Post-1965 immigrants from South America, Asia, and Africa maintain ties with their countries of origin (exhibiting transnationalism), which include sending financial remittances; preserving cultural patterns of language and food; consuming news from overseas; and engaging in active political lobbying for their homeland. The importance of individualism in the US bolsters

**The underlying basis for a more positive view of Israel among the American Jewish public already exists, and the question is whether Israelis will succeed in tapping into it.**

multiculturalism. Under these circumstances, Jews are less concerned than in past generations of being accused of dual loyalty.

Not only is the identification of American Jews with Israel strong, the number of Jews in the US today is larger than ever. Between 1990 and 2020, American Jewry increased from 5.5 million to 7.5 million. There are now 2 million more Jews in America, many of them offspring of mixed parentage, who although often on the fringes of organized Jewish life, may be somewhat attached to Israel, nevertheless. Furthermore, intermarriage is expanding the sympathy for Judaism and Israel among non-Jewish circles in the US. Every Jew who marries a non-Jew draws their spouse toward their Jewish ethnic and religious identity. Their Jewishness then penetrates, in varying levels, other relatives of the non-Jewish spouse, including parents and siblings, and perhaps close friends who are invited to celebrate Jewish festivals (sometimes combined with Christian festivals, as with Hanukkah and Christmas, Passover and Easter). In this manner, Judaism and Israel are incorporated into the social discourse of millions of Americans who have no Jewish background or connection. This comes on top of the growing population of evangelical Protestants in the US, many of whom consider themselves Christian Zionists who strongly support Israel, the Jewish people, and the return of Jews to their ancestral homeland.

The solidarity with Israel, however, hides serious and growing weaknesses among young Jews as compared to older cohorts. For example, according to the 2020 Pew survey, two-thirds of American Jews aged 65 and over feel very or somewhat attached to Israel while this is true of just under half of Jews aged 18–29. Some of the differences may be explained by the composition of the younger group, which includes numerous offspring of mixed couples who were not raised Jewish, resulting in weak group identification, but who, nevertheless, wish to express their Jewish belonging. Notably, longitudinal studies show that Jewish identification, including attachment to Israel, strengthens with the transition from early to later stages of the life cycle, especially if marriage and child rearing are involved. In addition, structural demographic

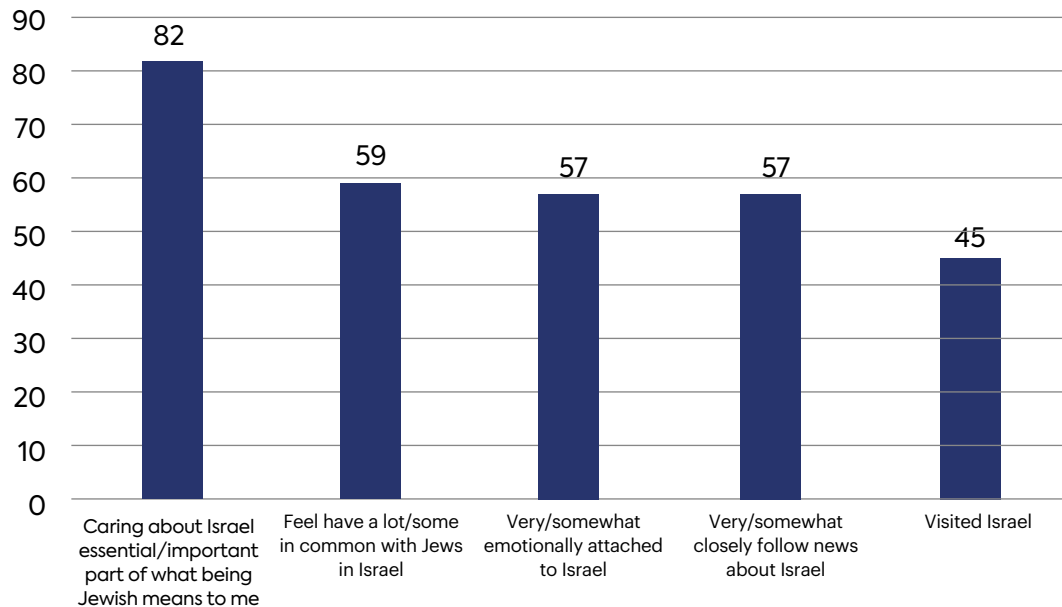
changes, especially the growing proportions of Orthodox Jews and Israelis in American Jewry, both closely connected to Israel, partly compensate for the growing distance among the young American-born non-Orthodox. As Ira Sheskin found in a study of 37 Jewish communities, the total affinity of American Jews with Israel has not changed.

Still, some young Jews will not touch Israel with a ten-foot pole, for two main reasons. First, many have an overall weak Jewish identity including having abandoned denominational or communal affiliation. Second, Israeli government policies have had a corrosive effect on this identification, whether they are policies toward the Israeli–Arab conflict, the treatment of foreigners, or discrimination against Conservative and Reform Judaism, which represent the majority of synagogue-going Jews in America. Some of these tensions intensified during the overlapping terms in office of President Donald Trump and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who adopted policies that clashed with the liberal orientations of the majority of American Jews. Young Jews with weak group identity found this especially abrasive and, in extreme cases, challenged Israel's right to exist as a sovereign state altogether.

The new political leadership in Israel has the potential to address this disaffection among the younger generation of American Jews. This leadership includes a broad-based government that includes left and right-wing parties and an Israeli Arab party for the first time. President Yitzhak Herzog and his younger brother Michael, the Israeli ambassador in Washington, share an intimate understanding of American Jewish dynamics. With the power of the ultra-Orthodox parties greatly reduced, and with the presence of Minister of Diaspora Affairs Nachman Shai, who served for years as the Jewish federations representative in Israel, the concerns of the diaspora may now have a stronger presence at the governing table in Israel. The COVID-19 pandemic, while severely disrupting travel to and from Israel, has created new opportunities for virtual connections that can enrich and diversify the acquaintance of American Jews with Israel and its Jewish and

**SELECTED INDICATORS OF AMERICAN JEWS' CONNECTION TO ISRAEL, 2020**

(Percentages)

Source: Pew Research Center, *Jewish Americans in 2020* (2021).

non-Jewish citizens. These developments can help Israelis present their country not only in terms of regional conflicts and internal tensions, about which Americans are already familiar, but also about Israel as a successful democracy with a robust economy, advanced industry, scientific excellence, and a rich and diverse culture.

The underlying basis for a more positive view of Israel among the American Jewish public already exists, and the question is whether Israelis will succeed in tapping into it. The statistics in this graph above attest that nearly 60% of American Jews are continuously connected to Israel by having shared feelings of commonality with Jews in Israel, an emotional attachment to Israel, and following news about Israel, while more than 80% care about Israel as an essential or important part of their Jewishness. Thus, the overwhelming majority of American Jews echo what Elie Wiesel once wrote: “The fact that I do not live in Jerusalem is

secondary; Jerusalem lives within me. Forever inherent in my Jewishness, it is at the center of my commitments and my dreams” (*New York Times*, January 24, 2001). \*

**UZI REBHUN**

Prof. Uzi Rebhun is the Shlomo Argov chair of Israel-Diaspora Relations and head of the Division of Jewish Demography at the Avraham Harman Research Institute of Contemporary Jewry, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

# ISRAEL'S RELATIONS WITH DIASPORA JEWRY: CAN THE RIFT BE HEALED? A PRACTICAL START AT HEALING

A demonstrator carrying an Israeli flag at a Capitol Hill rally in 2015.  
Photo credit: REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst







*by Nadav Tamir*

A widening rift between the Jews of Israel and those living in the diaspora now looms over the future of the Jewish people. Israel's problematic engagement with diaspora communities in recent years has brought into focus the failure of the homeland of the Jewish people to realize the goals of its genesis. This was not always the case, and it need not be. Stipulated in Israel's Declaration of Independence as a critical force for the redemption of Israel, diaspora Jewry today remains an essential component of the nation's soul. The Israeli government must consider the deterioration of the Israeli-diaspora Jewish relationship as an existential and strategic threat to the future of Israel's national identity.

The public and the political establishment in Israel has consistently taken a demanding and often unilateral approach toward diaspora Jewry, expecting it to serve as a vital resource to generate pro-Israel support, a cash machine for unconditional funding, and a potential pool of future immigrants. By failing to seriously consider the views, values, and aspirations of diaspora Jews, the political representatives of the Jews of Israel have taken this important community's support for granted.

Moreover, while diaspora Jews bolstered Israel's success from abroad, the attitude of the Israeli religious establishment toward the non-Orthodox denominations of Judaism has left a large majority of the Jewish people—specifically, in the other great wing of the Jewish people, in North America—out in the cold. Israeli legislators seemed to have no political incentive to deal with this issue, since there are many more Orthodox Jews in Israel than Conservative or Reform Jews, and most secular Israelis are apathetic about religious discrimination against liberal denominations of Judaism.

The rift became dramatically more severe when successive Israeli governments came to be seen as distancing themselves from the liberal values enshrined in Israel's Declaration of Independence. The sense of abandoning the values shared with a large majority of American Jews has further exacerbated the divide between Israel and diaspora Jews.

Most glaringly in the US, but also in Europe, the situation has further deteriorated as practitioners of Israeli diplomacy have veered

**The Jewish nation has become more of a divisive element for Jews than a unifying force.**

away from the historical guiding principle that support for Israel should not become a divisive political issue in countries with large Jewish communities.

In recent years, Israel has become an ally of many right-wing populist regimes around the world. Many Jews in the diaspora are shocked by Israel's alliances with racist regimes that have replaced antisemitism with a hatred of Muslims and have thus found in Israel a like-minded state. This development has led to a situation where the Jewish nation has become more of a divisive element for Jews than a unifying force, leading many congregations to avoid any discussion about Israel altogether.

### MY JOURNEY TO JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

Like many secular Israelis, I found myself unattached to my Jewish brothers and sisters in the diaspora; growing up as a member of a kibbutz, it was easier to fully embrace my national identity as an Israeli than to navigate the complexities of my role in the global Jewish community. I was influenced by the founders of the kibbutz movement who attempted to distinguish us from the diaspora Jews. They portrayed diaspora Jews as weak and fearful, while we were strong Israelis, capable of defending ourselves and working the land.

The socialist ideology of the kibbutz movement also pushed us away from Jewish identity, which we viewed as a religion and not a nationality. We perceived Judaism as a religion to be unattractive not only because we were secular but also due to the frustrating monopoly of the orthodox religious establishment in Israel and the coercive policies of the religious parties. Back then, I conceptualized Judaism only as a faith and not as the common culture of the international Jewish community as I understand it today.

When I first engaged with American Jewish communities while serving as a diplomat at the Israeli embassy in Washington, DC, I initially saw them as an instrument to be utilized for political influence. I had failed to understand

that we belong to the same extended family.

The first time I understood the meaning of Jewish peoplehood was in my year as a Wexner fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. The Wexner Foundation was established to develop Jewish leadership in the US and Israel, as well as to connect future leaders from these two communities in a Jewish context. I had applied to the fellowship for a Harvard education, but it was the Jewish experience I had in Boston that changed my life.

The Jewish community of Boston embraced us, the Wexner fellows, with amazing hospitality. It was in Boston where I first lived as a member of our extended family. There, I realized that Israel is a joint venture between Israelis (Jews and non-Jews alike) and the Jews of the diaspora. My immersion into diaspora Jewry helped me understand that my preconceptions about Jews in the diaspora were tremendously counterproductive for the future of Israel.

I learned that the center of Jewish life in America is the power of community. In Israel, because of the centralist nature of the state in its early days, we expected the government to be the solution to every challenge. We thought that it is enough if we pay our taxes and serve in the Israel Defense Forces. For American Jews that grew up in an individualistic American culture, it was understood that many solutions can be better addressed by community and philanthropy, rather than by the state. The role of the Jewish community in the US was invaluable for solidifying a sense of Jewish identity in the minds of its members, a connection to Judaism that I had lacked in Israel.

In Boston we learned about pluralism and the ability for each person in the community to practice Judaism as they choose, allowing each congregation to define its own path. This experience led us to be more open to Jewish community life, even though we were, and still are, secular. When our son chose to have a traditional bar mitzvah, we did it in a liberal synagogue close to our home in Brookline where a female rabbi prepared him for the ceremony.

In Israel, we were not aware that this option was even possible.

Because of our exposure to liberal Judaism, our oldest daughter decided to go to a Reform summer camp, while our youngest daughter eventually became a counselor in the Union for Reform Judaism youth movement. When we returned to Israel, we chose to join the Reform congregation in Zur Hadassa once we understood that Jewish life was not only about religious ceremonies (which, as a secular family, had less appeal to us) but also about being part of a community with people that shared our pluralistic values.

In Boston I also realized the growing disconnect between the Jewish grassroots organizations and the establishment of the Jewish organizations, with whom we in Israel interacted as the only representatives of the community.

My personal experience led me to be proactive in an attempt to connect Israelis to the Jews in the diaspora. I came to understand that the worrying rift between Israel and many in the Jewish diaspora requires a proactive approach with a broad vision of “Jewish peoplehood,” which advocates for a new direction in Israeli politics. Since diaspora Jews lack voting rights in Israel, their needs and preferences do not enjoy formal representation, and we must serve as their voice in Israel.

### HOW TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGE

We must hold Israel’s politicians accountable when they adopt myopic, harmful decisions like the reneging on promises of pluralistic prayer at the Western Wall or restrictions on nonorthodox conversions to Judaism.

Resolving the rift requires a change of all existing Israel–diaspora relationship paradigms, basing them on actions that connect people.

We must create a “reverse Birthright project,” which enables every Israeli high school student to join a Jewish community abroad to experience direct contact with its members. My time in America as a Wexner fellow was a

transformational experience, and I can only imagine how my relationship with diaspora Jewry would have evolved if I had gone to Boston as a young man instead of as a mid-career professional.

The annual visits by Israeli high school students to concentration camps in Poland help us understand our national trauma; but meeting living Jews is no less important. For the sake of our joint future, sustaining our relationship with the living is just as vital as preserving the legacy of the dead.

One way to heal this relationship would be to collaborate on “tikkun olam” (loosely translated to mean “repairing the world”) projects. This ancient Jewish ideal speaks to all Jews in their relationships with each other and with the rest of the world. Projects like these would be a proactive step that could attract the interest of the Jewish world’s next generation. A self-confident, globally integrated Judaism, rather than an isolationist one, is far more of a draw for younger Jews.

Israel’s Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV) under the Foreign Ministry should be transformed into a project involving the entire Jewish people, training young Jews and sending them

**When I first engaged with American Jewish communities, I saw them as an instrument to be utilized for political influence. I had failed to understand that we belong to the same extended family.**



**Judaism has always encouraged debate and disagreements.** A “Detroit Jews For Justice” event in support of Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib. Photo credit: REUTERS/Rebecca Cook

to confront need wherever it arises, not just where narrow interests dictate. Energetic young Israelis in organizations such as IsraAID and Israel Flying Aid have already shown the way, often working in close association with allies in the diaspora.

The expectation that diaspora Jews will continue sending money to Israel as in the old days, when Israel was a poor society fighting for its economic survival, is anachronistic and unsustainable. With Israel having one of the most dynamic economies in the world, diaspora

Jews should no longer be expected to finance Israel as they did in years past. Israel no longer needs donations, but it does desperately need a stronger connection with diaspora Jews. This connection can be developed through investments from Israeli and American Jews alike in joint projects with civil society organizations promoting humanistic Jewish values and youth exchange programs.

As for the expectation of Jewish aliyah or immigration to Israel, we should be happy with every new immigrant to Israel; but we must



accept the legitimacy of life in the diaspora and avoid judgment of, or arrogance toward, Jews living abroad as if there were only one way to be a Zionist.

We must also embrace families of mixed marriage and accept them as part of the community. The Boston Federation is doing exactly that; because of this approach, more mixed families are choosing to raise their kids as Jews and the community is growing—a pattern that Pew Research Center has now identified across the board in American Jewry.

Because of the differences in political leanings between diaspora and Israeli Jews, we cannot allow the only acceptable political views of diaspora Jews to be those in support of our government. Israeli Jews and their elected officials need to be more accepting of criticism from diaspora Jews who feel ignored in Israel. We must embrace also those among the Jewish people who disagree with our government's positions, while accepting the basic legitimacy of Jewish peoplehood and self-determination. Judaism has always encouraged debate and disagreements.

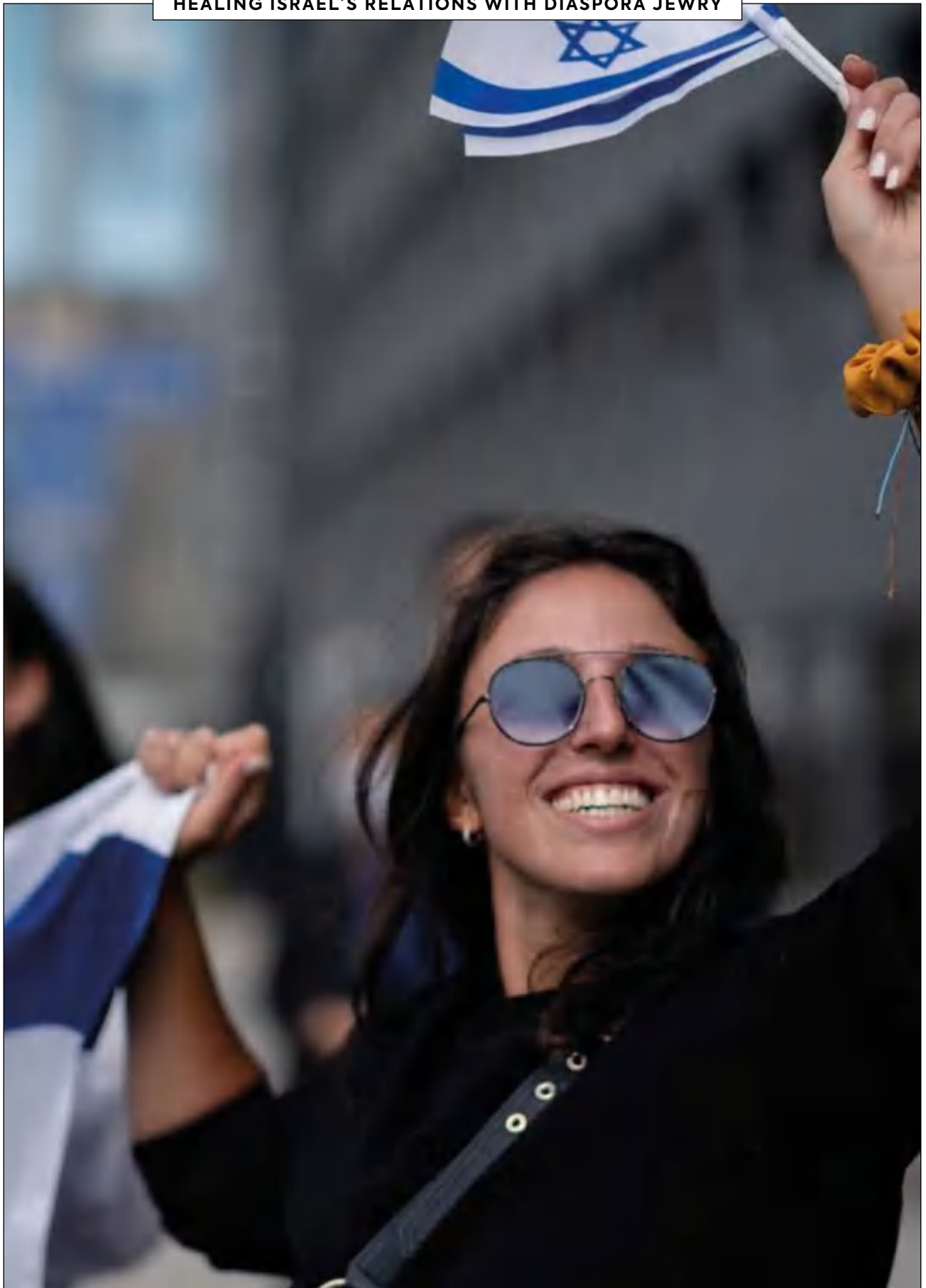
Just as we should embrace liberal denominations of Judaism, we have to also embrace liberal perspectives of Zionism. This is the reason why I joined J Street as their representative in Israel. I feel that we are creating a space where American Jews can connect with Israel in a way that aligns with their progressive values. We legitimize a discourse where they don't have to make an uncompromising choice between their values and their Jewish identity. We provide a platform for them to use their political influence as Americans to promote pro-Israel, pro-peace policies. We are trying to help Israel avoid what we believe would be a one-state outcome, which will be disastrous to the Zionist vision of our Declaration of Independence.

The crisis of Israel's relationship with diaspora Jewry is a dire one, which threatens the essence of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people. Resolving the rift within world Jewry

and the promotion of a wider understanding of "Jewish peoplehood" must become a priority of Israel's public agenda if we are to stay true to the goals of Israel's founding, no less than the future of a unified Jewish people being at stake. \*

#### **NADAV TAMIR**

Nadav Tamir is the executive director of J Street Israel, adviser for international affairs at the Peres Center for Peace and Innovation, and a board member at the Mitvim Institute. He served in multiple positions at Israel's Foreign Ministry, including as consul general in Boston. Tamir earned his MA from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government where he was a Wexner fellow.





US, Israel, UAE, and Bahrain flags projected on Jerusalem's Old City walls, in 2020. Photo credit: REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun

# HOW THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS CAN ALSO HELP RESTORE ISRAEL-AMERICAN JEWRY RELATIONS







by Dan Feferman

I just returned from a speaking tour about the Abraham Accords in the United States. The accords were intended to bring together Abraham's descendants—Isaac and Ishmael. But they might also help bring together the children of Isaac—that is, help mend the relations between Israel and American Jewry.

Recently I was forwarded, with great concern, a *New York Times* article by Marc Tracy, titled “Inside the Unraveling of American Zionism: How a New Generation of Jewish Leaders Began to Rethink Their Support for Israel.” It is a fair and balanced piece that informs of the growing divide and offers insights about its roots.

Neither informed readers on either side of the Atlantic nor the readers of Nadav Tamir's essay on the pages of the JST will be shocked to learn that younger American Jews seem to be growing more distant and more critical of Israel.

This past spring's military conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas led to new and unheard-of levels of criticism and rage against Israel by younger American Jews, including future leaders. The most public expression of this criticism, as described in the article by Tracy, was a letter penned by 93 rabbinical students from virtually every rabbinic seminary outside the Orthodox world. The authors, most of whom have spent considerable time in Israel and are relatively knowledgeable on its politics, chided Israel for its use of military force against the Palestinians, asking the Jewish world “to

change our behavior and demand better.” They called for a rethinking of US military support for Israel and “insisted” that Jewish educators complicate their teaching of Israel's founding to convey “the messy truth of a persecuted people searching for safety, going to a land full of meaning for the Jewish people, full of meaning for so many other peoples, and also full of human beings who didn't ask for new neighbors.” They also made no mention of Hamas, the terror organization behind the war against Israel, and its total control of the Gaza strip.

Recently I helped to lead a speaker delegation sponsored by an NGO called Sharaka—Arabic for “partnership”—to discuss the Abraham Accords and the “new” Middle East with groups and communities across the Bay Area. Following this experience, I am convinced that the Abraham Accords—Israel's new relationships with the Gulf States, Sudan, and Morocco—can offer a framework to heal not only the Middle East divides and conflicts but also the growing division between Israel and American Jewry.

Sharaka is a non-profit, non-political, and non-governmental organization founded by young leaders from Israel and the Arab Gulf after the signing of the Abraham Accords. (Full disclosure, the author is an employee of Sharaka.) Sharaka's goal is to translate the diplomatic agreements to the people's level and promote the concept of the Abraham Accords to the broader Arab and Muslim world. The delegation was composed of young people from the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Syria, and Israel.

We met with Jewish communities (synagogues of all denominations, Jewish federations, Jewish community centers, Jewish political clubs)—the vast majority on



Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz shakes hands with Jared Kushner alongside Ivanka Trump, daughter and senior advisor to former US President Donald Trump during the inaugural event of the Abraham Accords Caucus, at the Knesset (Israel's parliament) in Jerusalem on October 11, 2021. Photo credit: Ahmad Gharabli / AFP

the liberal side of the political map. We met with Democratic Party activists, progressive politicians, university students, civic society leaders, intellectuals, and prominent businesspeople. In each appearance, we spoke of a new Middle East, one in which the region is increasingly divided into the Abraham Accords countries—those who wish to work together, for the betterment of all—and the radical, backward, reactionary camp, who wish to bring the region down, or rather back to its darker days. The Abraham Accords, we explained, were providing the conceptual framework for the fundamental restructuring of the region.

Many in the Middle East, especially the younger generation, view Israel less and less as the problem but rather as part of a solution to the region's troubles. This is based on many personal conversations with Arabs and Muslims over the past 18 months on multiple trips to the Gulf, as well as with friends and colleagues in Sharaka and beyond. But don't take our word. Public

opinion polls of the Arab world are also telling in this regard. Various polls reveal different degrees of positive answers to this sentiment. Thus, according to a survey of Saudis by the Washington Institute, 41% felt the Abraham Accords were positive, while 37% agreed that those who wish to do business with Israel should be allowed to do so. A survey of 8,000 adults in eight Arab countries conducted in 2019 by Zogby Research Services found that 70% felt it "was desirable that some Arab states will develop normalized relations with Israel, even without peace between Israel and the Palestinians." However, it is worth considering that other recent studies, such as the Arab Barometer, found that 88% across the Arab world opposed diplomatic recognition of Israel. Similarly, a high number across the Arab world still view Israel as the greatest state threat to Arab countries. The lack of consistency across polls makes it hard to get a clear answer. And yet, what is interesting and clear, as can be seen in this analysis by David Patrikarakos,

is when you compare the same polls across years. In this manner, the Arab Opinion Index shows a significant drop of those viewing Israel as the greatest threat and an increase in those viewing Iran as such. The Zogby poll showed, according to Patrikarakos, a massive increase of Egyptians ready for peace with Israel (should the Palestinian issue be resolved), as well as of Saudis. The statistic of 37% from the Washington Institute is “quadruple” the number who agreed with doing business with Israel just before the accords. David Pollock, a fellow at the Washington Institute, commented that “the rapid growth demonstrates that popular attitudes on this supposedly sensitive point are actually quite fluid, probably responding both to new events and official guidance.”

These voices among the people of the Middle East and, increasingly, most of its governments understand that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has been long dragged out and blown out of proportion, and it can no longer be blamed for a host of regional challenges. They understand that the Palestinians have responsibility and agency for solving the conflict as well. They are not entirely convinced that they should hold back their own national interests due to the unsolvable Palestinian issue. And, they also believe that perhaps positive engagement with Israel could actually help solve the unsolvable challenge where boycotts and demonization did not.

The people of the Middle East and most of its governments increasingly are aware of bigger challenges—such as climate change, sustainability, food and water security, education, and employment—in which Israel has too much to offer to be ignored. The Middle East increasingly sees that Israel’s military might be used to keep Iran and its radical proxies in check and is not the bogeyman they were taught to fear. The same Middle East saw what Iran and its proxies have done to other Arabs and Muslims in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. They have come to understand that Israel has little-to-nothing to do with these conflicts. Some even saw that while Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and ISIS

were massacring Muslim Arabs, Kurds, Yazidis, and others, Israel was quietly helping wounded Syrians on its border.

In each presentation, we offered a message of hope. In each panel, we urged Americans to leave their domestic, partisan political lenses aside when approaching the Middle East. We found that too many Americans were unaware of the Abraham Accords and their positive and transformative regional influence. Those Americans who were aware perceived the accords with a measure of insincerity because of their own domestic political positions. Many were simply not aware of how the region was changing because Western media tends to be stuck in old paradigms about the Middle East that are fixated on conflict and place the Palestinian issue at the heart of everything. American Democrats and most American Jews we met seemed unable, at least initially, to break out of this paradigmatic thinking. For too long, they had been trained to discuss Israel only in the context of the Palestinian conflict.

Of course, in every panel presentation, someone predictably asked if the Abraham Accords were not a cynical way to ignore and bury the Palestinian conflict. It is a fair question. They asked if the accords were not essentially a business-deal masked as “peace” by the political leaders who orchestrated them. After all, Israel was never at war with these states.

Each of us, in our own way and from our own national and regional perspective, did not deny the economic benefits enjoyed by the signatory states and nor should we. Deepening and broadening economic ties can be a lynchpin of peace and coexistence. Nor did each of us, in our own way, skirt the Palestinian question. What was clear to the Emiratis, Bahrainis, Moroccans, and even the Israelis was that seven decades of boycotting Israel had not worked.

As the lone Israeli Jew on the panel, I answered to one such audience member that had the Arab world’s past strategy been successful—of boycotting Israel until the Palestinian issue has been resolved—I would

have understood entirely what drove this approach. Each in our own way said that we all wish to see the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolved, but that the reigning paradigm of the past seven decades simply did not work. If anything, it only caused the Palestinians to forgo compromise and dig in their heels. After all, the Arab world backs them, and this, in turn, causes Israelis to dig in on our own positions.

The Emirati, Bahraini, and Moroccan speakers stressed that the Abraham Accords could help their countries become more positively engaged in resolving the conflict, by having friendly relations with both sides and not just one. We all emphasized our sincere hope that the regional-first paradigm will succeed where the Palestinian-first paradigm continuously has failed. I am entirely hopeful that through a regional-first paradigm, with the encouragement and support of the broader region, the Palestinians will increasingly view Israel more positively, and that Israelis will also see the Palestinians more positively; after all, most Israelis do not have regular, positive contact with Palestinians. Unfortunately, what we do see are the terrorists, the extremists, and their supporters. With so many Israelis now travelling to the Arab world and positively engaging with Arabs and Muslims, the region-first approach can create the necessary conditions to later solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after it has been reduced to its true proportions.

Our message seems to have resonated. The responses we received after each presentation was a teary-eyed round of applause. “We had no idea,” we heard from virtually everyone we met, and “Just when we had so little hope regarding Israel and the Middle East, you gave us hope.”

### **NOW BACK TO TRACY'S NEW YORK TIMES PIECE.**

One of the key reasons behind this growing divide between Israel and American Jewry, as Tracy correctly points out, is a generational issue. American Jews under 30 only know of a right-wing Israel, led by a nationalistic Benjamin

Netanyahu, a self-confident settler movement, and near constant military campaigns against Hamas in Gaza. American Jews under 30 hardly recall a time when Israel made far-reaching peace offers to its Palestinian neighbors, or that those offers were rejected and met with violence and extremism in the form of the Second Intifada, or Hamas's takeover of Gaza after the disengagement. They don't recall Shimon Peres or Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, or even an older, reformed Ariel Sharon—whose efforts were rejected by the Palestinians time and again.

What is less understood is that, in large part, Israeli society's disillusionment with failed peace attempts drove many to the right. By contrast, American Jews under 30 hardly remember an Israel that extended its hand in peace, or that ever seemed vulnerable; rather, they only know one that is militarily dominant. They also hardly remember a time when Jews seemed vulnerable or unaccepted as a minority in the US.

As Tracy's article also correctly points out, many young American Jews critical of Israel consistently try to place a very American-centric racial-structural framework on highly complicated but unrelated issues taking place in the Middle East. “American Jews have been part of a racial reckoning in our community,” they said. “And yet,” they added, “so many of those same institutions are silent when abuse of power and racist violence erupts in Israel and Palestine.”

Responding to this letter, Rabbis Bradley Shavit Artson, dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, and Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, president of Hebrew College, felt the need to speak out, suggesting that what the young generation of critics seems to lack is *ahavat Yisrael*, a “love of Israel.” Said otherwise, it seems that young American Jews lack empathy toward Israel and their Israeli brethren.

Israel of the past decade is viewed, rightly or wrongly, as one that does not seek out peace. Perhaps the opposite; it seemed as if it was actively working to bury the chances for peace with the Palestinians through settlement



expansion and aggressive and often nationalistic rhetoric. This is a view that meshes well with the racial-structural framework through which American Jews and young Americans more broadly view the world.

Essentially, American Jews increasingly came to view Israelis as aggressors and oppressors, and as the dominant side of a structural imbalance, when, in fact, Israeli Jews are also victims. This might not be outwardly evident from the militant rhetoric voiced by right-wing Israelis, but it should be clear to anyone who is listening, with empathy.

To be fair, the past decade or more of Israeli history has not given Israelis too much of a chance to seek peace. The Palestinian Authority maintains constant diplomatic attacks while supporting a culture of terrorism. Terror attacks are a mainstay of daily life in East Jerusalem, the Old City, and Judea and Samaria. Gaza, overrun by extremist groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, became a launching-pad for rockets and other terror campaigns. Israel's shift rightward, if American Jews are really listening, is an expression of a sense of genuine threat.

Let's be honest: American Jews over 30, and especially over 40, hold many of the same critiques of Israel as do their younger counterparts. They are critical of the settlement enterprise and Israel's policies regarding the Palestinians. They seek religious equality for the liberal Jewish streams and secular Jews and chafe at the control of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate over religious institutions. They support the left-leaning NGOs that Netanyahu's governments sought to limit and censor. They also took offense and expressed outrage at Netanyahu and the Israeli right when they seemingly chose the Republican Party of Donald Trump and the Evangelicals over the Democratic Party.

They held and continue to hold these critical positions while supporting Israel in its time of need. They certainly held their criticisms in check while rockets fell on Israel. They showed empathy; they showed *ahavat Yisrael*, which

younger American Jews seem to be lacking. Why would the previous generation be more empathetic to Israel than the younger one?

Here's a theory: The Abraham Accords present us with a unique moment in the modern history of the Middle East. They offer the chance for a true realignment and the expansion of peaceful and warm relations between Israel and much of the region. Even young Arabs and Muslims across the region in countries that have yet to normalize are starting to view Israel in this new light and reaching out to me and my colleagues on a daily basis to offer their support.

The Abraham Accords are, of course, not intended for an American audience. They are, first and foremost, intended to positively transform the Middle East. Yet one major and unintended benefit can be healing this growing divide between American Jewry and Israel by reminding American Jews that Israelis truly desire peace with their neighbors, so much that their Arab neighbors are recognizing this, one by one.

If we can put aside domestic partisan politics and outdated paradigms, as did the audiences who met the Sharaka delegation, perhaps these accords can have another positive contribution—they bring together not just the children of Isaac and Ishmael but also the descendants of Isaac with one another. \*

#### DAN FEFERMAN

Dan Feferman is a fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute, co-host of the Jewanced Podcast, and director of Communications and Global Affairs at Sharaka, an Israeli–Emirati NGO that promotes people-to-people peace between Israel and the Arab world.



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# BETWEEN EAST AND THE MIDDLE EAST: THE INTEGRATION STORY OF THE INDIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY IN ISRAEL







Indian immigrants from Cochin vote in Israel's 1955 election, at a polling station in the Jerusalem area.  
Photo credit: Fritz Cohen/GPO





by Oshrit Birvadker

In 1948, when the State of Israel was founded, waves of Jews from the three major centuries-old Jewish communities in India began to migrate to Israel, gradually forming a population of over 80,000 Jews of Indian origin in Israel today. Yet, strikingly, scholars of both Israel and the Indian diaspora have paid scant attention to the Indian Israeli community, and many in the public are also quite unaware of the story of the Indian Jewish migration to Israel and of the community's contributions. In January 2022, India and Israel will celebrate the 30th anniversary of establishing formal relations, which provides an opportunity to take a look at a community that lives between the East and the Middle East.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, immigrants from various subcontinent groups began to immigrate to Israel and settled largely in the Israeli peripheral areas rather than in the urban core. Although in the Israeli landscape, Indian immigrants are perceived as quiet and unobtrusive, an in-depth look reveals a warrior community that has defined its own identity in a special way, refusing to hand over its cultural assets in the name of a prevailing assimilationist ethic and ultimately playing a role in forging the strong links between two very different yet increasingly friendly nations.

#### WHO ARE THE JEWS OF INDIA?

The Jews of India do not form one homogenous community but rather comprise five distinct ones, each with its history and social

composition. The Bene Israel community from the Maharashtra area traces its history back to seven refugee couples who were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast 2,200 years ago after migrating from Judea where they were persecuted under Greek rule. In India, they built their own community life according to the Jewish ritual practice and placed themselves outside the caste system. With the process of modernization of India in the 18th century, they began to migrate to Mumbai, Thane, and Pune and integrated into the British colonial administration. Today the Bene Israel is the largest of the five Indian Jewish communities. The second largest group is the Jews of Cochin. Ample evidence shows that this community lived in and around Cranganore from the 5th century CE to the 15th century. Some scholars, however, believe that they arrived in India at the time of King Solomon, although there is no evidence to support that early date.

The third group is the Baghdadi Jews, a well-known subgroup of Indian Jews despite their small numbers. Although Baghdadi traders visited India frequently during the medieval Abbasid Caliphate, they only settled in Mumbai in the late 18th century. These three distinct Jewish communities had little interaction; they spoke different languages, observed their own traditions, and were products of very distinct cultures. They also lived in three separate regions of India.

The fourth and fifth groups of Indian Jews—the Bene Ephraim and the Bene Menashe—are also distinct, small communities with their own separate languages and customs. Bene Menashe are called the “North-East Indian Jews,” while the Bene Ephraim are known as the “Telugu Jews” after the Telugu language of the



**Centuries of history.** Indian Jews mark the Jewish New Year in Mumbai, 2007. Photo credit: REUTERS/Arko Datta

province of Andhra Pradesh. This group lives in the southern part of the province, and its documented links to Judaism, like those of the Bene Menashe, date back no more than 70 years.

The story of Indian Jewish immigration, acculturation, and identity in Israel has only recently been researched. Although Indian Jews constitute a distinct ethnic group, there is also significant variation within this population in terms of levels of education and behavioral patterns, stemming from their areas of origin in India. A variety of factors influence the experience of immigration and the integration of immigrants in the destination country. In the case of the aliyah (the Hebrew term for Jewish immigration to Israel—literally meaning “ascent”) from India, one can point to two significant incidents that shaped the aliyah experience and the integration of the Indians in Israel: the first Satyagraha in Israel and the questioning of their Jewish legality.

#### MAHATMA GANDHI’S IDEAS REACH TEL AVIV

When Israel became a sovereign nation, it opened its borders to Jews from all across the globe. Between May 1948 and December 1951 alone, approximately 684,000 people immigrated into the new country—doubling the number of pre-independence Jews in the country. Never before had so many diverse cultures, languages, and ethnicities come together in such a confined geographical area over such a short period to form a new collective. However, the young state found it difficult to keep its promises, having painted an overly bright image for its future citizens. In his memoir, Shlomo Hillel, one of the leaders of the Iraqi Jewish community, described his conversation with future Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, who was at the time the treasurer of the Jewish Agency. Hillel expressed his enthusiasm about bringing more Iraqi Jews to Israel, but



A cartoon published by Israeli newspaper *Davar* on May 19, 1952 shows on the right Indian Jews at the Jewish Agency's Tel Aviv office, demanding their return to India, and on the left Indian Jews in Mumbai demanding their return to Israel. Illustration: Aryeh Navon

Eshkol replied: “tell the Jews to come, but not to rush to Israel.” Eshkol explained that his concern was with logistics—mainly housing the newcomers. Hillel responded he had no intention to delay the immigrants since the danger they faced in Iraq was probably greater than the challenges facing the immigrants in Israel. Although this was true for other immigrant groups as well and not just the ones from Iraq, the motive of the Indian Jews to immigrate, however, was mostly rooted in a combination of Zionist and religious sentiment together with economic factors.

The 1950s witnessed three main waves of Indian migration, mostly from the Bene Israel and the Baghdadi communities. In this decade, the initial meeting between the newcomers from India and the Israeli society took place. This was also the era of “the absorption protests.” Between the years 1949–1964, new immigrants initiated 65 out of the 326 total protest events, while 40% of those demonstrations were in response to economic issues. The “Indian Protest” was one of the first demonstrations organized by new immigrants, and it was the

first protest charging the Israeli establishment with having a racial bias. On November 8, 1951, a group of newcomers who settled in Be’er Sheva wrote the Jewish Agency in Tel Aviv and demanded their return to India within eight days or else they would start a hunger strike. In their letter, they complained of discrimination against their community in employment, housing, and medical care. The group also had serious grievances about education—their children were not admitted to educational settings, and they were forced to send them to the mission school, which was open on Saturdays.

The new immigrants, who had experienced India’s struggle for independent rule and the great upheaval when the British departed, came to Israel equipped with a developed consciousness of protest. Gandhi developed the way of Satyagraha, which means “insistence on truth,” according to which man must resist any injustice, discrimination, or violence against him, but he should do so without causing any harm to the one who harms him on the physical level and also without displaying hatred toward him. Armed with a protest consciousness,

although devoid of local language skills and personal connections, the Indians made a difference. The Bene Israel group reacted to unfair treatment and favoritism with a unique form of insurgency against Israeli authorities. The Bene Israel plight was widely noted, mostly for their ability to mobilize grassroots-level activism and for their mastery at building non-governmental organizational support.

In an extraordinary initiative, the Indian Jews made good use of their skills in English, addressing government ministers, the British Consulate, the American Consulate, the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, and the media. They brought their grievances to the international arena, with their story covered by *Haaretz* and the *New York Times*. Fearing the impact on the country's image, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion eventually gave in and in April 1952 sent the 112 Indians back to India at the expense of the Jewish Agency. Ben-Gurion was convinced there was no other way to change the minds of passive hunger-strikers. Many consider this protest a great failure since some members of the group decided to return to Israel at their own expense a few years later; however, for future generations, this protest has been used to design the community's own narrative and revival.

### JEWISH LEGALITY

A decade after the anti-Indian discrimination protests had broken out, the Indian Jews in Israel became embroiled in a conflict with the chief rabbinate over their identity, born out of rivalry and competition between the different immigrant groups. In 1962 the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Itzhak Nissim issued a directive ordering rabbis in Israel to investigate the ancestry of the Bene Israel. Facing difficult conditions in adjusting to their new country and not having any support, doubting their Jewishness was a slap in their faces, since the community saw their Jewishness as a crucial element of their identity and the central motivational factor for immigrating to Israel. Unlike other communities

from Eastern Europe and the Middle East, the Indians did not migrate to Israel due to a lack of security. The Indian community and its supporters accused the rabbinate of "racism," arguing that Jews from affluent Western countries were not subject to such an extensive investigation before being permitted to marry other Jews. Here, too, the Indian community made clever use of lobbying and media pressure and their struggle again made headlines in the *New York Times*, which followed the case. After a demonstration in August 1964, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol convened a special session of the Knesset to pass a resolution supporting the Bene Israel position and demanding the removal of "every factor producing a feeling of discrimination."

Although this case was settled in 1964, the insult and self-doubt affected the community and left a scar among the people who had experienced it at the time. Consequently, this crisis strengthened the community's solidarity and reduced its desire to merge with Israeli society. In addition, the chief rabbinate's skepticism continued to prevail, and despite official approval, some municipal chief rabbis refused to marry Indians with other Israeli citizens. It dawned on the members of the community that while in India they had not faced official discrimination, it was in Israel where they encountered prejudice toward their ethnicity.

### THE PRESENT IS BRIGHT, BUT WORK IS STILL NEEDED

The protests of the Indian community failed to compel the state to implement any changes regarding their conditions. Internalizing this, they turned to other sophisticated means—their own community. Community strategies were key in assisting the Indian Jewish migrants on two levels: First, the community served a functional role in organizing, decision making, and providing assistance to individuals; second, the community had a symbolic role in providing a sense of belonging, power, and identification,



and it represented values and qualities that strengthened and supported the immigrants' coping abilities. Community strategies were particularly effective because the settlement pattern of the Indian immigrants in the periphery was concentrated in certain cities.

Culture is the foundation that allows immigrants to live in peace with their past while incorporating cultural elements that originate in changing spaces. This was true in the first years of these communities in Israel and is still a firm truth in the digital age. Today, digital platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok, play a crucial role in transforming the way the Indian Jewish community in Israel interacts with its culture. They serve as important platforms in reaching varied audiences in the community, and they have a crucial impact on cultivating the unique identity of Indian Jews in Israel between the East and the Middle East. Indian Jews in Israel have assimilated into Israeli society, while keeping their own distinct identity. The young generations especially are eager to adopt an Israeli way of life rather than remain distinctive from the rest of their society, as many of their ancestors did. In recent years, the community has placed a special emphasis on preserving Indian Jewish culture and their contribution to the mosaic of Israeli society. This is evident from the growing number of conferences and media coverage about their culture as well as about the mega project of the community, the Cochin Jewish Heritage Museum at Moshav Nevatim. Another important trend is the involvement of the weakest and underprivileged group in Indian culture—youth and women.

Israel's government and society have traditionally placed Indian Jews in the Mizrahi bloc (Jews of Middle-Eastern and North African descent), but in recent years they have increasingly identified themselves in a separate category, as South Asians. Their social patterns, psychological characteristics, and culture all bear the marks of the Indian civilization within which they have lived for hundreds if not thousands of years.

The burgeoning bilateral relationship between Israel and India today has boosted the confidence of the community. The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel in 2017 increased the community's publicity. Modi's decision to host a rally of Indian Jews in the midst of an intense three-day visit helped inform Israeli society and decision makers of the importance of the community in the eyes of the Indian government. Since the early 2000s, the government of India has undergone an institutional and conceptual change in which the Indian diaspora has become an important tool in Indian foreign policy. At first, it was the affluent Indians in the West who were courted by the Indian government, but under the rule of the BJP, working-class diaspora communities have become a significant part of the government's foreign relations strategy, such as the Indians in the Gulf countries and in Israel.

Indian Jews have forged a somewhat fluid identity between the East and the Middle East. Although the 1950s protest is still subject to various interpretations as to whether it was a success or a failure, today, the absorption challenges of new immigrants from the Bene Menashe community, who come from a rural area of India, remain significant. The growing partnership between India and Israel should serve as an incentive to encourage research on the histories and cultures of Indian Jews. Such research would not only add to the understanding of the immigrant experience in Israel, as well in other Indian diaspora communities, but it will also shed light on the understanding of how cultural, religious, and national identities are taking shape across the two nations. \*

#### OSHRIT BIRVADKER

Dr. Oshrit Birvadker, an expert on India's foreign policy, is a research fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS) and lecturer at Reichman University (IDC Herzliya).



Indian Jews offer prayers during a Sabbath service in a synagogue in Aizawl on November 29, 2008.  
Photo credit: DIPTENDU DUTTA / AFP



A rally against discrimination, hate, and violence on the steps of Brooklyn Borough Hall in New York, in March 2021. Photo credit: Anthony Behar/Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

# A COMMON STAND: A ANTI-HINDU AND AN





# JEWISH RESPONSE TO ANTI-ASIAN PREJUDICE





*by Shira Loewenberg*

In recent months, an alarming new trend in anti-Hindu activism in the United States has come to the fore as the latest manifestation of identity politics. The issue is complicated by internal politics as well as conflicting ideologies within the Indian American and South Asian communities in America. Yet blatant acts and hateful rhetoric targeting Hindu practitioners—or those identified as such, by their Indian names or ancestry—is something that the Jewish community can and should vociferously oppose.

I am proud to be associated with the American Jewish community and the American Jewish Committee (AJC), both of which have a long history of supporting civil rights in the US. Long preceding this pandemic, we have for decades demonstrated our support for Asian American communities. AJC was the first Jewish organization to support the efforts of Japanese Americans to receive a formal apology and reparations for their incarceration in US internment camps during World War II—an effort that succeeded with the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. AJC partnered with Chinese American and other Asian American groups in 2011 and 2012 to push for the passage of Senate and House resolutions expressing regret for the discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Laws of 1879 and 1904. We worked with Indian American groups in the wake of 9/11 to combat racism and discrimination and joined Chinese American partners in denouncing accusations of dual loyalty that have targeted Chinese

American scholars and researchers in recent years—an accusation all too familiar to Jews.

Over the last two years, spiking numbers of events reflecting anti-Asian hate spurred AJC and others in the Jewish community to write op-eds, sign joint letters, and attend rallies condemning the violence. Additionally, AJC's Asia Pacific Institute spearheaded support from over 50 Asian American national partner organizations for passage of the Jabara-Heyer No Hate Act. The legislation, which was signed into law in May 2021, enhances national reporting of hate crimes and improved security for targeted communities in the US.

Correspondingly, Asian American groups have also stood with us in our time of need, opposing antisemitism in its many forms and demonstrating solidarity. Following the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue fatal shooting in 2018, over 100 Chinese American organizations expressed their support for the Jewish community, including participation in the “Show Up for Shabbat” campaign organized by AJC. Several Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) organizations made statements in letters and social media relaying their condemnation and expressing unity, in the belief that an America that is dangerous for one minority is perilous for all.

Indian Americans have shown tremendous solidarity with the Jewish community at critical times when American Jews felt particularly vulnerable, such as when Jews have been targeted because of their perceived responsibility for the actions of Israel. Accompanying the surge of antisemitism during the COVID-19 pandemic, the fighting between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 sparked



A rally in New York in support of Asian American communities, in April 2021.  
Photo credit: Lev Radin/Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

numerous physical assaults, vandalism, and hateful accusations against Jews across the country. Indian American friends and partner organizations stepped up to show their support by participating in demonstrations decrying antisemitism and posting expressions of solidarity in the social media. Such public displays of alliance are enormously important, conveying the sense that we are not standing alone in our demand for equality, respect, and dignity. Being joined by others, just as we have stood up for them, gives us confidence and strength.

The Jewish and Indian American communities have in the last decade found common ground over a number of issues such as US immigration reform, religious and ethnic pluralism, and minority rights. In recent years, there is a new issue of convergence—of great

concern and reflecting a rift, actually, within the Indian American community, with broad repercussions in the wider public sphere. There is a growing anti-Hindu movement in the US that bears a strong resemblance to the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, as it is manifested on college campuses and in local politics.

Anti-Hindu sentiments—similar to many BDS protests—often grow out of the assertion that members of an American ethnic or religious group are by virtue of their identity (or even simply by name or perceived ethnic ancestry), affiliated with or supportive of the foreign government from which their ethnicity and religion originates. Just as BDS associates American Jews with the policies of an Israeli government, so too anti-Hindu activists associate Indian Americans with India and its

current ruling party, the BJP, and its allegedly nationalistic, Hindu-superiority agenda.

Just as Zionists are called racists and Islamophobes in some US circles, Hindu Indians are also called Islamophobes. Just as the true loyalty of American Jews is asserted to be to Israel, the loyalty of Indian American Hindus is asserted to be to India. The two communities—Indian Hindus and Jews—find themselves uniquely aligned in battles they face, primarily on college campuses, but growingly and alarmingly, in city councils. Seattle, Chicago, and Burlington are recent examples where anti-Hindu or BDS legislation, or both, were battled; more cities are sure to follow.

There is some overlap in the organizations aligned to support BDS and anti-Hindu activism. They are mostly progressive movements bound together by intersectionality and, thereby, support for all real and alleged victims of oppression, imperialism, racism, misogyny, discrimination, and authoritarianism that find unity in a call for justice. Additional groups have found a common vocabulary in their calls for a free Kashmir and free Palestine, both victims ostensibly under the boot of their respective Indian and Israeli oppressors. While a group like Stand with Kashmir, for example, may be focused on Kashmir, the organization's fellow travelers may include anti-Zionist, pro-Palestinian organizations that support BDS or similarly accuse Israel of being an apartheid state, a settler occupier of stolen land, or worse still, accuse Jews of being contemporary Nazis with genocidal intent. The differences between these geographically, culturally, and historically distinct situations is lost on most supporters, who see only a black and white, good versus evil situation with little attention or interest in understanding the details. They are allies in what they perceive as equivalent if not identical situations of victims and oppressors.

The growing friendship between India and Israel, demonstrated most effectively by former Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and current Indian Prime Minister Modi, is attributed by

critics of India's BJP government and of Prime Minister Modi, to both leaders' authoritarian tendencies, to their shared anti-democratic policies, but mostly, to both countries' alleged hatred of Muslims and a growing sense of nationalism defined by religious identity.

It is important to note that the anti-Hindu movement also significantly differs from antisemitism, anti-Zionism, and BDS. It is critical not only of Indian politics and nationalism, but it also of the Hindu religion and philosophy itself. Some Indian American organizations that are combatting anti-Hindu hatred are accused of stifling academic freedom and of threatening legitimate criticism and debate on college campuses. As Jewish organizations show their support and solidarity in combatting anti-Hindu rhetoric and activism, we must also be careful not to be drawn into internecine battles within the American Indian community. But where the rights of individuals, minorities, civil liberties, and the right to express personal identity in the US are being attacked—where the very fact of their identity is used to target and tar individuals with gross accusations of disloyalty, partisanship, bias, and hatred—the Jewish community can and must stand up for our Hindu friends in protecting their rights, as we expect them to stand up for ours.

While the pandemic has wrought undeniable damage on a personal and national level, it is heartening to know that out of tragedy can come something positive. Based upon the foundation of decades of engagement between the Jewish and AAPI communities, now intensified by the past two years of crisis, I am certain that our relationship with various communities moving forward will be marked by even greater empathy, understanding, comradeship, alliance, and good works. \*

#### SHIRA LOEWENBERG

Shira Loewenberg is director of the American Jewish Committee's Asia Pacific Institute.





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Germany: Protest against the ban of the Kurdistan Workers party PKK in Berlin.  
Photo credit: Michael Kuenne/PRESSCOV/Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

# THE GROWING POLITICAL INDIVIDUALS IN THE KURD



# ROLE OF PROMINENT ISH DIASPORA IN EUROPE



*by Veysi Dag*

**K**urdish diaspora communities in Europe are estimated to be between two to three million people, more than half of whom are in Germany, according to Kurdish institutions. Other significant Kurdish communities are in France, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Austria, and the Netherlands. The Kurdish diaspora in Europe is unusual in that its homeland is spread among four countries (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran).

By becoming involved in the political structures and institutionalized venues of their host societies, the Kurdish diasporas are signaling a shift in their approach by representing their local constituencies and becoming mouthpieces for their homeland compatriots.

The work of these diaspora communities on behalf of the Kurds in the homeland has assumed a variety of forms, ranging from the collection of donations and other humanitarian aid to political acts, such as demonstrations, rallies, sit-ins, and the occupation of public spaces in London, Berlin, Brussels, Stockholm, and other European metropolitan cities. In this vein, they aim to improve the cultural, economic, and political conditions of the Kurdish population in the Middle East; to challenge the politics of the Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian, and

Syrian regimes, and to influence the policies of European governments. Given the diverse forms that this engagement takes, what are its transnational implications for the political affairs of the Kurdish homeland?

Kurdish diasporas have formed community centers, initiatives, associations, and assemblies, which are heavily dominated by long-standing immigrants who are extremely politicized and follow the line of their political counterparts in the homeland. While the Kurdish Red Crescent, for example, collects donations from Kurdish immigrants in Europe and sends them as remittances to their compatriots in their home countries, the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) is an advocacy organization that raises awareness of Kurdish rights by seeking to pressure European governments to recognize the plight of the Kurds and change their policies toward the Middle Eastern regimes that are responsible for their oppression. These organizations, among others, have been vocal during the Kurdish battles against ISIS and the Turkish army in Iraq and Syria. Yet despite the dynamic mobilization of the Kurdish diasporas, European governments have rarely altered their policies toward those countries where the Kurdish populations face oppression. No European government has imposed sanctions on Turkey or other Middle Eastern countries for their repressive policies toward their Kurdish populations or even recognized the Kurdish demands and plight beyond basic humanitarian needs.





Amineh Kakabaveh speaks before the Swedish Parliament. Photo credit: REUTERS

Four major factors have contributed to suppressing the voice of the Kurdish diaspora community within European institutions and have undermined its potential impact. First and foremost is the lack of a Kurdish state, which represents the Kurdish population and defends its interests at the international level. As a result, Kurds in the European diaspora find themselves excluded from the political and diplomatic structures of the international community and the global economic and political system, which are built around the concept of the nation state. For example, despite the Kurds' battle against ISIS and their acknowledged sacrifices, Kurds in northern Syria have been permanently excluded from the political negotiation process and constitutional committees in Geneva, due to Turkey's diplomatic pressure on the UN and other players.

A second major factor in silencing the Kurdish voice relates to the ongoing diplomatic efforts of the previous and current Turkish governments—in particular, the Erdoğan regime—to legitimize their repressive policies against the Kurds both in Turkey and abroad by referring to these policies as being a “war against terrorism.” For example, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has asked the German chancellor in bilateral meetings as well as EU representatives to crack down on the mobilization of the Kurdish diasporas by highlighting the PKK's presence on the European and American terror lists. By linking Kurdish diaspora groups with terrorism, Turkey has pressured the European governments to effectively criminalize the Kurdish diaspora movement and its mobilization. These governments are then able to justify their lack



of response to the demands of the Kurds for humanitarian and political actions against repressive policies in their homeland.

The lack of strong reactions of European governments to the repeated Turkish invasions into Rojava, the Kurdish region in Syria, can be interpreted as such and manifests the success of the Turkish regime in blocking the diaspora's access to mainstream political and societal structures within the European host countries. According to Kurdish diaspora leaders in Germany, European governments have repressed their efforts to support the Kurdish struggle in the Middle East, while claiming that these European governments have always been supportive of Turkish demands in terms of crackdowns against Kurdish organizations and their mobilization.

A third reason for the Kurds' failure to have an impact on policies in Europe can be described as the self-isolation of the Kurds. Kurdish diasporas have often ignored political developments in their host societies and focused solely on addressing their own concerns relating to homeland events.

A fourth and final factor in the lack of an effective Kurdish diaspora voice is division and factionalism among the Kurdish diaspora groups themselves. Separated geographically among four countries (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria), linguistically (Northern Kurdish or Kurmanji and Zaza/Dimili, Central Kurdish or Sorani, and the Southern dialects of Hawrami/Gorani), religiously (Alevi, Kaka'i, Jewish, Yazidi, Sunni, and Shia) as well as tribally and ideologically, they have a history of internecine conflict. Within the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, for instance, there are serious divisions between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) dominated by the Barzani tribe, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by the Talabani family, and the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) controlled by Alevi, Kurdish, and Turkish leftist groups. Similarly, within the Kurdish part of Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), following the line of the PKK's

imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan in Turkey, and the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), following the line of the KDP's Masoud Barzani in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, are rivals. These divisions within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Kurdish region of Syria, which are just two of the four countries of the traditional Kurdish homeland, are reflected within the Kurdish communities in Europe. Given this reality, no diaspora umbrella organization unites all the disparate groups of Kurds in Europe, equivalent to the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations in the US.

Despite these factors that have contributed to the absence of organized Kurdish advocacy in Europe, an increasing number of Europeans of Kurdish descent have become mainstream political figures. Seven German men and women of Kurdish descent, whose parents immigrated either as guest workers or refugees, have in the last few years won local and national elections as members of either the Left Party (Gökay Akbulut in Germany's federal parliament, Fırat Ali Göçek in Berlin's parliament, and Cansu Özdemir in Hamburg's parliament) or the Green Party (Canan Bayram, Taylan Kurt, and Jiyan Omer in Berlin's parliament, and Muhterem Aras in the state parliament of Baden-Württemberg). In Sweden, five Kurdish Swedish citizens are in the national parliament representing three Swedish parties (Amineh Kakabaveh, formerly of the

**The Kurdish diaspora has started to move from the streets into the institutionalized venues and attempt to harness political support among civil society organizations.**

Left Party and now an Independent; Serkan Köse, Lawen Redar, and Roza Güclü Hedin of the Social Democrats; and Gulan Avcı of the Liberal Party), while another Kurdish Swedish citizen (Evin Incir of the Social Democrats) won a seat in the European Parliament. There are other examples of individual politicians of Kurdish descent, all in left-of-center parties, in the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, and Austria. These politicians have publicly supported agendas of their Kurdish compatriots in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. This support—along with that of their political parties—for the Kurds in the homeland has often become a point of conflict with the politicians of Turkish descent in these countries. For example, a group of Turkish Dutch politicians chose to leave the Dutch left-wing parties due to the sympathy these parties showed for the Kurdish cause during the battle of Kobani in 2014.

Within the local regional and national parliaments, these elected representatives of Kurdish descent have been successful in getting host states to offer Kurdish classes in public schools and nurseries. They also have organized formal support for Kurdish cultural and social festivals and have drawn attention within the institutional structures to political events affecting the Kurdish population and the discrimination directed against them by Turkey and other regional players in the Middle East. Many of these European Kurdish politicians have joined European political delegations and have visited Kurdish parties and associations in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.

As a result, the Kurdish diaspora has started to move from the streets into the institutionalized venues and has attempted to harness political support among civil society organizations, such as trade unions, churches, environmental organizations, and political parties. By becoming involved in the political structures and institutionalized venues of their host societies, the Kurdish diasporas are signaling a shift in their approach by representing their local constituencies and

becoming mouthpieces for their homeland compatriots. Their aim is to effect a change in their circumstances by making their claims resonate with a wider audience and by gaining a platform to legitimize their discourse against those of state actors.

Although the Kurdish diaspora groups still face major hurdles of a lack of cultural and political recognition within institutionalized settings due to the Kurds' statelessness—a situation that seems unlikely to change in the near future—by building alliances within European political parties, this diaspora can come closer to achieving the desired recognition of its local and national claims. Moreover, this engagement of prominent individuals in the Kurdish diaspora in Europe can help the Kurds in their countries of origin live alongside ancient and indigenous populations such as Jews, Yazidis, Assyrians, Druze, and Christians as well as Arabs and Turks, in a peaceful and democratic coexistence in the Middle East. \*

#### VEYSI DAG

Veysi Dag is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Political Science Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, working on the governance structures of the Kurdish diaspora community in Berlin and the structures of the Kurdish Jews in Jerusalem.



# IRAN'S PERFORMATIVE ZIONISM: AN INTERPRETA POLICY TOWARD ITS JEWIS

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi at a press conference in Tehran. Photo credit: Shota Mizuno / The Yomiuri Shimbun via Reuters Connect



# ANTISEMITISM AND ANTI- TION OF IRAN'S CURRENT H COMMUNITY AND ISRAEL





*by Edward Luttwak*

I ran's public policies of hostility to Jews in general (but not to its own Jewish community), which have gone as far as denying the Holocaust, are obviously intended to win greater acceptance for the Shiite regime in a largely Sunni Middle East. Likewise, its threats to annihilate Israel are intended for Arab consumption, to advance Iran's attempt to claim regional leadership in spite of intense, deeply rooted anti-Persian sentiments, along the lines of "we hate Israel more than you do" so it does not matter that we are Persian. Israel must act against the physical threats emanating from Iran both directly and diplomatically by every means possible, but it should not provide the resonance of "alarmed audience reactions" to the Iranian regime's performative threats and boasts.

Jewish communities, once omnipresent, hardly exist anymore in the Muslim world. Exceptions are in Turkey under sufferance; in Morocco under monarchical benevolence; in Tunisia in small and dwindling numbers; in Azerbaijan where Jews live in unique amity in a country strategically allied with Israel; and finally in Iran. Although the total number of Jews still living in Iran does not exceed 8,500, it is still much more than in all Arab countries combined. This is indeed remarkable, considering Iran's more hostile Shiite jurisprudence, its history of murderous

pogroms, its recent bouts of official Holocaust-denial antisemitism, and incessant anti-Israel sloganeering that includes officially proclaimed, if implicit, genocidal intentions.

Inertia is the strongest force in nature, its Jewish humans included, but the persistence of Jewish life—with a full panoply of institutions in Tehran and at least some functioning synagogues elsewhere—does strongly suggest that another factor is at play. In actual practice, Iran's rulers have been more friendly to Jews than their counterparts in all Arab countries, except for Morocco and Tunisia, while at the same time, they have incessantly striven to convey the very opposite impression.

It is easy to identify the purpose of this performative hostility. It seeks to diminish, even nullify, the significance of Iran's Shiism in addressing the Sunni majority of the Muslim world: We hate the Jews more than you do, and that is what really matters, not the (deep and increasing) jurisprudential and liturgical differences between us. Given the depths of anti-Shiite hostility in Sunni lands, ranging from the constant persecution of Egypt's 1% Shiite minority (they can be arrested for "spreading Shiism"), the Saudi repression of its Shiites, to the frequent bomb attacks against Pakistan's Shiites at prayer, and lately also the blasphemy prosecutions entailing the death penalty that are something of a Pakistani specialty, Iran's performative antisemitism is clearly diversionary in intent. Actually, Iran's conduct with its Jews can be more simply described as fraudulent, with all Sunnis as the

targets but Sunni Arabs especially, because Iran's hegemonial ambitions encompass the Arab world but hardly extend to the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia.

One problem that the Iranian regime has encountered in the past is that its own local authorities have sometimes confused performance with the real thing. For example, back in 1999 the misnamed Intelligence Department arrested 13 Jews in Shiraz and Isfahan (synagogues functioned in both cities and still do), including five merchants, a rabbi, two university professors, three teachers in private Hebrew schools, a kosher butcher, and a 16-year-old boy, accusing them of spying for Israel. The evidence was conclusive, the spies confessed, and death penalties seemed imminent (Iran's rulers lead the world in executing minors), but unaccountably only prison sentences followed and hardly long ones—the shortest a mere four years and the longest only 13. Yet more laxity ensued because the prisoners were released in short order one by one, with the last one released on February 19, 2003; evidently Tehran had intervened to enlighten the benighted provincials.

**The total number of Jews still living in Iran is remarkable, considering Iran's more hostile Shiite jurisprudence, its history of murderous pogroms, its recent bouts of official Holocaust-denial antisemitism, and incessant anti-Israel sloganeering.**

Among the tens of thousands judicially murdered in Iran since the Islamic regime was installed (quite a few under the Tehran prosecutor Ebrahim Raisi, now Iran's newly installed president), Iran executed 17 Iranian Jews in the early years of the regime—starting with the richest: the industrial magnate and philanthropist Habib Elghanian. First betrayed and imprisoned by the Shah, then released and safely in the US when the Shah fell, Elghanian unwisely returned to Iran, where he was arrested and executed on May 9, 1979, in the third month of the new regime. That shocking event was followed by the emigration of thousands of Iran's Jews but instead of welcoming their departure, Iran's new authorities insisted that Elghanian was executed for his supposed crimes and not because he was the country's most prominent Jew, thereupon issuing multiple assurances to the remaining Jews that they had nothing to fear qua Jews.

Their validity was paradoxically affirmed most clearly by Iran's President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a recidivist Holocaust denier. When Haroun Yashayaei, Tehran's most prominent Jewish leader, sent Ahmadinejad an open letter on January 26, 2006, calling on him to cease and desist, which was immediately taken up by the world press and then followed by a parallel statement on February 11, 2006 by Maurice Motamed, then the incumbent of the Jewish seat in Iran's parliament, Ahmadinejad sent no police to arrest them or goons to kill them. Instead, he responded with lame excuses and a bit of backtracking. Reality emerged when Ahmadinejad could not follow up the performance with the real thing by stringing up the two Jewish complainers, as Saddam Hussein would have done. Even if he had wanted to, which I doubt very much, he would not have been allowed to do so by higher authority: Notoriously, Iran's president is not even a *primus inter pares*.

The regime's endeavor to lead a predominantly Sunni region has not been made any easier by its meager record of killing Jews, when compared to the impressive number of Sunnis it has killed. Iran killed large numbers of Sunnis in the Iran–Iraq

war that it did not initiate, but also in its repression of Sunni Kurds in West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Kermanshah, and of Sunni Turkmen in Golestan and North Khorasan; of Sunni Baloch in Sistan and Baluchistan; and through its support of Shiite militias in Iraq, whose Sunni victims were exceeded by the number of Syrian Sunnis killed from 2011 onward by the Iranian-supported Assad regime, by Iran's Revolutionary Guards; by Shiite militiamen recruited from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even India; and by Hezbollah in various guises. The Sunni victims of Hezbollah certainly outnumber the Jews it has killed since its inception.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the complaints of the two unmolested Jews did not dissuade Ahmadinejad from promoting the regime's anti-Jewish credentials. Having already denied the Holocaust, Ahmadinejad sponsored an International Conference to Review the Global Vision of the Holocaust, which was convened on December 11, 2006. No historian even minimally reputable attended, an Arab-Israeli who wanted to come was denied a visa on his Israeli passport, and those who did come were an embarrassing menagerie of eccentrics; but the conference was, nevertheless, a success in affirming the regime's antisemitic credentials, especially because an exhibition of cartoons mocking the Holocaust launched a few months earlier on August 14, 2006 had already revved up the predictable global outrage.

These very imaginative efforts certainly attracted the approval of Jew-haters everywhere, but they proved to be of little value in winning over the region's Sunnis. One reason is the persistent and widely known refusal to allow any Sunni mosques in Tehran. Although there is at least one known Sunni place of prayer (and there must be others), it has no cupola, no minaret, and no audible call to prayer. In fact, it amounts to an unmarked common room on the ground floor of a rather nice apartment building, in a setup that is more furtive than discrete, certainly as compared to Tehran's several functioning synagogues, all housed in

dedicated and duly identified buildings, and at least one with external signage in English for foreign visitors. There are many Sunni mosques elsewhere in Iran, so we can assume that the regime's prohibition of an overt Sunni mosque in Tehran is meant to convey the message that only its own Shiite Islam is valid, even if Sunni practices are tolerated in peripheral areas.

The regime has certainly done much better with its anti-Israel efforts, which are meant, above all, to evoke Arab support for a Persian regime. Those efforts have not been undermined by the blatant contradictions of its antisemitic posturing but then again, their total costs have been enormously greater—sufficiently so to have seriously degraded living standards in Iran. Those costs begin with the cumulatively large sums given to Palestinian armed organizations, whose extreme verbal bellicosity is not matched by their actual achievements in damaging Israel (compare their total results since 1967—the very latest Hamas attacks included—with what the IRA achieved in Northern Ireland with some Armalite rifles). It would be interesting to calculate Iran's total "Palestinian" costs since January 19, 1979, the day when Yasser Arafat personally claimed the building that had housed the Israeli mission in Tehran for his own Palestine Liberation Organization. In a manner quite typical for Arafat, that glorious starting point was also the climax of a relationship quickly ruined by Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein's aggression against Iran; it led to the swift expulsion of the Fatah envoys who had just settled down in Tehran with their families—a faint anticipation of the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians consequent to Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

The cumulative effect of more than 40 years of pro-Palestinian policies by an increasingly unpopular regime is manifest in the chants of "death to Palestine" by Iranians protesting economic conditions, first recorded in 2018 and increasingly common thereafter.

In reality, of course, Iran's spending on the Palestinians, including the continuing



Iranian Jews prepare for prayers at the Abrishami synagogue at Palestine street in Tehran.  
Photo credit: REUTERS

support of both Hamas and its very own proxies, Islamic Jihad in Gaza, is dwarfed by Iran's altogether greater costs for Hezbollah that can be attributed to its anti-Israel efforts, as distinct from the pursuit of its own political ambitions within Lebanon, and its protracted anti-Sunni campaigning in Syria.

Much more difficult to estimate are the costs to Iran's reputation of the frequent official calls for the destruction of Israel, the prematurely gleeful announcements of its imminent demise, and incessant "death-to-Israel" chants. The frequency and intensity of these calls, however, have not escaped entropy any more than the once popular practice of walking over the Israeli flag that is now widely viewed as a childish vulgarity (when a Jewish university professor

refused to do so, there was no retaliation).

Iran's verbal attacks against Israel have certainly been costly: They have legitimized Israel's actual attack against both human and material targets in Iran through diverse covert means, from motorcycle-borne and robot executioners to computer viruses, which have cumulatively inflicted great damage on Iran—both material damage, which is in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and the reputational costs of the regime's failure to deter, prevent, or punish Israel's attacks.

In addition, there are the direct and indirect (sanction-imposed) costs of whatever part of Iran's nuclear-weapon and missile efforts since 1981 one cares to attribute to its anti-Israel intentions, as opposed to its own



national aspirations, not least as the neighbor of perpetually unfriendly and nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Whatever those Israel-related nuclear costs might be, they are not offset by the strategic value of prospective nuclear-attack options against Israel. That is so because all such options are pre-neutralized by Israel's own capabilities as a country reputed to have both many deliverable nuclear weapons, and reliable "second-strike" delivery means with ranges sufficient to reach all parts of Iran. The one axiom of international politics that cannot be overturned is that "mutual assured destruction" yields no useful options.

It is true that the mere possession of nuclear weapons—regardless of their actual capabilities and limitations—would enhance Iran's overall standing in the regions of North Africa and the Near East as a power to be reckoned with. Yet that is very likely to impede rather than advance its hegemonial ambitions, by intensifying the already intense anti-Persian sentiments prevalent in the Arab world. Arabs call the Persians *ajamis*, foreigners, literally "people from the [Persian] plateau," in a manner exactly analogous to the classical Greek use of *barbaroi* for those who could not speak urbane Greek but only back-country dialects or, even worse, non-Greek languages.

The difference, however, is that the *ajamis* were not culturally, technically, or organizationally inferior to the Arabs of the first Caliphate who defeated them in 663, as the *barbaroi* had been to metropolitan Greeks. On the contrary, the Persians were greatly superior to the Arabs in every aspect of civilization; yet they were incapable of defending themselves in 663 because their Sasanian Empire had just sustained catastrophic damage following a devastating 26-year war with the Byzantine Empire, in which Constantinople had been besieged, while the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon was conquered and pillaged by the Byzantine army.

It was that accidental victory that validated and hugely amplified the bellicose promises

of Islam with immense consequences that persist until today, but the resulting explosion of religious self-confidence evidently did not suffice to overcome Arab resentment evoked by cultural inferiority. What happened next was the near obliteration of pre-Islamic Persian culture. (Centuries later, it was triumphantly revived by the *Shahnameh* of Ferdowsi, the epic "Book of Kings" that poetically recounts Persian imperial history from the Achaemenids to the Sasanian dynasty via Alexander and the Arsacids, inspiring Persian writings till this day.)

Such is the depth of Arab diffidence toward the Persians that Iran's nuclear endeavors, which cannot yield useful capabilities against Israel—whose strike-back deterrence is already in place—cannot win Arab allegiance either. On the contrary, Iran's nuclear efforts contribute to the threat perceptions that have induced Arab governments to cooperate with Israel, increasingly overtly of late.

Iran's long-range missile endeavors, whose large costs degrade the country's standard of living, have habitually been associated with the long-promised onslaught against Israel. (To remove any doubts, Iranian ballistic missiles are periodically decorated before TV cameras with bloodthirsty threats.) Long-range ballistic missiles with non-nuclear warheads are ineffectual; as of this writing, Iran is seemingly still years away from acquiring the real thing, but its long-range ballistic missile threat has long evoked a strong response from Israel, which is now the only country in the world to operate ballistic missile defenses whose coverage extends across its entire territory.

It would be foolishly dismissive to describe Iran's entire long-range missile effort as performative, yet there is a nagging fact that suggests just that: A regime that has spent huge sums to acquire ballistic missiles that can deliver warheads over the thousand nautical miles that separate Iran from Israel, has scarcely tried to attack Israel with much cheaper shorter-range missiles when it could do so abundantly from adjacent Syrian territory. True, Israel would



Lebanese and Palestinian youths burn a make-shift Israeli flag as they raise a Palestinian one during a demonstration at the “Garden of Iran” Park, which was built by the Iranian government on July 21, 2017, protesting against new Israeli security measures implemented in Jerusalem. Photo credit: Mahmoud Zayyat / AFP

have responded with a sustained bombardment campaign that would entail heavy casualties for the launch crews. Although nothing could have deprived Iran of the advantage of attacking an enemy with short-range weapons, whose counterattacks would require long-range weapons, Iran once again preferred performance to the real thing.

All the above does not mean that Israel's protracted effort to oppose Iran's nuclear and missile endeavors with every available means has been misguided and should now be diminished. It does suggest, however, that Israel's leaders should stop providing the incentive of “alarmed audience reactions” to the regime's performative threats and boasts and should stop the new and unwise practice of boastfully revealing covert operations

against Iran's nuclear and missile-production installations. Indeed, let them not mention Iran at all, and instead speak of Persia—as the former word evokes alarms, the latter evokes poetry. \*

#### — EDWARD LUTTWAK

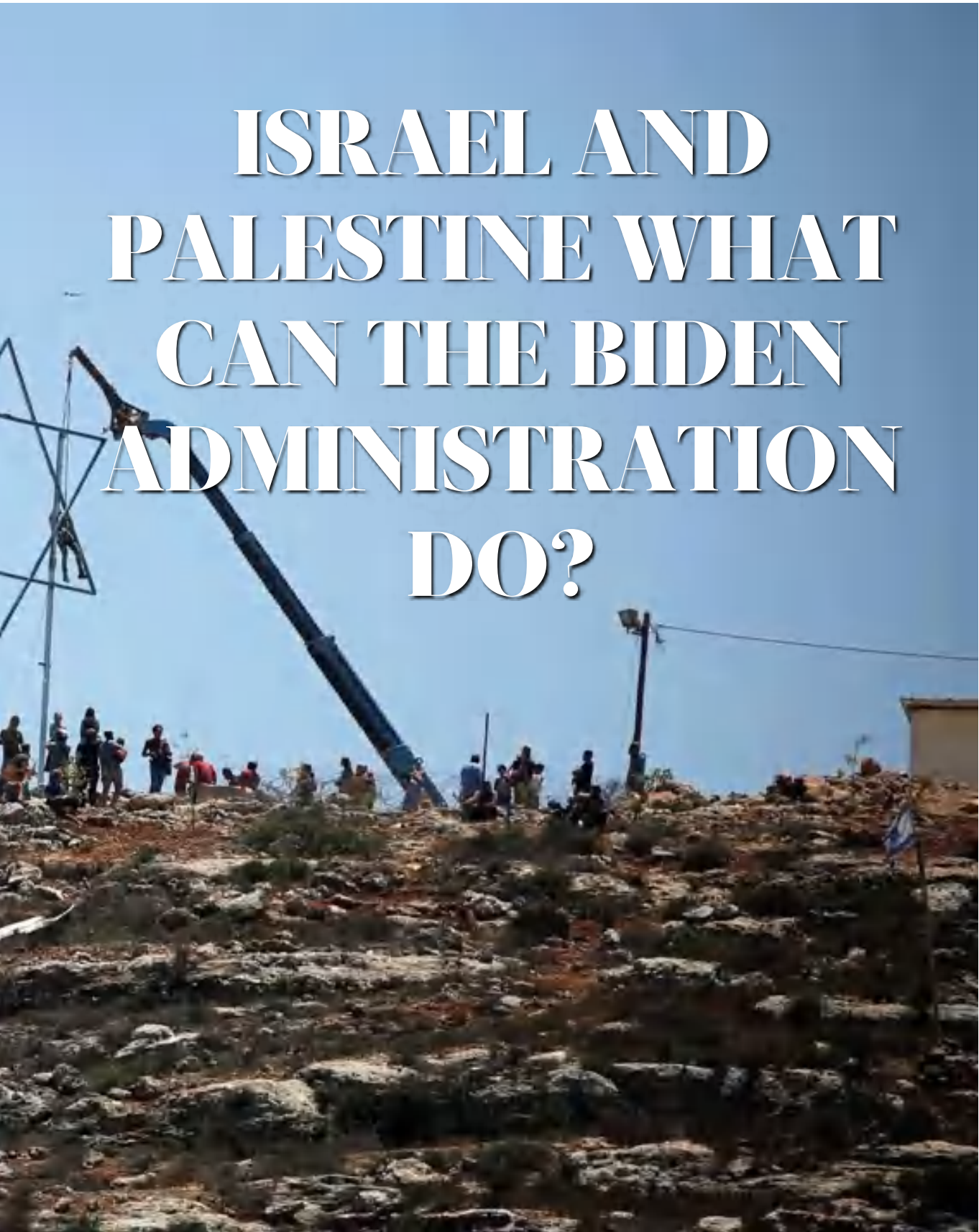
Edward Luttwak is the author of several books, mostly on military strategy, including the widely cited *The Rise of China and the Logic of Strategy* (Harvard University Press). He first studied Iran in the context of his Byzantine studies, now partly published in his *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Harvard University Press). His books have been published in 25 languages including Hebrew.



A third party is needed. Israeli settlers erect poles with the Star of David during a protest by Palestinians in the West Bank.  
Photo credit: REUTERS/Raneen Sawafta



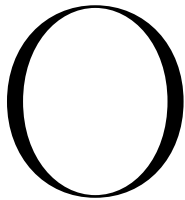
# ISRAEL AND PALESTINE WHAT CAN THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION DO?







by Yossi Beilin



n the eve of President Joe Biden's entry to the White House, several think tanks in Washington published some detailed papers about his policy options in the Middle East. Their authors were media commentators, academicians, and former officials from the Clinton and Obama administrations.

One of the most cited papers was published by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) in December 2020. Authored by Ilan Goldenberg, Tamara Cofman Wittes, and Michael Koplow (the first two are now in the Biden administration.), it was titled "A New U.S. Strategy for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict." Its real title should have been "Since the Palestinian-Israeli problem is going to be very low on Biden's agenda, what are the things that can be done to prevent explosions that may burden the administration with having to invest time and energy in that region?"

The main argument of this paper is to restore the pre-Trump era, return the PLO office in Washington, reinstate the American consulate (for the Palestinians) in Jerusalem, and return finances to the Palestinian Authority and UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency). The paper asserts that "in the current moment, negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians may not be fruitful" and suggests steps to keep open the option for the two-state solution. This paper became a self-fulfilling prophecy. This "hands off" policy, while repeating publicly the view of the Democrats about the main guidelines for the permanent agreement, became the official policy of the White House from January 20, 2021 until now.

President Biden knows the Middle East much better than most of his predecessors and has a very clear view about the way to solve the conflict, which corresponds closely to the Clinton Parameters of December 2000. He worries that in less than a year, his party may lose its current frail advantage in both chambers of the Congress, and in the coming months, he intends to invest time and energy to implement his ambitious domestic agenda. In foreign affairs, as expected, China will be in the focus of his efforts.

But no leader of the free world can pick only one or two issues and dedicate all efforts to them to the exclusion of all others. Eschewing the Middle East conflict is not an option. Although all of Biden's predecessors in the last 50 years were advised not to touch this region, most of them found themselves very much involved in trying to find solutions for the tensions between Israel and its neighbors, and while some succeeded, most failed.

Less than five months after his inauguration, President Biden had to deal with the Israeli

**Putting things back in place isn't as easy as uprooting them. Undoing the perceived wrongs of the Trump era while avoiding steps that may hamper a permanent solution seems nice on paper but totally detached from reality.**



**What will be his legacy?** Prime Minister Naftali Bennett sits next to Yair Lapid at a weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem. Photo credit: REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun

military campaign “Operation Guardian of the Walls,” the first violent confrontation between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip during his term. The president found himself calling Benjamin Netanyahu, at the time Israel’s prime minister, the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, and other regional leaders, to try to achieve a ceasefire between the parties. It was a reminder for Biden that an arbitrary decision to avoid dealing with the Israeli–Palestinian issue, just because his predecessors had failed, was neither feasible nor realistic.

The formation of a new and surprising government in Israel, whose main common denominator was the wish to depose Netanyahu, presented President Biden with a new dilemma. The new government, which was established in June this year, is currently led by Naftali Bennett, who is ideologically to the right while most of the coalition members are identified with the center-left. This, in turn, is a good news

for the American administration; however, Bennett’s declarations regarding the Palestinian question pose difficulties for the Biden administration.

President Biden does not understand how this young (age 49) and intelligent Israeli Zionist leader can support Israel’s continued presence in the West Bank and oppose its partition, even though it means that Israel would lose its title as a Jewish and democratic state, as this territory will not have a Jewish majority. Biden does not understand why Bennett declares—contrary to most of his predecessors, including Netanyahu—that under no circumstances will he be ready to accept a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and why he is not ready to meet with President Abbas, whom Biden considers a man of peace.

Still, Biden is trying to cater to Bennett’s political needs, including the acceptance of the idea that no Palestinian state will be established

in the current circumstances. He prefers to keep his criticism of the Israeli prime minister in the private channel between the two of them, but he knows that it will be very difficult for him to avoid tensions in the long run.

Biden is trying to implement the recommendations of the policy papers issued by the different Washington think tanks, but he finds it very difficult to do so. Putting things back in place isn't as easy as uprooting them, such as reestablishing the PLO office in Washington or the American Consulate in East Jerusalem. The plan to undo the perceived wrongs of the Trump era and yet refrain from taking steps that may hamper the permanent solution seems nice on paper but totally detached from reality.

Prime Minister Bennett got his position as part of a rotation agreement and will hold it for two years. In August 2023 he will have to step down and hand over the premiership to Yair Lapid, the head of a centrist party and a supporter of the two-state solution. Bennett is unlikely to ever return as prime minister, as he heads a small religious-rightist party, which won only six seats in the Knesset in the last elections, and, according to some opinion polls, is not likely to cross the four-seat threshold in the next elections. Only by a miracle could he once again become the head of the government just by joining the coalition. Bennett, a high-tech millionaire, may decide to leave politics and get back to high-tech, once his political peak is behind him. In the meantime he wants to "reduce the conflict," help the Palestinians economically, improve their daily lives, and build more housing units for Israelis in the occupied territories, to make it more difficult to establish a future Palestinian state. In that respect, Bennett is pushing the envelope vis-à-vis the Biden administration in the hope that the Americans will turn a blind eye to what is happening in the West Bank during his term.

But Bennett knows that this kind of behavior will not be his legacy. He knows that some prime ministers, including those who stayed in power for long—such as Yitzhak Shamir—left no mark on Israel's history. Yet there have been cases of prime ministers who do leave their mark even in short periods of time, such as Pierre Mendes-France, who served as France's prime minister

only for 10 months but ended its military involvement in Vietnam, thus leaving a huge impression on France's history. If Bennett is convinced to take a bold step toward peace, he could save Israel as a Jewish-Democratic state and secure his place in the Israeli Hall of Fame.

At the age of 86, President Mahmud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority is approaching the end of his political career. He has been considered the most prominent figure in the Palestinian peace camp, and he was the most courageous Palestinian who confronted Yasser Arafat during the Second Intifada and criticized him for allowing a return to armed struggle. Mahmud Abbas was my partner, behind the scenes, in the Oslo Process, and again my counterpart in the Beilin–Abu Mazen understandings for a possible permanent status agreement (1995). As a Palestinian nationalist, Abbas believes in the benefits of close relationship with Israel and is ready for compromises, as he has proven in his negotiations with top Israelis.

Abbas draws his legitimacy from the fact he is one of the founding fathers of Fatah (established in 1959). He was democratically elected as president in 2005 (by 62% of the voters), but since then there have been no new elections. The Palestinian Authority is far from being a success story, and clouds of corruption hover over it. Abbas himself is considered a weak leader (especially since the split between Fatah and Hamas led to the latter's violent takeover of Gaza in July 2007). Nevertheless, the entire world recognizes him as the legitimate Palestinian

**All parties badly need a solution, but no one is willing to initiate anything of substance. The Biden administration has to take the bull by its horns and put an innovative offer on the table.**

leader, and any agreement he may sign, will be respected internationally. If an agreement is not signed in the near future, it may take years for his successor to acquire enough clout to make the compromises needed for achieving peace.

Abbas may step down having naively tried to lead his people to peace with Israel and having failed. For him too, a “*deus ex machina*” initiative, which meets a substantial part of his demands, will be more than welcome, even if its full implementation will be achieved by his successors.

The hawkish background of Bennett and the weakness of Abbas create a situation that is unlikely to bring about regional initiatives. As a result, after conducting low profile consultations both with the Israeli and the Palestinian leaderships, it seems that a third party initiative is needed. The obvious third party is the US. The most realistic initiative is an Israeli–Palestinian confederation, which, as a matter of fact, was already offered in the UNGA Partition resolution 181, in 1947.

The confederation should allow the Israelis who live today in the West Bank, and who wish to stay there, to remain there as Israeli citizens and as Palestinian permanent residents. The same number of Palestinian citizens should be invited to live in Israel with a similar status.

The evacuation of a large Israeli population is the main difficulty for any Israeli leader seeking to withdraw from the West Bank, and such an arrangement may facilitate the way to the two-state solution. While both sides will benefit from the high level of coordination in infrastructure, health, agriculture, they will mainly benefit economically and in the high level of security coordination.

The model for this confederation should be the European Union because it devoutly keeps the independence and the sovereignty of its members while developing its internal ties gradually, including the permeability of the borders. The Palestinian state should be established first, and only later—the confederation.

At the beginning, there will be no joint political institutions, but only coordinating bodies. There will be no joint leadership, parliament, or cabinet, and the two governments

will have to decide whether or not they adopt the advice of the coordinating bodies. Later on, the high level government officials on both sides will meet to consider different proposals for the liberalization of the arrangements between the two parties.

Both sides need a border. The Palestinians deserve to fulfill their right of self determination and to have their independent state based on the 1967 line with equal land swaps; Israel needs a border if it wishes to remain a Jewish and democratic state. Any future border will be artificial, and its gradual permeability will be much more natural, provided it will not generate security threats. Both peoples have historic bonds to the whole area to the west of the Jordan River, and if the confederation is a success story, both sides will move freely in the Holy Land. This will minimize the frustrations that are expected on both sides if the partition is accompanied by high walls.

Raising the idea of a Palestinian–Israeli confederation could renew the need for a solution and return it to the political agenda. The one-state solution, which is regretfully becoming a reality as long as nothing else is happening, is devastating to both sides, and a unilateral withdrawal of Israel from the West Bank is only a last resort solution, if everything else fails. The Biden administration should be careful not to fall into the trap of the different “red herrings,” (like addressing the money sent to officials in Gaza, or the ways we can all deceive ourselves by reestablishing an American Consulate in Jerusalem without calling it a consulate). It has to take the bull by its horns and put an innovative offer on the table. All the parties need a solution badly. No one can really afford to wait, but none will initiate anything of substance. The next explosion is around the corner, and it can be prevented. \*

#### — YOSSEI BEILIN

Yossi Beilin is a former Knesset member, justice minister and deputy foreign minister. Among the policy achievements he contributed to are the 1993 Oslo Accords and the 2003 Geneva Initiative, as well as the Birthright program of heritage trips to Israel.





An Israeli soldier along the Gaza border.  
Photo credit: Iliia Yefimovich/dpa

# POWER OVER FORCE: A NEW POLICY FOR ISRAEL







*by Ofer Shelah*

**I**srael is a regional power in the Middle East that is stronger militarily, economically, and diplomatically than its foes. The time has come for it to act accordingly and seek to promote its interests through regional alliances and a vision that would bring the US back to the Middle East. This is the only way to reach an equilibrium with Iran, prevent it from becoming nuclear, and move toward a possible agreement with the Palestinians.

In its 73rd year of existence, Israel seems more secure than ever. The recent annual commemoration of the Yom Kippur War only reminded Israelis how far removed Israel is today from the major wars fought against large enemy armies camping on Israel's borders. Israel's neighbors have either reached peace agreements with it (Egypt and Jordan) or they have disintegrated from within (Syria and Lebanon), their armies weakened.

The bad memories of the Second Intifada, with over 700 Israelis murdered in terrorist attacks, are also a thing of the past: An efficient preventive system, fueled by highly accurate intelligence from the Shin Bet, thwarts most of the attempts by Hamas and other organizations to renew suicide bombing and other acts of

terrorism. In the north, Hezbollah—by far the most threatening of Israel's neighboring enemies—has been restrained since 2006, largely due to mutual deterrence following the Second Lebanon War. The unstable situation in Gaza erupts now and then in cycles of violence, but effective defense systems—Iron Dome in the air and the underground wall against tunnels crossing into Israel—help keep the number of casualties to a minimum.

Militarily, economically, and diplomatically, Israel is by far stronger than any of its immediate foes. Yet this situation, welcome as it is, has hardly changed the way Israelis view the world, nor—more importantly—the way different Israeli governments have acted on security matters. The main reason for Israel's persistent fear mongering is the difficulty that we have of ridding ourselves of fears that are deeply rooted in our collective consciousness.

It is time to consider a new strategy, based on the realization that Israel is powerful. But first we should define what “powerful” really means and attend to the crucial difference between power and force: A powerful nation does not run around flexing its muscles all over the place, as Israel seems to do in too many instances. Instead, it conducts itself as a power, viewing its environment through the lens of its relationships with other powers, regional and global. It seeks an equilibrium compatible with its basic interests, rather than exercising force as



**Use of force without implementing the grand strategy of a power is not likely to deliver long-term results.**

Debris fly following an Israeli strike in Khan Younis, Gaza Strip, in May 2021.

Photo credit: REUTERS/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa

**The Middle East is always changing, always in a flux: What you didn't do in relatively safe times will come to haunt you once they are gone.**

if every challenge is an existential threat.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Major General Gadi Eisenkot, former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, revealed that Israel “attacked thousands of targets” in Syria and Lebanon during his four-year tenure. Yet this force-wielding did little to promote Israel’s long-term interests vis-à-vis its various challengers. Use of force without implementing the grand strategy of a power is not likely to deliver long-term results.

If indeed, as I maintain, Israel’s failure to act as a power has to do with internal politics, mass psychology, and the lack of a proper decision-making process, it is a high time for a change. Unless it begins to form and implement



this “power doctrine,” Israel faces the risk of weakening from within and losing its edge in a changing world. The Middle East is always changing, always in a flux: What you didn’t do in relatively safe times will come to haunt you once they are gone.

The power policy should manifest itself, first and foremost, vis-à-vis Israel’s two most important external challenges—the threat of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons and the future of the Israeli–Palestinian relationships (in the plural, given the different prospects of Gaza and the Palestinian Authority). The first may come to a head in the immediate future; the latter presents a threat to Israel’s long-term prospects as a Jewish and democratic state, a self-definition that inherently entails a built-in tension.

The major fault line in the Middle East has become the rift between stability-seeking countries and the disruptive (and often destructive) forces of radical Islamism, whether Shiite (led by Iran) or Sunni (the Islamic State, al-Qaida, and the like). Israel has, of course, deep common interests with those who seek stability, and faces direct threats from the Iran axis and the forces of international terrorism.

So far, Israel has reacted to this relatively new situation in the limited manner of a “villa in the jungle”—a term often used by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak. It has strengthened its security cooperation with its immediate and not-so-immediate neighbors, exploited the turmoil in Syria to wage an aerial campaign against the arming of Hezbollah, and finally, signed the Abraham Accords, bringing about peace agreements with countries who were, de facto, never at war with Israel and, in fact, already had rather extensive economic relations with it.

The signing of the Abraham Accords had to do both with Israel’s limited outlook of its place in the region and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s obvious opposition to moving forward on the Palestinian issue. In fact, Netanyahu saw the Abraham Accords as proof

that, contrary to what others thought, he was right in claiming that Israel could reach peace with Arab countries without consenting to the creation of a Palestinian state.

But in his speech at Bar-Ilan University in 2009, even Netanyahu acknowledged that peace with the Palestinians is essential to preserving a Jewish and democratic Israel. Moreover, a strategy based on the idea of Israel as a regional power is the only way of extricating the stalled peace process from the morass it is in now.

A nuclear Iran would present an existential threat to Israel and a dangerous disruption of the equilibrium in the Middle East. This isn’t debatable; but the current use of force—covert, diplomatic, economic, and the threat of military action—has done little to prevent it from becoming reality. After years of “maximum pressure,” exerted by the Trump administration at Israel’s behest and accompanied by covert operations on Iranian soil, Iran is closer to the bomb than ever.

A powerful Israel should seek a balance with Iran. I’m not talking about negotiations, which I believe are impossible with the present Iranian regime. Iran is a regional power, with a rich history, a deep sense of its place in the region, and also with many interests. Some of its neighbors present much greater challenges to its aspirations than Israel does. Iran sees itself as leader of the Shiite world and protector of Shiites throughout the Middle East. Many of its actions, including the strides it takes toward having weapons of mass destruction, are rooted in the perceived threats to its regime.

We should broaden the field of negotiations with Iran. Instead of using rhetoric of bringing them to submission (“the object is to bring the Iranian regime to a point in which it will have to choose between its own survival and the bomb,” former Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon used to declare), Israel should seek to work with other countries to help create this balance, understanding that Iran will not be brought down to its knees.

First and foremost, this entails bringing the US back to the Middle East. The one thing the Obama and Trump administrations shared was the desire to leave the Middle East and its unsolvable problems behind. It was and is for the US a region “best avoided,” in the words of former President Obama, and this seems to be the case for the Biden administration as well. Indeed, the priorities of the Biden administration are elsewhere, from the global power competition with China to the climate crisis to internal matters.

The only possible way, if at all possible, of bringing the US back to the region, is to present to Washington a vision of a Middle East led by its allies—Israel standing with the stability-seeking regimes of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Gulf States, Jordan, and the countries in North Africa. This alliance can work together with the US and other global forces to broaden the field of negotiations, assuage some of the regime’s fears, and present an alternative that would render the pursuit of the nuclear bomb harmful to Iran itself. This alliance should negotiate with and bring to the table many of Iran’s neighbors, from Turkey in the west to the former Soviet countries in the north, and all the way to Pakistan and China.

Israel should draw red lines in terms of the armed presence of hostile forces in its immediate environment, but it should recognize that it is futile and harmful to chase after every militia crossing the border into Syria. In time, Russia and even the Assad regime will have differences with the Iranians; by seeing everything through the tactical lens of “where can we bomb,” Israel only delays that point in time.

None of this, of course, is possible without real progress on the Palestinian front. Although most of the Arab world doesn’t seem to care much for the Palestinians, the difference between the shallow framework of the Abraham Accords and a real new reality in the Middle East is the resumption of moving toward an agreement with the Palestinians. In fact, a regional view is essential to extricating the

Palestinian issue out of its present deadlock.

There will be risks involved. As papers prepared by the IDF Planning Branch and American think tanks have shown, possible measures could lower those risks to an acceptable level. The main point, though, is that a powerful nation is strong enough to take risks: and a power-based strategy is essential to move Israel toward real stability and a future filled with hope. \*

#### OFER SHELAH

Ofer Shelah, a former Knesset member and a veteran journalist, is a senior research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv. He served on the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee and chaired the State Control Committee. Shelah is the author of four books on the IDF and Israel’s defense policy.



# AUSTRALIA'S SUBMARINE DECISION UNDER THE MICROSCOPE



French President Emmanuel Macron and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull stand on the deck of a Royal Australian Navy submarine in Sydney, 2018. Photo credit: Ludovic Marin/Abaca Press





*by Paul Monk*

**T**he Australian government informed the French government on September 15, 2021 that it was withdrawing from a large signed contract to develop next generation conventional submarines. The Australian government then announced that it would instead be acquiring British or American nuclear-powered submarines to replace its current Collins class diesel electric submarines. This has created a diplomatic rift between Canberra and Paris.

The decision was taken for three reasons. Relations with the French were not good, and ongoing rancor over the terms and conditions of the contract were irritating powerful people in Canberra. The strategic environment has been rapidly deteriorating; although France is a marginal player in Indo-Pacific affairs, it has been closer to China than either London or Washington and Canberra saw it as a less than fully reliable strategic partner if push came to shove. Finally, Washington and London resolved to stand up to China and made it clear to Canberra that they see Australia as an indispensable strategic ally in the looming geostrategic confrontation. I have been an observer of these developments for many

years. Ten years ago, before any decision had been taken in Canberra on the next generation submarine capability, I was asked, as a special consultant, to run a series of workshops for the Submarine Institute of Australia (SIA) on the core issues involved. Those workshops equipped me to understand the series of developments that have since unfolded. This essay is written from that perspective.

Since the 1980s, Australia has labored under a law that prohibits the development of a nuclear industry within its borders. That has been one of two impediments to any idea of acquiring nuclear powered submarines. The other impediment was, until very recently, the US refusal to make them available. This impediment was suddenly removed of late, which precipitated the decision—given the dissatisfaction with the French deal—to make the radical shift to nuclear submarines. The lack of a nuclear industry, however, will still impede the operating and sustaining of such boats when they become available. That is an issue that remains to be tackled.

In the first SIA workshop, held at ANZAC House, in Melbourne, in 2011, the senior submariners made it clear that the Virginia class nuclear submarines, purchased from the US, would be the perfect solution to Australia's maritime security needs—if they were available—but that the above two impediments seemed insuperable. Therefore, Australia would



**The AUKUS revolution is just beginning.** Macron and Turnbull visit the HMAS Waller, a Collins-class submarine, in Sydney. Photo credit: Ludovic Marin/Abaca Press

have to settle for conventional boats. The central focus from that point was to make the case—contested by various parties in both the armed services and the political class—that those conventional boats had to be long range ones.

Why long range? Because Australia is an enormous country, with an immense coastline and a vast maritime territory, as well as being a long way from where it seeks to operate its submarines. This is not true of any country in Europe or the Middle East to any appreciable extent. The boats had to be long range simply to get from their home bases to the South China Sea or further north, or to patrol the straits in the archipelago to the country's north, or the enormous expanse of the South Pacific and Melanesia. They also needed to be able to remain

on station for as long as possible and to be able to rotate.

Nuclear submarines are far better than conventional submarines because they are faster, quieter, and have vastly greater staying power on station than any conventional platform. Short of that, the Collins class submarines are designed to fill these roles to the greatest extent possible. They are very good at what they do—within conventional limits. There were problems in building and operating them and much controversy ensued; however, those problems were overcome and a great deal was learned in the process. The most practical and affordable option, at that time, would have been to proceed with a “son-of-Collins” conventional boat and keep the production lines operating.

That option was not exercised, in part, because of unresolved confusion concerning the Collins design and production process. It needs to be understood that some within the Navy, to say nothing of the other service arms, have been opponents of the submarine capability, at least as compared with surface platforms or other force structure priorities. The long delays and confusion regarding the design and building of the Collins class boats did not weaken that opposition; rather, it was further ramped up over contracting a foreign firm to design and build new boats. This opposition is expected to escalate to a whole new level over Australia's decision, made so abruptly, to acquire nuclear submarines that will cost even more and take decades to bring into service.

Politics and ineptitude have long delayed a decision on the new generation of conventional boats. The rapidly deteriorating strategic environment of the past couple of years precipitated the creation of the AUKUS alliance between Australia, the UK, and the US for the Indo-Pacific region, and the decision to shift from conventional subs to nuclear ones. Stephen Smith, as minister of defense (2010–2013), pushed the decision off rather than taking the risk of becoming the target of political broadsides over what was bound to be a complex and controversial call. Tony Abbott, having become prime minister in 2013, made what he dubbed a “captain’s call” and declared Australia would buy Japanese Soryu-class conventional submarines. There was a hue and cry about not having had a proper tendering process and the decision was then overturned.

The bidding process that followed, under Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (2015–2018), did involve competitive tendering. The German firm Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft (often abbreviated HDW) that is part of the ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) group, which is owned by ThyssenKrupp and headquartered in Kiel, was expected to win the bid, but it mishandled the bidding process. The Japanese put in a bid, but they were not used to

selling for export in the arms market and were fairly easily outmaneuvered by the Europeans. The French did not expect to win but did so due to deft lobbying in Canberra and the German mistakes. The way in which the French won is important in understanding what went wrong afterward, which contributed to the decision of Scott Morrison (prime minister since 2018) to cancel the French contract and opt for nuclear submarines under the aegis of AUKUS.

The French Navy Group bidding team, led by Marie-Pierre de Baillencourt, hired a group of five Australians as part of its bid and gave them free rein to develop a marketing plan. De Baillencourt shielded them from the big boys in the French bureaucracy and defense industry establishment and enabled them to move adroitly. The moment their bid succeeded, however, the French team was shunted aside by a management group led by the Belgian Jean-Michel Billig. Billig and his team proceeded to alienate almost everyone at the Australian end with their arrogance and ignorance, which poisoned the relationship from the start and led to an eight-month delay in even signing off on the partnership agreement.

Nonetheless, the deal could have worked. The French Barracuda-class conventional boats envisaged would have been state of the art, and there was a provision, after the first four or five platforms, to make a seamless shift to nuclear propulsion, using the French nuclear model, which is substantially different from the Anglo-American model. It was, therefore, perfectly possible to have stuck with the French deal, while announcing that the nuclear mutation would be confirmed and perhaps brought forward. That would have been far less disruptive to both the relations with France and force structure planning.

The chief criticisms of the decision to withdraw from the contract are that the decision was made too hastily, without critically evaluating its merits, and that the nuclear boats will take even longer to come into service than the Barracuda would have, which was already

overly long. In a brewing crisis deemed likely to come to a head within the next three to ten years, what possible use could it be to contract for the acquisition of eight Virginia or Astute class nuclear submarines that would not enter service for decades?

To this there are several possible answers. First, Virginia or Astute class boats might be leased from our allies in advance of the built ones being brought into service. Second, the criticism overlooks the fact that in that three-to-ten-year time frame we will still have the Collins class boats. Third, many things besides just shifting to nuclear submarines are now being done to bolster both Australia's defense capabilities and its operational cooperation with its key Anglophone allies. The nuclear submarines therefore are not the pivotal issue here. Fourth, all members of AUKUS are preparing themselves for potentially a 50-year contest with China for primacy in the Indo-Pacific. That contest, brilliantly analyzed by Rory Medcalf, director of the National Security College at the Australian National University in Canberra, in his *Contest for the Indo-Pacific: Why China Won't Map the Future* (La Trobe University Press, Black Inc., 2020), is just beginning.

For some reason, Morrison's announcement included the statement that there will be "no tinkering" with the US Virginia class model. That sounded a little odd, given several considerations. For one thing, Australia has tinkered with all conventional submarine models for decades in an effort to get a boat made for our specific and highly unusual requirements. Why make this declaration in advance? Secondly, there was supposedly some ambivalence about whether Australia would purchase the American or the British nuclear submarine. The statement could be taken as the prime minister tipping his hand. Thirdly, the Americans themselves are tinkering with the model and are likely to do further as they ramp up its modernization and production. This prompts the question of whether Australia in

fact should purchase the Virginia class or Astute class, the American or the British boats. There are several reasons for going with the American one. Firstly, the Virginia submarines have the same combat systems as the Collins class boats currently in Australia's inventory, so transition would be seamless. The combat systems in the Astute class boats are very different. Secondly, the Americans are building 66 or more Virginia class boats, so adding eight for us will be straightforward. By contrast the British are building only a tiny number of Astute class boats, which increases the probability of cost overruns or long delays in production. Finally, in any conflict, we would be reliant on American supply chains, which is surely a compelling argument. Yet in certain respects the Navy would prefer the Astute class boats. For one thing, the Virginia class requires a crew of 140 compared with 85 for the Astute class and just 48 for the Collins class subs. Crewing has already been a challenge and shifting from six Collins to eight Virginias would require increasing the corps of submariners from 288 to 1120—a very large ramp-up. To attract and retain this complement of personnel will require a major adjustment to basing and recruitment. Most qualified or eligible recruits have grown up on the East Coast, but the submarine tenders are on the West Coast. That is a serious disincentive to potential recruits and an obstacle to long-term retention of personnel. There is time, however, for these issues to be thought through carefully and for adjustments to be made. The AUKUS revolution is just beginning. \*

#### PAUL MONK

Paul Monk is an independent consultant, journalist, speaker, and essayist. He was head of the China desk in Australia's Defense Intelligence Organization in the mid-1990s and is the author of 12 books, including *Thunder From the Silent Zone: Rethinking China* and *Dictators and Dangerous Ideas*.





Israel's and Germany's air force chiefs fly together over Israel to kick off the Blue Flag 2021 exercise. Photo credit: Team Luftwaffe via EYEPRESS

# THE CASE FOR MILITARY DIPLOMACY





*by Reuven Ben-Shalom*

**I**s the pen truly mightier than the sword? It depends on whom you ask.

Israelis tend to perceive national security in a narrow prism of military might and downplay other fundamental pillars, such as robust democratic institutions and national resilience. Historic and cultural influences have led to a perceptual timeline with wars as milestones, and everything else either leading to or resulting from them. According to this way of thinking, there is time for diplomacy, managed by diplomats, and when diplomacy fails, warriors wage war. This makes the term military diplomacy an oxymoron. But in reality, things are not clear cut, and the military regularly uses diplomatic tools to serve both its mission and broader national goals.

It is odd that diplomacy in Israel is mostly disregarded, and military diplomacy is totally unnoticed, when, in fact, it plays a significant role in managing and shaping reality.

#### **A NEW TERM FOR OLD PRACTICES**

Militaries have engaged in dialogue since the dawn of time but usually for limited military purposes. The scope and nature of these

interactions gradually evolved into what we now call military (or defense) diplomacy.

In the last two centuries, defense attachés progressed from low-ranking officers who were focused on gathering intelligence and viewed as detrimental to the diplomatic mission, to their current role as senior military advisors to the ambassador, tasked with identifying and realizing multifaceted avenues of engagement.

The term defense diplomacy was first coined in the UK, in the Strategic Defense Review White Paper of 1998. The initiative was meant to “dispel hostility, build and maintain trust, and assist in the development of democratically accountable armed forces,” and called for increasing the number of defense attachés, or “ambassadors of defense diplomacy.” The paper plainly stated that defense diplomacy was “not a new idea,” and the term simply attached “greater intellectual coherence” to a collection of previously unlinked diplomatic engagements.

#### **WHAT IS MILITARY DIPLOMACY?**

An informal definition may be the pursuit of military and national objectives, by the military and defense agencies, utilizing an array of non-violent diplomatic instruments.

But why not quote the formal IDF definition? We will get to that.

In the realm of defense, efforts may include facilitating force buildup, preparedness,

signaling deterrence, resolving conflicts, and formalizing post-war mechanisms. Various venues may be used, such as strategic dialogues, mutual-learning seminars, joint exercises, senior visits, combined planning, and formulating agreements and combined operating procedures.

As a form of soft power, military diplomacy also promotes public diplomacy aimed at enhancing legitimacy and garnering support. As in the case of other countries imbued with a sense of purpose and moral calling, Israel's military diplomacy seeks to demonstrate and instill values and contribute to the world even without having any direct benefit. An example of utilizing military diplomacy in promotion of national interests is China's growing footprint in peacekeeping forces, overseas bases, and bilateral exercises where capabilities are brandished and messages are conveyed.

### MILITARY DIPLOMACY IN ISRAELI HISTORY

Israel's tumultuous history saw multiple instances of military diplomacy playing a vital role and even saving the day. Force buildup operations were crucial to the fledgling army, necessitating creative and stubborn diplomatic efforts. Two out of many examples are the 1948 Czechoslovakian weapon shipments to circumvent the UN arms embargo, which enabled the newly created IDF to fend off the Arab armies' invasion; and Operation Nickel

Grass 25 years later, the American strategic airlift to replenish Israel's dwindled resources during the Yom Kippur War in 1973, which may have had a limited practical impact—as the tide of battle had already turned—but sent a powerful signal and played a role in convincing the Egyptian leadership that the chapter of wars should now be closed.

Many military campaigns have included international coordination, although usually they are kept under the radar, as publicity may hinder the outcome. One example is the collaboration between the IDF with British and French forces in the Sinai campaign in 1956, following covert trilateral discussions. More recently, “according to foreign sources,”—as Israelis are fond of saying in such cases—Israel's military cooperation with Egypt against the branch of the Islamic State terrorist organization in the Sinai Peninsula has become an important element of this vital bilateral relationship. The enemy of 1956 is now the peace partner and beneficiary of Israeli support.

In the 1949 armistice agreements after the War of Independence, as well as in the 1974 agreements on disengagement following the Yom Kippur War, military leaders were instrumental in forging mechanisms that stood the test of time. The peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan had significant military diplomacy aspects, and the IDF continues to serve as a dominant channel of communication with these key strategic partners.

Truth be told, Israelis tend to scorn peacekeeping forces, some due to justified criticism and some as a result of lacking familiarity with the complexity of their missions. But those who see it up close appreciate the sensitive role these missions play. Israel has reservations as to UNIFIL's interpretation and limited implementation of its mandate in Lebanon, but there is no doubt that the trilateral dialogue between UNIFIL, the IDF, and the Lebanese Armed Force (LAF) prevents miscommunication from turning into miscalculation.

**The world order is in flux. Military diplomacy will become increasingly vital in sustaining national security and promoting stability and peace.**



## MAJOR TRENDS IN THE IDF

Originally entrusted entirely to Israel's military intelligence agency, international coordination between militaries is now shared with a separate division of the IDF focused on diplomacy and cooperation. Although each IDF service branch has its own foreign relations unit, the International Cooperation Division (ICD) oversees international cooperation throughout the IDF and leads general-staff level relationships—from handling the intricacies of cross-border cooperation, through shoulder-to-shoulder collaboration with strategic allies, to deconfliction with key players (for example, Russia in Syria).

A significant shift in the last two decades has been the decentralization from clandestine general-staff elements, to overt, service-level engagement. This has resulted in a transition from discourse via intermediates to an operator-to-operator mode.

In recent years, there has been an ongoing process of cultivating a military diplomacy “community,” similar to other disciplines that are centrally guided but organizationally dispersed. It is a positive concept but not yet fully implemented.

The alignment of all military diplomacy efforts under the operational rather than the intelligence sphere has been a profound transformation. While the ICD resides in the newly established Strategic Planning and Cooperation Directorate (J5), it is subordinate to the Operations Branch (J3) during contingencies. This signifies that military diplomacy is now inherent to operational planning and execution.

Multilateral exercises—once quite rare—have become frequent and popular and take place both in Israel (such as the Blue Flag exercises every two years) and abroad (such as the IDF special forces training in Cyprus). Besides obvious operational benefits and an exceptional learning experience, these events serve as a strategic projection of unity in the face of common challenges and rivals.

## ISRAEL-UNITED STATES DEFENSE RELATIONS

The 1981 Memorandum of Understanding between the US and Israel on strategic cooperation—frozen after the OSIRAK raid and then renewed in 1984—launched a massive, ever-growing effort, spanning multiple areas such as research and development, mutual learning, intelligence sharing, logistics, interoperability, and combined operations in counterterrorism, missile defense, air operations, and more.

The alliance serves not only Israel's security and qualitative military edge but also significantly contributes to US interests and capabilities. A notable example is the extensive learning following the Yom Kippur war and after every conflict since.

Although collaboration takes place on a professional level, it also reflects camaraderie, friendship, and shared values in addition to providing opportunities for mutual learning. A recent initiative in the US Congress now calls for this interaction—specifically, in regard to the application of advanced technological solutions to operational problems—to be codified in an organizational framework.

## WE SHALL DEFEND OURSELVES BY OURSELVES

A “lone ranger” mentality is nevertheless deeply ingrained in the Israeli psyche, dating back to the biblical description (by an outsider, Balaam) of “a nation that dwells alone” (Numbers 39:9), and currently enhanced by metaphors describing Israel's distinct place in the Middle East such as Ehud Barak's famous (or infamous) phrase, “a villa in the jungle.”

The slogan “we shall defend ourselves by ourselves,” which is voiced regularly by Israeli leaders—indeed, repeated by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in his recent discourse at the White House—reflects this narrative. It also serves another purpose of conveying to the American people that they will never be asked to shed blood on our behalf. The problem is that it comes across as haughty and fails to depict



US Marine during Juniper Cobra, a US-Israeli joint air defense exercise. Photo credit: REUTERS/Amir Cohen

the reality of massive US assistance, not only in terms of generous foreign military financing of which Israel is the largest cumulative recipient but also with boots on the ground during contingencies, primarily for active defense against ballistic missiles as well as for the management of the emergency supply effort. True, we do not wish to have US Marines fight for us, but we should not push the stand-alone agenda too far—when thousands of US soldiers are actually scheduled to come to our assistance (judging by data published during previous exercises).

In this day and age, it is preferable to stress the need for collaborative efforts, and even admit that we can't do everything on our own. Sure, the IDF can carry out a strike of momentous

proportion if the need arises ultimately, but we still rely heavily on the backing and legitimacy accorded by our allies and the international community.

### WORDS DON'T COME EASY

Israel is a global leader in fields such as counterterrorism, cyberwarfare, and unmanned systems, and Israelis are often eager to collaborate with other countries. On the down side, Israelis talk more than listen, teach instead of learn, and preach instead of offering perspective. But at least as far as rhetoric goes, phrases like “mutual learning” are finally gaining popularity in Israel, after decades of telling partners: “It's only natural that you came to learn from us and we are happy to teach you.”

We are still too ethnocentric, however, and view others as foreigners instead of equal partners. Israelis lack sufficient cultural skill, and the average level of English is not where it should be.

Israelis want results here and now, while diplomacy is based on fostering long-term relations. Short terms of service in military positions add to the challenge.

But all in all, even without diplomatic finesse, Israelis are fun to befriend and engage, and they offer a wealth of know-how and motivation to share.

### THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Several organizational culture attributes pose a challenge to military diplomacy:

Israelis have a “good guys, bad guys” worldview, having grown up learning that we are “a country surrounded by enemies.” But this is no longer the case, as Israel now is a significant regional player within a network of interests and power struggles. In the military, terminology has expanded to reflect allies, partners, rivals, and yes—even bitter enemies. The public has yet to catch on, however.

Lacking a constitution and characterized by flexibility and blurry jurisdictional lines, Israel has a tendency to expand areas of responsibility, especially when identifying a void. Military personnel tend to explain and justify policy even when it relates to the political echelon. There are those who see this as a necessity and an asset, but I believe it should be better balanced.

Inconceivably, there is no written military diplomacy doctrine. Commanders come and go, each with new ideas on what should be done and how. The IDF School of Military Diplomacy trains all personnel from newly recruited soldiers to defense attachés. With no doctrine to follow, the school punches over its weight and does an amazing job of consolidating deliverable know-how and instilling core competencies, but these are still delivered according to personal experience and agenda. Military diplomacy is not perceived

as a discipline requiring systemic training and experience. Most leaders show up with little relevant experience and take over after a short handover, and defense attachés become military diplomats after a condensed training phase. Coupled with miserable organizational memory, it is a recipe for continuously reinventing the wheel. The problem is exacerbated because in diplomacy, failures are not always apparent, as partners are polite and do not tend to complain, and it is difficult to investigate unidentified opportunities.

Luckily for us, excellent officers from various professional backgrounds bring authenticity, candidness, and creativity, which are much appreciated by international partners, so the bottom line is positive, albeit not perfect.

These shortcomings should be addressed by conceptual progression and significant resources. Perhaps we cannot match our German and American counterparts who send attachés abroad after lengthy training periods, including the acquisition of language skills, but we should at least try.

### THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’

In an age of instantly-accessible information and direct connectivity, one might think that diplomacy is obsolete. Perhaps human interaction was essential for gathering information, unraveling hidden truths, and deciphering intentions, but some of this is no longer needed with endless, instant, and accessible data. Meeting in person to exchange confidential information may no longer be required with secure networks at hand. According to this narrative, embassies and missions overseas are a waste of money, as diplomats can chat via web-conferencing instead of face-to-face and fly out only for rare meetings.

But this line of thought is seriously flawed (on its civilian diplomatic counterpart and its rebuttal, see Robert Silverman’s column in *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*). The age of the internet has brought an abundance of information, but raw data does not necessarily



The Israel Defence Forces on November 12, 2021. An Israeli F-15 fighter (bottom) escorts US Air Force B-1B heavy bombers on their way from the Gulf. Photo credit: Israel Defence Ministry Spokesperson / AFP

translate into knowledge, let alone wisdom. Gleaning insights, distilling lessons learned, and establishing strategies require people getting together and looking each other in the eye. When the issues at hand are sensitive, influential, and even existential, human attributes—such as empathy, friendship, and trust—are key.

Military diplomacy is not merely about give and take; rather it generates opportunities for sharing, learning, evolving, and collaborating.

## CONCLUSION

The world order is in flux, moving toward multipolar rivalries, liable to have a significant impact on the Middle East. Iran's hegemonic aspirations threaten regional stability, while new opportunities and peaceful alliances emerge. Technological advancements transform warfare as we know it and usher in new dimensions and challenges. In this challenging strategic environment, military diplomacy

will become increasingly vital in sustaining national security and promoting stability and peace. IDF leadership should, therefore, address deficiencies and advance military diplomacy as a major national asset.

Israel is a small country with people who are culturally averse to diplomacy; yet its strategic posture, unique experience, frontline innovation, and an intrinsic drive to collaborate, share, and contribute make it a great ally, partner, and friend. \*

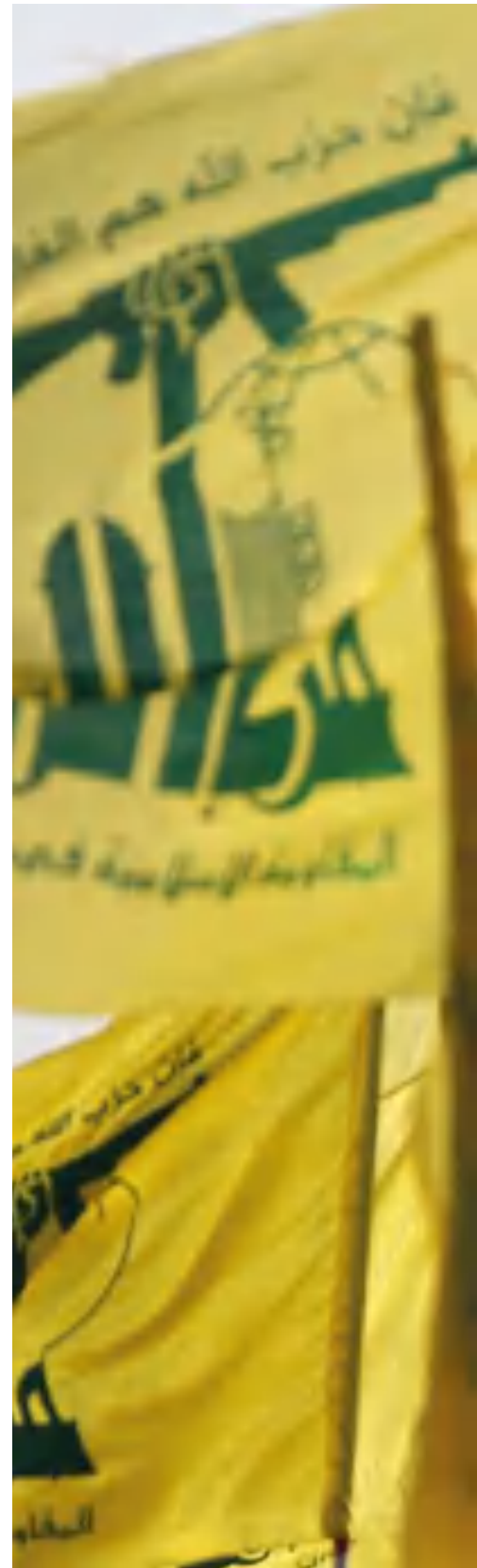
## REUVEN BEN-SHALOM

Col. (res.) Reuven Ben-Shalom is a cross-cultural strategist, a fellow at Reichman University's International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT), and lecturer at the Israel National Defense College and the IDF School of Military Diplomacy.



# DOES THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION IN WARFARE PUT THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES AT A DISADVANTAGE?

Hezbollah flags and posters during a rally marking the 12th anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon.  
Photo credit: REUTERS/Ali Hashisho







*by Yaacov Falkov*

In August 2021, commenting on the hasty withdrawal of Western military forces from Afghanistan, retired US Army Brigadier General and former Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Mark Kimmitt told the press that the US “underestimated the Taliban’s capabilities when it comes to psychological warfare.” Kimmitt praised the ability of Afghan Islamists not only to inspire their fighters but also to “get inside the heads” of soldiers who served the defeated Afghan government. He nevertheless emphasized that “when it comes to military capability, the US military outguns, outflies, and outnumber the Taliban,” which makes the outcome all the more dramatic, and indicative of the importance of the first half of the equation.

This candid confession illustrates what may be the biggest flaw in the current perception of the rapidly changing nature of war by the US military establishment and its allies. Even when they admit their own mistakes and failures in the psychological sphere, which does not happen often, establishment speakers still tend to emphasize their countries’ overwhelming superiority in the “classical” kinetic sphere. Yet

contemporary strategic encounters between state and/or non-state actors, including those that involve the use of military force on various scales, are won primarily in the psychological sphere. In this domain, those who “outgun, outfly, and outnumber” their adversaries do not necessarily win.

This essay will define this groundbreaking shift in the nature of military conflicts as an “influence revolution in military affairs,” to paraphrase the old Soviet (and later American) concept of a revolution in military affairs. It seeks to show how a better understanding of this aspect of warfare—particularly by non-state actors—has catalyzed the race for securing psychological superiority during conflicts, non-violent and violent alike. The art of this warfare—as practiced by the champions in this field, namely the Russians, the Chinese, and the Iranians, as well as Hezbollah and the Islamic State—will be presented to assess the growing gap between them and Western societies in terms of these capacities. This essay concludes by exploring the possible reasons for this gap and identifying some urgent steps to be taken in order to narrow it.

**RUSSIA AND EAST ASIA: EMBRACING INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS AS PART OF A POSTMODERN REVOLUTION IN MILITARY AFFAIRS**

The penchant of both Russian and Chinese civil and military elites for covert measures and psychological operations—aimed to undermine the enemy’s government, solidarity, and capabilities—is rooted in the earliest stages of the two countries’ long history, enhanced by their legacy of Marxist revolutionary operational concepts. During the last century, the Russian and East Asian preference for winning interstate strategic rivalries by covert and/or overt non-military means was reinforced, adapted to the changing international, social, and technological circumstances, and implemented globally.

Contemporary Russian military thought systematically speaks of the “new-type warfare” of the 21st century, which has no clear limits of time nor space. It does not seek so much to physically annihilate the enemy’s forces through a kinetic encounter in the classic sense but rather to influence the enemy’s international environment, the public perceptions, and the attitudes of the ruling elites, armed forces, and decision makers to end the conflict on Russia’s terms. In this new reality of “psychological battles,” the purposefully and skillfully “cooked” blend of truthful, biased, and false information—spread via multiple channels of Russian and foreign official and private media, social networks, agents of influence, and so forth—in a sense became one of Moscow’s main weapons. It is operated separately or jointly with limited kinetic and/or cyber activities by a diverse alignment of forces. It is run not only by a community of the “information warfare professionals”—Russian official and semi-official military, intelligence and civil entities—but also by a growing constellation of Russian civilians and foreign players who consciously or blindly (“useful idiots”) serve Moscow’s geopolitical and military interests. The targets are plentiful, ranging from the near abroad countries, such as the Baltics, to foreign entities and figures further afield. The widely spoken successes in the operational theatres like Ukraine, Syria, or Hungary are just the tip of the iceberg of Russia’s recent achievements on this silent

global front. Among the latest trends in the field are posting fake stories on real news sites to discredit and disunite NATO and threatening NATO servicemen and their families back home through phone calls and social networks.

According to the information about China available to the West, the authorities in Beijing seem to be developing their own psychological warfare capabilities. The Chinese apparently have adjusted their official military doctrine and, in practice, have called for the fusing of kinetic, psychological, and legal actions. As a result, psychological operations have been absorbed within the recently established People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Strategic Support Force. China is actively using its official media, such as the national Xinhua News Agency and the military PLA Daily, alongside local and foreign social platforms to disseminate overt enemy-detering propaganda.

At the same time, China is covertly trying to “design” China-friendly political, military, societal, and economic spheres within specific countries, especially the key Western players, including Israel, which is targeted as a fountainhead of technological innovation. Recent reports by leading US civilian think tanks highlight the PLA’s commitment to improving its psychological warfare capabilities and predict that an elevated level of general disinformation, accompanied by messages tailored for key groups, such as senior political and military leaders, service members and their families, and base-hosting communities, will characterize any future kinetic exchanges between the US and China.

Similarly, neighboring North Korea allocates a significant share of its scarce resources in developing information warfare doctrine, tactics, and tools, including those dedicated to waging psychological offensives against regional players, the West, and the international community in general. The ultimate goal of these North Korean offensives is to stifle the adversaries’ political resolve to initiate military actions against the Kim Jong-Un regime.



## IRAN AND ISLAMIST TERROR GROUPS: INFLUENCE WEAPONS IN THE SERVICE OF JIHAD

Iran is fully aware of the strategic advantages of the ongoing information revolution in military affairs and is devoting growing attention, energy, and resources, as well as intellectual, organizational, and technical efforts to improve its doctrines and capabilities in the sphere of information warfare (*jang-e narm* or “soft war”).

Tehran’s goals in conducting its influence operations abroad in peacetime are multiple: promoting the export of the Islamic revolution and elevating its interpretation of the Shiite mission in the world; securing a safe passage for the Iranian nuclear program, by deterring regional and international state rivals—especially Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the US—from attacking the Islamic Republic; dividing and demoralizing rival societies; defending Shiite populations across the Middle East while supporting proxies, such as the Iraqi Shiite militias, Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad; and finally assisting the cross-border covert and overt activities of the Iranian Quds Force (QF), an elite military and intelligence entity affiliated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In 2021, special reports by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy warned of an increase in Iranian psychological operations both in Israel and the Gaza Strip, conducted in part through the IRGC. Among Israelis, such activity is aimed at fuelling internal conflicts over controversial issues and emphasizing Iran’s strategic superiority, whereas among the Palestinians, Iran sought to politically radicalize them and exploit them for geopolitical purposes.

In wartime, it is expected that intensive psychological warfare, inseparable from Iranian military efforts, will target the enemy’s moral strength and political will in continuing the hostilities. (The head of Iran’s National Security Council has recently picked up the habit of tweeting in Hebrew to gain Israeli attention.) The influence tools at the Iranians’ disposal

are numerous, ranging from the official media platforms, social networks, religious-cultural centers abroad, and unattributed cyberattacks, to the covert, semi-covert or overt violent actions, including terror, commando raids, and drone or missile strikes, performed by the QF/IRGC and/or its different regional partners. Western scholars have indicated that Tehran regularly and increasingly practices psychological operations and has no compunction about disseminating falsehoods or manipulating information. Some of their activities in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and even more remote geographical areas such as Latin America are considered highly effective.

Multiple violent non-state actors, including the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic State, al-Qaida, Hamas (who in recent rounds used the social networks to sow fear in Israeli society), and, above all, Hezbollah, have also fully entered the era of the information revolution in military affairs. Inspired by their Iranian patron’s successful example, the last two movements are actively guided and supported by Tehran, both doctrinally, technically, and operationally. Both Hezbollah and Hamas have invested significant resources in developing a military doctrine that embraces conventional and psychological warfare, establishing a professional mechanism of psychological operations, and integrating them tightly into the organizations’ broader combat and intelligence architecture.

Since the beginning of the current century, during the rounds of open military hostilities with Israel, both Hamas and Hezbollah tailored many of their combat actions to the media. Fighting units are usually deployed with cameramen. The footage is carefully edited to give the impression that the Islamists are doing better on the battlefield than the Israelis and it is widely broadcast. Recently, Hamas, equipped with professional propaganda apparatus and supported by private “online influence fighters,” has made effective psychological use of launching rockets and incendiary balloons into Israeli territory. Demonizing the Jewish

state both regionally and internationally, counteracting what they see as Zionist propaganda, and at times (at least according to their own perception) even degrading the IDF's will to fight have been remarkable achievements for the Lebanese and Palestinian guerrillas on the psychological battleground and have played a crucial role in narrowing the gap in their strategic capabilities vis-à-vis Israel.

### **THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES: PROBLEMS OF UNDERESTIMATING, UNDERFUNDING, AND MULTIPLE CONSTRAINTS**

While it does have a sophisticated PSYOP function, the US military often seems frustrated in the face of the progress that the influence revolution in military affairs is apparently making among its state adversaries and non-state actors. Big military apparatuses, meticulously elaborated combat doctrines, and vast stocks of the most advanced weapons have not spared the US and its allies the painful strategic fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor have they been successful in preventing Russia and China's military, cyber, espionage, and influence activism worldwide and even on US sovereign territory.

Sporadic Western ad hoc initiatives in the field of psychological warfare—in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Afghanistan—as well as the growing understanding by Western security and academic communities of adversarial conduct in the influence sphere have yet to be translated into the West's own culture, concept, and practice of managing kinetic-psychological strategic offensives. It is therefore not surprising that the ability of Western armies to withstand hostile psychological actions from abroad is also underdeveloped. A series of recent Western academic reports on this issue argue that efforts to man, train, and equip forces for counter-disinformation remain ad hoc, service-dependent, and exhibit ambiguous effects. Western scholars in the field point to various possible reasons for this weakness, from poor

understanding of the growing significance of psychological operations that results in weak theoretical development and underfunding, to obvious and profound differences in legal and moral constraints that prevent Western state actors from behaving in the sphere of influence like Russia, North Korea, or Iran, let alone the Islamic State.

The US ally that I am most familiar with—Israel—is dedicating thought and resources to the challenge of conducting effective influence operations. Since the 2006 Lebanon war, the Israel Defense Forces and the intelligence community have recognized the appearance of a new sphere of encounter, beyond that of the classical kinetic combat—“the battle over consciousness” (*ha-ma'aracha 'al ha-toda'a*)—and understood its challenges and advantages. The IDF created a special function for “consciousness operations,” aimed at shaping opinions and attitudes toward Israel's military actions among enemy forces, other Middle Eastern players, as well as Western and global audiences. Besides official warnings sent to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran through the Israeli and regional non-Hebrew media channels, constant messaging is directed at the broader international community, including foreign civil and military leaders, diplomats, the press, and the greater public. Much emphasis has been placed on coordinating the organizational, operational, and technological efforts throughout “all of government,” the civil and security authorities alike, to avoid delivering mismatched messages.

Still, within the “classical” Israeli military establishment, there is constant and significant opposition to Israel's entering the era of the informational revolution in military affairs. The new trend of focusing on psychological warfare has been criticized for promising far more than its real strategic capabilities can deliver. As a result, the new unit of “consciousness operations” and the IDF Spokesperson's Unit—while attempting to accompany every military operation with its own, specially

tailored, psychological warfare program—are frequently marginalized and sometimes even accused of wasting vital military resources. This may be why Israel still often loses to its non-state foes in a fierce competition for psychological superiority as well as regional and world support. Israel also seems unprepared to deal with the growing Russian and Chinese psychological assertiveness in the Middle East in general and in Israeli society specifically.

### **CONCLUSION: IT IS TIME FOR THE US AND ITS ALLIES TO REGAIN PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPERIORITY**

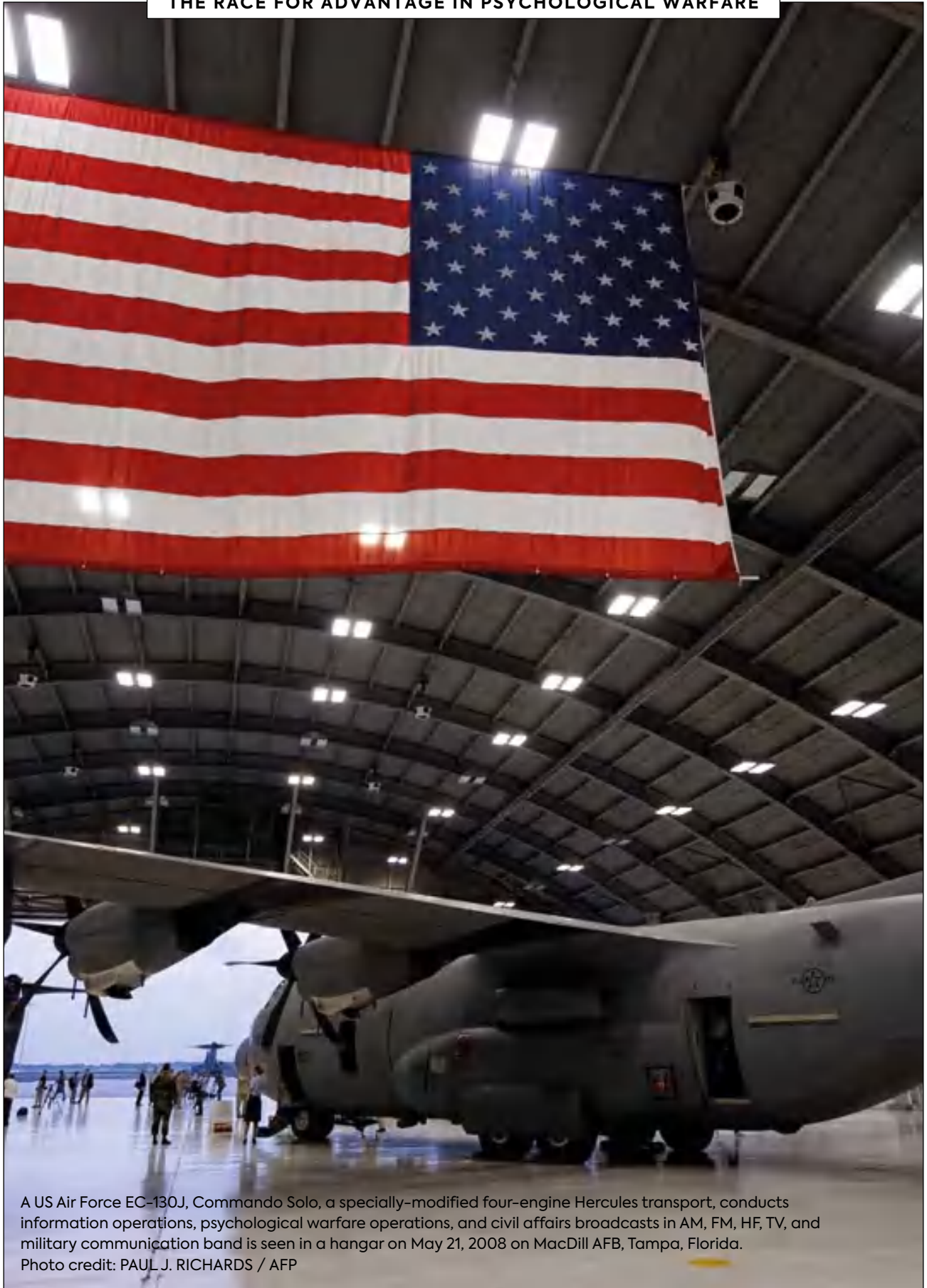
Since the beginning of the current century, we have been witnessing the ongoing rise of the influence revolution in military affairs. Psychological warfare has become the principal tool for winning both broad strategic competitions and military encounters between state and/or non-state actors. By wisely assessing and effectively pursuing strategic, operational, and tactical influence goals, such networks—especially those supported by their own side’s cyber and limited but purposive kinetic activities—can simultaneously impact the enemy’s international environment, attitudes of the general populace, economic infrastructures, ruling elites, and armed forces, thus compelling the opposing side’s decision makers to stop fighting and surrender or retreat.

At present, adversarial states and non-state actors seem to benefit from the influence revolution in military affairs, while the achievements in the field by the US and its allies are much less impressive. Fruitful Russian and Chinese investments in strategic and military influence worldwide—as well as the same trend in Iran and among the Islamist terrorist and guerrilla organizations—seem to face no serious competition from the US and its allies, where attempts to improve local psychological warfare capabilities suffer from insufficient political support and funding, voluntary moral and legal constraints, and serious resistance from conservative military establishments.

To effectively overcome these obstacles, Western political and military decision makers must finally realize the paramount strategic threat posed by hostile advances on the psychological front and adapt to this new reality—with all its challenges and advantages—by making the necessary theoretical, doctrinal, organizational, technological, and legal adjustments. Among the urgently needed measures are the creation in the US and key allied countries—and in alliance structures—of authorities capable of effectively fusing together the psychological, kinetic, and cyber types of warfare; the coordination of policies among allies; the creation at both national and international levels of networked public and private bodies and their adequate funding; academic instruction in psychological warfare; its constant study; and the training and employment of specialists in psychological operations who can foil their impact. \*

### **YAACOV FALKOV**

Dr. Yaacov Falkov is a research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at Reichman University (IDC Herzliya). A former senior analyst at the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, he holds a Ph.D. in history from Tel Aviv University and is the author of several books on the history and theory of guerrilla warfare, underground resistance, diplomacy, and intelligence.



A US Air Force EC-130J, Commando Solo, a specially-modified four-engine Hercules transport, conducts information operations, psychological warfare operations, and civil affairs broadcasts in AM, FM, HF, TV, and military communication band is seen in a hangar on May 21, 2008 on MacDill AFB, Tampa, Florida. Photo credit: PAUL J. RICHARDS / AFP





# **ISRAEL—A CYBER NATION? A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ISRAELI CYBERSPACE**



An image of Israeli soldiers with markings of a face recognition script, during a cyber security training course in southern Israel, 2017. Photo credit: REUTERS/Amir Cohen



by Lev Topor

Israel is perceived as a powerful cyber nation worldwide. Technology companies like Check Point, Argus, Verint, and NSO, to name just a few, promote Israeli technologies as well the narrative of a nation able to translate its prowess at the military field into marketable assets. Furthermore, alleged cyberattacks on terror organizations or rogue countries like Iran (e.g., Stuxnet—the joint US–Israeli operation also known by its American codename, “Olympic Games”) add to the narrative that Israel is a cyber power. So did President Clinton’s novel, *The President is Missing*. Indeed, Israel’s offensive cyber capabilities are better than those of most other nations. Yet, to become a truly powerful cyber nation Israel must be able to defend itself from cyberattacks. A critical review of the Israeli cyberspace reveals that in terms of civil resilience and defensive capabilities, it is not at all behind a firewall.

A critical review of the actual structure of cyberspace in Israel reveals flaws and vulnerabilities often exploited by adversaries or criminals, as discussed below. These vulnerabilities downgrade national security and especially civilian security since the whole civilian domain is less protected. Naturally, it is far less secure than the military cyber domain. The simple logic behind this argument was reflected in the films of Rocky Balboa when the main character addressed boxing matches: “It’s

not about how hard you hit. It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward.” Israel can indeed attack, but can it get hit and keep moving forward? Moreover, this question has now become very pertinent as the global pandemic shifted much of human life to the cyber domain.

### ISRAELI CYBERSPACE UNDER ATTACK— SOME EXAMPLES

What exactly is cyber warfare? It is the use of cyber weapons and other systems and means in cyberspace for the purpose of espionage, damage, destruction, and influence on others. Cyber warfare is not revolutionary in its underlying concepts of war and strategy; that is, people and nations have long battled each other over sovereignty, resources, or ideology. Cyber warfare is merely evolutionary in the sense that war among nations still takes place, yet now it is done with computer code and disinformation alongside other, more kinetic means. Thus, Israel and its adversaries will continue to battle each other, but with cyber means added to their traditional armories. The arsenal of cyber warfare tactics includes acts of illicit access to data, propaganda, denial of service (DDoS), data modification, and infrastructure manipulation or sabotage, all for the purpose of espionage, damage, destruction, and influence.

On January 7, 2019, Nadav Argaman, the director of Israel’s domestic security service, the Shin Bet, made an unusual public appearance. Argaman warned that foreign forces were planning to attack Israel and interfere with



its upcoming elections. Although Argaman did not name the suspects explicitly, it was later speculated that Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Hamas, Hezbollah, and even so-called “hacktivism” groups like “Anonymous” attacked Israel’s cyberspace, mainly with cyber influence campaigns and Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks on governmental and business services. It is yet unclear (and/or censored) whether the cyberattacks and influence campaigns had any effect on the elections.

A year and a half later, Israel continued to suffer from additional cyberattacks. For instance, in early 2020, Yuval Steinitz, then the minister of national infrastructures, energy and water resources, announced that Israel had foiled a significant and dangerous cyberattack on its power stations. In another example, Russian submarines were seen near the Israeli coastline. Did they eavesdrop on submarine internet cables? In August 2021, Western non-governmental entities, some of which were Israeli, blamed China for launching significant cyberattacks against Israeli public and private sector groups.

Facing this ongoing pattern of cyber operations against Israel, an obvious question arises: Is the Israeli cyberspace as secure

and resilient as many perceive it to be, or as some of the country’s government officials (and cyber corporations) argue? How does Israel’s geopolitical position in the Middle East influence and shape cyber strategy? In this matter, Israel is a unique case, as it is surrounded by historical adversaries and unable to completely rely on the neighboring countries with which it has peace agreements. This physical, geographical, and political isolation puts Israel at a disadvantage in the cyber domain since it cannot widely distribute its connection points to the rest of the world.

### ISRAELI CYBERSPACE: STRUCTURE, VULNERABILITIES, AND MORE EXAMPLES

Cyberspace is an interdependent network of information technology infrastructures and resident data. It includes the internet, other telecommunications networks, computer systems and other related controllers.

Cyberspace is built on four key layers, each with different characteristics: the physical foundations (infrastructure), the logic layer, the information layer, and the user layer.

Describing and analyzing these layers can shed light on vulnerabilities and specifically on how vulnerable Israeli cyberspace is altogether.

The physical layer is the actual infrastructure of hardware. It consists of fiber optic cables, nodes of cables, satellites, cellular towers, computers and servers, and any other related hardware. Approximately 95% of global internet connections run through submarine cables with no current options of ground traffic in its northern, eastern or southern borders (despite peace with Jordan and Egypt, connectivity is unlikely). Israel’s internet connections are limited to vulnerable submarine fiber optic cables and problematic satellite connections. Cables can be cut, damaged, and eavesdropped. Furthermore, physical damage is difficult to repair as it requires special ships and equipment. In case of satellite damage, a new one would likely be required. Repairs are difficult and expensive. If a country were to lose its cables and communication with satellites, it would be (almost) disconnected from the rest of the world and would have to rely on other types of communication like radio.

**If submarine cables were cut, communication within the military and the security services would remain intact. Yet, the very core that needs protection in a democratic and liberal nation is not the military but the citizens who should be able to engage in social, economic, and political life without concern.**



With just two sea-to-shore internet ports near Haifa and Tel Aviv and several land cables spread throughout the country, hostile foreign forces could disconnect Israel from the internet and shut down most of its socioeconomic activities. The global coronavirus pandemic has forced Israel to shut its borders. Israel's adversaries can also shut its cyber border, or at least manipulate it and eavesdrop on communications. A well-coordinated cyberattack could have a large impact on the Israeli market and society, especially in times of large-scale operations, and, as mentioned earlier, foreign submarines are always lurking in the depths near submarine cables. Military cyberspace would be less affected by damaged cables as it often relies on satellite communications or on closed-circuit intranets; however, civilian life and civilian emergency services would be significantly damaged.

The next layer on top of the physical layer is the logic layer. Effectively, it is the central nervous system of cyberspace. It is responsible for routing information from clients to servers to clients through various types of communication protocols. The vulnerabilities of this layer are mainly manipulations to the communication systems and denial of service (DDoS). Since 2013 the decentralized hacking group "Anonymous" has organized annual DDoS attacks against Israeli websites, promoting its campaign on Twitter, Telegram, and the dark web using the hashtag #OpIsrael. The campaign has blocked mostly civilian websites of Israeli businesses and some publicly available governmental websites, used by Israeli citizens. Since the military networks are secure, hackers worldwide focus mainly on civilian websites; thus, it is the civilian domain of cyberspace that suffers the most damage.

The third layer of cyberspace is the information layer, which consists of information like encoded text, photos, videos, audio, and any other kind of stored data. The main vulnerability of this layer is the information itself can be leaked, falsified, or manipulated. This layer is deeply connected to the final layer, that of the users. The latter shapes the whole experience of cyberspace as most of the users are regular, peaceful, and harmless, but some

are criminals, terrorists, or agents of foreign powers. Manipulative users who use cyberspace for crime, terror, or disinformation campaigns are extremely dangerous as they can steal information and shift public attention or public opinions using legal and legitimate platforms like social media or messaging application groups. In recent years Israel has been subject to a widespread influence campaign not only by its immediate adversaries such as terror organizations or Iran but also by global powers like China, Russia, and even Western countries that attempt to shift Israeli public opinion to reflect their perspectives on certain issues.

### **ATTENDING TO VULNERABILITIES: TOWARD A SECURE CYBERSPACE**

A critical review of Israeli cyberspace reveals some significant flaws and vulnerabilities that mainly affect the civilian domain. In contrast, the military domain is more secure as it relies on various types of communications, satellites, and its own intranets that are better protected from external threats. For instance, if submarine cables were cut, military intranets would not be affected and communication within the military and the security services would remain intact. Yet, the very core that needs protection in a democratic and liberal nation is not the military but the citizens who should be able to engage in social, economic, and political life without concern.

Without any sufficient regulations on businesses and a lack of proper response from governmental bodies like the National Cyber Directorate, Israeli citizens are bound to suffer from more cyberattacks in the future. In recent espionage attacks on the Shirbit insurance company and Bar Ilan University, the entire Israeli security community was exposed—as the hackers knew beforehand that military and intelligence personnel were customers of Shirbit and studied at Bar Ilan University, which offers special programs to the abovementioned personnel. Thus, while Israel's adversaries were not able to penetrate internal military or intelligence intranets, they managed to spy on high-ranking officials indirectly by attacking their service providers. This is only the tip of the iceberg as the personal data of more than 6



**Israel's physical, geographical, and political isolation puts it at a disadvantage in the cyber domain.**

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett at the Cyber Week conference at Tel Aviv University, in July, 2021.

Photo credit: REUTERS/Amir Cohen

million Israeli citizens was exposed in previous election-related data leaks.

In general, neither Israeli civilians nor its military and intelligence communities are sufficiently protected from cyberattacks. Israel's adversaries carefully chose which cyberspace layer to attack. Thus, which problems should be attended to immediately, to make Israeli cyberspace more secure? First, the Israeli government should make cybersecurity regulation a standard among businesses and institutions that handle large amounts of personal information. Second, Israel should look at nations like Finland, Denmark, Estonia, or Sweden, which have extensive education programs intended to increase digital orientation (and awareness of threats such as disinformation) among children. Young children might not be able to develop their own Stuxnet malware, but they will be able to identify

an online fraud or a phishing attempt with malicious files. Third, Israel should invest and develop its infrastructure to make the scenario of cutting its cables and shutting down the whole country less likely. All these measures, in turn, are applicable to other countries facing similar challenges. \*

#### LEV TOPOR

Dr. Lev Topor is a senior research fellow at the Center for Cyber Law and Policy at the University of Haifa and a forthcoming fellow at Yad Vashem. He is the coauthor of *Why Do People Discriminate Against Jews?* and a recipient of the 2019 Robert Wistrich Award.

# HOW ISRAEL BECAME A PR BEN-GURION'S GRAND STRATEGY A



David Ben-Gurion and Israeli Ambassador to the United States Abba Eban with US President Truman at the White House, 1951. Photo credit: US National Archives, PikiWiki

# PRO-AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF AMERICAN JEWRY

BY ERAN LERMAN

Four score years ago, on December 7, 1941—that “date that will live in infamy,” as President Roosevelt called it—David Ben-Gurion happened to be in Washington DC. By then he was already the established leader of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in mandatory Palestine. Eighty years later, almost to the day (December 9 to 10, 2021), the nation that he led to independence in 1948 was one of only two nations in the Middle East (the other being Iraq) invited to the virtual Summit for Democracy convened by the Biden administration. The link between the two events is more than the mere coincidence of dates. In a sense, what Ben-Gurion understood at that fateful moment was to have a profound impact on his grand strategy in the quest for Jewish sovereignty—and on Israel’s present political identity and international orientation.

Israel’s democratic identity and, as a corollary, the country’s steadfast association with the US are often taken for granted. But the course of history could have been quite different. Most Israelis today hail from families who came from non-democratic countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the Middle East and North Africa region. True, aspects of participatory politics are embedded in the Jewish tradition. Moreover, all who







David Ben-Gurion visiting New York City. Photo credit: GPO, PikiWiki

have ever experienced the lively, even abrasive political culture of modern Israel would find it hard to imagine that a totalitarian model would have appealed to such a bluntly outspoken society. Yet it is easy to forget that all too many Jewish “reckless minds,” to quote Mark Lilla’s title, were tempted in the 20th century by the promise of a transformative change in the fortunes of humanity, brought about by a violent revolutionary elite. There were fierce advocates of the Marxist model within the Yishuv (and in Israel’s early years), who also argued for a pro-Soviet orientation during and after World War II. The immense and heroic role played by the Red Army in defeating Nazi Germany—bearing in mind that some 200,000 Jews fell while serving in its ranks—gave an added poignance to their geostrategic arguments.

And yet Ben-Gurion, while an avowed socialist, led the Zionist movement and then

Israel in a different direction. One of the first among regional leaders to grasp the full meaning of what had happened, he understood that the entry of the US into the war would, by necessity, place Washington—and not London—in a position to shape the postwar order. He had come to know and admire American dynamism and power in his younger years: Exiled by the Ottoman Empire, he spent a significant portion of World War I in New York, where he also met and married Paula. But in 1941 his perspective was also that of a leader whose movement had been betrayed by His Majesty’s Government. The latter’s endorsement of the 1939 White Paper threatened to doom not only immigration (aliyah) but also any prospect of future independence.

Much as he admired both Churchill and the fortitude of the British people, which he had witnessed firsthand during the Blitz, Ben-

Gurion nevertheless could no longer trust London's policies. Indeed, it was against this background that he had a fierce falling out with Chaim Weizmann, the man who led the Zionist movement for a generation and had secured the Balfour Declaration back in 1917. Ben-Gurion came to see Weizmann's British orientation as an outdated and irrelevant grand strategy in a world irretrievably changed by the war.

He was not tempted, however, to opt for Soviet patronage (although Stalin did end up supporting the creation of Israel in 1947 and arming the young Israel Defense Forces via Czechoslovakia in 1948). Ben-Gurion's energies and attentions, and subsequently also the way in which he shaped the policies of the Zionist movement and then the politics of Israel, came to focus upon the quest for American support. This, in turn, required the emerging nation to keep a certain distance from Soviet influence—and to sustain an open political culture that Americans could recognize, despite the glaring differences, as ultimately akin to their own.

Although moral and ideological imperatives were involved, there was a concern that Ben-Gurion referred to from time to time (even in conversations with the British government, which did not quite wish to think of Israel as a future friend). It is an aspect still relevant today—as new non-democratic challenges arise and Israeli politics are in turmoil—as it had been 80 years ago, which is one of the reasons a good part of this issue of the *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune* is dedicated to what could be called “the cares of kith and kin” and the impact of diasporic politics. Ben-Gurion knew all too well that for the goal of independence to be achieved, Israel would need the support and involvement of the Jewish people. (By 1941 he was also aware, even if he rarely spoke of it in public, that not much would be left of European Jewry after the war.)

This was a crucial aspect of his grand strategy and his choice of orientation, and it remains valid today. True, at the time, a large number of Jews remained in the Soviet Union; even after the Holocaust, they still numbered between 2 and 3 million. But as Ben-Gurion bluntly said to British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin as

early as 1946, the Zionists were bound to be the West's allies against Stalin, because, under the latter's rule, the Jews—no matter how numerous (or senior in the party hierarchy)—could not possibly have any voice of their own. In America, on the other hand, the country's democratic traditions meant that Jews could have their say, if not during the war, then in its wake. The tragedy that had befallen European Jewry made them all the more committed to exercise their right to raise their voice (as Bevin painfully learned).

In other words, one of the key reasons that Israel became a democracy, remains a democracy, and took part (in the form of a three-minute virtual address by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett) in the Summit for Democracy, is that the Jewish people's two main wings today are in Israel and in America. Despite all their differences—discussed in worrying detail by several of our contributors—these two vital parts do share common aspects and persistent mutual bonds. This is enough to essentially determine Israel's democratic, pro-American orientation.

It was so back in the 1940s, when the alternatives were a waning British empire or a rising Soviet superpower; it remains so today, when the challenge is posed by an ambitious leadership in China and the future of American power at times is cast in doubt. Israel's diasporic bond is also the guarantee of Israel's identity and grand strategy in a fast-changing world; and there are indications that this is understood all too well in Jerusalem today as it was grasped by Ben-Gurion amidst the shock of Pearl Harbor. \*

## ERAN LERMAN

Editor-in-chief

Col. (ret.) Dr. Eran Lerman is a former senior intelligence officer. He served as Israel's deputy national security adviser (2009–2015), and prior to that as director, AJC Israel and ME office (2001–2009). He is currently the vice president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and a lecturer at Shalem College.

# IS DIPLOMACY A PROFESSION?

George Plimpton 1981. Photo credit: MPTV





BY ROBERT SILVERMAN

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When I think of the tension between professionals and amateurs, the first name that comes to mind is the late George Plimpton.

George Plimpton wrote about sports starting in the late 1950s in a form called “participatory journalism.” Using his Harvard connections, he would talk his way onto a professional playing field and later write about the experience from an amusing amateur perspective. A tall, athletic blue-blood New Yorker, descended from the Mayflower on both sides, he sparred with heavyweight champion boxer Archie Moore, played goalie for part of one game of the Boston Bruins, pitched in a Major League Baseball exhibition game, and joined the PGA tour with golf legends Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus. Most famously, he played quarterback in a professional football game for one set of downs (and lost 30 yards). Plimpton was a good writer and editor, the founder of *The Paris Review*, but he is most remembered today for these bravado adventures in sports. (For the record, he also played percussion once with the New York Symphony Orchestra, performed in the circus in tights on the flying trapeze, and acted in films, as a Bedouin in *Lawrence of Arabia* and a psychologist in *Good Will Hunting* opposite Matt Damon.)

No one mourns the demise of participatory journalism. Plimpton’s peculiar form of charisma—a talented amateur with “the right background” and insouciant attitude who enters

any arena and holds his own—is of an age now long past, derived from the English gentleman ideal (Plimpton affected a sort of English accent and patrician air.) But he played the role with an American twist, satirizing the ideal by taking it to extremes. He let his audience in on the joke that what he was doing was a preposterous charade liable to collapse at any moment. And it often did.

The problem of American diplomacy for many years now is that instead of one or two Plimptons surrounded by professionals, there are an awful lot of Plimptons, all acting in deadly seriousness and without any hint of the original Plimpton’s sense of self-deprecation.

Wait a minute, one might say in response, who’s to say what is and what is not a professional in the field of diplomacy? Diplomacy is not like a professional sport. Complete amateurs with no prior training in diplomacy are appointed to the most senior and sensitive positions representing the interests of the most powerful country on earth. Some of them are widely regarded as effective emissaries. This raises the question of whether diplomacy is a profession.

The answer, I believe, is that diplomacy

**Diplomacy is a profession, though not a technical one. A diplomat, like other professionals, must learn the skills of the trade.**



Gordon Sondland testifies before the House Intelligence Committee. Photo credit: REUTERS

is a profession, though not a technical one. A diplomat, like other professionals, must learn the skills of the trade; these skills improve through accumulated experience and dedicated practice, just like in other professions. But diplomatic skills are not technical in nature, like those of a dentist, surgeon, or captain of an aircraft carrier. (A New Yorker cartoon of the 1970s shows a masked surgeon in the operating room with the patient raising his head from the table and asking, “How do I know you aren’t George Plimpton?”)

Okay, so what are these non-technical diplomatic skills? I once led an effort to describe

them succinctly in a three-page document, entitled “Guidelines for the Successful Performance of a Chief of Mission,” when I was the president of the American Foreign Service Association. The guidelines were published in the April 2014 edition of *The Foreign Service Journal*. In short, there are three overarching skills applicable to all diplomats:

Understanding of a Host Country and International Affairs from an Operational Perspective. A diplomat learns the language, history, culture, institutions, politics and economics of the country of assignment, in

order to help shape public and private messages from one's capital to the host country and to influence the host country. This is a different kind of understanding from that of a university academic or an intelligence analyst. The diplomat has access to the academic's publications and the intelligence officer's analyses, but the diplomat's understanding is also informed by having worked with the host country's elites on governmental problems.

Understanding of One's Own Country and Its Policy Interests, together with the ability to communicate them and negotiate effectively in a foreign setting. A diplomat learns to participate constructively in the formulation of policy in one's own government and implement policy in a creative manner that yields positive results for one's country, and to communicate persuasively with one's own and foreign governments and with business circles and wider publics.

Leadership, management, moral character and interpersonal skills. A diplomat of any kind, from the ambassador down to the visa officer and the motor pool supervisor, must work effectively as a member of a team. He or she must show moral courage and manage in often difficult circumstances. Diplomats supervise locally hired employees starting in entry-level assignments and, if effective, they might eventually lead government agencies at home and missions overseas of many hundreds, even thousands of employees.

Those are the overarching big three skill sets of a diplomat, parts of which are found in other fields and which explains why non-professionals can sometimes succeed as diplomats.

But these skills are sharpened through experience in the field. A good diplomat cultivates a problem-solving mindset that seeks the "sweet spot" of enlightened self interest, based on knowing how to get to the possible overlap of skill set one (the other country's interests) and skill set two (the interests of one's own country). In my experience, political appointee ambassadors have a hard time finding that sweet spot. I have seen them become combative or go into virtual self-

isolation when the host nation "doesn't get it," or at the other extreme, they regard themselves as their host nation's best insider advocate in Washington.

In the US, the demand for patronage and government jobs grows with each succeeding administration and translates into increasing numbers of non-professionals in the top diplomatic jobs. The national interest in effective American diplomacy takes a distant second place to the need to reward campaign donors, staffers, and others seen as loyalists. In short, with every administration we get a larger batch of Plimptons seeking to learn how to be ambassadors and increasingly demanding to be posted to the most important overseas missions.

There are various rationalizations promoted in the American media to cover up the practice of rewarding campaign donors and staffers with diplomatic jobs. The latest rationalization fits nicely with this issue of the *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune's* theme of diaspora politics: sending an American (donor or staffer) to represent the US in his or her ethnicity's country of origin. This practice is long-established and fairly benign in some cases, for instance, an Irish American campaign donor as US ambassador in Dublin. US-Ireland ties are unlikely to be damaged severely by this practice, even though it has the effect of inserting Ireland into the US patronage system.

In other cases, however, sending an American ambassador because of his or her ethnicity to the home country of the ethnicity can have unintended negative consequences. The announcement that the Biden administration intends to nominate hotelier (and Democratic Party donor) George Tsunis as ambassador to Greece resulted in negative feedback like this in the Greek press: "The children of poor immigrants who somehow found success in the US are not seen as qualified to advise today's elected leaders about current Greek political life and foreign relations." Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American, reportedly had special difficulties as Special Envoy to Afghanistan

because successive Afghan presidents saw him as a potential political rival in Afghanistan. In Israel, when relations with the US get tense, Jewish American ambassadors are sometimes baited as turncoats and called “Jew Boy” (a taunt first applied to Secretary of State Kissinger and borrowed from the Nixon tapes.) When that happens, the US embassy staff has a new priority of working on ambassador–Israel relations rather than US–Israel relations.

Another example of unintended consequences is sending Indian Americans to represent the US in India. Many Indian Americans are descendants of the Brahmin caste. Brahmins had often collaborated with the British colonial administration. When India became independent and began implementing policies of affirmative action to help the lower castes, some Brahmins emigrated to seek opportunities in the US. Sending the descendant of a Brahmin back to India as ambassador can, instead of engendering goodwill as intended, further complicate the US–India relationship.

The solution is to fill ambassadorial positions with diplomats who meet the highest standards of the profession together with occasional non-professionals who have the necessary skill sets and who also bring also a fresh perspective to diplomatic problems. But that is not how US diplomacy is generally staffed these days.

A senior career official recently told me, quite proudly, that the State Department training course for new political appointee ambassadors, who have no prior experience in the profession and who are increasingly being sent to our biggest and most important embassies, was recently expanded from two to three weeks. According to a video of his performance, the original George Plimpton spent more than three weeks training to perform on the flying trapeze.

There was always a moment in the Plimpton performance art when, about to face the prospect of serious injury or crushing defeat, a troubled look would replace his usual confident demeanor. Thus, about to take a snap from the Baltimore Colts center in 1972, he looks across at the

opposing Detroit Lions and spots the ferocious linebacker Alex Karras pointing at his head. It reminds one of the similarly troubled look that crossed the mien of the Trump administration’s ambassador to the European Union, the campaign donor Gordon Sondland, as he was about to testify under congressional subpoena about his role in the Ukraine scandal. Thus Plimpton-esque farces have become translated into the world of American diplomacy as national tragedies.

To answer the question of this column’s title: Yes, diplomacy is a profession, though rarely as practiced of late in the United States. \*

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### ROBERT SILVERMAN

A former US diplomat and president of the American Foreign Service Association, Robert Silverman is a lecturer at Shalem College, a senior fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, and president of the Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance.





# AMERICA'S POLITICAL TROUBLES

President Joe Biden and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi arrive at the House Democratic Caucus, in October 2021. Photo credit: REUTERS/AI Drago



BY DOV S. ZAKHEIM

Observers of the Washington scene are engaged in hand-wringing exercises over the bitter political and cultural divisions that characterize governance in the United States today. To some extent they are certainly correct; yet the prevailing climate is a far cry from the polarization of America in the late 1960s. It would be a mistake to underestimate America's ability to rebound from the current malaise.

Washington is suffering from a severe case of political gridlock. Because Democrats hold a razor-thin edge in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, the party's leadership finds itself unable to implement its policies in a timely fashion. Thanks to Senate procedures, particularly the 60-vote requirement for bringing the debate on most legislation to closure, that chamber's Democratic leadership must accommodate every single member in order to pass its bills in the face of unanimous Republican opposition. The Democratic leadership of the House of Representatives faces a somewhat similar conundrum. It must satisfy not only its increasingly strong Progressive Caucus, but it must also win the support of the most radical elements of that caucus, the so-called six-person "Squad," led by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—who has accumulated a huge Twitter following and has become somewhat of a cult figure on the left.

The political divisions between right and left run very deep. For millions of Americans, the 2020 election has yet to be resolved. Donald Trump continues to stoke those divisions by

claiming—falsely—that he remains the rightful president from whom the election was stolen by “unpatriotic” Democrats. The vast majority of Congressional Republicans, primarily in the House of Representatives, either believe him or, fearing for their own political prospects, are unwilling to challenge him. Those who have done so, like Representatives Liz Cheney of Wyoming or Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, have found themselves ostracized by their fellow legislators.

Even matters of health have become politicized. The overwhelming majority of Americans never before have questioned the need for vaccines, just as they have not challenged the need for drivers' licenses or car insurance. Yet today millions of Americans see vaccination mandates—or for that matter, wearing masks in congested areas—as a threat to their personal freedoms. Somehow, they distinguish between government requirements for those who wish to drive cars, which are intended to protect other drivers and pedestrians, and requirements for vaccines that are meant to protect others from the ravages of COVID-19 and its variants.

Many Republicans have defied Democratic-led state mandates to wear masks, while Republican-led states have banned such mandates. To a great extent, Donald Trump's ambiguous responses to the COVID-19 threat and the policies of some Republican governors have fueled the anger of the anti-vaxxers. For their part, Democrats have presented themselves as champions of the vaccination. The result is that party adherence has come to determine health policy.

Cultural divisions run equally deep and are similarly expressed in political terms. Conservatives fear that their values are being



**For millions of Americans, the 2020 election has yet to be resolved.**

Trump supporters in front of the US Capitol Building, on January 6, 2021. Photo credit: REUTERS/Jim Urquhart

eroded by secularists who advocate for policies that violate their deepest religious beliefs. Among Republican Trump supporters, there are some unabashed bigots. Trump himself employed familiar “dog-whistles” to play to the worst instincts of racist elements among his supporters. These are the people that spearheaded and participated in the notorious 2017 demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, whom Trump then disingenuously described as “very fine people.” Trump’s influence on his party may actually be greatest in terms of immigration policy, on which it has adopted the toughest line. Indeed, Stephen Miller—ironically a great-grandson of immigrants who escaped the Russian pogroms—accurately reflected the prejudices of Trump’s base when he proposed that nearly half the US Army should be deployed along the Mexican border to stop immigrants from Central America from entering the US.

In many respects, political extremism within the Democratic Party is no better. Progressive Democrats promote policies that will also fundamentally change the nature of the country. Several are unabashed about their collectivist instincts. Led by Senator Bernie Sanders, who for years described himself merely as a socialist, they now call themselves democratic socialists and have succeeded in planting themselves within the Democratic Party. Progressives advocate endless spending, seemingly without any sense of the consequences of such policies. Progressives are increasingly present on university faculties and have actively promoted what has come to be called the “cancel culture.” Some who have expressed views contrary to the nostrums of the progressive left have been censured and all too often dismissed from their posts. Universities have disinvited guest speakers because their views do not mesh with





**Despite all of its current travails, those who would write America off would be seriously mistaken.**  
 "Squad" members Bowman and Tlaib speak at a sit-in at the US Capitol in support of the Build Back Better Act.  
 Photo credit: Allison Bailey via Reuters Connect

progressivism even if the subject of their talks have nothing whatsoever to do with politics.

Newspapers, notably the *New York Times*, likewise have moved increasingly to the left. While retaining some token conservatives, the Times in particular has made at least one conservative, Bari Weiss, an outspoken advocate of Israel, uncomfortable to the point of resigning.

Progressives promote what they have termed "intersectionality"—the claim to unite all oppressed elements of society against what they consider to be bigotry, wherever in the world it might take place. To that end, they have been in the forefront of efforts to ostracize if not destroy the State of Israel, particularly by throwing their weight behind the movement to boycott, divest,

and sanction (BDS) the Jewish state. In their view, Israel is an apartheid regime that is bent on oppressing and victimizing the Palestinian Arab people under its control. That Israel, in contrast to South Africa, the originator of apartheid, has long had Arab students attending its universities, has had Arab members of its Knesset—even if they advocate an anti-Zionist creed—and now even has an Arab party in its governing coalition is of no importance to American leftists.

The progressive "Squad" has taken a lead in criticizing aid to Israel, with Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib, of Palestinian origin, practically calling for Israel's destruction. Yet the "Squad" is hardly alone. The Democratic leadership in the House has countenanced antisemitic slurs

on the part of Representative Ilhan Omar, also part of the “Squad.” At recent party conventions, rank and file Democrats have increasingly voiced their opposition to recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

In light of all of the foregoing, it should come as no surprise that many observers, both domestically and overseas, have begun to question the inherent viability and sustainability of the American democratic project. That certainly appears to be the view of authoritarians such as China’s Xi Jinping, who reflects the opinion of many of his generation that China is a rising power while America is in decline. No doubt that view has underpinned China’s increasingly aggressive stance against Taiwan in particular and more generally in the East and South China Seas.

Russia’s Vladimir Putin, no less an authoritarian than Xi but whose country, unlike China, suffers from weak economic fundamentals, also appears to view Washington as no obstacle to his predatory instincts. Despite pressure from the West, notably US sanctions, Russia continues to support Donetsk and Luhansk, the breakaway provinces of Ukraine, and has made it clear that Western Europe is hostage to Russian natural gas. Russia continues its cyberattacks on Western democracies, while Putin contrasts his country’s morals with what he asserts is the decadence of the West.

America’s friends and allies worry that internal divisions are sapping American leadership. Some states—Hungary and Turkey are prime examples—have moved far closer to Russia for NATO’s taste. Other states have been less vocal about their concerns, but several, notably in Southeast Asia and in the Middle East, are hedging against what they fear is Washington’s inability to confront what it has termed its “strategic competitors.”

Yet the current climate, politically charged as it may be, is a far cry from the America of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The war in Vietnam, especially conscription, motivated liberals and young adults to hold countless demonstrations

and riots, which resulted in police violence; in particular, the National Guard’s killing of four students at Kent State University was an event that shocked the nation. The hundreds of deaths following inner city riots and police response, sparked by the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., is another example of the violence of that period.

America, for all its current troubles, has come a long way when compared to the previous decades. Minorities continue to make strides in all facets of the country’s political, economic, and social life as well. From a growing number of minority senior executives in industry to once lily-white suburbs that are now racially mixed, America simply does not look like the country did in the 1960s. Moreover, there is a heightened sensitivity of the need to rectify the scourge of racism that extends well beyond the Democratic left to moderates of all political stripes.

In sum, despite all of its current travails, those who would write America off would be seriously mistaken. One need only look at immigration patterns. Millions clamor to enter the US. No one seeks to emigrate to China, Russia, or any other authoritarian state. As long as Americans debate among themselves how better to improve both the individual lives of their fellow citizens and their collective body politic, the country will remain both intact and a force for good. As Winston Churchill once said, “I want no criticism of America at my table. The Americans criticize themselves more than enough.” \*

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#### DOV S. ZAKHEIM

Dov S. Zakheim is a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and vice chairman of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is a former US under secretary of defense (2001–2004) and deputy under secretary of defense (1985–1987).



# NO MAN IN THE MACHINE: HAS THE TIME COME FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT?





Illustration. Photo credit: Mike MacKenzie/Flickr



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**BY AMIR OREN**

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**D**eadline. This column must be completed by midnight. There is a problem, however. I must first get home and watch an exciting soccer match in the English Premier League before I sit to write. It is rush hour though, and the roads are jammed. Guessing the fastest route may or may not be useful. Inevitably, the solution is a navigation and live-traffic application such as Waze. The more people are behind the wheel for their livelihood, the more they rely on such apps and do not try to second guess them or beat the odds.

Once I am safely on the couch, the match quickly turns into endless disputes. A goal. A penalty. An off-side. Several decisions are challenged. The referee reconsiders. He consults, as he now must, the Video Assistant Referee (VAR). The human eye and the traditional judgment call have again given way to technology, especially in fast-paced and partly obscured action.

And now, as the deadline looms for writing this column...

Waze and VAR are just two of many improvements to the everyday tasks of data mining and decision making. Mankind intelligently farmed out these jobs to computerized systems using artificial intelligence (AI). Humans are employing non-human tools (computers, sensors, networks, robots) to accomplish super-human missions. This is most evident in austere environments such as space, Mars, ocean bottom, enemy territory. Drones of various sizes and uses are

edging out manned aircraft. Why train, pay, and risk humans in the cockpit—and have them land after several hours—when the same results or better ones can be achieved by remote control?

In the ancient art of espionage, cyber penetrations from remote neon-lit rooms have taken over the adventurous infiltration of an individual into the target's core surroundings. While not totally supplanting the spy (and his case officer), it is nevertheless more tempting—professionally, politically, and diplomatically—to collect from afar. After all, a captured spy can be tortured, executed, or used in a prisoner exchange, incurring political costs.

Applying AI to data collection purposes is thus relatively straightforward. But what about research and assessment—taking raw data and refining it into digestible intelligence? Then comes the production—editing, publishing, and distributing the finished product to its consumers. Finally, the work of intelligence agencies comes full circle through tasking—the duty of giving the collectors prioritized requests—which in turn determines how they will invest their resources, based on the assessments gleaned from what they collected earlier.

In real life, this is much too neat to be applicable. Moreover, there is no separate laboratory compartment for intelligence, where it is kept pure and unsoiled. Rather, it is inevitable, and, if done ethically, it is even highly valuable for intelligence to interact with both strategy and tactics; otherwise, the cost can be high. For example, the Israeli Air Force, basking in the glory of its victories in 1967 and of its continuous dogfighting dominance thereafter, missed the ominous significance of Egypt's ability (with Soviet assistance) to build

a surface-to-air missile belt and fight the IAF to a draw in the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal in 1969–1970. The IAF paid a heavy price for this oversight again in October 1973.

One lesson learned was the need to fuse intelligence, operations, and command and control, as demonstrated by Operation Mole Cricket 19 against Syria in June 1982. The collaboration between the IDF's most high-tech-oriented services, the Air Force and Intelligence, grew even tighter over the years, whereas intelligence support for the ground forces lagged behind.

The Second Lebanon War in 2006 was a wake-up call in this respect, and in the years since, measurable progress has been noted. Reforms under former Directorate of Military Intelligence Chief Aviv Kochavi (currently the IDF's chief of general staff) and his successors broke down barriers within the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) as well as between it and the operational stakeholders. The DMI established an all-source architecture, fusing data from Unit 8200 (Israel's equivalent of the NSA and Cyber Command) with HUMINT (including the civilian Israel Security Agency, charged with Palestinian affairs), GEOINT,

VISINT, and open sources. This flow, in turn, is linked to the General Staff's Operations Division—the military's nerve center—as well as to the Air Force, Navy, territorial commands, and frontline divisions.

In both the Northern Command, facing Syria and Lebanon, and the Southern Command, watching Gaza, a new intelligence-based industry was set up, the so-called “target factories.” These commands not only painstakingly collect and analyze but also match thousands of potential targets with compatible fire units—aircraft, manned and unmanned; tanks, artillery, missile boats—and then train and simulate their missions. In real time, of course, the scheme may go awry: targets keep moving around or are destroyed, or pop up unannounced; hence the need to speed up the sensor-to-shooter cycle.

Thus, when Operation Guardian of the Walls in Gaza ended, the DMI revealed one of the secrets behind its success in hitting Hamas's extensive tunnel network. AI was apparently, for the first time, embedded in the data-to-destruction continuum. There are simply too many incoming pieces of information and outgoing orders and authorizations for the human mind to digest and prioritize, in the minutes and seconds before it becomes useless. Only with AI can the “target factories” operate at what is termed in the US as “the speed of relevance.”

There is no inoculation against intelligence mistakes, however. Even with AI, mistakes will inherently be made by humans. If a pattern is fed into the system, errors of interpretation are still possible and natural—until the deviation sets off an alarm. Even when based on a review of AI-generated options and recommendations, Go/No Go decisions are still matters of human policy. While these emerging systems and procedures are obviously priceless resources available to those who need to answer “how,” “when,” and “where”—questions regarding the conduct of battles—the fundamental question remains “whether” to fight. On this ultimate

**Emerging technology is a priceless resource available to those who need to answer “how,” “when,” and “where.” But the fundamental question remains “whether” to fight. On this ultimate question, the AI algorithms may fall short.**

question, the AI algorithms may fall short.

In a notional case of game theory, one can construct a set of indicators activating an alarm—or even a war warning. It is a sort of smoke siren, or a tripwire that has been stepped on. Surely, such an alarm should trigger automatic, reflexive reactions, leaving the decision maker no choice; but such stark situations are atypical. When the weather forecaster on the evening news projects a “low probability” of rain—the term famously used by the DMI in 1973, when they misread Anwar Sadat’s inclination to wage war—the forecaster may even translate “low” into percentages: 30%. That ends her part of the process. The responsibility now lies on the viewer’s shoulders. What should the viewer do with this assessment?

Take an umbrella, one is tempted to shout, even if there is a 70% chance of its staying dry and folded. Compared to the risk of singing in the rain, it is a no-brainer, rather than a no-rainer. Yet some “umbrellas”—such as a massive reserve call-up—are neither that cheap nor that useful.

The cadence of deter-detect-defeat rhymes nicely (also in Hebrew: *harta’ah, hatra’ah, hakhra’ah*), but the detection or early warning mechanism was never automatic. Back in the 1950s, Ben-Gurion, by then a seasoned politician, explained to fellow ministers why he was deviating from his own doctrine of “early warning”: While Jordan was being goaded by Egypt to threaten an invasion of vulnerable Israel, he nevertheless argued that he could not act on the assumption that hostilities were imminent. A reserve call-up would be very costly and could turn into a situation of attrition, bleeding Israel dry, without a shot being fired.

He was right at the time; but in 1973 the same chain of reasoning left Israel ill-prepared for Sadat’s decision to go to war (and undo Ben-Gurion’s doctrine piece by piece—the Egyptian president even wondered aloud, in a mid-war speech, what Israel’s old and dying former leader would have done). Egypt and Syria shattered

the concept of deterrence, avoided detection, and sought—less successfully—to deflect the IDF from the goal of scoring a decisive outcome. The logic that proved right in the 1950s proved wrong in 1973.

No algorithm, then or now, would have been compelling enough to override human judgement. After all, Sadat’s threat to go to war was no secret. The entire Israeli political and military leadership was aware that without some diplomatic progress, war could come—but not, they reasoned, when the Egyptian Armed Forces still lacked some hardware (planes, missiles), and not on the eve of Knesset elections. In 1975, perhaps, but not in the first week of October 1973.

Some five months earlier, a similar debate, based on similar intelligence reports, unsettled Prime Minister Golda Meir, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, and the IDF Chief of Staff David “Dado” Elazar. In contrast, Eli Zeira, then director of the DMI, boldly and correctly predicted that Sadat would find some pretext to abort his own war. Zeira’s prediction remained unchanged in October, but not Sadat’s decision. Sadat had outsmarted the best minds in Israel of 1973; could another leadership group in today’s context act otherwise, helped by AI at the strategic level?

The jury—consisting of humans, not robots—is still out, because there is no way of telling a future Golda what would be her best option. An intelligence assessment may be based on science, but it is still an art, as in artful—not artificial—intelligence. Can AI still be elevated from a command technology to a cabinet tool? Perhaps it can, by upending the process and making the AI product the default option, which the leadership will be urged to adopt, unless convincing counterarguments prevail. War is never inevitable. It is a human endeavor, and the assessment of warlike trends is too important to be left to machines. \*



**No algorithm, then or now, would have been compelling enough to override human judgement.**  
Israeli artillery forces during the 1973 war.

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**AMIR OREN**

Amir Oren has been covering national security, intelligence, and foreign affairs as a combat correspondent and commentator for decades. He is a regular lecturer at defense colleges and intelligence and diplomacy fora in Israel, Canada, the EU, and NATO.



# THE ROLE OF THE ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS: REVIEW, LESSONS, AND ASSESSMENT

BY PNINA SHUKER

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**A**lmost two years after it first broke out, the COVID-19 virus continues to deceive the world by changing its shape frequently and claiming many victims even where it had assumingly been vanquished. While domestic civilian agencies are ultimately best suited to lead the response to the pandemic, the capacity of the public health system—even in the most developed countries—has become overextended. Considering the urgent need for additional personnel and resources, countries across the globe have mobilized some degree of military involvement in response to the crisis, ranging from setting up field hospitals to delivering protective equipment or enforcing lockdowns. Yet, relative to the militaries of other

democracies, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were deployed more extensively to fight the pandemic during 2020–2021<sup>(1)</sup>.

## THE IDF'S STRUGGLE AGAINST AN INVISIBLE ENEMY

Ever since its establishment, the IDF has been involved in civilian missions, especially in the fields of civil infrastructure and education. Given its logistical and budgetary capabilities, it was only natural that the IDF would be extensively involved in the country's response to the virus from the beginning of the pandemic. Much of the military support was provided or coordinated by the Home Front Command (HFC), the arm of the IDF specializing in civilian protection, usually in times of conflict, and experienced in cooperating with local authorities. Presumably, this should have been the mission of the National Emergency Authority, a civilian authority established in 2007 in the aftermath



IDF Deputy Chiefs of Staff visit to COVID-19 drive-through testing. Photo credit: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

of the Second Lebanon War, whose role was to support the home front in emergency situations—war, fires, earthquakes—and prepare for a global pandemic as well. Over the years, however, its functions have diminished to the point that it has become a small advisory body, devoid of executive authorities, and thus creating a vacuum for the HFC to fulfill.

Against this background, the HFC provided logistical support to civilian authorities that supplied aid to the civilian population, such as food, medication, and essential services to the elderly. The HFC has also been operating several COVID-19 “drive-through” testing locations across the country, making testing more accessible for civilians, in addition to initially being charged with operating hotels for recovering COVID-19 patients who did not require medical support. At the end of March 2020, the Israeli government decided to allocate 1,400 soldiers of the HFC to assist the

police in enforcing lockdowns and maintaining public order. In the field of public information, the HFC operated a call center that provided guidelines and other necessary information regarding COVID-19 for civilians, and its troops distributed leaflets in several languages (in Arabic, Russian, and Amharic as well as Hebrew and English), explaining the significance of complying with the government instructions.

Considering the recent spread of the Omicron variant, hundreds of soldiers have been sent door to door to test civilians who had returned to Israel from African countries, where the Omicron variant first appeared. The HFC also has been tasked with the mission of coordinating vaccination campaigns in schools and vaccination sites in local authorities, to make the vaccines as accessible as possible to the Israeli public.

The IDF's extensive involvement in the national response to COVID-19 caused many

to call upon the government to limit the IDF's involvement, due to several concerns. Some fear that this involvement could undermine the delicate balance of military–social relations in Israel.

In July 2020, when it became apparent that the Ministry of Health was unable to operate an effective system of epidemiological investigations, the HFC was charged with the task and established the “Alon” (Oak) Coronavirus Command Center, as well as the “Ella” (Terebinth) Unit. The latter uses a special digital system, developed by the IDF's SIGINT Agency, Unit 8200, and the Cyber Defense Directorate. During 2021 these units performed 706,271 investigations, carried out 13,540,000 PCR tests, and operated 28 hotels for quarantine purposes. In no other democracy have the armed forces been tasked with similar missions.<sup>(2)</sup>

The involvement of the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI) in the COVID-19 crisis was multidimensional and controversial. Its technological unit created an information management software for the coronavirus testing labs and conducted epidemiological analysis of COVID-19 patients to determine hotspots of where the infection spread in order to help the local authorities focus their efforts in preventing the disease from spreading in their vicinity.

Additionally, the DMI established the National Information and Knowledge Center for the Fight against COVID-19. The central task of the center is to analyze the spread of the virus and identify risks and opportunities, in addition to providing governmental organizations with data analysis, global information, and recommendations to assist policy formulation.

The DMI's secret units were also called to support the crisis response. The General Staff Reconnaissance Unit (Sayeret Matkal)—Israel's most prominent special forces unit—was called upon to deliver samples taken from testing locations to the laboratories certified to carry out the tests at the beginning of the crisis. The technological unit of DMI, known as Unit 81, was responsible for designing sophisticated gadgets,

such as monitors for remote control operations, personal protection gear, and designated ambulances.

### THE MISSION IS FAR FROM ACCOMPLISHED

The vast resources at the disposal of the IDF, its expertise in dealing with crisis situations, and the public trust it enjoys, have led some politicians during the crisis to call for even greater military involvement in Israel's response to the pandemic. A few have even suggested, with seemingly public support, the notion that the coordination of response should be transferred from the health authorities to the IDF.

Experts of military–social relations tend to agree that it is unlikely that the IDF will take advantage of its role expansion, as reflected during the crisis. The IDF's extensive involvement in the national response to COVID-19, however, also caused many to call upon the government to limit the IDF's involvement, due to several concerns. Some fear that this involvement could undermine the delicate balance of military–social relations in Israel, as well as the foundations of the presumably fragile Israeli democracy. Some are concerned that using the military for unpopular and controversial missions, such as enforcing lockdowns, may provoke antagonism toward it, while others felt that the military should stay focused on its primary responsibilities of warfare; and against the background of the instability of the Israeli political system, some invoked the fear that military involvement in a

**Do the advantages of utilizing the IDF in responding to a the Covid-19 crisis outweigh the disadvantages?**

civilian crisis might paint the IDF as a tool of the political echelon.

As for the criticism regarding the IDF's involvement in unpopular missions, such as enforcing lockdowns, the use of the IDF in these missions was done with great care, recognizing its sensitivity. Thus, soldiers who operated in the civilian sphere were not given police authority and were instructed to not carry weapons. Furthermore, in most cases, the different sectors, even the Arab and ultra-Orthodox ones, welcomed the IDF troops. Although the IDF traditionally enjoys the highest level of public trust, in a survey conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute, less than a third surveyed (31%) gave the IDF a good score regarding its budgetary conduct. Thus, by demonstrating the considerable role that the IDF played during the pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis has provided an opportunity to show taxpayers the necessity of public spending on the IDF. Therefore, this experience has enabled the IDF to boost its image, especially among populations where the majority do not serve in the military (ultra-Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs).

Despite the criticism levelled at the military intelligence units and their involvement in this civilian crisis, the DMI has utilized its significant capabilities in analyzing big data using advanced technologies and has provided decision makers with valuable information regarding infection and vaccination indexes, without exposing any personal details and violating individual privacy. In doing so, it has demonstrated the growing need for an intelligence capacity that is relevant for civilian needs, no less than strategic or military ones. One should also differentiate between the actions of the DMI during the crisis and the actions of the internal Israeli Security Agency, which included digital tracking capabilities to monitor infected civilians and those who have been exposed to them—actions that have been subjected to harsh public criticism. However, since the government had declared a national state of emergency in March 2020, following the high infection

rates, it was both legitimate and legal to use the IDF—including its DMI units—for the sake of monitoring the situation.

A caveat is required: For the past two years, I served a total of almost eight months as a reservist in the HFC, and for the last four months, I have served as an advisor to the Ministry of Health, and so I have been privy to both the military and civilian aspects of the COVID-19 crisis management. I feel confident in claiming that, at least from my perspective, the military is well aware that it is subordinate to the political echelon and the relevant bureaucratic hierarchy, and that its joint efforts with the Ministry of Health, as well as with other governmental organizations, have been fruitful, transparent, and, in most cases, effective. In terms of the actual results, the IDF proved once again its utility in responding to a large-scale crisis and the advantages of utilizing the IDF outweigh the disadvantages. There is still much to be done, however, to win this war; considering the need to act rapidly and effectively, the involvement of the armed forces—as demonstrated in other countries as well—is inevitable and crucial. \*

1. Stuart Cohen and Meir Elran, "Patterns of Military Activity in the Battle against the Coronavirus: Lessons for Israel from Other Nations," *INSS Insight* No. 1300 (April 17, 2020), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-army-and-the-fight-against-the-coronavirus/>

2. Yagil Levy, "The People's Army 'Enemising' the People: The COVID-19 Case of Israel," *European Journal of International Security* (2021), p. 2; <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.33>

## PNINA SHUKER

Dr. Pnina Shuker is a national security expert and a postdoctoral fellow at Tel Aviv University's School of Political Science, Government, and International Affairs. She is a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University, Israel's Open University, and the Academic College of Law and Science.



# HASSAN NASRALLAH, MASTER OF LEBANON

WHAT COMES  
NEXT FOR THE  
MOST POWERFUL  
MAN IN ONE OF  
THE MIDDLE  
EAST'S WEAKEST  
COUNTRIES?



Hassan Nasrallah is seen on a giant screen giving a speech to his supporters during a rally in Beirut.  
Photo credit: dpa

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**BY KSENIA SVETLOVA**

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**I**n 2022, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah will celebrate 30 years as the undisputed leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon—upholding a pattern of Arab leaders who mature, age, and often die while in power. It was on February 16, 1992 that Abbas al-Musawi, the second secretary-general of Hezbollah, was assassinated by the Israel Defense Forces. While in some cases the elimination of terrorist leaders did weaken their organizations, in this case, the result for Israel was distinctly counterproductive. His successor was a talented young man—a cleric by training, who had studied in Najaf and Qom, and formerly served the more moderate Shiite party in Lebanon, Amal, as a delegate representing the Beqaa valley. The choice fell on Hassan Nasrallah largely due to the wish of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and from his perspective he chose well. During Nasrallah’s three decades in power, as an extremely able leader, he greatly increased the influence of Hezbollah and turned it into a major political power, much stronger than the Lebanese state itself. Yet 30 years after he took control of the movement, Lebanon seems to be sinking fast, and many Lebanese—including members of his own community—hold him responsible. What comes next for the most powerful man in one of the Middle East’s weakest countries?

#### **BETWEEN ISLAMIC REVOLUTION AND THE CEDAR TREE**

Many of Nasrallah’s enemies call him “an Iranian agent,” and indeed, one of his formal titles is that of the Supreme leader’s Representative in Lebanon. For his supporters, he is the sole defender of Lebanon. In fact, as a leader of Hezbollah, he embodies both identities—a true son of the Iranian Islamic revolution and a Lebanese political leader who represents his authentic constituency.

By birth, upbringing, and socialization, Hassan Nasrallah is just as Lebanese as any member of the privileged Maronite or Sunni families who reside in posh neighborhoods like Achrafiya or Gemmayzeh, in another Lebanese universe. He was born and raised in Burj Hammoud, the eastern suburb of Beirut. During the civil war his family moved to the Tyre area in southern Lebanon. Later he moved to Baalbek, the heart of Beqaa Valley, to study. Soon, like many of his peers, he joined the Amal movement (also called Harakat al-Mahrumin, “The Movement of the Deprived”), which was deeply influenced by Imam Musa Sadr who fought against corruption and poverty in largely Shia-populated South Lebanon. Later, discouraged by what he described as the Amal leaders’ “lack of religious devotion” and their readiness to accept Israeli-supported Bashir Gemayil as Lebanon’s president, he left Amal and joined the ranks of the newly established Hezbollah—more radical, far more religious, and closely associated with Iran.

“All of my sisters are active members of Hezbollah. But, as for the brothers, they were all in the Amal movement first. Now, all of them, except for Hoseyn, have left it. We have been discussing and exchanging views with each other for some time now. Today, Hezbollah is making good progress and changing for the better. Its goal is to move in the right direction with the necessities of the time and to uphold its Shiite principles,” said Nasrallah in his autobiography, published in Persian in 2006.

According to personal accounts of people who were close to him, Nasrallah is indeed a deeply religious person, a scholar who dreamt of becoming a religious leader. According to his autobiography, his “ideal person” remains Khomeini, founder of the Iranian Islamic Revolution, while the ideal form of authority is *velayat e-faqih*—a revolutionary variation of the Shia faith, in which the Islamist system of governance requires obedience to the “Interpreter of the Law,” the Supreme Leader. However, in practice, Nasrallah often acts as a realist. Not unlike the leaders of the Soviet Union—who let go of the dream of the global communist revolution—he no longer dreams about establishing an Islamic Republic in Lebanon today or in the future.

“It is not possible with force and resistance. It requires a national referendum. A referendum that wins 51% of the vote is still not the solution. What it needs is a referendum for which 90% of the people vote. Hence, with this assumption, and in view of the status quo, establishing an Islamic Republic system in Lebanon is not possible at the present time” said Nasrallah back in 2006. At the time, Southern Lebanon lay in ruins, devastated after a war with Israel that Nasrallah had triggered. He then concentrated on establishing charitable organizations to win back the loyalty of the people and find his place in mainstream Lebanese politics.

Yet according to Sheikh Subhi Tufayli, the first secretary-general of Hezbollah, it was Nasrallah’s total loyalty to Iran that eventually caused a split inside the organization,

transforming it into an operative arm of Iran in Lebanon (unlike Nasrallah, Tufayli rejected the principle of *velayat e-faqih* as un-Islamic, and viewed Iran’s government as tyrannical). After the explosion in Beirut in August 2020, Tufayli openly accused Nasrallah of being complicit in the disaster. Nasrallah regularly affirms his loyalty to Iran and Ayatollah Khamenei, implying that if Iran will be drawn into war, his organization will not sit idle. This constant tension between his Lebanese identity and his loyalty as well as religious and organizational connections to Iran is perhaps the defining aspect of Nasrallah’s era.

## NO LONGER A ROBIN HOOD

Nasrallah understood well how badly his Shia constituency needed the welfare they were denied by the Lebanese state. Establishing this social service program was also vital to Hezbollah’s rise and success. For poor Lebanese families in the southern villages and city slums, what mattered was not the jihadi agenda but rather the food packages during Ramadan, medical services, and small zero-percent loans. This use of social services gave Nasrallah an image of a Lebanese “Robin Hood,” ready to “take from the rich” in order to “give to the poor.” He skillfully filled the vacuum created by the weak government, while his constituency was ready to overlook the many shady activities in which Hezbollah was involved: money laundering, drug trade, and massive accumulation of weapons for local dominance and a future devastating war with Israel.

However, in 2021, after almost three decades in power, these structures—created by Hezbollah during the years of plenty—are no longer enough. The crisis in Lebanon, multiplied by the spread of coronavirus, is now much wider and deeper than anything Hezbollah could solve. Sanctions on Iran and measures taken by Western powers against illicit funds and drugs smuggling slowed down the money flow from Iran to Lebanon, as well as from Hezbollah’s supporters in Africa and Latin America.



More and more Western countries decided to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, halting all activities of related groups and associations.

Thus, neither Hezbollah nor the Iranian oil shipments (another Robin Hood-like act) can resolve the energy crisis or offer an alternative to Western or Arab aid. Hezbollah's role in support of the Syrian regime in the long and bloody civil war raised doubts about the true necessity of the "resistance weapon." The man who praised martyrdom and sacrificed his son Hadi and sent hundreds of other people's sons to their death during armed conflicts with Israel—and the war in Syria—now found out that his men actually wanted to live and thrive, rather than pay the price of his politics. Two out of three pillars of Hezbollah's appeal—the charity and the ethos of resistance—have now been seriously diminished.

### **WILL NASRALLAH TAKE LEBANON TO THE GRAVEYARD OF THE FAILED STATES?**

Hezbollah, which once vied with Amal for attention and influence among Lebanese Shia, now holds significant military and political power, a separate financial system, a powerful militia, a network of charities, and political representation in Lebanon's Parliament. It relies on three important principles: religion, the fight against Israel, and the battle against corruption and poverty. Despite previous setbacks—such as the war with Israel in 2006 or the demonstrations in 2019 when anti-Hezbollah slogans sounded loud and clear—Nasrallah has been able to maintain his power over Hezbollah and Lebanon, essentially ruling a state within a state. In 2008 he effectively occupied Beirut and proved to the then Prime Minister Saad ad-Din al-Hariri who really held the keys to power in Lebanon. He then delayed the formation of the government and the election of a president until he got the desired result. He came to be known as a mighty and skillful political player, perhaps the only player in town.

This proved to be a pyrrhic victory. Today Nasrallah bears overt responsibility for the

prospect that his country—once considered the "Switzerland of the Middle East,"—is a step away from the graveyard of failed states. By posing impossible conditions and promoting the interests of Iran over those of Lebanon, he jeopardizes Lebanon's future. His organization, as it turns out, does not have the capacity to replace the Lebanese state, nor is it willing to evolve into a normative political organization and let go of terror, illicit funding, the drug trade, and its ultimate commitment to fight Israel on Iran's behalf. The Shia Lebanese identity of Nasrallah leaves him little room beyond tactical compromises, while his loyalty to Iran's leadership will prevent serious reforms and true change. Lebanon can hardly be called a sovereign country anymore as the shallow nature of the Lebanese state led Hezbollah to fill the void and expand into every sphere of life in the country. But it now falls to him to reap the bitter results of the chaotic situation that for 30 years served his interests. The real danger is that he might need a new war to change the equation and regain Hezbollah's status as the "defender of Lebanon." \*

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### **KSENIA SVETLOVA**

Ksenia Svetlova is a research fellow at the Institute for Policy and Strategy at Reichman University (IDC Herzliya) and the director of the program on Israel–Middle East relations at the Mitvim Institute. She is a former Knesset member.

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