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LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER



The Middle East at a Moment of Strategic Choice

by Ahmed Charai

Some media commentators were quick to dismiss Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting this week with President Donald J. Trump, depicting it as driven by domestic politics, legal pressures, or media optics. But that is a mistake. This meeting comes at a time of profound regional fragility and converging pressures.

On one front lies Iran's aggressive proxy network, stretching from Gaza to Lebanon, from Yemen across the Red Sea. On the other lies a quieter but no less corrosive danger: the strategic incoherence of actors who present themselves as partners of the United States while sustaining, through action or omission, the ecosystems in which extremism regenerates. This dual pressure—external aggression and internal contradiction—defines the strategic reality confronting Washington and its allies.

In the December 29 Trump-Netanyahu meeting, key topics included Gaza, next-phase regional arrangements, deterrence generally

and specifically in the question of future action against Iran's capabilities. The significance of the meeting does not lie in whether or not every detail was finalized or publicly disclosed. It lies in a shared recognition that the old Middle East—defined by proxies, ideological capture, and the manipulation of legitimacy—is attempting to reassert itself, even as the foundations of a new regional order struggle to emerge.

The Abraham Accords represent a deliberate shift away from ideological conflict toward pragmatic cooperation, from permanent grievance and proxy warfare toward regional integration and sovereign responsibility. The Accords are the product of sustained strategic effort, intellectual clarity, and unusual political courage.

In this regard, the statecraft of Jared Kushner, and his willingness to challenge failed orthodoxies, deserves recognition. The Abraham Accords have endured over the past five years, through wars, regional shocks, and political transitions, in no small part owing to the well-designed architecture of shared interests and their serious implementation efforts.

Today, the United States, Israel, and the signatories to the Abraham Accords face a two-front challenge.

The first is overt and familiar: Hamas, Hizbullah, the Houthis, and a wider constellation of armed actors trained, financed, and politically shielded by Iran.

The second is more insidious. It comes from states that speak the language of counterterrorism while enabling movements tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. They denounce extremism while empowering ideologues inside “legitimate” institutions; they praise stability while tolerating and even sponsoring destabilizing networks under the protection of state recognition.

In Yemen, these states back an official governing authority penetrated by Brotherhood-aligned actors. That does not defeat political Islam but rather institutionalizes it. Violent ideology is laundered through bureaucracy. International legitimacy becomes a shield for a long-term project that lacks genuine popular consent. The outcome is predictable: Islamist networks embed themselves in ministries, security services, and patronage systems, while presenting themselves internationally as the only alternative to chaos. Meanwhile, the external threat of the Houthis persists and Tehran retains leverage not because it is strong, but because its adversaries are divided.

The Netanyahu–Trump meeting should be understood as pointing to the central strategic question of the present-day Middle East: How to prevent Tehran from regenerating its proxy capacity and exporting crisis as a governing strategy.

Iran itself is also showing signs of internal exhaustion. A regime forced to rely increasingly on coercion at home has diminishing capacity to sustain complex external architectures indefinitely. Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Houthis are not autonomous actors; they are extensions of an Iran that supplies financing, coordination, weapons pipelines, and media support. As Tehran’s domestic legitimacy erodes, so too does the ideological credibility on which its proxies depend.

This is why the present moment constitutes a strategic window, which will not remain open indefinitely. Coordinated Western and regional action can exploit Iran’s internal strain to fragment its proxy network and raise the cost of

its asymmetric strategy beyond sustainability. Coordination, however, must be operational, not rhetorical: sanctions enforcement that disrupts procurement, intelligence integration that chokes weapons routes, hardened maritime and air defenses, and diplomatic clarity that denies legitimacy to ideological capture.

For those states supporting violent Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, ambiguity must end. Strategic clarity is not moral theater; it is survival logic. One cannot oppose the Muslim Brotherhood while enabling its advance. One cannot fight terrorism while empowering regressive Islamist movements that capture governing institutions. One cannot defend the Abraham Accords rhetorically while eroding their foundations in practice.

The Abraham Accords can still shape the Middle East’s future, but only if those who benefited from their promise accept the cost of clarity. History will not record intentions. It will record strategic choices. *

AHMED CHARAI

Publisher

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A Father's Cry, a Nation's Future

by Ahmed Charai

There are moments when abstraction collapses under the weight of lived reality—when a single human voice compels strategy to confront morality.

Such a moment emerged when a letter written by an Iranian father, living inside Iran and addressed to Jared Kushner, circulated widely across the Abraham TV platforms, reaching more than 27 million viewers. Devoid of slogans and free of ideological posture, the letter articulated a truth that decades of propaganda have attempted—and failed—to obscure.

The author did not write as a dissident intellectual, a political activist, or a partisan figure. He wrote as a father—a man anxious about rising prices, unavailable medicine, exhausted hospitals, and a future that feels increasingly foreclosed. His words carried no call for vengeance, no appeal for chaos, no revolutionary rhetoric. They carried something far more unsettling for an authoritarian system: quiet honesty.

That is precisely why the letter matters.

For decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has projected an image of strength, resistance, and moral certainty. Its leaders speak fluently of sacrifice, ideology, and regional influence. Yet beneath this carefully maintained narrative lies

a society drained by repression, corruption, and economic failure. The father's letter exposes not only material hardship, but a deeper affliction: the erosion of hope.

When silence becomes the primary means of survival, the crisis is no longer economic alone—it is existential. This is the true cost of authoritarian rule. It does not merely govern behavior; it suffocates aspiration.

It is not incidental that this father chose to address his letter to Jared Kushner. In his eyes, Mr. Kushner represents more than a former American official. He symbolizes a generational shift in Middle Eastern thinking—one that prioritizes economic opportunity over ideological rigidity, coexistence over perpetual confrontation, and prosperity over indoctrination.

The Abraham Accords marked a conceptual break with the past. They demonstrated that peace could be pursued through shared interests rather than enforced silence, and that regional stability need not be built on fear. For an Iranian father trapped in a system sustained by slogans and repression, this vision represents an alternative future—one where leaders speak the language of jobs, education, dignity, and normal life.

In invoking Jared Kushner, this father is not expressing envy of power or privilege, but of something far rarer: normality — a life in which one can plan, build, and hope without fear.

The letter reminds us of a truth that must remain central: the Iranian people are not the

regime. They are its first and greatest victims.

This recognition carries strategic implications. It is no longer sufficient to ask whether the current regime can endure. The more urgent question is whether Iranians—and those who engage with Iran—are prepared for what follows its eventual collapse.

History is unforgiving to those who postpone the “day after.”

Revolutions that succeed in dismantling tyranny but fail to prepare governance often give rise to new forms of authoritarianism, fragmentation, or prolonged instability. Iran's future cannot be improvised. It must be contemplated with seriousness, sobriety, and urgency.

Iran is not a minor or homogeneous state. It is a major civilization—territorially vast, socially complex, and demographically diverse. Persians, Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Jews, and others have coexisted within its borders for centuries. Any post-revolutionary order that ignores this diversity risks either fragmentation or the emergence of a new, perhaps even harsher, authoritarianism.

Nor can Iran's internal transformation be separated from its regional role. For years, the regime has relied on proxies, militias, and ideological confrontation as instruments of influence. A future Iran will face a strategic choice: to continue exporting instability, or to become a stabilizing actor that reduces tensions, respects sovereignty, and contributes constructively to regional order.

Who, then, can guide such a transition—and under what political framework? These questions are uncomfortable, but unavoidable.

One option merits serious and immediate examination: a constitutional monarchy rooted in the Pahlavi framework, adapted to the realities of the twenty-first century. This is not an appeal to nostalgia, nor a call to restore absolute rule. Rather, it is a proposal for institutional balance during a fragile national transition.

In such a framework, the monarch's role would be to represent the nation in its entirety—not a faction, not an ideology, not a past, but the collective continuity of Iran itself.

His responsibility would be to safeguard unity during transition and to ensure that a new constitutional order enshrines freedom, dignity, and justice for all Iranians, without distinction.

This approach is neither theoretical nor unprecedented. Constitutional monarchies have demonstrated resilience precisely because they separate symbolic authority from political power.

Yet no political system—monarchical or republican—can succeed without legitimacy. The Iranian people must not be instructed; they must be convinced. Convinced that unity will be preserved. That freedoms will be guaranteed. That prosperity is attainable. That peace—internally and regionally—is not an illusion.

The father who wrote that letter is not asking for a crown or a constitution. He is asking for dignity—for a system that allows him to work honestly, care for his parents, educate his children, and sleep without fear. Any political vision that fails to meet this fundamental human demand will fail, regardless of ideology.

His letter is more than an emotional appeal. It is a strategic warning. Hope, once destroyed, is difficult to restore. Ignoring such voices would be moral blindness—and geopolitical folly.

History rarely offers clean transitions. But it does offer moments of clarity. This letter is one of them.

Listening to it is not merely an act of compassion.

It is an act of strategic wisdom. ✱

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THE UPRISING IN IRAN: THE MEANING OF MASHAD, A SHIFT IN SLOGANS, AND THE ROLE OF REZA PAHLAVI

Iranian protesters demonstrate in Tehran



by Raghu Kondori

THE MEANING OF MASHHAD

Reports from Mashhad, Iran's second-largest city and one of the regime's most important religious strongholds, mark a qualitative shift in Iran's unrest. Over one million people reportedly rallied, regime forces withdrew, and the city briefly fell under protester control. Since the beginning of the uprising, more than 1,000 protests have been documented nationwide.

Mashhad is not a peripheral city. It is central to the Islamic Republic's religious legitimacy and ideological authority. When mass protests overwhelm such a place, the nature of the crisis changes. This is no longer scattered dissent or cyclical unrest but a breakdown in the regime's ability to govern.

FROM GRIEVANCE TO ASSUMPTION OF COLLAPSE

The slogans dominating these protests make that shift unmistakable. The shift from "Pahlavi will return" to "Javid Shah" represents escalation. What began as symbolic alignment evolved into a direct political assertion. Historically, movements escalate slogans only when they believe momentum is moving in their favor.

The most widespread chants are "This is the last battle, Pahlavi will return" and "Javid Shah" ("Long live the King"). These are not demands for reform or negotiation. They are slogans of succession.

Inflation, sanctions, economic collapse, and social repression may have ignited the protests, but they no longer define them. International

media often describe the events as "unrest" or "protests" while avoiding the content of the slogans themselves. But when large segments of a population chant the fall of a regime as an assumption rather than a request, politics moves from grievance to anticipation. The uprising stops reacting to power and begins preparing for its absence.

This shift matters more than protest size alone. Many regimes survive mass demonstrations. But regimes have difficulty surviving once popular belief in their permanence collapses.

The chant "*Pahlavi will return*" is often mischaracterized as a narrow call for monarchical restoration. In practice, it signals continuity with Iran's last widely recognized state identity without forcing an immediate resolution of the long-divisive monarchy-versus-republic debate within the opposition.

"Javid Shah" is a slogan that allows diverse social groups—students, workers, secular liberals, nationalists, professionals, and politically unaffiliated citizens—to align around a shared direction without ideological uniformity. Instead of consensus, it offers sequencing: first the removal of the Islamic Republic, then a democratic transition.

Iran's uprising now follows a recognizable pattern of regime collapse:

First, psychological rupture. The spread of "Pahlavi will return" marked the breaking of fear.

Second, national synchronization. After Pahlavi called for nationwide participation on January 8 and 9, millions of Iranians responded

across cities and regions, transforming dispersed protests into coordinated national action.

Third, regime retreat. Authorities cut internet access, disrupted landlines, and reportedly prepared to interfere with satellite communications. States sever communications when they feel strategically vulnerable, when they are losing narrative control.

THE UNIVERSITY-STREET NEXUS

Iran's most transformative moments have historically occurred when street protests and intellectual institutions moved together. As slogans spread into universities, professional associations, and civil society, their impact multiplies.

These institutions are central to the regime's ideology. When students, academics, artists, and professionals echo the language of the streets, the state loses both symbolic authority and organizational depth. This university-street nexus forms the backbone of sustained national mobilization.

PAHLAVI'S ROLE

Prince Reza Pahlavi's role is best understood as catalytic rather than authoritarian. He has functioned as a unifying reference point, capable of aligning internal resistance with external engagement.

Following the January mobilization, he thanked President Donald Trump for pledging accountability for regime crimes and urged European leaders to move beyond ambiguity. His appeal was practical: use technical, financial, and diplomatic tools to restore communications, protect information flows, and ensure Iranian protesters are not silenced behind digital blackouts.

His message—"*Great nation of Iran, the eyes of the world are upon you*"—reinforced morale inside Iran while placing some responsibility on the international community. The regime's attempt to cut communications confirms how

threatening this linkage has become.

Crucially, the direction of the movement does not predetermine Iran's final political system. The collapse of the Islamic Republic would not end the political process; it would begin a transitional phase. A transitional government, led by Prince Reza Pahlavi, would focus on stabilizing the country, restoring communications and public order, and preparing the ground for a national referendum.

on the outcome, a new parliament would be elected, and a final constitution drafted and approved. What ultimately unites all credible pathways is not the form of the state, but its foundation: a secular democratic system based on popular consent, accountable institutions, and a clear separation between religion and political power.

The evolution from "*Pahlavi will return*" to "*Javid Shah*" captures this moment of transition. It reflects a society that no longer asks whether the Islamic Republic should fall, but prepares for what comes after. The destination remains open. The direction is no longer in doubt. *

RAGHU KONDORI

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THE SHOE DROPS IN VENEZUELA

Venezuelans celebrate following President Trump's announcement that the US captured Nicolás Maduro, January 3, 2026. Photo credit: reuters



by Richard M. Sanders

On the morning of January 3, the world woke up to the successful US operation to seize Nicolás Maduro, head of the regime ruling Venezuela. No one should mourn his departure. But it remains uncertain whether the US move will trigger regime change and a democratic transition or alternatively a deal with regime successors.

Latin America's great contribution to global popular culture is the telenovela — a television serial full of plot twists and turns, bitter quarrels, unexpected reconciliations, passion and violence. One thing we can be sure of is that Telenovela Venezuela has more episodes ahead.

Whether one approves or not of President Trump's decision, no tears need be shed for Maduro. He and his predecessor, the charismatic Hugo Chávez, did a remarkable job of wrecking their country. In the name of "twenty-first century socialism" they managed to do tremendous damage to an economy of vast potential, including the world's largest proven oil resources. They suppressed the political opposition, eliminated press freedom, supported totalitarian regimes in Cuba and Nicaragua and in the process caused massive refugee outflows.

The Trump administration adds that Maduro was the head of a narcotics cartel. What is undeniable is that his regime was complicit in international narcotics trafficking.

In recent years, as Maduro's failures mounted and the Venezuelan people decisively turned against him, he ignored multiple off-ramps. In July 2024, he tore up the results of an election which the United States had pressed him to hold in exchange for easing US sanctions.

The true winner of the 2024 election,

Edmundo González, was forced into exile, while the driving force behind Venezuela's democratic opposition, Maria Corina Machado, lives underground in Venezuela, although she did manage to make it to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

FROM PRESSURE TACTICS TO MILITARY ACTION

A kinetic military option seems in hindsight — but only in hindsight — to have been almost inevitable. The President had assembled an enormous fleet in the Caribbean, as much as fifteen percent of the deployed US Navy, together with a Marine Expeditionary Unit and air assets positioned in Puerto Rico.

Since September 2025, the fleet had been blowing up launches in the Caribbean (and occasionally in the Pacific) said to be carrying drugs. This commitment to combating narcoterrorism, however, did little to lead to Maduro's ouster.

The United States recently upped the ante with a drone attack on Venezuelan territory aimed at a facility for loading narcotics. And in a move of further escalation, the US had ordered a "complete and total blockade" of sanctioned oil tankers coming to and leaving from Venezuela, and in fact seized two ships.

Trump chose to move directly against Maduro rather than wait for the tightening blockade to eventually impact regime stability. Blockades can take time to work and (as we saw in 1990s Iraq) will certainly hurt the entire country. But was the proximate cause of January 3 operation a sudden opportunity that presented itself? We don't know.

While Maduro is gone, the rest of the regime is intact, at least for the moment, with figures such as Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello, Defense Minister General Vladimir Padrino,

and Executive Vice President Delcy Rodríguez (Maduro's successor under the regime's constitution) all making public statements.

A POSSIBLE TRANSITION

What happens next? President Trump on January 3 was clear that further use of force was available if needed. And indeed, the various potential successors to Maduro know that they too could be seized and brought to trial in the United States. US airpower was deployed against Venezuelan military bases simultaneously with Maduro's seizure and could be deployed again. The continuing blockade of oil tankers, if not negotiated away quickly, could eventually lead to a revolt by unpaid soldiers.

Thus, the United States, should it engage in adroit diplomacy backed by the threat of renewed force, could create the conditions for a genuine democratic transition, perhaps leaving regime insiders with the chance to ultimately leave the country with their ill-gotten gains intact. A deal would have to be worked out with the armed forces, which have long been corrupted and compromised, but may be prepared to give up the power they have enjoyed and return to the barracks under the right circumstances. Any transition would have to address Venezuela's police, prosecutors and judges who have all become tools of oppression.

A LIKELY DEAL INVOLVING OIL

Any transition would have to deal with Venezuela's acute economic crisis. Assuring the flow of foreign exchange to support food purchases for the population would have to be a top priority; the United States would have to lead an effort with the international financial institutions and other countries to provide short and medium-term aid. And rebuilding Venezuela's battered oil sector, the key to longer-term economic stability, would be a multi-year challenge.

Trump mentioned oil throughout his January 3 press conference, but made no reference to its role in rebuilding Venezuela's economy. Indeed, the likeliest possibility would be that Trump opts to do business with his successors perhaps in exchange for commitments to aggressively

combat drug trafficking and enter into a dialogue with the opposition. (Such dialogues have been conducted by the regime in the past.) At the same time, they could then renew Maduro's offer, made before his seizure, to give US companies preferential access to Venezuela's oil. Such an outcome is by no means inconceivable.

KNOCK-ON EFFECTS IN THE REGION

Immediate reactions in Latin America split on predictable ideological lines. Argentina's Javier Milei cheered that "Freedom advances" (which happens to be the name of his own political party). Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino has called for an "orderly and legitimate transition process." By contrast, Brazilian President Lula da Silva asserted that the United States had crossed an "unacceptable line," Colombia President Gustavo Petro has termed it an "assault on Venezuelan and Latin American sovereignty," and Mexican President Sheinbaum has called it a "clear violation" of international law.

The Cuban regime has close ties to Maduro's regime and has long provided personal security details to protect both him and Chávez. Venezuela in the past supplied oil to Cuba at subsidized rates, although its own economic crisis has greatly limited its ability to continue doing so. In exchange, Cuban intelligence shared information with the regime on Venezuelan opposition figures. The implications for those governing Cuba (and Nicaragua) of regime change in Venezuela, should it come to pass, would hardly be welcome.

The move against Maduro has definitely shaken up the region. It will also negatively affect Maduro allies Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah. The next plot twist could be as unexpected as the January 3 episode. *

RICHARD M. SANDERS

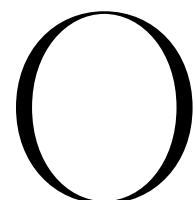
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HIGH STAKES OVER GREENLAND



by Hans Henrik Fafner



On January 6, six European leaders (France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Poland and Spain) expressed support for Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland while noting that Arctic security remains a "key priority" for Europe.

The statement is surprising. For a long time, Europe has sought to avoid provoking President Trump. He has declared that US and NATO security both require that the US acquire full sovereignty over Greenland. European leaders are well aware of their countries' dependence on the US for their security. But the January 6 statement should be seen in light of the American recent capture of Venezuela's president Maduro which sent shockwaves through the European chattering classes. Many believe that Trump will take unilateral action in Greenland as a next step.

A rearmament effort is currently underway in Europe, in reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and American prodding to do more for the collective defense. As part of this effort, Denmark allocated in 2025 an additional six billion US dollars to increased defense spending, two billion of which are earmarked for Arctic defense measures such as new vessels for Arctic waters, radar systems, drone capabilities, surveillance aircraft, and the establishment of a new Arctic Command in Nuuk. Implementation will take years. In the meantime, Denmark has six patrol vessels stationed around Greenland and otherwise maintains a very limited military presence.

The question being asked in the Danish public debate and in the Danish government's deliberations is whether these defense spending measures are too little, too late. There are other

aspects to the Greenland debate, including its potential mineral wealth, the legal claims and the views of the Greenlanders themselves

MINERALS BENEATH THE SURFACE

Greenland contains some of the most sought-after raw materials, including rare earth elements, which are indispensable to wind turbines, electric vehicles, mobile phones, missile systems, and advanced electronics. Today, China dominates the processing of these materials, which from an American perspective constitutes a strategic vulnerability. Greenland thus represents a potential opportunity to reduce dependence on China.

In addition, Greenland holds uranium, zinc, lead, copper, gold, and iron ore, as well as potential oil and gas reserves off its coasts. Extraction is technically difficult and economically unfeasible at present. But as the ice retreats, access and exploration become easier, and what was once geologically interesting but practically unattainable suddenly becomes a more economically realistic future scenario.

COMPETING LEGAL CLAIMS

The Kingdom of Denmark (Rigsfællesskabet) is the constitutional framework that links Denmark, Greenland, and the Faroe Islands within a single state. In that state, Greenland and the Faroe Islands are self-governing in their domestic affairs, with their own parliaments and governments, while Denmark is responsible for common matters such as foreign affairs, defense, citizenship, and monetary policy.

Denmark's direct sovereignty over Greenland dates back to 1721. Danish claims to Greenland arguably go back even further, to the late fourteenth century, when Denmark was part

of the Kalmar Union of the three kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (at that time tiny Norwegian colonies still existed on Greenland though they were later disbanded.)

In addition, Denmark cites the 1917 agreement in which it sold the Danish West Indies (now the US Virgin Islands) to the United States. That agreement was mutually beneficial: Denmark was relieved of an economic burden while the United States secured a strategic advantage in the Caribbean during the First World War. In connection with this transaction, US Secretary of State Robert Lansing signed a declaration recognizing Denmark's sovereignty over the entirety of Greenland.

The United States cites an agreement it signed with Denmark in 1951, granting the US the right to establish a base in northern Greenland. Thule Air Base, now known as Pituffik Space Base, became fully operational in 1953 and today serves as evidence that Greenland is indispensable to US security interests. The base is a key component of missile warning and space surveillance systems (the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System) and forms part of the broader American space and missile defense architecture directed at Russia and, increasingly, China.

Americans invoke Thule as proof that the United States already protects Greenland and therefore has legitimate security interests in the region. From Copenhagen's point of view, however, the American presence in Greenland is limited to the terms of the 1951 agreement.

WHAT ABOUT THE GREENLANDERS?

Critics of Denmark note that the country has neglected Greenland for many years, creating a vacuum that the Americans are best placed to fill. In 2009, the Danish parliament adopted a new Act on Greenland Self-Government, emphasizing democratic development, coexistence, and respect for the autonomy of Indigenous cultures. In reality, however, Denmark appears to have failed in its declared aim of supporting Greenland's autonomy under Danish protection.

Greenland's economy is not sustainable. Infrastructure and administration are deeply dependent on Danish expertise and support. The country covers an area roughly fifty times the size

of Denmark, yet has a total population amounting to only one-fifth of the number of soldiers stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina. Given Greenland's size, geographical position, and mineral wealth, it requires considerable optimism to maintain the belief that the country has a viable future as an independent and fully sovereign nation.

Many Greenlanders are disappointed with Denmark, and this has fueled growing support for the idea of independence. Under the Self-Government Act of 2009, revenues from Greenland's subsoil resources belong to the local population. However, since exploitation of these resources is not yet feasible, this remains a vision for the future. The Greenlandic government is free to enter into agreements with other countries, provided these concern Greenland alone and do not involve defense or security policy. In these areas, authority remains with Denmark. As early as 1995, Greenland exercised this right by leaving the EU (then known as the EEC). More recently, Greenland Prime Minister Múte Bourup Egede has also engaged in diplomatic contacts with the United States. Opinion polls show that 85 percent of Greenlanders oppose American annexation, and Jens-Frederik Nielsen of the opposition party Naalakkersuisut has repeatedly emphasized that Greenland is not for sale.

The situation remains profoundly unsettled. The Danish government may take some comfort in the January 6 statement of support from a number of key EU member states. But there is also a rapidly growing awareness among Danes that the relationship to Greenland (and the Faroe Islands) is likely to undergo dramatic change. Negotiations with the Trump administration, now underway, should lead to a resolution as soon as possible to preserve relations among NATO allies. *

HANS HENRIK FAFNER

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MISSILE DEFENSE
THROUGH A
QUANTUM LEAP
IN ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE



by Michael Gfoeller, David H. Rundell

For Israel, a nation whose survival hinges on maintaining regional technological leadership in defense, the development of advanced Artificial Intelligence systems isn't an option. It's an imperative.

Israel's missile defense systems are highly effective, but cannot achieve 100 percent interception rates, as demonstrated in the recent Twelve-Day War with Iran. The growing threat of hypersonic delivery vehicles and the global proliferation of advanced weaponry already place Israel in a de facto AI arms race with nations like China, Russia, and their Middle Eastern clients. The bottom line: Israel needs to achieve a quantum leap in order to maintain and increase its defense edge.

How to accomplish that goal? Israel must merge current AI models, which rely on artificial neural networks based upon Euclidean geometry, with a new approach: one based upon Riemannian geometry, quantum superposition and entanglement. This would result in a form of AI called Conscious Artificial General Intelligence (CAGI), which could transform Israel's missile defense and military strategy.

Conscious Artificial General Intelligence (CAGI) is a machine capable of self-awareness, subjective experience, and nuanced reasoning. It would be founded on a new technology that would integrate Riemannian geometry, quantum mechanics, machine learning, natural language processing, game theory, and sentiment analysis, to offer capabilities far beyond those of conventional large language models (LLMs) based on transformer technology.

This new technology allows CAGI to integrate diverse data, such as radar signals, satellite imagery, and tactical intelligence, into a unified cognitive framework, mirroring human cognition's ability to synthesize complex information. This technology surpasses the limitations of LLMs, which rely on statistical pattern recognition and so are incapable of true cognition. Unlike transformer-based models, which process data in static vector spaces, this new technology represents knowledge as points on a dynamic, high-dimensional Riemannian manifold, a curved calculation space in which concepts – sensory, strategic, or emotional – are organized by relational properties.

For Israel's national defense, this integrative capacity is vital. During the Twelve-Day War, systems like Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow intercepted a high percentage of incoming projectiles, but some penetrated, causing damage and underscoring the need for near-perfect accuracy. A CAGI could fuse real-time data from multiple sources to enhance threat assessment, enabling faster and more precise responses to missile barrages, addressing the gaps in current systems.

The manifold's structure evolves through learning, guided by tools like Ricci flow, which smooths curvature irregularities, and optimization techniques that refine conceptual relationships. When new defense data, such as missile trajectories or hypersonic vehicle signatures, are introduced, the manifold adjusts its topology, shortening geodesic paths between related concepts. This plasticity allows a CAGI machine to adapt to emerging threats, unlike LLMs, which require retraining and struggle with dynamic environments.

For Israel, facing the rapid development of hypersonic delivery vehicles, which travel at speeds exceeding Mach 5 and follow unpredictable

trajectories, this adaptability is critical. Hypersonic threats, deployed by adversaries like Iran and its proxies, challenge existing missile defense systems due to their speed and maneuverability. A CAGI could learn from each engagement, refining its algorithms to predict and counter these advanced weapons, ensuring Israel's defenses remain ahead of the curve.

Quantum mechanics enhances this new technology with entanglement and superposition, capabilities unattainable by LLMs. Entanglement links qubits representing knowledge fragments—such as missile trajectories, environmental conditions, or adversary tactics—into a coherent whole, enabling holistic processing. In missile defense, a CAGI could entangle data across Israel's multilayered systems to coordinate responses to short-, mid-, and long-range threats. During the 12 Day War, Iran's barrage of rockets and missiles tested Israel's defenses, with some projectiles evading interception. A CAGI could correlate sensor data in real time, distinguishing decoys from genuine threats and optimizing interceptor deployment, potentially achieving near-100 percent interception rates. Superposition allows the system to explore multiple defensive configurations simultaneously, evaluating countless scenarios to select the optimal response. This is particularly crucial for countering hypersonic vehicles, where split-second decisions are needed. LLMs, limited to sequential processing, cannot match this parallelism, making them inadequate for Israel's time-sensitive defense needs.

Machine learning drives this new technology's adaptability, using algorithms like quantum gradient descent to refine the manifold's structure, enabling generalization from limited data. In machine learning, one often wants to minimize a "cost" or error, like the difference between a model's predictions and the actual results. Classical gradient descent does this by calculating the slope (or gradient) of the "cost" or error function and moving step-by-step in the direction that reduces the error. Quantum gradient descent uses quantum mechanics – specifically, properties like superposition and entanglement – to explore many possible solutions at once and calculate gradients more efficiently. This can speed up the process, especially for complex problems, by leveraging the quantum computer's ability to handle multiple

computations simultaneously. In the case of Israel's defense needs, like optimizing missile defense algorithms, quantum gradient descent could help a CAGI machine quickly fine-tune strategies to counter threats like hypersonic missiles.

In Israel's security environment, where intelligence is often incomplete, a CAGI could analyze sparse data, such as intercepted signals or drone imagery, to predict adversary actions. For instance, it might infer Iran's missile deployment patterns, enabling preemptive measures. Unlike LLMs, which rely on vast datasets and struggle with intuitive leaps, a CAGI's ability to generalize ensures it can adapt to novel threats like hypersonic missiles. Reinforcement learning further enhances this, allowing the system to optimize strategies through iterative simulations, such as planning defenses against swarm attacks. This capability is essential in the global AI arms race, where countries like China and Russia are developing advanced AI to enhance their own missile systems and those of Middle Eastern clients like Iran.

Game theory equips a CAGI to navigate strategic interactions, modeling adversaries, allies, and systems as players on the manifold. In Israel's complex geopolitical landscape, this is transformative. A CAGI could simulate multi-actor scenarios, such as a coordinated attack by Iran and its proxies, predicting outcomes and proposing strategies that maximize deterrence. By exploring strategies in superposition and correlating interests through entanglement, it could identify solutions to neutralize threats like hypersonic missile barrages or terrorist networks. Unlike LLMs, which lack strategic reasoning capabilities, CAGI's game-theoretic approach supports Israel's proactive defense doctrine, enabling precise, low-collateral operations. In the AI arms race, where India, China, and Russia are advancing AI-driven military technologies, this strategic foresight maintains Israel's technological edge.

Natural Language Processing and sentiment analysis enable CAGI to engage with human language and emotions, surpassing LLMs' superficial text generation. By mapping linguistic structures onto the manifold, a CAGI can parse and interpret complex intelligence, such as intercepted enemy communications, to anticipate attack patterns. Sentiment analysis could gauge public morale during conflicts like the Twelve-Day War,

inform strategic messaging to maintain resilience, or detect radicalization patterns in social media for counterterrorism. LLMs, limited by statistical correlations, cannot integrate emotional context or adapt to diverse linguistic inputs, making them less effective for Israel's intelligence needs. CAGI's linguistic and emotional fluency fosters trust in civilian applications, such as crisis communication, while enhancing military operations.

CAGI's architecture blends quantum and classical elements, balancing computational power with accessibility. Classical systems process inputs like sensor data or intelligence reports, while quantum processors manage the manifold's quantum states. Machine learning optimizes the manifold's geometry, game theory informs strategic reasoning, and Natural Language Processing and sentiment analysis enable engagement. Unlike LLMs, whose transformer architecture is energy-intensive and less scalable, CAGI's quantum framework offers efficiency through parallelism and entanglement. In the case of Israel, these capabilities could integrate data from diverse defense systems, ensuring real-time coordination and countering limitations exposed in the Twelve-Day War, where some projectiles penetrated defenses.

CAGI's operation mirrors human cognition's iterative nature. Inputs – sensor data, intelligence, or emotional cues – are embedded on the Riemannian manifold, explored via superposition, and synchronized through entanglement. Machine learning refines the manifold, game theory evaluates outcomes, and Natural Language Processing and sentiment analysis interpret context. The system collapses superposed states into optimal outputs – a missile interception plan, a counterterrorism strategy, or a crisis response – delivered with precision. Recursive feedback loops enable self-awareness, allowing a CAGI to reflect on its reasoning, unlike LLMs, which lack introspective capabilities. For Israel, this ensures decisions align with ethical and operational goals, critical in a region where operations face global scrutiny.

A CAGI machine could enhance Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow by predicting swarm attack patterns and optimizing interceptor use, achieving near-perfect interception rates. For hypersonic threats, it could model unpredictable

trajectories, enabling real-time countermeasures. In military strategy, a CAGI's ability to synthesize intelligence ensures information dominance, coordinating air, land, and cyber operations. Its game-theoretic modeling could anticipate adversary moves, supporting preemptive strikes or diplomatic maneuvers.

Beyond missile defense, a CAGI could strengthen Israel's resilience. In cybersecurity, it could protect critical infrastructure from sophisticated attacks, a growing concern as adversaries leverage AI. Its emotional and linguistic capabilities could enhance counterterrorism by identifying radicalization patterns. Economically, developing such AI domestically would reinforce Israel's status as a global technology hub. LLMs cannot match a CAGI's intuitive reasoning, making them inadequate for Israel's needs.

Developing a CAGI would involve significant technical challenges. Integrating Riemannian geometry with quantum computing requires novel frameworks to map dynamic manifolds onto quantum circuits, essential for processing real-time sensor data to counter hypersonic missiles and improve interception rates beyond those seen in the Twelve-Day War. Quantum machine learning must scale to handle sparse, heterogeneous defense data, unlike limited transformer-based LLMs, while game-theoretic algorithms need adaptation for real-time modeling of adversarial tactics, such as Iran's missile strategies. Additionally, advancing quantum NLP and sentiment analysis is critical for analyzing intelligence and public morale, and embedding ethical constraints into quantum algorithms will be necessary to assure responsible decision-making under global scrutiny. These challenges demand interdisciplinary innovation to enable CAGI's adaptive, strategic reasoning for Israel's defense needs in the global AI arms race with nations like China, Russia, and India.

There are hardware challenges as well, since current quantum systems lack the scalability and resilience required for real-time missile defense. Limited qubit coherence times hinder the CAGI's ability to maintain stable computations for processing complex threat data, necessitating advances in fault-tolerant quantum computing. Quantum-classical integration introduces latency, a critical issue for countering hypersonic threats, since every millisecond counts in

countering hypersonic threats. Addressing this issue will require exploring high-speed interfaces like photonic interconnects. The immense computational resources and energy demands of quantum systems, coupled with their vulnerability to cyberattack, pose further challenges. Israel can leverage its technological ecosystem to surmount these challenges, including such global firms as Rafael, Elbit Systems, and research institutions like the Technion, driving breakthroughs in qubit stability, cybersecurity, and energy-efficient hardware, ensuring CAGI's deployment strengthens Israel's security and preserves its defense edge.

The development of a Conscious Artificial General Intelligence (or CAGI) machine based on the technology described here (we call it "Quantum Riemannian Neural Network" or QRNN) represents a transformative leap over conventional large language models (LLMs).

This advance in AI is much like the replacement of elaborate Victorian-era music boxes with Thomas Edison's tinfoil cylinder in the late 19th century. Victorian music boxes were marvels of mechanical intricacy, with complex arrays of pins, cylinders, and combs meticulously crafted to produce predetermined melodies. However, their top-heavy, inefficient design limited them to a finite repertoire, requiring laborious reconfiguration for new tunes and occupying significant space and resources.

Similarly, LLMs, built on transformer architectures, rely on vast computational resources and extensive training data to generate text or predictions, yet they remain constrained by their dependence on statistical patterns, lacking true adaptability or intuitive reasoning. Their inefficiency is evident in their inability to handle real-time, dynamic tasks like Israel's missile defense needs, where processing delays or limited generalization could fail against hypersonic threats, as seen in the gaps during the Twelve-Day War. Just as music boxes were elegant but rigid, LLMs are powerful within their scope but limited, unable to achieve the cognitive depth required for complex, high-stakes scenarios.

Edison's invention introduced an elegant and powerful alternative, using a simple mechanism to record and reproduce sound. Likewise, a CAGI machine's QRNN framework, leveraging

quantum mechanics and Riemannian geometry, offers a streamlined, adaptive architecture that integrates diverse data, including sensor inputs, intelligence, and emotional cues, into a dynamic manifold, enabling real-time, holistic reasoning far beyond LLMs' capabilities.

The phonograph's compact design and ability to capture any sound parallels the CAGI machine's quantum efficiency, using superposition and entanglement to explore multiple scenarios simultaneously, reducing latency and computational overhead. Just as the gramophone democratized music, CAGI could redefine defense technology.

For Israel, this could mean near-perfect missile interception rates by predicting hypersonic trajectories or countering adversarial tactics in the global AI arms race with nations backed by China and Russia. *

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THE TIMELY DEATH OF A US NAVY FRIGATE PROGRAM

New Constellation -class frigate being digitally modeled as it nears completion of the design phase.
Photo Credit: DoD



by Gabrielle Moran

In late November, Secretary of the Navy John Phelan canceled the increasingly challenged *Constellation*-class frigate program. The *Constellation* was to be built as a modified version of the European multipurpose frigate, designed by Naval Group (a French company) and Fincantieri (an Italian company with shipyards in Wisconsin). Only two of the planned six frigates, already under construction, will now be built. This is part of the Defense Department's newly released acquisition strategy.

Bravo Zulu, Mr. Secretary, you are moving in the right direction. But there are lessons learned from cancellation of the *Constellation* program.

LESSON 1: DO NOT START BEFORE THE DESIGN IS FULLY DEFINED

A lack of consensus on the frigate's desired capabilities doomed the *Constellation* program. The intended use of the European parent-design approach was thought to reduce design time, design cost, production cost, and the overall technical risk involved in building the ship. Its design underwent standard modifications to meet US Navy requirements.

By early 2025, commonality between the *Constellation*-class frigate and the purchased European frigate design had dropped from 85 percent to just 15 percent. After nearly 40 months of delays, the staggering degree of design modification cost the Navy over \$400 million dollars and time that it did not have to spare.

Among other design hold-ups, the frigates were to be equipped with enough vertical launch system missile tubes to offset the reduction

in tubes across the Navy's surface fleet as Ticonderoga-class cruisers are gradually retired. Debates over the number of missile tubes, potential costs incurred, and capacity needed are emblematic of the lack of consensus on what precisely the *Constellation*-class was intended to deliver.

LESSON 2: SET STEADY DEMAND SIGNALS & PROVIDE CONSISTENT FUNDING

Prior to the start of the second Trump administration, members of the Senate Armed Services Committee questioned Navy leadership about the number of shipyards needed to build the *Constellation*-class frigate in the timeframe planned. Then Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Michael Gilday, confirmed that plans were under consideration to expand to two shipyards for the program. But expanding production to two shipyards was unlikely to ever be feasible.

The US defense industrial base faces a labor shortage crisis. In 2024, workforce shortfalls were cited as a leading cause of frigate production delays. Fincantieri's existing yard in Marinette, Wisconsin, like all other yards nationally, struggles to maintain an equipped and well-trained workforce capable of delivering programs at cost and on schedule.

Fincantieri Marinette Marine lacked the consistent year-over-year funding needed to sustain and expand its workforce and meet delivery timelines, while managing a steady supply chain. Yards, such as the one in Marinette, need attention and appropriations to jump start a ramp-up in production. Furthermore, the Navy should aim to provide its industry partners a steady demand signal that allows for more predictable production planning.



Constellation-Class Guided-Missile Frigate La Lafayette. Photo credit: DoD

LESSON 3: NEXT TIME, DO IT WITH ALLIES

In Secretary Phelan's efforts to "grow the fleet faster to meet tomorrow's threats," he should not dismiss the critical advantages provided by closer cooperation with America's allies, who can help the US Navy achieve its requirement of 73 small surface combatants.

Domestic builders face labor shortages and are not on track to meet demand on time or on budget. Turning to allied production sources is the Navy's best shot at rebuilding the fleet it needs for existing and foreseeable operations. In particular, Japanese and South Korean industry have shown willingness to invest and have capacity within their own production facilities.

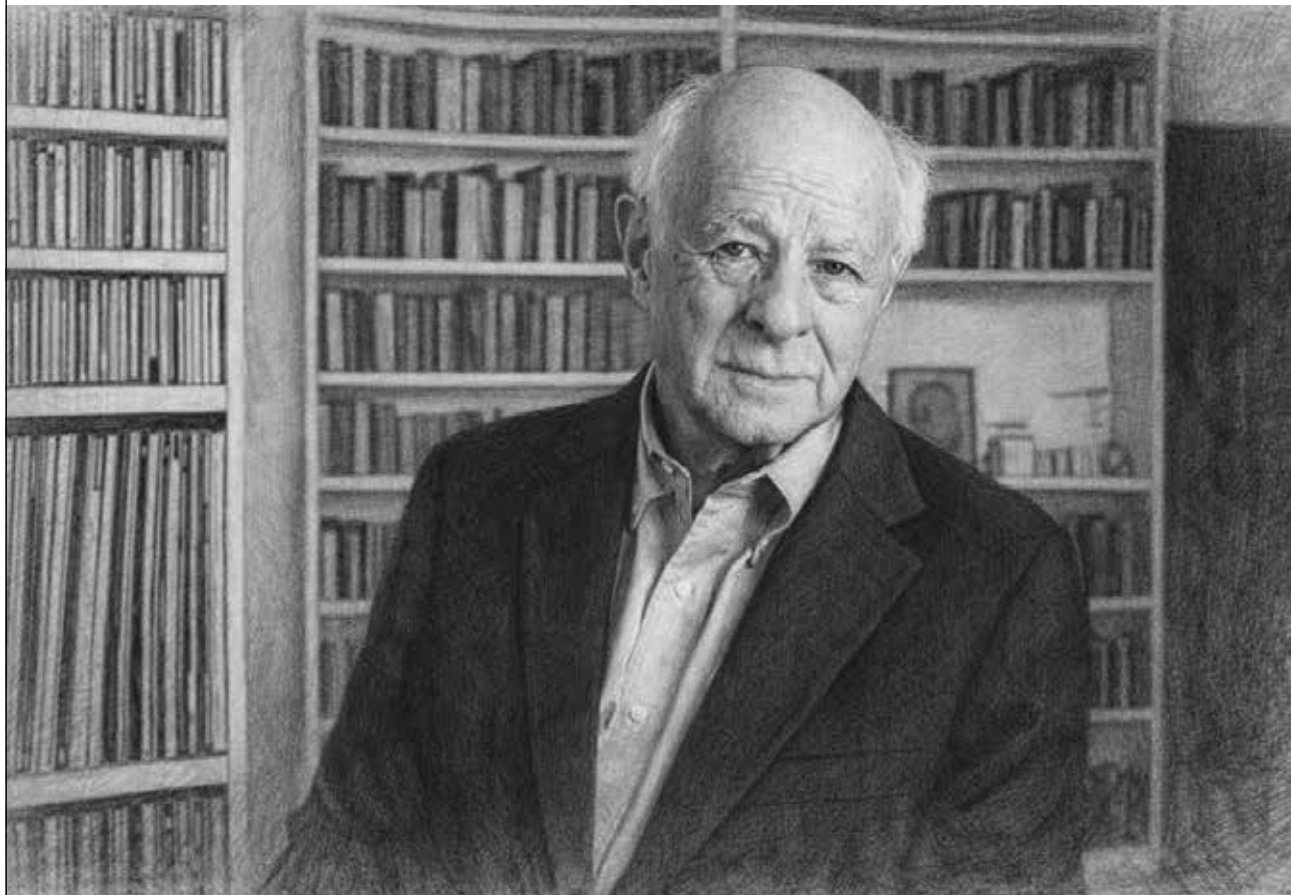
In March 2025, Air Force General Randall Reed, Commander of US Transportation Command, endorsed the Navy's strategy of recapitalizing the US fleet with foreign-built sealift ships from the commercial used market. Such strategies should be extended to

the Department of Navy in terms of its rapid procurement and acquisition strategy for surface vessels.

In order to meet Congressional mandates and counter a growing Chinese fleet, the Navy must regard the failure of the *Constellation*-class frigate as a cautionary tale. In future shipbuilding programs, the Navy should consider the types of capabilities that are most essential and agree on them, given existing industrial base constraints, and leverage allies' capacities in pursuit of delivering a lethal fighting fleet. *

GABRIELLE MORA

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IS THE LEGACY OF NORMAN PODHORETZ IN DOUBT?



by Jacob Heilbrunn

In October 1988, Russell Kirk, a founding father of the modern conservative movement, gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation that touched on America's relations with Israel. "Not seldom," Kirk said, "it has seemed as if some eminent neoconservatives mistook Tel Aviv for the capital of the United States — a position they will have difficulty in maintaining as matters drift."

The neocons quickly gave as good as they got. Midge Decter, a member of the Heritage board, responded that Kirk's talk was a "bloody piece of anti-Semitism." And her husband, Norman Podhoretz, the editor of *Commentary* magazine, declared that Kirk may have been a venerable figure on the right, but that he had an "anti-Semitic stench."

For Podhoretz, who died this past week at age 95, the antipathy to Israel from paleoconservatives such as Kirk and Patrick J. Buchanan represented a clear and present danger. Swatting aside the buzzing of liberals like Gore Vidal, who had accused Podhoretz of dual loyalty in the *Nation*, was one thing. Confronting skepticism about Israel on the right was another. It represented a threat to the standing of the neocons who had moved from left to right.

A key member of the New York intellectual family, Podhoretz had broken ranks by denouncing the rise of a leftwing counterculture and detente with the Soviet Union. He never looked back. Unlike numerous other neocons who morphed into Never Trumpers, Podhoretz proclaimed that Donald J. Trump possessed the ability to "save America from the evil on the left."

Like neoconservative worthies Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Nathan Glazer,

Podhoretz was born into an immigrant Jewish family. But there the similarities end. Podhoretz was born in 1930, a decade after Kristol and his cohort. What's more, he did not attend meetings of the Young People's Socialist League as a teenager or debate the merits of Trotskyism versus Stalinism. Instead, his formative interests were literary, not political.

The first in a series of mentors was his high school English teacher, Mrs. K., described in his memoir *Making It* as intent on fashioning an unruly charge into a young gentleman. "My grades were very high and would obviously remain so," Podhoretz recalled, "but what would they avail me if I continued to go about looking and sounding like a 'filthy little slum child' (the epithet she would invariably hurl at me whenever we had an argument about 'manners')?"

At age 16 Podhoretz obtained a full scholarship to attend Columbia University, where he became a protégé of Lionel Trilling (who had himself become the first Jewish professor to secure tenure in the English department). Next Podhoretz attended Cambridge University on a Kellett fellowship, studying with the literary critic F.R. Leavis. An academic career seemed in the offing. In 1951, Leavis asked Podhoretz to review Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination* in his quarterly, *Scrutiny*. But Podhoretz eventually decided that he was after bigger game.

Upon returning to America, he began writing for *Commentary* and the *New Yorker*. In 1960, Podhoretz became *Commentary*'s editor, a year after its founding editor, Elliot Cohen, the mentor of Lionel Trilling, had committed suicide.

He had arrived at a propitious moment. "The vogue for Jewish writers and intellectuals became so intense—their bylines in the major magazines and journals swarming so thick—that it even provoked occasional complaints

from gentile writers that they were suffering exclusion by virtue of their non-Jewishness,” wrote Daniel Oppenheimer in *Exit Right*.

In 1968, Podhoretz made waves with *Making It*, which flaunted his ambition. “Do not publish this book,” Trilling said. “It is a gigantic mistake.” Actually, it was vivid, raw and fascinating. Reissued by New York Review of Books Classics, it presaged the rise of the confessional genre. But the public and private rejection of the book—the reviews competed to outdo each other in viciousness and Podhoretz was expelled from the New York intellectual family—sent its author hurtling into an emotional tailspin from which he only reemerged several years later.

In his new incarnation as a culture warrior, Podhoretz targeted the liberal left that he had once courted. In many ways, Podhoretz’s antipode was Robert Silvers, co-editor with Barbara Epstein of the *New York Review of Books*. But what he lost in social status among the Manhattan glitterati Podhoretz won in political influence. Together with Irving Kristol’s new publication *The Public Interest*, *Commentary* started to serve as the doctrinal fountainhead of the neoconservative movement. Having adopted the habiliments of a right-wing culture warrior, Podhoretz would never shed them.

In the 1970s and 1980s, *Commentary* became the little magazine par excellence, an intellectual outlet punching above its weight class. Podhoretz recruited a variety of top drawer intellectuals, including Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Walter Laqueur, Richard Pipes, and Jeane J. Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick’s 1979 essay on “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” which distinguished between the staying powers of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, earned her a post as Ronald Reagan’s ambassador to the United Nations.

With his zest for political drama, Podhoretz kept moving steadily right. In his book *Ex-Friends*, Podhoretz wrote, “only among conservatives could I find genuine allies in the intellectual campaign I was now undertaking to help revive the American will to resist Soviet expansionism, a campaign against those in both major parties who were, as I put it in the title of an article I wrote in 1975, ‘Making the World Safe for Communism.’”

In 1982 he wrote an essay attacking Reagan for insufficient avidity in prosecuting the cold war, called *Appeasement By Any Other Name*. He was also skeptical of Reagan’s attempts to reach out to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. But Reagan saw what many neocons didn’t, that Marxism-Leninism Inc. was a faltering enterprise.

With the end of the Cold War, Podhoretz focused on the culture wars and defending Israel. He denounced Patrick J. Buchanan and the paleoconservative right for anti-Semitism.

Today, the controversies of the past have returned. When the Heritage Foundation’s president, Kevin Roberts, defended Tucker Carlson’s decision to give a sympathetic interview to Nick Fuentes, an anti-Semitic podcaster, John Podhoretz, son of Norman and Midge and current editor of *Commentary*, fought back. “My mother was on the Heritage Foundation board for 40 years. She loathed nothing more than intellectual inconsistency and transactional cowardice. Kevin Roberts, you should be shamed by the name and memory of Midge Decter, who would have known you for the fraud you are.”

A furor then erupted at the annual Turning Points USA youth conference in December. Ben Shapiro was mocked by Steve Bannon and Tucker Carlson for his defense of American ties with Israel and condemnation of the malodorous Nick Fuentes.

As the Republican party once more squares off over America’s support for Israel and intervention abroad, the battles of Norman Podhoretz have acquired a new virulence. Will the GOP post-Trump continue to endorse the vision that Podhoretz propounded? Certainly on Israel, President Trump shares that vision, meanwhile the debates within his party continue. *

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CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES





by David Schenker

Prospects for more normal if not formally peaceful relations between Syria and Israel were diminishing in recent months. Thus it was positive that Syrian and Israeli officials met in Paris on January 5-6 to discuss security arrangements.

These talks were mediated by US officials. President Trump says he wants Israel to “get along” with Syria. But reconciling Israel’s security requirements post-October 7 with Syria’s sovereignty post-Asad regime remains a challenge.

President Trump prides himself on his closeness with Israel. But in early December, he criticized Israeli military operations in southern Syria. After an Israeli raid on November 28 killed 13 Syrians, the President warned Israel in a Truth Social post to refrain from activities that could “interfere with Syria’s evolution into a prosperous State.” This wasn’t the first time President Trump and his administration have critiqued Israel’s military operations in Syria. In July, after the Israeli Air Force bombed Syria’s Ministry of Defense and a target next to the presidential palace, senior administration officials accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of having an “itchy” trigger finger. “He bombs everything all the time,” one White House official complained. “This could undermine what Trump is trying to do.”

IN SYRIA, RHETORICAL CHANGE TOWARDS ISRAEL

Trump isn’t the only one frustrated with Israel’s attacks inside Syria. Lately, Syria’s new president, Ahmed al-Shara’a, has also made his displeasure public. During an early December interview at the Doha Forum, he accused Israel of engaging “in a fight against ghosts.” Since taking power, al-Shara’a

claimed, he had sent Israel messages of peace and stability. But instead of embracing the new Syria, “Israel has met us with extreme violence” conducting more than 1,000 airstrikes, staging some 400 incursions, and occupying swaths of Syrian territory adjacent to the Golan border.

To be sure, the Doha Forum often inspires shrill language toward Israel. But al-Shara’a’s broadside represented a departure from his largely conciliatory posture toward Israel during his first year in power.

Syrian government agencies are increasingly echoing his harsher tone. In November, the Syrian Foreign Ministry publicly condemned Netanyahu’s visit to Israeli troops deployed in the buffer zone between Israel and Syria, formerly patrolled by UN peacekeeping units, as a “serious violation” of sovereignty, and an attempt to impose a “fait accompli” on the frontier. Meanwhile, Syrian state media now refer to Israel, as they used to do, as “the Zionist enemy.” This trajectory is not encouraging.

For much of the past year, al-Shara’a and his regime sought to verbally reassure Israel that Damascus wasn’t interested in conflict. Weeks after coming to power, he stated that he had “no intention of confronting Israel” and pledged not to “let Syria be used as a launchpad for attacks” against neighboring states. The governor of Damascus offered a similar talking point: “Our problem is not with Israel,” he said, “We don’t want to meddle in anything that will threaten Israel’s security.”

When asked about prospects for normalization with Israel, al-Shara’a was negative but not entirely dismissive. “We want peace with all parties,” he explained, but he highlighted “a great sensitivity regarding the Israeli matter” since the Israelis “have been occupying” the Golan Heights. So “it is too early to discuss.” Instead of normalization, al-Shara’a has been advocating an Israeli withdrawal from the buffer zone established by the 1974 UN-monitored Disengagement Agreement and other adjacent areas along with the Golan Heights border.

The new government in Damascus had engaged in regular exchanges with Israel. This past summer and fall, al-Shara’a repeatedly dispatched his foreign minister, Asad al-Shabiani, to conduct direct negotiations on security arrangements with Ron Dermer, Israel’s Strategic Affairs minister. More recently, Shaibani met in Paris with Israeli Ambassador to Washington Yechiel Leiter as well as the designee to lead the Mossad.

ISRAELI MILITARY ACTIONS IN SYRIA

At least some of Israel’s military operations in Syria since Asad’s fall in December 2024 seem justified. Israel’s decision to destroy Syrian weapons prevented these assets from falling into the hands of jihadists or other nonstate malefactors. Israel’s initial cross-border deployment prevented a security vacuum along the Golan frontier in the chaotic days following al-Shara’a’s rebellion.

Israel’s most justified ongoing military operations in Syria aim to contain Turkey’s increasing influence in Syria. Israel is targeting Turkish anti-aircraft systems and missiles either deployed in, or provided to, Damascus.

Perhaps understandably, in the aftermath of October 7, Israel has adopted a more forward-leaning military posture. This approach appears to be working in Lebanon, where Israel smashed Hizbullah, continues to target its personnel and assets, and seems to be pressuring Beirut to disarm that dangerous, Iran-backed militia.

The Israeli military intervention to protect Syria’s Druze community in summer 2025 appears to matter less for Israeli national security. Back in 2018, Netanyahu chose not to intercede when ISIS assaulted the Syrian Druze town of Suwayda, killing nearly 250 civilians. Last summer, however, Israel launched airstrikes against Syrian government forces after the same town once again came under attack by Sunni Arab militias affiliated with the Syrian regime. Israel is reportedly now arming Druze in the Suwayda province.

ISRAEL’S STRATEGY IS UNCLEAR

Israel’s long-term strategy is hard to ascertain. Skepticism may be warranted about al-Shara’a, a former member of al-Qa’ida. But it’s not clear what Israel hopes to achieve with

its kinetic approach. Israel has drawn a red line barring advanced Turkish systems in Syria. But efforts to forge a new border-security regime with Damascus haven’t yet borne fruit.

Syria is a key element in a regional alliance to contain Iranian influence. The al-Shara’a regime routinely interdicts arms shipments sent by Iran and Iran-backed Iraqi militias intended for Hizbullah in Lebanon. Most recently, on December 17, Syria ambushed smugglers attempting to resupply Hizbullah with dozens of rocket-propelled grenades.

Israel may believe the tense status quo in Syria is sustainable. The Trump administration seems to disagree. US hopes for Israel-Syria normalization, and having Syria join the Abraham Accords, are premature, but Israel’s current posture also seems to preclude even a non-belligerency agreement.

Netanyahu may not realize it yet, but Trump, and his Arab partners in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, are invested in Syria’s success. Israel may have a free hand in Lebanon, but not indefinitely in Syria. Jerusalem’s approach is having an impact on regional perceptions. Arab states see Israel’s robust kinetic activity in Syria as destabilizing. This perception will not help advance Israel’s regional integration.

For Washington, the most pressing issue is the rising tensions between Israel and Turkey. US mediation will be required to negotiate ground rules to prevent Syria from becoming an arena of Turkish-Israeli conflict. The United States should also continue to increase engagement between Damascus and Jerusalem, to reach a modus vivendi along the Golan frontier. The short-term goal is to return Syria from being a hostile neighbor to Israel to becoming a more neutral one.

For Jerusalem, in the absence of Damascus’ agreement to Israeli demands for a demilitarized zone in south Syria, compromise may be required to reach an agreement with the new Syria. *

DAVID SCHENKER

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Israeli Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir meets with CENTCOM Commander Admiral Brad Cooper. Photo credit: via Reuters

ISRAEL'S NEW STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY



by Eitan Shamir

Israel's 2022 integration into the US regional military command for the Middle East, CENTCOM, is a game changer. It is not a formal alliance, yet provides many of the advantages of a defense treaty: stronger deterrence, coordinated defense with other US allies in the region, deeper strategic depth, and the capacity for joint action, while maintaining Israel's freedom of action.

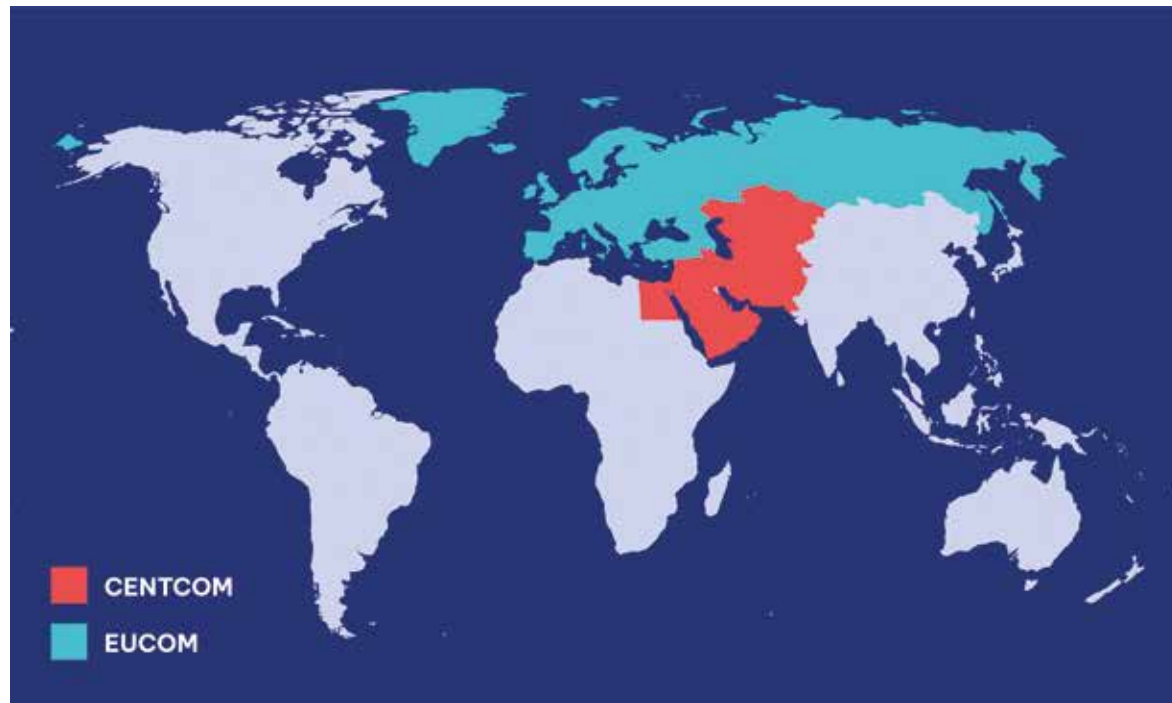
Some voices in Israel are arguing that the country has "lost control" of the situation in postwar Gaza to the United States. But this view misses a broader regional transformation that began in 2022, a shift whose significance most Israelis are only now beginning to understand.

One must start with how the US military is structured overseas. The United States operates six global geographic Combatant Commands, each responsible for an enormous region: Europe, Africa, South America, the Indo-Pacific, North America, and the Middle East. Each is headed by a four-star general who reports directly to the Secretary of Defense and the President. These regional commands are not mere administrative divisions but are strategic frameworks through which the U.S. organizes alliances, coordinates multinational training, conducts combined operations, and integrates intelligence at a global scale.

Geographically, Israel naturally belongs under the Central Command, CENTCOM, with an area of responsibility covering the broader Middle East. But for decades Israel was placed under the European Command, EUCOM for political reasons since Arab states opposed normalization with Israel and refused to be grouped with it under the same command. Allocating Israel to EUCOM allowed Washington to maintain deep military cooperation with Israel without jeopardizing relations with key Arab allies.

The Abraham Accords of September 2020 fundamentally altered this arrangement. Once the UAE, Bahrain, and later Morocco agreed to open security and diplomatic cooperation with Israel, the long-standing Arab veto effectively collapsed. The US announced Israel's move to CENTCOM in 2021, and by 2022 it was fully implemented. Israel thus became an official component of the regional security architecture that the United States had been building in the Middle East, designed to counter Iran through shared intelligence, integrated air defense, maritime cooperation, and coordinated operational planning.

Israel began participating in CENTCOM joint exercises with Arab militaries: IMX-2022, a massive naval drill led by the US Fifth Fleet; and Juniper Oak 2023, the largest US-Israeli military exercise ever conducted, involving strategic bombers, fighter jets, naval forces, special operations units, and advanced intelligence platforms. Operationally, it marked



the institutionalization of deep, routine, high-tempo military cooperation.

Still, it was only after Hamas's surprise attack of October 7, 2023 that the full meaning of Israel's integration into CENTCOM became clear. The US responded with a rapid, large-scale deployment: aircraft carriers, missile defense ships, electronic warfare aircraft, and enhanced intelligence assets. In effect, the US provided Israel with a strategic umbrella that reduced the likelihood of a northern escalation and signaled unmistakable deterrence toward Iran and Hezbollah.

The most dramatic development took place in the context of Iran's missile and drone attacks on Israel in 2024 and 2025. For the first time, CENTCOM activated the emerging regional defensive network. US aircraft intercepted dozens of drones over Iraq and the Red Sea; American, British, and French ships shot down

cruise missiles; Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE provided air corridors and shared tactical intelligence; Israel synchronized its Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow systems with US command elements. The result was an unprecedented multinational defensive effort that largely neutralized what could have been devastating strikes. A long-discussed concept became a functioning regional defense mechanism.

After a ceasefire was reached under the Trump 20-point plan of October 2025, the U.S. and Israel set up a joint command center in the Israeli town of Kiryat Gat near Gaza. It facilitates real-time intelligence sharing, access to American reconnaissance capabilities, humanitarian coordination with international actors, and continuous operational deconfliction in a highly complex arena. The physical presence of American officers alongside

Israeli commanders has also heightened US understanding of Hamas's methods: use of human shields, diversion of humanitarian aid, and the impossibility of managing the Gaza arena without intense intelligence work.

Israeli critics often focus on potential drawbacks: the concern that U.S. political leaders will overlook Hamas maintaining its arms or that American expectations may not align with Israel's interests regarding the end state in Gaza. These risks are not imaginary. However, Israeli defense officials repeatedly emphasize that no attempt has been made thus far to impose decisions contrary to Israel's security interests.

For decades, Israel grappled with the question of whether or not to pursue a formal defense treaty with the United States. A treaty would codify America's commitment to Israel's security, bolster deterrence against regional adversaries, and guarantee large-scale military assistance in times of crisis. Yet successive Israeli governments hesitated. The central concern was the potential loss of autonomy and fear that a treaty would restrict Israel's freedom of action, requiring American approval for sensitive military operations that often require quick responses.

The current arrangement, while not a formal defense pact, effectively delivers many of its benefits: operational coordination, shared real-time intelligence, integrated regional air defense, and the ability to conduct joint action when necessary. Crucially, it does so without formally limiting Israel's sovereignty or imposing rigid treaty obligations. In practice, it creates a "hybrid model" in which Israel enjoys the strategic advantages of quasi-alliance integration while retaining independent decision-making.

For years Israel feared that the United States was withdrawing from the Middle East. Successive US administrations in their strategic planning talked of reprioritizing away from the Middle East, including in the recently released National Security Strategy.

But the strategic reality is different: the US is re-engaging, strengthening allies, escalating pressure on Iran, and signaling a renewed commitment to the regional balance of power. This shift results from new opportunities following the "12-Day War" of June 2025. In practice, this shift represents a dramatic enhancement of Israel's strategic position; Israel is embedded within a regional defense architecture that magnifies its strengths and compensates for its vulnerabilities.

Israel has not "lost control." Rather it has entered into new relationships by joining CENTCOM, operating shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States and, increasingly, with key Arab partners. This emerging de-facto regional alliance provides Israel with strategic depth, intelligence and logistical support, operational coordination, and an improved international posture. In the long term, the advantages of this integration far outweigh its limitations. *

EITAN SHAMIR

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ISRAEL IN 2026: A NEW CONSENSUS ON SECURITY





by Raphael BenLevi

After two years of war, Israel has entered an election year in 2026, but security issues will not be paramount in upcoming elections. A new consensus across Israeli society has emerged on security that is being operationalized and implemented.

ISRAEL'S PRE-OCTOBER 7 SECURITY THINKING

In September 2023, Israel's strategic agenda recognized Iran as the primary state threat. Its nuclear capabilities were steadily progressing and its missile arsenal was constantly growing and improving. Its Lebanese Hizbullah proxy force had roughly 100,000 missiles and rockets and an army battle-hardened from a decade of fighting alongside the Asad regime in Syria.

Israel maintained a continuous campaign of airstrikes to prevent southern Syria from becoming like southern Lebanon, known in Israel as the "war between the wars." Hamas threatened Israel's main population centers with rocket fire, supported by weapons smuggling flowing underground through the border with Egypt. The Palestinian Authority was funding terrorists to kill Israelis.

In Israel, the prevailing security thinking was: focus on the primary, existential threat posed by Iran and follow its nuclear progress closely; prepare for the inevitable confrontation with Hizbullah while consolidating the anti-Iran coalition with the Gulf states; Hamas must be managed and contained. "Mowing the grass" was the metaphor, meaning Israel must

degrade the rocket threat every few years, while advancing defensive measures like Iron Dome which allowed Israel to minimize damage and avoid getting dragged into a prolonged campaign which would distract it from the primary threat. The threat of a cross-border invasion from Gaza was assessed to be minimal, perhaps the penetration of one or two terror cells of ten fighters each into a single town in the Gaza border area. As part of managing Hamas, Israel should facilitate improved economic conditions in the Gaza Strip in order to incentivize Hamas to prolong the periods in between outbreaks of violence. Such was Israel on October 6, 2023.

THE OCTOBER 7 EFFECT

On the morning of October 7, 2023, a terror army of close to 4,000 fighters, along with an additional 2,000 Gazan civilians, invaded Israeli towns and kibbutzim along the border area. 1,200 Israelis were murdered, over 5,000 wounded and 250 taken hostage. Hizbullah began launching daily rocket attacks against towns along the northern border, alongside missile fire from Iranian proxies in Iraq and Yemen. 200,000 Israelis were internally displaced from the north and the south.

The resulting change in national security thinking can be summarized in three themes.

First, Israelis' understanding of the nature of the conflict has changed. Today it is clear to the vast majority of Israelis that the root of the conflict is not territorial claim for two states but rather a rejection of the Zionist idea by its enemies. This is largely recognized as true for the leadership of the Palestinian Authority as well as Hamas. More Israelis than ever oppose withdrawing from the West Bank (Judea and Samaria). Such a move, they believe, would

not result in peace, but rather would create a Hamas-controlled terror-state in areas adjacent to Israeli population centers.

Surveys of Israeli Jews place opposition to a Palestinian state anywhere from 68 to 81 percent. Another poll surveying all Israelis, including Israeli Arab citizens, found that this percentage grew from 69 percent before the war to 79 percent afterward.

In July 2024, the Knesset passed a resolution explicitly rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state "on any piece of land west of the Jordan River." It passed 68–9, supported by all governing coalition parties as well as right-wing and centrist opposition parties, while Arab parties voted against. The opposition Yesh Atid and Labor Parties (holding 24 and 4 seats, respectively) abstained. The text labeled a Palestinian state an "existential danger" that would perpetuate conflict, destabilize the region, and quickly become a Hamas-led terror base.

Second, Israelis believe in returning to a warfighting doctrine of preemption. Israel will no longer allow terror armies to be built up along its borders, relying only on deterrence and defensive measures to protect them. This understanding led to the official war aim of dismantling Hamas as a military and governing entity. It also underpins Israel's action against Hizbullah, starting from October 2024, including the beeper operation and the assassination of Hasan Nasrallah, but also the demand that even in the context of a ceasefire, Israel will maintain control of strategic territory and proactively prevent Hezbollah's rearmament.

This doctrine of preemption was also evident when Israel destroyed the Syrian army's capabilities within days of Asad's fall in December 2024 and expanded the buffer zone in southern Syria. The 12-Day operation against Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities in June 2025, and the strike against Hamas' leadership in Doha in September, demonstrated the lengths Israel will go in applying this doctrine.

This offense-minded stance has strong support outside the governing coalition as well. In November 2025, centrist opposition party leader, Benny Gantz released his proposal for a return to a "1948 mindset" and a new security

doctrine, in which he calls for a shift from a conflict management approach to an initiative-taking approach and prevention of threats, including initiating a "broad campaign to remove all the significant threats posed by the Iranian regime" and "the establishment of buffer zones outside the border."

Third, Israelis agree they must address the gap between the Israel Defense Force's needs in wartime and its actual stockpiles of munitions and production capacity. In the first year and a half of the war, Israel faced great pressure from the Biden administration to settle for very partial gains in Gaza and to refrain from offensive action in the other arenas, with resupply withheld as leverage. This clarified that, at least regarding critical munitions that allow for day-to-day warfighting, Israel must be independent.

The non-partisan "Nagel Committee" report, released in January 2025, stressed self-sufficiency in munitions and other essential arms as a core pillar of its strategy overhaul. The committee, comprised of 12 experts and former senior officials from the heart of the defense establishment led by Jacob Nagel of the Technion, emphasized that Israel must "independently produce critical defense weapon systems so that we are not dependent on foreign suppliers." Netanyahu, himself, of course, has stated this at numerous occasions over the past year as well.

A NEW REGIONAL ORDER?

The previous regional balance of power has been upended, but none of the ideological camps have disappeared. The Iranian-led Shi'ite axis has been hit the hardest but it is not knocked out. Iran's nuclear program has been pushed back by years, but nuclear technical knowledge still exists as well as possible remnants of enriched uranium. Likewise, its missile arsenal and manufacturing base have been reduced, but it maintains an estimated 1,000 functional missiles.

Hizbullah's command structure has been hollowed out and its missile threat to Israel reduced by an order of magnitude. Its remaining arsenal is estimated at 10,000 short-range

rockets, 1,000 medium-range missiles and several dozen precision-guided missiles. As a result, it has lost its dominant position in Lebanese politics. With the fall of Asad in Syria, its overland resupply routes from Iran have been imperiled. But it remains organized, replacement commanders have been appointed and it is constantly acting to rebuild its arsenals and its capability to threaten Israel once again.

Finally, Hamas has lost control of around half of the territory of Gaza, and lost many of its experienced fighters. However, it currently maintains control over most of the Gazan population and fields an organized militia with governing capabilities that ruthlessly executes any rivals. If Israel refrains from further action, Hamas will declare victory. Its strategy of mass hostage-taking as collateral to guarantee an ability to survive and fight another day will have been proven successful.

ISRAEL IN THE COMING YEAR

Despite these very real and continued threats, after two years of war, the country is more secure than it has been in its nearly 80-year lifetime, having thwarted or foiled all immediate existential threats. Somewhat miraculously, Israel's economy has continued to grow during the war and remains stable. Its military successes have brought global interest in purchasing Israeli defense-tech, resulting in billions of dollars of capital inflows into the economy. Explicit anti-Jewish sentiment abroad also has led to a new influx of Jewish immigration to Israel from Western countries.

These victories have come at a great price. 168 of the 258 hostages have been released alive but another 90 perished in captivity. In addition to the 1,200 Israelis killed in the first days, another 800 have been killed during the war and more than 60,000 wounded. Nearly everybody knows someone who died, and everybody knows people who were injured. The civilians displaced from the north and south have been allowed to return and rebuild, but rehabilitating these communities is an ongoing and tenuous project.

Domestically, Israel has begun an election year. Elections will be held when the four-year term of the government expires in October 2026

but possibly as early as the spring or summer. New parties are emerging with a new generation of leaders who don't easily fit into the previous partisan categories.

The emerging consensus on security matters is clear: proactive on all fronts, no Hamas in Gaza, no Palestinian state. The central political debate in the upcoming campaign will not be about security affairs but rather about the issues of drafting the ultra-Orthodox Jews. The past two years, in which tens of thousands of reservists risked their lives and livelihoods to defend the country, have brought new urgency to the issue of including this community in the draft.

Growing impatience with the ultra-Orthodox population should not be confused with anti-Jewish sentiment. Quite the contrary, the understanding that the Jewish state is being attacked precisely for its Jewish identity has led many to reconsider their relationship with tradition and embrace greater parts of it. People across the country are prouder of their Jewish identity and more willing to emphasize it in fashion, speech and observance.

After 24 months of war, Israel has been wounded, but it has emerged victorious, more resilient, more united, and more determined than ever to ensure its own security in its ancient homeland. *

— RAPHAEL BENLEVI

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Photo credit: Shutterstock

THE FUTURE OF GAZA



by Samer Sinijlawi

History is not gentle with Israelis and Palestinians. Every time diplomacy collapses, there is a round of violence. We saw this in the year 2000 after Camp David with the Second Intifada, again in 2008 after the Annapolis Summit with Israel-Hamas war, and most recently in 2023 after years of paralysis and political decay. Each time we failed to build a political horizon, and the ground beneath us exploded. This is not a coincidence. It is cause and effect.

MY STORY

I know this not as a distant observer, but as a Palestinian activist shaped by this conflict. When the First Intifada erupted in 1987, I was fourteen years old. Like many Palestinian teenagers, I was pulled into a conflict that felt personal and unavoidable — streets were filled with anger, television screens showed stone-throwing youth facing tanks. It felt simple, moral, and urgent. I wanted to belong to it. I threw stones. I was arrested. A military judge sentenced me to five years in prison.

That chapter did not end my political life. After my release, I rose through Fatah's youth movement, eventually serving as international

secretary and later heading the movement's international and Israel file, deeply engaged in dialogue with Israelis that continues to this day. Over the years, my beliefs changed, not because the occupation disappeared, but because I learned, painfully and gradually, what violence does and what it never does.

Today, I call openly for Palestinian reform and democracy, and for Palestinian-Israeli coexistence and dialogue. After October 7, I visited the Israeli communities near the Gaza border and publicly condemned Hamas in front of cameras. I later visited the shiva [week-long mourning] of the Bibas family and asked Yarden Bibas for forgiveness, an act that was neither easy nor symbolic, but necessary. I continue to address Israelis in public and in their media.

I lived through the collapse of diplomacy as a child, a prisoner, a negotiator, and now a witness to catastrophe. And if history teaches us anything, it is that when politics fails, civilians pay the price.

IMPLEMENTING THE TRUMP PLAN

Today, a unique moment has emerged. We have a US President who not only makes promises but appears determined to act. His 20-step plan is not perfect. No peace plan is. But it is concrete, detailed, implementable, backed by regional powers and the only plan currently on the table. For once, we have a framework rather than a slogan. If Israelis and

Palestinians engage with it seriously rather than ideologically, it can mark the beginning of a new chapter and this window will not remain open forever.

Disarmament and demilitarization of Hamas is an essential condition for moving forward under the Trump plan. But so is replacing the Hamas government. Hamas is not just a militia. It is also a governing bureaucracy, a social network, an employer, a provider of basic services and a major component of the local economy.

Approximately 60,000 civil and police employees worked under the Hamas government. One-third have been killed, leaving behind tens of thousands of widows, orphans, and dependents. Of the remaining employees, nearly half were not Hamas members; they were simply workers seeking income to feed their families. They currently receive around \$300 per month from the remnants of Hamas's structures, a social and economic lifeline that cannot simply be cut. Demilitarization that ignores these realities is impossible. Demilitarization that embraces them is achievable.

Therefore the new governing system in Gaza must integrate non-affiliated civil employees immediately, create retirement pathways for older or ideologically committed members, offer structured reintegration for those who renounce violence, build transparent social-security mechanisms for families of the dead, launch a massive vocational and administrative training program and replace Hamas's payroll with a modernized civil service from day one. This is not appeasement. It is institution-building, the only path to ending armed factions.

SOCIAL REFORMS

Few Israelis know the Gazan society which Hamas rules. Gaza is not just a political landscape but an ecosystem of powerful family clans, tribal networks with deep social authority, family-centered business conglomerates, civil society organizations, religious institutions,

neighborhood leadership structures, women's networks, student unions and professional unions and syndicates.

These social forces often have far greater legitimacy than any political organizations. They have survived the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, the authoritarianism of Hamas, sixteen years of blockade, and years of repeated war. If Gaza's reconstruction is to succeed, these forces must be the engine of transformation. They hold the social capital and legitimacy needed to weaken extremism and stabilize governance. What Gaza lacks is not only capacity, it also lacks opportunity.

Some in Israel speak of deradicalization as though it is a matter of rewriting textbooks. But indoctrination is not undone in a classroom alone. Palestinians have lived under conditions that generate radicalization for decades: hopelessness, displacement, unemployment, blockade, political stagnation, internal repression and external violence. Deradicalization requires: rebuilding an educational system based on critical thinking, science, foreign languages, and global engagement. It requires transforming the university sector through cooperation with top global institutions (including Israeli universities if possible), creating public dialogues and introducing media reforms that reward analytical journalism over populist rhetoric, and promoting cultural and historical literacy that acknowledges Jewish and Israeli narratives.

POLITICAL REFORMS

Demilitarization and deradicalization will not succeed without the most difficult transformation of all: political reform. Gaza and the West Bank need a system that resembles a social-democratic framework: transparent, accountable, pluralistic, participatory, grounded in rule of law, and equipped with functioning institutions.

The Palestinian public is currently trapped between two disasters: Hamas's violence and

Mahmoud Abbas's authoritarian stagnation, which has suffocated political life and prevented generational change. This dual crisis has devastated Palestinian society and destroyed public trust in political elites. But there is a more urgent political priority than simply electing new leadership (though that is necessary).

Palestinians must demonstrate they are capable of a functioning civilian service, transparent budgeting, independent courts, professional police, and a government that can compromise and negotiate, implement agreements, and deliver results. Without this, Israelis will not believe that peace is possible — and they will not say yes to any political horizon. International technical assistance to help Palestinians build governance institutions is urgent.

ECONOMIC REFORMS

No political or social transformation will survive without economic revival. Gaza's economy must be rebuilt around a reconstruction authority insulated from corruption, with major Arab and international financing, in partnerships with Israeli private-sector actors, in a long-term vision that integrates Gaza with the global economy, with energy, water, and transportation infrastructure, a modern port and logistics systems, industrial zones and vocational training for tens of thousands of young people. The old economic dependency breeder radicalism while the new economic dignity should breed self-confidence and stability.

For too long, Palestinians have spoken to Israelis in the language of political rights and international law. These concepts do not resonate in Israel's current landscape. We need a new language that acknowledges Israeli trauma and concerns, recognizes Jewish history, and appeals to shared interests and shared futures. I know Israelis well. I spent years engaging with their civil society, journalists, intellectuals, commanders, and businesspeople. Beneath the

politics, there is a reservoir of shared humanity waiting to be tapped.

When one side changes deeply and sincerely, the other side eventually responds. And we Palestinians must take the first step for pragmatic reasons. In Gaza, nearly two million people live in plastic shelters. Israelis, despite fear and trauma, can survive another decade like this, but Palestinians cannot. This moment will not return soon, if we miss it, we will pay the price for another generation.

Gaza is a wounded society but one also full of talent, energy, resilience, family loyalty, and human dignity. It can become a model of reconstruction, a laboratory for new governance, a zone of stability, and bridge between Israelis and Palestinians if we choose to make it so. *

SAMER SINIJLAWI

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Hamas leader Khalil al-Hayya

HAMAS RESTRUCTURES



by Yaakov Lappin

According to Israeli military assessments, Hamas currently has no single figure currently holding the entire apparatus together. Israel's elimination of the top tier has left a vacuum that the external leadership is rushing to fill.

Hamas is in the final stages of an election process to select replacements for both Yahya Sinwar, the late head of the political bureau in Gaza, and Ismail Haniyeh, the late head of the overseas political bureau. Both were eliminated by Israel during the war – Sinwar in Gaza in October 2024 and Haniyeh in Tehran in July 2024.

In Gaza, nearly all of Hamas's brigade commanders were killed in northern, central, and southern Gaza, with the exception of Izz-a-Din al-Haddad, former Gaza City Brigade commander who is now head of the military wing in the Strip. Israel estimates that more than half of the original Hamas terror army in Gaza was killed in action, with more injured or captured.

With Yahya Sinwar, his brother and successor Muhammad Sinwar, Muhammad Deif (former head of the military wing), and Marwan Issa (Deif's deputy) all dead, the "Gaza veto"—the ability of the military wing to dictate terms to the political leadership abroad—has been

severely weakened. Hamas's overseas leadership, based in Qatar, remains mostly intact despite the September 2025 Israeli strike targeting senior Hamas leaders in Doha.

Regarding Phase Two of the Trump 20-Point plan, codified in UN Security Council Resolution 2803, a stalemate persists because Hamas refuses to demilitarize, blocking the entry of any international alternative security force.

THE CANDIDATES

The upcoming elections, originally scheduled for the first ten days of January 2026, were postponed owing to Hamas's participation in talks for Phase Two of the Trump 20-Point Plan, according to a report by Asharq Al-Awsat.

The Shura Council, the group's secretive consultative body, has been convened to adjudicate between competing factions, primarily split between an Iranian-aligned group and a Qatar – Turkey one.

The leading candidate for the top position is Khalil al-Hayya, currently the deputy chairman of the political bureau in Gaza, though he operates out of Qatar. He is favored by the Iranian axis and the remnants of the military wing. He was a close confidant of Sinwar and supports a continued jihadist armed struggle model that relies on Tehran's financial and military backing.

Opposing him is Khalid Mash'al, the current head of the overseas office, who represents a faction more aligned with pro-Islamist states

like Qatar and Turkey and is reportedly open to a negotiated truce as a tactic to try and get Israel to withdraw from the roughly 50 percent of Gaza that it currently controls.

Muhammad Darwish (Abu Omar Hassan), the current head of the General Shura Council and the temporary head of the Leadership Council, with ties to both Iran and Turkey, has emerged as potential compromise candidate, though one that is less popular. Darwish is a shadowy figure who has historically managed Hamas's immense investment portfolio. His candidacy is bolstered by his control over the organization's purse strings and his role as the interim chair of the joint leadership council formed after Haniyeh's death.

Another key power broker in the current restructuring is Zaher Jabarin, who holds the West Bank file and manages the organization's finance bureau. Jabarin, who was also released in the 2011 Gilad Shalit deal, operates from Turkey and has been instrumental in laundering money for terrorist operations in the West Bank and Gaza. His influence has grown as the Gaza Strip's local economy has collapsed, making external funding streams critical for the survival of the movement's remaining infrastructure.

A fifth key figure in the leadership mix is the Doha-based Nizar Awadallah, a veteran member of the Gaza Political Bureau who previously challenged Sinwar for leadership and represents the internal Gaza establishment that is distinct from the military wing.

The current chief of the military wing in Gaza and surviving brigade commander, 'Izz al-Din al-Haddad, is reportedly focused on basic survival and stabilizing the ranks rather than projecting political power.

The interim political head in Gaza is 'Ali al-'Amoudi, a former head of Hamas's media apparatus and Sinwar ally who was released in the 2011 prisoner deal, swapping one Israeli soldier (Gilad Shalit) for over 1,000 Palestinian security prisoners. *Asharq Al-Awsat* reported that al-'Amoudi effectively took over the political bureau's work in Gaza, stabilizing Hamas's

leadership, together with Tawfiq Abu Naim, a senior Hamas internal security forces member and another Sinwar ally.

With the Gaza leadership decimated and its military command and control gone, the balance of power appears to have shifted to the external leadership. Furthermore, the inability of the Gaza leadership to physically meet or communicate securely has forced the Shura Council deliberations to take place abroad.

THE HAMAS STRATEGY IN GAZA

According to Israeli military sources, Hamas's current operational priority is not large-scale military offensives, but rather the preservation of its administrative and political control over the civilian population. This "civil governance" strategy aims to prove to the Palestinian population that it remains the sole political powerbroker in the Strip – an effort bolstered by frequent brutal street executions of any suspected rivals, opponents, or dissidents in Gaza.

The organization seeks to wait out the Israeli military presence, using its control over the civilian sphere and the local tax-supported government to survive until international pressure forces an Israeli withdrawal.

Hamas suppresses attempts by local clans or alternative factions to distribute aid independently, ensuring that all resources flow through its checkpoints and administrative organs. This control over the "stomach" of Gaza allows the external political leadership to maintain leverage in negotiations, despite the loss of military assets.

Hamas bolsters this strategy by collecting taxes on commercial goods entering Gaza, capitalizing on the flow of "dual-use" items and private trucks to generate revenue. Reports indicate that Hamas has generated over 200 million shekels (approximately \$66 million) in tax revenue since recent ceasefire arrangements began, levying fees of up to 50,000 shekels per truck.

Hamas security forces in Gaza supervise market prices and distribution, signaling to both the local population and the international community that no alternative governing body can function without its consent.

In terms of military strategy, Hamas is recruiting new troops in Gaza, using Iranian funds and money raised internally from taxing international humanitarian organizations who import aid, and selling stolen humanitarian aid in Gaza's markets.

The disconnect between the military reality on the ground and the political maneuvering abroad is creating friction within the movement. The Gaza faction, now led by mid-level commanders like al-Haddad and political caretakers like 'Ali al-'Amoudi and Tawfiq Abu Naim, operate under extreme duress and logistical isolation.

These figures are tasked with the job of rebuilding the al-Qassam Brigades (the military wing), despite being surrounded on all sides by the IDF, including being cut off from smuggling routes from Sinai, while simultaneously deferring to a leadership in Doha that is insulated from the immediate physical danger.

ISRAELI MILITARY TACTICS

Meanwhile, on the ground, the Israeli military has adopted a policy of striking any attempt at Hamas military rehabilitation, such as the assassination of senior Hamas military operational commander Raad Saad in December 2025, a key architect in building the elite Nukhba force and its death squads that raided southern Israel on October 7, to prevent the military wing from reorganizing into a coherent threat.

Israeli forces are currently preparing the ground in areas like Khan Yunis and Rafah, clearing rubble and removing unexploded ordnance, to allow for the future construction of alternative urban centers managed by international entities.

CONCLUSION

If Khalil al-Hayya wins the upcoming elections, this would consolidate the Iranian grip on the organization and likely signals a continuation of a military strategy of attrition, relying on the "Unity of Fields" concept where Gaza is just one front in a broader Iranian-led conflict.

If a compromise candidate like Darwish is selected, it may indicate a desire to focus on rebuilding the organization's shattered financial and administrative networks rather than immediate military confrontation.

Regardless of the outcome, civilians within the Strip are moving back into Hamas-controlled zones not out of ideological support, but because Hamas's administrative apparatus, however degraded, remains more capable of organizing basic life and rebuilding infrastructure than the Israeli military government in the Israeli-controlled zones.

Hamas's ability to levy taxes and police markets is more critical to its survival at this time than its ability to launch rockets. Israeli military sources acknowledge this dynamic, noting that Hamas is "terribly trying to preserve its status as sovereign" by signaling to the population that "you will not have anything better than us." *

YAAKOV LAPPIN

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THE VIEW OVER THE YARMOUK RIVER, AN ISRAELI RESERVE OFFICER ON THE ISRAEL-SYRIA BORDER

Yarmouk River valley. Photo credit: Shutterstock



by Eitan Rubinstein

As part of my army reserve service, I belong to a unit that is holding a sector opposite Syria and defending the State of Israel's territory on the northern border. The scenery can only be described as breathtaking. The deep, carved Rokad River meets the Yarmouk River in a tri-border area, creating a magical, peaceful landscape that expands the heart and the mind after almost two years of fighting.

The calm and beauty, however, are an illusion. This is one of the most complicated sectors Israel faces today. Syria stretches out before us – a country with a long-standing conflict with Israel that continues to host terrorist organizations hostile to Israel and intent on harming it. Here, on the tranquil banks of the Yarmouk, Israel conducts active defense inside an area that has become a “no man's land.”

The fall of Asad's regime did not bring peace. Instead, it created a strategic vacuum that was quickly filled by radical Sunni militias. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and the reserve forces in particular, serve as the first line of defense in the new geopolitical struggle.

When Syrian opposition forces took control of Damascus on December 8, 2024, Israeli intelligence was caught by surprise. In response, the IDF moved into the demilitarized zone between Israel and Syria established by the 1974 ceasefire agreement, and set up several forward posts across the fence there. Today the IDF holds these positions in the demilitarized zone, as strategic depth to defend the nearby towns

and villages of the Golan Heights from various hostile actors.

The Syrian front is full of different forces, almost all of them hostile to Israel. Now, a year after the fall of the Asad regime, local actors are beginning to understand the balance of power and to learn what is permissible and what is forbidden under the new regime, while the new regime itself is occupied with achieving stability – with limited success.

Iranian-backed Shi'ite forces are still operating in southwest Syria and are trying to rebuild their capabilities, after the losses Iran sustained in the June 2025 war. The “Golan File,” an operational arm of Lebanese Hizbullah, is attempting to rebuild its capabilities on the Syrian front, with funding from Iran. These resources strengthen Iran's influence among the local population and provide an operational capacity against Israel.

There are also global terrorist organizations facing us in southern Syria, the most notorious being ISIS. In addition, there are many small terrorist groups seeking to harm Israel, including organizations affiliated with Hamas abroad.

Before October 7, 2023, Israel was focused on the Iranian-backed Shi'ite forces in Syria, waging what Israelis called a “campaign between wars” against these forces primarily through airstrikes. Now we must contend with a dual threat: the recovering Shi'ite axis and an array of fundamentalist Sunni groups (some backed by Turkey) – all of which exploit the Syrian governance gap.

The State of Israel must not take lightly what is happening in Syria. The flat terrain in the center of the Golan Heights allows vehicles quick



access to civilian communities in a very short time, and preparations must be made to defend accordingly. The landscape of the southern Golan, characterized by deep, carved wadis, can enable covert infiltration by terror cells and mass-casualty attacks on Golan communities. The constant presence of the IDF in this challenging terrain allows it to set the rules and to preempt the build-up of hostile forces – a task that would have been impossible had the IDF remained behind the buffer zone fence.

This situation requires Israel to maintain a vigilant military strategy toward the threats emanating from Syria. The Israeli presence in the buffer-zone posts is essential to prevent a repeat of an October 7-type surprise attack by terrorist groups, this time in the Golan.

But military strategy alone is not enough. The regime led by al-Shara'a seeks to position itself as the legitimate ruler of Syria and to govern the entire country. Israel should seek to alter the long-standing political stalemate with Syria and bring about regional stability. This appears to be a realistic scenario, if press reports of secret talks are accurate.

In the most optimistic scenario, with cooperation from the Trump administration, it should be possible for Syria to join the Abraham Accords and participate in the prosperity of this regional coalition. These accords would support the new regime and its stability, ensure the security of the State of Israel, and remove proxy forces and international terrorism from Syrian soil. From such a diplomatic achievement, and from a peace of strength, a new reality on the northern border could emerge, turning Syria from a “no man's land” into a center of regional stability. *

EITAN RUBINSTEIN

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President Trump with Ukrainian President Zelensky and European leaders in Washington, August 2025.
Photo credit: Reuters

DEFINING AN ACCEPTABLE OUTCOME TO THE RUSSO- UKRAINE WAR



by Nikolas K. Gvosdev

In the last session of a “History of the Cold War” class that I teach at Harvard Extension School, I share images of how wars end, starting with iconic images such as the Japanese surrender on the deck of the *USS Missouri* in Tokyo Bay and Nazi defendants being arraigned in the war crimes tribunal at Nuremberg. For many of my students, the way World War II ended is the default setting for international diplomacy: unconditional surrender, peace terms imposed, defeated powers subject to occupation and reconstruction along US preferences regarding democratic governance.

Of course, unconditional surrender came about as part of the willingness of the Allied powers to wage total war and to accept commensurate losses in blood and treasure. Even in the waning months of the war, when both German and Japanese peace feelers attempted to bargain for a negotiated settlement, the Allies refused and instead accepted additional casualties rather than allow existing governments in Berlin and Tokyo to remain in place.

When details of the “28 point plan” reportedly developed by the Trump administration for ending the conflict in Ukraine first leaked in November, the reaction of European and American political leaders and pundits was fierce. The rejoinder of EU High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas – a “two point plan” (Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat) – was enthusiastically repeated across the European media landscape.

The implication is clear: just as the Allies rejected various German and Japanese proposals for a negotiated end to the war, Ukraine (and by extension, its Western friends

and partners) should brook no compromises with Moscow. Indeed, would-be policymakers on social media advanced an entire agenda for conflict termination that would not only see Russia give up control of all Ukrainian territory but accept demilitarization, denuclearization and the transportation of Vladimir Putin and other senior Russian government officials to the Hague for trial.

Promoting the image of the end of World War II as defining the range of acceptable solutions to end the Russia-Ukraine war is problematic. It makes any subsequent version of the 28-point proposal politically difficult for Western governments and it misleads Ukrainians that a new massive wave of Western support is coming to first stem and then reverse the Russian onslaught.

The problem is a major disconnect between the rhetoric of “unconditional surrender” and the practical requirements needed to realistically consider this as an option for war termination.

As of mid-December 2025, European institutions, nearly four years after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, cannot agree on the disposition of Russian state assets temporarily frozen in European banks. Despite the imposition of sanctions, Europeans continue to import a variety of raw materials from Russia, from natural gas to uranium, and the value of Western-Russian trade roughly equals the aid provided to Ukraine. European members of NATO have failed to make concrete progress on their promises to send military forces to Ukraine either to help secure its critical infrastructure or to become a credible tripwire to enforce any future ceasefire. Despite all the talk about the size of the combined North American/European economies, there has been no massive World War II-style increase in the capacity of defense-industrial bases to scale up production.

Some recent analyses suggests that the Ukrainian military needs not the drips and drabs of Western military castoffs, but hundreds of advanced fighter planes, thousands of new tanks and armored vehicles, and the components to construct tens of thousands of missiles and millions of drones in order to credibly deter the Russians from continuing the current war or, in the event of a ceasefire, starting a new conflict.

Proponents of *moralpolitik* generally respond by predicting that a massive Western effort will not be needed, because of their hope that Russia is nearing collapse and so will be unable to sustain its operations in Ukraine. Every social media image of a drone strike on a Russian refinery or oil tanker, every unconfirmed report of a supposed shortage of a key good in Russia, every speculation on the number of Russian casualties – all are taken as signs that the long-awaited day when Moscow throws in the towel is at hand. Yet Russia shows no signs of being in extremis. Predictions that Russia is running out of missiles “in two weeks” started in April 2022. Perhaps that day may come, but basing strategy on a timetable for Russian collapse does not seem to be prudent.

There are, of course, other images for war termination. Interestingly, senior Ukrainian figures like Ambassador Valeri Zaluzhnyi and Kyrylo Budanov, the head of military intelligence, recognize that the World War II image of war termination was an exception rather than the rule. Most wars end via negotiation and some degree of satisfactory compromise.

The other set of images I use in class are those of the 19th century European Congresses, starting with the 1815 Congress of Vienna. The Congress system focused less on achieving just outcomes in favor of promoting stability. Interestingly, many of the initial proposals in the 28-point plan would have been quite recognizable to “amoral” diplomatic eminences like France’s Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord or Austria’s Klemens von Metternich, who in constructing the post-Napoleonic

European state system embraced limits on armed forces, treaty neutrality, and redrawing frontiers and lines of control. What animated many of the early Congresses, especially under the direction of Metternich, was to find ways to constrain and balance Russian power while accommodating Russian preferences.

It is easy to critique the 19th century Congress system on moral grounds. Yet the system functioned because it fundamentally adhered to Walter Lippmann’s power/commitment equilibrium: any obligations that are extended must be guaranteed by sufficient power to implement them (and the political will to use that power). The problem today is the two-part Kallas formula (Ukrainian victory, Russian defeat) has not, as of yet, matched either the European obligations or resources that such a strategy demands. And while the 28-point plan (even if it ends up being edited to 19 points or 14 points) is deeply unsatisfying, it starts from a premise of what amount of power the US and its partners are willing to bring to bear to achieve a settlement.

Those not satisfied with the Trump administration-led process must show how they will alter the Lippmann equilibrium to favor the outcome they prefer.

Right now, we do not have the requisite political conditions for accepting a compromise arrangement, but neither is there the necessary political support for the degree of support Ukraine would require to alter the current balance of power and force a Russian reversal. Unfortunately, this presages a continuation of bloodletting and destruction. *

— NIKOLAS K. GVOSDEV

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HOW RUSSIA TURNED ANTISEMITISM INTO A WEAPON





by Antonia Ferrier

In the Soviet Union, antisemitism was not incidental. It was a tool of statecraft. That tool has been picked up again by Russia.

In the late nineteenth century, the tsarist police fabricated The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a document that purported to reveal the inner workings of a Jewish plot for global domination. It has remained a potent source of antisemitic conspiracy thinking.

The collapse of the Romanov dynasty in 1917 did little to attenuate the virulence of antisemitism in Russia. After World War II, Joseph Stalin denounced “rootless cosmopolitans” and hatched the “Doctors’ Plot,” claiming that Jewish doctors in Moscow were conspiring to eliminate the Soviet leadership. A new purge trial loomed that was only stymied by Stalin’s sudden death in March 1953.

Stalin’s successors were not shy about dipping into the anti-Semitic well. In the 1970s, for example, Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB, described Zionism as a hostile force working against the Soviet state, formalizing a Stalin-era doctrine that treated Jews as inherently suspect and politically expendable. At the same time, the Soviet authorities denied Jews exit visas to Israel, creating the phenomenon known as “refuseniks.”

While the Soviet overt use of antisemitism faded with the USSR’s dissolution at the end of the Cold War, the logic behind it never disappeared. Today, those tactics have re-emerged — modernized, digitized, and amplified through global networks.

Following the heinous October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, a brief spasm of support for Israel was replaced by a surge of antisemitism worldwide. Once Israel began to defend itself against Hamas, it was widely depicted as the international bad guy.

In short order Jewish schools, synagogues, sporting events, and concerts faced threats and attacks from Islamist extremists, often amid institutional paralysis. In the United Kingdom, the Community Security Trust reported a record spike in antisemitic incidents in the weeks after October 7. Meanwhile, French authorities deployed police to protect Jewish sites amid escalating threats reported by *Le Monde*.

These arenas — campuses, social media, street protests, and political movements — are not isolated. Antisemitic narratives circulate easily between them, adapting in form while preserving their animating hostility. That permeability makes antisemitism especially potent and difficult to contain.

In particular, Moscow moved quickly to exploit the moment, not by openly promoting Hamas but by amplifying antisemitism as a destabilizing force within Western societies. This was not passive opportunism. During

periods of crisis, Russia routinely and adeptly deploys state media, proxy outlets, and covert online networks to inflame social division for strategic gain.

Within days of the Hamas attacks, Russian state media mobilized. In October 2023, RT Arabic and Sputnik broadcast unverified and inflated Gaza casualty figures as evidence of Israeli “genocide,” well before any independent assessments existed. These patterns were documented by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. By November, the Russian-linked “Doppelgänger” network escalated further, publishing cloned versions of major European newspapers falsely claiming that Western officials had privately acknowledged Israeli genocide, according to EU DisinfoLab.

At the same time, Russian bot networks pushed fabricated atrocity claims at scale — doctored casualty charts, manipulated images, and false reports of hospital bombings. By the time corrections emerged, many of these claims had already migrated into street protests. The protestors saw what they wanted to see.

The consequences were visible. In Berlin and Paris in late 2023, demonstrations featured open Nazi comparisons targeting Jews and Israel, alongside explicit antisemitic chants. Jewish schools and synagogues heightened security amid rising threats and vandalism. French authorities and independent reporting also documented cases in which Russian-linked operatives were paid to spray antisemitic symbols across Paris. The result is not abstract for Jewish families, where fear has again become a daily calculation.

The Kremlin has been candid about its methods. Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT, has in interviews with the BBC openly described information warfare as cheaper and more effective than conventional military confrontation in interviews.

The Kremlin has fused its long-running “Nazi Ukraine” narrative with antisemitic inversion, portraying President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, through conspiratorial and mutually

contradictory lenses. Putin revels in the notion that Zelensky represents a new Third Reich that Mother Russia must once more battle and crush.

Russia exploits volatility deliberately. It injects antisemitism simultaneously into Muslim communities, the hard left, and the hard right — intensifying mistrust, inflaming grievance, and turning citizens against one another to weaken Europe from within.

Antisemitism never confines itself to Jews. It corrodes institutions, legitimizes violence, and leaves societies easier to fracture and harder to govern. Solidarity with Jewish communities therefore cannot be separated from confronting a Kremlin that has repeatedly weaponized antisemitism — against Jews, against Israel, and against the West. *

ANTONIA FERRIER

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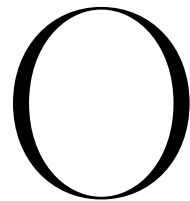


ISRAEL RECOGNIZES SOMALILAND; WILL THE US BE NEXT?

Photo credit: Shutterstock



by Michael Rubin



On December 26, 2025, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar announced on X that Israel has recognized Somaliland, becoming the first country in the world to officially do so. “Over the past year, based on an extensive and ongoing dialogue, relations between Israel and Somaliland have taken shape,” he wrote. “Today we signed an agreement on mutual recognition and the establishment of full diplomatic relations, which will include the appointment of ambassadors and the opening of embassies.”

Fireworks erupted in Hargeisa, Somaliland’s capital. Five years ago, the Somaliland president and foreign minister expressed their private interest in Israel ties, though it took some time to convince the Netanyahu government to engage. But Somalilanders were patient and persistent. They are one of only two African countries today who side with Taiwan over China. They embrace the United Kingdom and European Union and partner with the United Arab Emirates over more reactionary Arab states.

BACKGROUND ON SOMALILAND

Somali nationalists claim that recognition of Somaliland’s independence is an assault on Somali unity. But the unity they imagine never

existed. The five-pointed white star on Somalia’s pale blue flag, the “star of unity,” stands for five regions where ethnic Somalis reside: the former Italian colony (today’s Somalia), the former British colony (today’s Somaliland), the former French coaling station that today is Djibouti, Ethiopia’s Ogaden region, and Kenya’s North Eastern province.

In 1960, Somaliland won its independence from Britain. Five days later, however, Somaliland’s government chose to unify with the former Italian colony to form what would become Somalia.

It was not a happy marriage, and the former British protectorate split from Somalia in 1991.

Somali culture is clan-based, and the country’s Cold War dictator, Mohamed Siad Barre, first repressed and then attempted outright genocide of the Isaaq clan predominant in the former British Somaliland, which formed the core of resistance against his brutal rule. By the time Somalis ousted Siad Barre, his forces, augmented by South African and Angolan mercenaries, had killed up to 200,000 Isaaq clan members and leveled 80 percent of the city of Hargeisa.

Siad Barre’s exile in 1991 led to a vacuum of power throughout the country. The world remembers the period for its anarchy, starvation, warlordism, and “Black Hawk Down” chaos. But few know of the political consensus reached that year in Somaliland.

Rather than fight each other, Somalilander business leaders quarantined their political



Source: Shutterstock

elites until they were able to hash out a new compact. Academics debate why it was successful. Some suggest the bifurcation between business and political elites helped. Businessmen looked at Mogadishu and feared a repeat; they accepted no political dysfunction that could interrupt their livestock trade.

Others say it was a unique moment. The Somali and Somaliland diasporas can afford to take uncompromising, radical positions that they don’t have to live with every day. But the Somaliland compact of 1991 came before cellphones, so local elites could create a fait accompli before diaspora communities could interfere.

Somalilanders lacked modern banking and mortgage financing. This meant they self-financed homes and businesses based on family loans. Noone was willing to subordinate

themselves to politicians in Mogadishu consistently ranked by Transparency International as among the world’s most corrupt. Few Somalilanders living today have any direct memory of Mogadishu’s rule. They know history, though. To demand Isaaqs live under Mogadishu would be akin to demanding Rwandan Tutsis subordinate themselves to Hutu genocidaires; it simply was never realistic.

Unlike many other would-be secessionist states like the Kurds in Iraq, Biafrans in Nigeria, or Ambazonians in Cameroon, Somaliland’s borders were set by treaty under the British protectorate. Somalia might harbor irredentist claims to the regions of Sool and Sanaag, but this was always more the attempts of Mogadishu to distract from its own failures and China’s desire to wage a proxy war against Taiwan, with whom Somaliland partners.

SELF RELIANCE WORKED

Somaliland's three decades of isolation, in hindsight, may have been a blessing. The international community dumped billions of dollars of aid into Mogadishu, but Somaliland received next to none and had to raise its own budget from customs revenue and taxation. As a result, Somaliland built capacity and a tax base. It is home to major investments—multibillion-dollar communications and mobile money companies, one of the continent's largest Coca Cola bottling plants, hotels, resorts, and transportation companies. Its deep-water Berbera port now competes with Djibouti and Mombasa. Most businesses that the international community labels as Somali are actually owned by Somalilanders.

Nowhere has Somaliland demonstrated its capacity and accountability more than with elections. Somaliland, unlike Somalia, has held more than eight elections since 1991. One was decided by less than 100 votes of more than one million cast. Each change of power has been peaceful. Somaliland elections are among the world's most secure, with voter registration certified with biometric iris scans.

WHO IS NEXT?

Ethiopians often joke they will not be the first country to recognize Somaliland, but they will not be the third either. Somalilanders initially sought to win recognition in West Africa from countries like Gambia—another country that resumed independence after a failed confederation. Gambia only reversed course after receiving significant bribes from Somaliland opponents.

The United States itself is actively debating recognition. The Pentagon and many in Congress favor it, though the State Department is dragging its feet.

Recognition of Somaliland has strategic benefits. The port of Berbera has one of the longest airstrips in Africa; it used to be an

emergency landing strip for the U.S. space shuttle program. Several years ago, the United Arab Emirates renovated and upgraded it. Today, it could become a hub for anti-Houthi operations. The United States could also use Berbera as an alternative to an increasingly crowded Djibouti and interference from the Chinese base there.

What Israel has realized is that unity in the case of Somalia and Somaliland is neither realistic nor moral. They have gone separate ways since 1991, with Somaliland moving in positive directions that should be rewarded with recognition and engagement. *

MICHAEL RUBIN

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Source: Shutterstock

A TORMENTED SEARCH FOR BALANCE

Kissinger

A PBS documentary by Barak Goodman, October 2025

BY JAMES JEFFREY

PBS's three-hour documentary on Henry Kissinger is in most respects admirable and should be viewed by everyone. Kissinger's long life and exploits are handled briskly but thoroughly; the narrative does not dawdle, dramatic footage and scores of brief interview excerpts keep the story moving, quite coherently given the range of events covered.

Perhaps most important, the production portrays Kissinger as a foreign policy actor without peer in American history, with extraordinary impact in his active years and lasting influence through his achievements in office and relentless public engagement thereafter. What it does not do, however, is truly assess his role in the Cold War at the strategic level.

BALANCED ON SPECIFICS

PBS labors to be balanced about Kissinger. It compares favorably to the ocean of attacks on Kissinger over the decades. Two recent egregious ones were the Ben Rhodes obituary in the *New York Times*, and a *Washington Post* piece at the time of his hundredth birthday highlighting dismay that the evil Kissinger had made it that far.

The production credits many specific accomplishments, and balances many criticisms (for example, that he allowed the Vietnam War to continue too long when allegedly "lost," fomented upheaval in Cambodia, Chile, and Pakistan, betrayed American moral values) with explanations from biographers, former staffers, and his son David, of why Kissinger did what he did. This is so rare in other assessments. In particular, PBS has commentators note that for Kissinger, preserving American and Western security itself was the core moral value. Still, the series devoted considerably more time to criticism than to praise.

Cambodia was handled in a balanced way. Former staffer Winston Lord's exasperation in responding to allegations of supposedly illegal military operations in Cambodia was priceless. In sum, he said: come on, the North Vietnamese Army had invaded Cambodia, was attacking our forces and killing Americans from it and retreating back to it as a safe haven, so of course we attacked them.

Unfortunately, the program left unchallenged the assertion made by one Cambodian, and held by many Americans, that supposedly the Khmer Rouge's evolution from minor force to genocidal victors was the result of the US bombings and incursion. This idea that American decisions and actions can change the trajectory of whole states and societies, while prominent on the Left, was never one of Kissinger's beliefs.



Kissinger and President Nixon, 1971. Photo credit: via Reuters

In the case of Vietnam, Winston Lord noted it was only in fall 1972, not in 1969, that Hanoi dropped its non-negotiable, unacceptable demand that the US not only leave but dismantle the “puppet” South Vietnamese government. Both Kissinger and his son are eloquent in arguing that the 1975 fall of South Vietnam was his worst moment in government. Contrary to the accusations that he merely wanted a “decent interval,” Kissinger believed that if Congress had not blocked Washington’s resupply and air support commitments Saigon could have beaten back the 1975 Hanoi offensive. (This writer, having witnessed the South Vietnamese Army do just that in the 1972 Hanoi Easter offensive, agrees.)

On Chile, the documentary detailed Kissinger and Nixon’s direct involvement in the 1970 coup attempt. But unlike many accounts the program argues there is no evidence that the US, or at least Kissinger, knew in advance of the 1973 coup that overthrew Allende.

BUT ADRIFT ON A STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

What is lacking in the piece is a deeper analysis of the strategic-historic context of both Kissinger’s achievements and his alleged disregard for human rights values and the link between them. Kissinger biographer Niall Ferguson is quoted that we are all “in Kissinger’s world now,” but the production does not attempt either to flesh out or challenge that assertion.

That absence perhaps reflects a general American tendency to deal with factual specifics not more theoretical big pictures (Kissinger himself being an exception to the tendency). Still, the piece should have been clearer, explaining the strategic context of Kissinger’s work, analysing, drawing on examples from other administrations, of how the “agonizing options” were handled, and judging overall strategic success and failure.

In fact, such agonizing decisions were commonplace in the Cold War and afterward, and not solely Kissinger’s. The Truman Doctrine

undergirding Greece, Turkey and Iran, and the defense of Korea and Taiwan in 1950, were all in support of then undemocratic states, with the arguable exception of Greece. In 2022 President Biden embraced the same approach in his National Security Strategy, stating that the US will partner with “countries that do not embrace democratic institutions but nevertheless ... support a rules-based international system.” Kissinger couldn’t have said it better.

In the end, the United States won the Cold War, first helping flip China in 1972. And twenty years later the Soviet Bloc collapsed. Thus containment policy worked. But to work, it had to spread its shield over not only democratic states like Denmark but the gaggle of often hapless, oppressive dictatorships, monarchies, and military regimes that made up most of the states along the Soviet and Chinese perimeter.

WHAT PBS MISSED

Not only did Kissinger embrace with gusto that approach, but he achieved a degree of strategic success that certainly strengthened America’s position in the Cold War, and arguably fended off a communist victory. 1968, as the series makes clear, was America’s nadir in the almost fifty-year Cold War. America had suffered if not a battlefield, then a huge political defeat in Tet, the country was falling apart, the entire containment strategy under assault, with the streets ablaze and a president quitting.

Within six years, thanks to Kissinger and Nixon, the strategic picture was vastly different. In the Far East, Communist China had flipped from enemy to quasi-partner, and the Asian periphery had held, as Singapore’s then Prime Minister Lee has stressed, because America stayed the course in Vietnam and elsewhere long enough for those states to stabilize and China to cease its direct and indirect aggression.

In the Middle East, the US had saved what was to become its most important ally, Israel, from defeat in the Yom Kippur War, then transformed Egypt from enemy to ally, largely

excluding Moscow from the region. And in Europe, with the SALT nuclear accords with the USSR, and the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, a new stable status quo emerged ultimately fatal to the Soviets.

LASTING DIVIDE IN THE FOREIGN POLICY COMMUNITY

PBS may have avoided such an assessment because diving into it would have required entering a minefield dating back fifty plus years and still active, involving a still-unhealed split in America’s foreign policy community. This point is central to comprehend American foreign policy generally, and the treatment of Kissinger specifically.

The divide goes back to the turbulent sixties, even more polarized and violent than today’s America. From the 1940’s until roughly 1967, the American foreign policy community shared a common foreign policy dogma: containment, a continuation of the “avoid domination of the Eurasian world island by a hostile entity” policies of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, through a military-based collective security strategy along with various economic and political principles as appendages.

But by 1967 that dogma was severely challenged by the more progressive wing of the foreign policy community, composed of university communities, students, most media, foundations, many think tanks, much of civil society, and to some degree the Democratic Party and Congress, all involved in the business of shaping public views on foreign policy. They took a more stridently antiwar view towards Vietnam and later to containment generally.

The other wing, governance (the administration, military, diplomatic service, part of Congress, and some trusted outside advisors) also viewed Vietnam increasingly as a failure, including Henry Kissinger, as the PBS documentary clarifies. But it was a failure of application in the field, with General Westmoreland and Secretary of Defense

McNamara, not of containment theory. As PBS reports, Kissinger as an advisor wrestled with this. “Need a negotiated settlement, but cannot simply walk away with so many troops committed.” That is, find a way out but not at the expense of containment’s core component, American credibility, which Kissinger often described as “honor.”

For those opposed to Nixon and Kissinger, containment itself, not just its application in Asian jungles, became the problem, a view long held by pundit-in-chief Walter Lippmann, and given national prominence in the 1967 Senate Foreign Relations Committee Vietnam hearings chaired by Senator Fulbright.

Their proposed alternatives to containment were amorphous but focused on deemphasizing military force. (Their champion George McGovern’s “Come Home America” theme was directed at soldiers.) In addition, human rights, internationalism, global values and diplomacy were embraced. Essentially, they rejected the lessons of the 1930’s in favor of an untested theory that all international conflicts were the results of misunderstandings and insecurity, with the remedy being not Kissinger’s muscular policies but trust-building, negotiations, and above all military de-escalation.

For example, Kissinger critic Roger Morris and others repeatedly argue that Kissinger’s focus on credibility/honor cost many lives. True, but it also saved them. In the Yom Kippur War the Soviets mobilized troops to intervene. Nixon and Kissinger then placed the entire US military on DEFCON Three war readiness. Within hours Moscow backed down, having seen that this Washington, with actions like the Hanoi Christmas bombing, should not be toyed with. That ended the war and defused a potential Cuban Missile Crisis-level confrontation. Strangely, or perhaps not, PBS did not cite this most dangerous but arguably most triumphant moment of Kissinger’s tenure.

Fortunately for global stability and American security, the progressive viewpoint never captured the governance wing of the foreign

policy establishment, with the exception of the early Carter administration (his 1977 speech warning of an “inordinate fear of communism”) and occasionally thereafter (Obama’s Syrian “red line” choke of 2013). But that viewpoint has remained strong among many Americans, influencing congressional decisions (for example, the 1974 blocking of assistance to an embattled Saigon, three Senate roll call votes required in 1991 to endorse liberating Kuwait).

NEVER TO BE FORGIVEN

The problem for Kissinger and his legacy is that he (and Nixon) successfully defied this progressive catechism almost as soon as it was created. PBS cited Nixon’s 1972 electoral win only in passing but in fact it is vital to American foreign policy history.

The 1972 election represented a stinging rebuff by voters (in 49 of 50 states) to the progressive worldview and its candidate who apparently confused college students and *New York Times* subscribers with the American people. Nixon and Kissinger after all had escalated dramatically in Vietnam a few months earlier in response to the North Vietnamese offensive. Their support for Pakistan in the Bangladesh war, the attempted 1970 coup in Chile, and military operations in Cambodia were all in the public domain. Also, as promised, they had brought home 90 percent of the troops without defeat.

By the end of the Kissinger era, that impressive Cold War edifice described above was in place, and thirteen years later, final victory achieved, through Kissinger’s strategy as followed by Reagan and Bush. Kissinger had shown definitively that power, including military force, along with negotiating flexibility, can achieve stability, peace and victory.

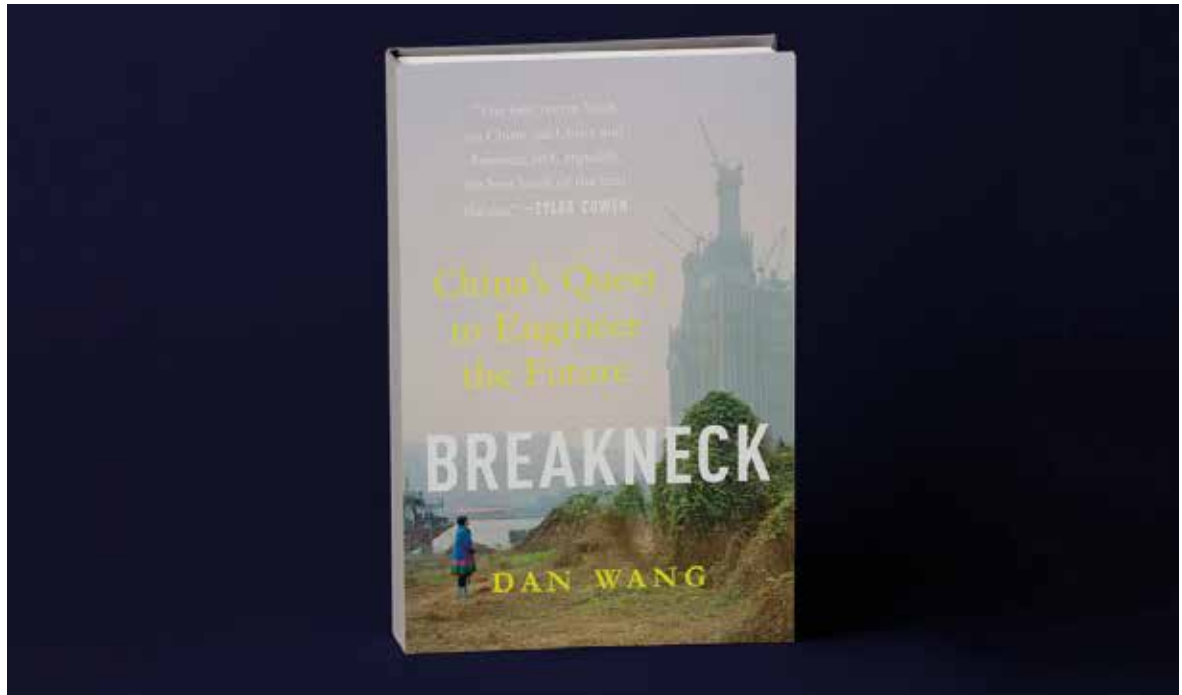
Many still remain wedded to that progressive worldview (most recently seeing the Israeli regional strategic victory of 2023-25 in terms only of a “genocide” in Gaza). Kissinger by proving them wrong has become an outcast,

condemned in many circles as a “war criminal.” And thus PBS, while trying commendably to give balance to both sides, but faced with all this, ducked the job of providing a serious assessment of Kissinger’s historic role.

One flaw of the production was not interviewing American soldiers, who were so impacted by Kissinger’s actions and who ultimately contributed to his successes. So let’s give the last word to one of them, the writer’s boyhood friend, former Lieutenant William Golden, deep in the bush with a Vietnamese unit in 1970: “I felt like I was on two separate tours, one, whew, before the 1970 Cambodian incursion, and then everything went quiet thereafter.” I am sure that former Sergeant Henry Kissinger, 84th Infantry Division and Battle of Bulge veteran, would have been touched. *

— JAMES JEFFREY

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CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES: THE ENGINEER AND THE LAWYER

Breakneck: China’s Quest to Engineer the Future

by Dan Wang. W.W. Norton, 2025

BY MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

The familiar typology of political systems comes to us from the ancient Greeks, who coined terms to describe the source of effective power. Thus, the United States counts as a democracy, with power vested in the people, the demos, while China may be termed an autocracy – rule by the self, that is, a single person — in the Chinese case the leader of the country’s ruling Communist Party.

There are other ways to distinguish among regime types, and in his book *Breakneck: China’s Quest to Engineer the Future*, Dan Wang proposes a useful one. He emigrated from China to Canada with his parents at the age of seven, received his education in the United States, and spent six years in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai as an analyst of Chinese economics and politics. He knows both America and China well. He calls China an engineering state and America a lawyerly society, terms that help to describe their strengths and weaknesses, to explain their achievements and failures, and to predict their likely futures.

The two terms have a literal application: most of China’s leaders have had some training in engineering, while a large proportion of the American political elite attended law school. The distinction also illuminates differences

in the styles of governance and the results of those styles in the world’s two most powerful countries. Engineers work in concrete and steel, lawyers in words, typically in the form of briefs and petitions. Engineers focus on material outcomes, lawyers on procedures. Most importantly, engineers build things while lawyers do not.

Over the past four decades, China has built on a colossal, historically unprecedented scale. It is now richly endowed – in many respects better endowed than the United States – with roads, ports, dams, airports, and railroads. Americans familiar with their country’s history will recognize that a hundred years ago the United States also built such things on a large scale. To coin a phrase, That Used To Be Us. Now, construction of American infrastructure proceeds painfully slowly and on a small scale, when it proceeds at all. Wang cites a vivid example of the difference.

[In 2008] California voters approved a state proposition to fund a high-speed rail link between San Francisco and Los Angeles; also that year, China began construction of its high-speed rail line between Beijing and Shanghai. Both lines would be around eight hundred miles long upon completion.

China opened the Beijing-Shanghai line in 2011 at a cost of \$36 billion. In its first decade of operation, it completed 1.35 billion passenger trips. California has built, seventeen years after the ballot proposition, a small stretch of rail to

connect two cities in the Central Valley, neither of which are [sic] close to San Francisco or Los Angeles. The latest estimate for California’s rail line is \$128 billion.

The Shanghai-Beijing rail link illustrates the advantages of China’s engineering state. More generally, the country’s 40-year building spree has helped to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty, making it arguably the most successful anti-poverty program in human history. The American system, too, has strengths: it allows for changes of course that can avoid costly errors of policy and protects individuals and groups of citizens from harmful consequences of government policy, as China’s engineering state, which functions as an unstoppable bulldozer once its course is set, does not.

The history of California’s ill-fated Los Angeles to San Francisco fast train makes clear the downside of America’s lawyer-dominated political system. Two acronyms express its defects: NIMBY – “not in my back yard” – refers to the tendency of Americans, especially wealthy ones, to prevent projects of which they approve in principle, sources of renewable energy, for example, from being located near where they live; and BANANA – “build absolutely nothing anywhere near anything” – is self-explanatory. Still, China’s engineering state, for all its visible and dramatic achievements, has negative effects as well, and Wang devotes most of his book to chronicling them.

He argues that China builds too much. It has put in place infrastructure that is little used and therefore uneconomical. It erected too much residential housing for even the most populous country in the world, leading to a housing bubble that has proven costly to unwind. In the Chinese system, local Communist officials get rewarded, above all with promotions, for shepherding building projects to completion, the more numerous and grandiose the better. Hence the proliferation of projects without regard for their ultimate economic viability. This is a poor use of the country’s resources.

In addition, China’s engineer-leaders are obsessed with manufacturing, and the country has duly become the leading manufacturer in the world. It produces far more manufactured products than are consumed at home, especially because China’s supreme leader, Xi Jinping, takes a dim view of consumption. As a result, China floods the world with what it makes. This, in turn, has caused a backlash in countries, and not only the United States, whose domestic industries the flood from China threatens. The Chinese regime’s strategy for economic growth depends on an ever-expanding volume of exports, but it is far from clear that other countries will continue to accept them.

China’s engineer-dominated political system has another deep flaw. In contrast to the United States, it does not respect the rights or interests of individual Chinese. It sets goals and then plows ahead to fulfill them, regardless of the cost to the Chinese people. Wang devotes a chapter each to two glaring examples of this feature of contemporary China: the policy of permitting married couples to have only one child, which began in 1980; and the restrictive lockdowns of large parts of the country’s population during the Covid pandemic. Both policies imposed enormous inconvenience and a good deal of discomfort: the one-child policy also occasioned instances of terrible cruelty.

While the engineering mindset that pervades the Chinese government may have had something to do with these episodes, each was also distinctly and characteristically communist. Both were nation-wide campaigns, decided at the whim of the supreme leader and implemented by government coercion, that caused widespread disruption and considerable suffering. In this way, they belong in the same category as the collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union and China as well as the Chinese “Great Leap Forward” of the 1950s, which caused as many as 40 million people to starve to death, and China’s “Great Proletarian Culture Revolution” of the 1960s, which threw the country into violent chaos. These

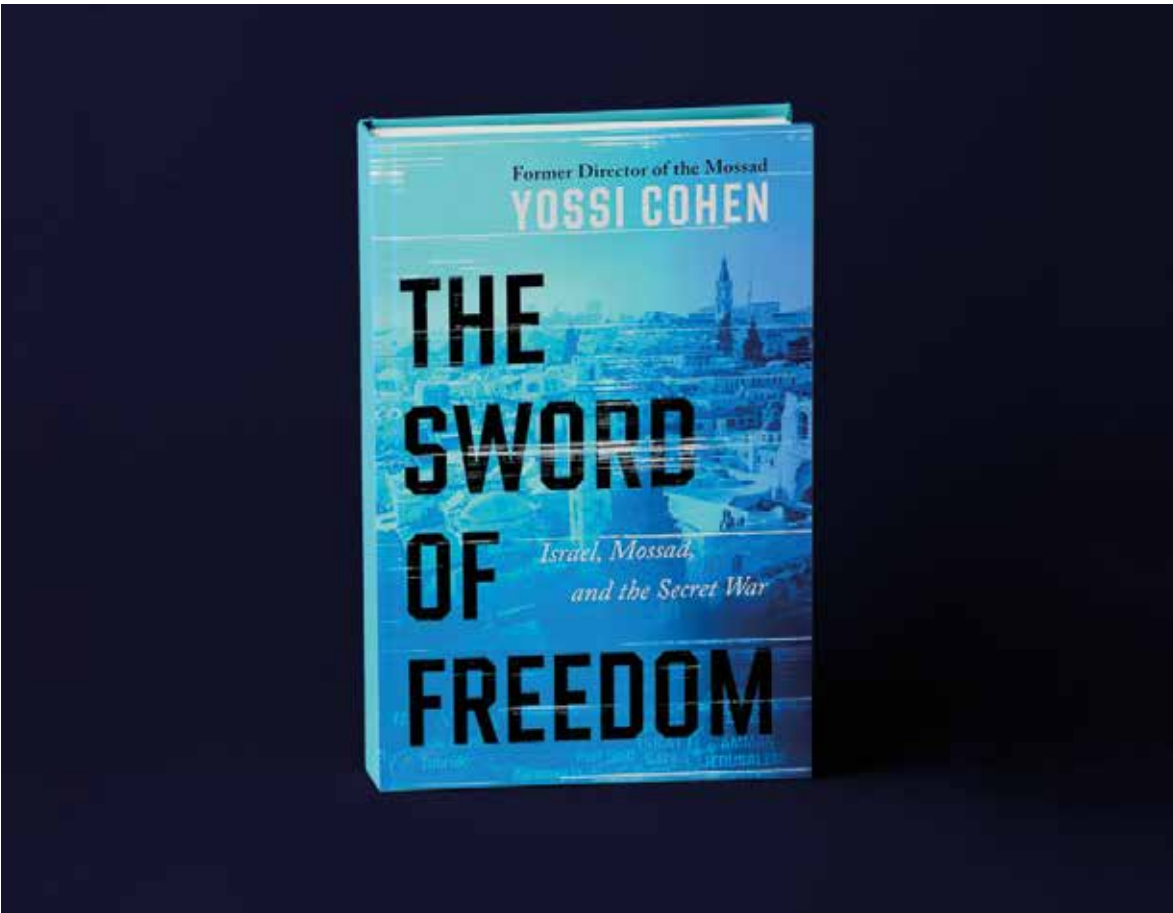
campaigns came about at the behest of Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, dedicated communist revolutionaries neither of whom was an engineer.

One consequence of the differences between the Chinese engineering state and the American lawyerly society has major, and for the West alarming, implications for international politics. The two countries are military rivals, each of whom is preparing for the possibility of a shooting war with the other. The likeliest cause of such a conflict is the status of the democratic and effectively independent island of Taiwan, located approximately 100 miles from the Chinese mainland. The Communist government in Beijing claims that Taiwan belongs under its jurisdiction, while the United States is committed – in fact albeit not by treaty – to protecting the island against a Chinese attack.

Wars are fought with military equipment and China makes far more of it, far more rapidly, than does the United States, even including the military production of America’s allies. “In 2022,” Wang writes, “China had nearly 1,800 ships under construction, and the United States had 5.” He quotes an American official as saying that, in a conflict with China, the United States would experience “the exhaustion of munition stockpiles very rapidly.” In this particular arena, that is, the Chinese system has a clear superiority over the American one. In a real war, engineers will beat lawyers every time. *

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

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THE ART OF DEFLECTION

The Sword of Freedom, Israel, Mossad and the Secret War
by Yossi Cohen. Broadside Books, 2025

BY ROBERT SILVERMAN

Israel is heading into an election year in 2026. And in recently published memoirs Yossi Cohen makes his case to be the next prime minister.

Director of Israel’s external intelligence service, the Mossad, from 2016 to 2021 and national security advisor from 2013 to 2016, Cohen writes of pondering his next move. “What type of PM would I be, if despite my current reticence, that is to be my fate?” Well, the reticence quickly vanishes. “I have one of the widest CVs in Israel,” he asserts, together with “strategic acumen and a proven ability to relate with leaders on the world stage” (in contrast with Prime Minister Netanyahu whom, he alleges, lacks this skill).

Self-promotion is common in political memoirs but Cohen’s version could have used a strong edit. “I’m a colorful guy” he admits, who “speaks four languages well” and, in explaining one of them, adds “Lebanese Arabic is a variety of Levantine Arabic indigenous to the country.”

Here is the opening line in a chapter describing one of the Mossad’s greatest achievements in recent years, stealing Iran’s nuclear archives: “It’s a dark and cold night in late January.” If only Charles Schultz were alive today to witness his literary influence.

All kidding aside, Israelis don’t need an introduction to Yossi Cohen. He has been squarely in the public limelight in Israel for more than 10 years, in contrast with the more shadowy presence of prior Mossad directors (though several others also wrote memoirs in retirement¹).

What Israelis need to hear from Cohen is his explanation for the security establishment’s disastrous groupthink about Hamas that emerged after the Israel-Hamas war of 2014 and prevailed for the next nine years, right up until the early morning hours of October 7, 2023 when thousands of Hamas terrorists crossed the border. This groupthink insisted Hamas was deterred from attacking Israel and could now be managed through economic incentives.

Cohen was not only a party to that groupthink. He was the key person implementing the policy of economic support for Hamas by arranging the delivery of suitcases of Qatari cash, estimated in the billions of dollars, to the Hamas government in Gaza. Cash was needed because Hamas is a worldwide designated terrorist organization and cut off from electronic payment systems, even the banking system of the Palestinian Authority.

Cohen’s memoirs go silent on this episode. Instead, he blames Mossad’s sister services – the Shabak (Internal Security Service) and military intelligence. He is right that they had direct responsibility for understanding what was happening inside Gaza. But his agency, Mossad, was responsible for Hamas’s critical external support and in fact he personally facilitated that support with trips to Doha.

To be fair, in the aftermath of the mini-war with Hamas in May 2021, right after his five-year term as Mossad chief ended, Cohen did admit to some misgivings. “We had hoped that Qatari involvement and Qatari money would lead us to a settlement with Hamas. But things got a little out of control.” Such candor is missing from his memoirs four years later. As he positions himself to run for prime minister, all blame is deflected onto the other services and onto Netanyahu.



Yossi Cohen. Photo credit: Reuters/Corinna Kern

Leaving aside his complicity in the intelligence failures that led to October 7, there is no doubt that Yossi Cohen served his country bravely and well for decades. The memoirs highlight key episodes. Among them is his counter-terrorism work with western European services that foiled ISIS attacks in Brussels and London: concrete evidence of the value of Israel’s intelligence sharing with these countries that they endanger through anti-Israel policies. He has an admirable personal side, particularly when talking about his son with multiple sclerosis. And Cohen also spices up the book with tales of the tactics of spying, in chapters like “The Art of Seduction.” His nickname in the Mossad was supposedly “the Model.”

Nevertheless, Cohen’s role in the soliciting and moving of Qatari cash to Hamas should weigh heavily on voters in 2026. It undercuts his claim to “strategic acumen.” And his attempt to shift all responsibility for intelligence failures onto others may help explain why Israel’s political party leaders are not rushing to recruit him.

The Israeli public’s demand for accountability for October 7 will likely overshadow Cohen’s art of deflection. The upcoming elections may well bring new figures, and some of the old ones, stepping forth from the dynamic Israeli population and giving voice to those who want a fresh, postwar start. *

1. These memoirs, in Hebrew, include Isser Harel’s *Soviet Espionage and Communism in Israel* (1987), Dani Yatom’s *The Confidant* (2009) about both his military and Mossad service, and Shabtai Shavit’s *Head of the Mossad* (2018). Ephraim Levy, born and raised in Britain, wrote in English, *Man in the Shadows* (2008).

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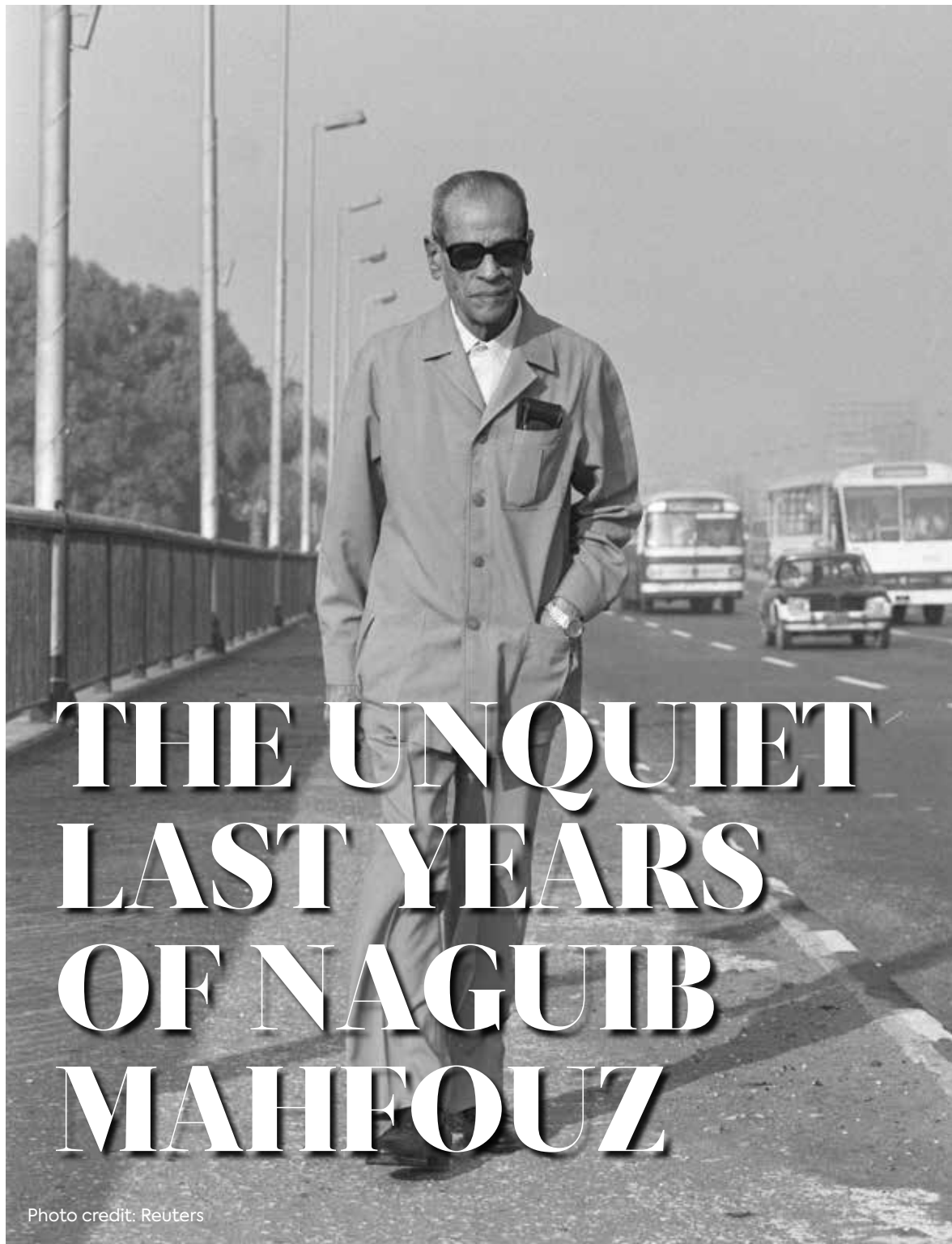


Photo credit: Reuters

BY RAYMOND STOCK

PREFACE

Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) became the Arab world's first Nobel Laureate in Literature in 1988. His 34 novels include *The Cairo Trilogy* (*Palace Walk*, *Palace of Desire*, and *Sugar Street*) and his dozens of movie scripts number among the top films of the Arab cinema. In addition, his essays were featured in the main Arabic newspapers of the day. Little known beyond his native region before his Nobel, his works now appear in at least thirty languages. This fame also brought with it new perils. In 1994, Mahfouz narrowly survived an attempt on his life by an Islamist fanatic. His writing hand was partially paralyzed by the attack, but after several years of intensive physiotherapy, Mahfouz resumed his creative output in 1999.

The present piece offers a portrait of Egypt's political turmoil and obsessions in Mahfouz's final years, which have largely continued until the present. Mahfouz's final work was serialized in a Cairo women's magazine called *Nisf al-Dunya* (Half of the World).

In the summer of 2001, nearly seven years after the attack on his life, the dogged, hyper-disciplined Mahfouz is back to writing. The would-be assassin's blade had touched the base of the nerve that controls Mahfouz's right arm and hand. As a result, it took more than five years of intense physiotherapy for him to write much more than his name again.

Regardless of his physical progress, the trauma still haunts him. Mahfouz's latest creative effort is a series of short (one-to-two paragraph) epigrammatic stories called *Dreams of the Period of Recovery* (Ahlam fatrat al-naqaha). Dream five is notably nightmarish:

I am walking aimlessly without anywhere in particular to go when suddenly I encounter

a surprising event that had never before entered my mind—every step I take turns the street upside-down into a circus. The walls and buildings and cars and passersby all disappear, and in their place a Big Top arises with its layered seats and long, hanging ropes, filled with trapezes and animal cages, with actors and acrobats and musclemen and even a clown. At first I am so happy that I could soar with joy. But as I move from street to street where the miracle is repeated over and over, my pleasure subsides and my irritation grows until I tire from the walking and the looking around, and I long in my soul to go back to my home. But just as I delight once again to see the familiar face of the world, and trust that soon my relief will come, I open the door—and find the clown there to greet me, giggling.

REVIVAL OF THE MAHFOUZ SALON

Since the early 1940s, Mahfouz has maintained a weekly *nadwa*, or literary salon, at a variety of venues throughout Cairo. He was en route to one of these, in the Casino Kasr el-Nil, at the moment he was stabbed in the neck. These public sessions were then cancelled but their cessation left a great void in his life. To stem post-assassination attempt depression, a psychiatrist friend, Dr. Yahya al-Rakhawi, suggested a series of rotating sessions with friends to keep the shocked and debilitated writer engaged with the world. And it works. Mahfouz now spends six nights a week outside his modest flat where he lives with his wife Atiyatallah and his two children, daughters Hoda (née Umm Kulthoum) and Faten (née Fatima), both in their early forties. They never accompany him on these evening forays.

The salon, attended by anywhere from five to fifteen of his devoted friends and their guests, starts with the arrival of the eternal Mahfouz, usually at 6:30 in the evening, walking in on the arm of his driver for that evening (often a civil engineer and fiction writer named Zaki Salem). He greets his friends, whom he can hardly see or hear, with a gallant wave of his weakened right arm and his sweet, magnetic smile. The atmosphere is thick with love, neither sentimental nor reverential. He is as familiar to all of them as their own fathers or grandfathers.

The talk is loud, always. For more than thirty years Mahfouz has been slowly going deaf. He cannot hear anything not shouted directly into his left ear, from only inches away. (His right ear has long been totally useless.) This makes talking with him an intimate experience—one that he is accustomed to after so many years, but which often unnerves first-time visitors. He listens carefully and often stuns you with what he has perceived.

The typical evening sails along on long-winded tales of politics and strife; Israel and the Palestinians; the seemingly insoluble problems of bureaucracy, poverty, and corruption in Egypt. An attendee wants to read an article to him. He usually accepts. Another requests that Mahfouz allow him to read aloud a short story that he has just composed, in the hope that the *Ustaz* (a common honorific, loosely “professor”) will comment on its quality. Mahfouz seldom says no, and his remarks afterwards are somehow always a pithy, sensitive blend of honesty and helpful criticism.

One evening, Zaki is accompanied by his six-year old son named Naguib Mahfouz Salem. “He was born the night after Naguib Bey’s attack,” the father explains. The boy poses for a picture with his namesake. Ironically, Mahfouz himself was named after Dr. Naguib Mahfouz, Egypt’s first obstetrician, who delivered the future writer in a difficult birth. In gratitude for saving mother and child, the future writer’s father, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Ibrahim Ahmad al-Basha, named the boy “Naguib Mahfouz” (which later became his *nom de plume*.)

AND REVIVAL OF THE ATTACKS ON MAHFOUZ

Mahfouz continues to face persistent rhetorical assaults and repeated threats of death, for causes both old and new, despite massive public sympathy and honors both at home and abroad. Before the Nobel, he was little known outside the Arab world, where he has been the most-renowned writer since the mid-1950s. He said that when his Nobel was announced at the Swedish Academy, “a silence fell, and many wondered who I was.” The obscurity did not last.

Mahfouz is reviled by Islamist militants mainly for one novel. Cited among several works by the Swedish Academy in justifying his prize, this is his *Awlad Haratina* (published in English as *Children of the Alley*), an allegory of mankind’s fate from the Garden of Eden to the age of science, with characters based on Biblical and Koranic figures such as Adam and Eve, the Devil, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. It remains banned in Egypt by order of al-Azhar, the nation’s official guardian of Islamic orthodoxy. The Academy’s praise of this work led to many accusations in the Arab world that Mahfouz had been rewarded with a Nobel for his services in slandering Islam, just as some also taunted him for receiving his prize as payment for his repeated calls for peace with Israel since 1973.

Many secularist critics have also denounced Mahfouz. After a book of his interviews with critic Raja’ al-Naqqash appeared in 1998, he came under attack for repudiating the policies of the still popular President Gamal Abdel-Nasser. Mahfouz felt that Nasser, who established a dictatorship that was responsible for the disastrous Arab defeat in 1967 and other military debacles, had also turned the world’s oldest bureaucracy into one of the world’s biggest, bankrupting the nation for generations to come. He felt this, he said, despite the fact that Nasser’s personality was so strong that “He gave me mythic feelings of immortality.”



Naguib Mahfouz with the author in the offices of the American University in Cairo Press, Mahfouz’s English-language publishers and literary agents, March 1990. Photo credit: Raymond Stock

Egypt—reads an article from that day’s edition of the London-based Arabic newspaper *al-Hayat*. It tells of the abrupt decision, after a two-year investigation, by the Egyptian Writers Union to expel Ali Salem, the first time the body has ever taken such an action. Salem’s crimes were visiting Israel, maintaining contact with Israelis, appearing on Israeli television, and related offenses. Mahfouz listens, clearly dismayed, but says very little.

The fifteen or so people clustered around Mahfouz are not so silent. They deplore the Writers Union’s decision against Salem. They believe Salem may have been punished not (only) for his abrasive sarcasm, often aimed at government bureaucracy, but for having defied the societal injunction to reject any contact with Israel, even with members of that country’s own peace camp, even if it means eliminating any chance to influence the public in that country.

Two days later, Mahfouz himself is on the front page of *al-Hayat*. The headline over the photo of the smiling Nobel is “Naguib Mahfouz on Ali Salem: Question Him before You Expel Him.” In the article, a clearly exasperated Mahfouz complains that the Writers Union, to which he also belongs, should have listened to Salem before condemning him. He welcomed Ali Salem’s intent to challenge the union’s judgment.

“It is necessary to hear his point of view, as we are all part of the same union. If one of us violates one of the rules, he must be questioned before being judged,” he declared. Yet the decision had been made without either calling Salem in for interrogation, or even informing him directly of his fate.

Then Mahfouz suddenly finds *himself* the object of an inquisition. Faruq Khurshid, head of the Egyptian Writers Union, announces that Mahfouz was under investigation for allegedly signing contracts with Israeli publishers to render his works into Hebrew. If it could be proven that Mahfouz had truly signed contracts with Israelis, the union would take unspecified “measures” against the octogenarian.

A BROUHAHA OVER HEBREW

Following publication of his views on Nasser, Mahfouz faded somewhat from the pages of the national press. Then a new ruckus threatened to engulf him in what—after the fading trauma of his near-assassination—had seemed to be something like a quiet life in venerable age.

In the summer of 2001, Mahfouz meets several friends in a private home in the rocky Moqattam hills overlooking the Citadel of Saladin. One of the stalwarts of this salon, Osama ‘Urabi—a descendant of the leader of Egypt’s 1882 military uprising that provided the excuse for Britain’s seventy-six-year occupation of



Naguib Mahfouz in happier times, with the playwright Ali Salem at Mahfouz's weekly literary gatherings in Cairo in early fall 1991. Photo credit: Raymond Stock

At the time this issue developed, up to twelve of Mahfouz's books had been published in Hebrew in Israel, the last in 1993. His works have long been available in the Jewish state, where publishers, with or without his or his agents' knowledge, pioneered the translation of his works, few of which were available at the time in any language besides Arabic. Indeed, at the time Mahfouz won his Nobel, his masterwork, *The Cairo Trilogy*, had been fully translated into only one language, Hebrew (by leading Israeli novelist Sami Mikhail).

Egypt's "anti-normalization" hysteria effloresced during the 1990s era of the Oslo Accords. The hysteria remains especially

acute among the nation's intellectuals, who for years have been gripped with fears that Israel would somehow steal the most precious elements of Egyptian culture and contaminate what they could not. This fear can reach absurd proportions. For example, a Japanese-financed project to trace the lineage of Pharaoh Tutankhamun by testing his mummy's DNA was abruptly cancelled by the Egyptian authorities, officially on grounds of "national security." Antiquities' officials then intimated that they believed the Japanese had hired an Israeli consultant, who would try to prove that King Tut and his family were actually Jews.

The wave of intolerance engulfing the country is particularly distressing for the aging Mahfouz and it includes some of his closest associates. For instance, the novelist Yusuf al-Qa'id publishes an article on the appearance of Mahfouz's works in Israel. Citing a recently published study by a scholar of comparative literature at Egypt's Tanta University, al-Qa'id complains that a number these novels had been grossly misrepresented as "influenced by Jewish heritage" in the press of the "eternal enemy" (many of whose members are welcomed at the Mahfouz *nadwas* said al-Qa'id).

Whatever the measures against Mahfouz the union contemplated, they could not be as draconian as those imposed by the late President Anwar al-Sadat in February 1973. Sadat banned Mahfouz and scores of other writers from having their works published, and from appearing on radio and TV broadcasts, for signing a public letter urging him to end the state of "No War-No Peace" between the Arabs and Israel. For Mahfouz, then a columnist for the semiofficial newspaper *al-Ahram*, there was the added punishment of proscribing any film bearing his name from being broadcast in Egypt. Sadat had reinstated all the proscribed writers in September 1973, only days before he went to war to break that very stalemate. Ironically some years later the Arab Gulf states banned Mahfouz's works after he voiced support for Sadat's search for peace. But when he won his



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Nobel, the award was instantly embraced by most (though not all) critics throughout the Arab world as “a prize for the Arabs.”

In earlier times, non-membership in the government-controlled Egyptian Writers Union could ruin one’s career. But the implications of expulsion are different today. As Ali Salem defiantly declared to *al-Hayat*, “I welcome my transformation from writer to reader,” adding that he could still publish nearly anywhere he pleased. Union membership was no longer crucial.

For Mahfouz, about to enter his tenth decade, the sanctions could only be symbolic. The attempt to intimidate him by his own union no doubt hurt his feelings. But he continues to serialize his new work in *Nisfal-dunya* magazine. And he lives largely on the royalties from his books, most of which are sold abroad.

Indeed, it all seemed to subside rather soon, at least for Mahfouz. Filmmaker Tawfik Saleh, who hosts the Thursday evening gathering called the *Harafish* (“the riffraff”), says, “The issue (of Hebrew translations of Egyptian books) was very hot for a while, until it came to Naguib, then it cooled down straight away.” No further action is now likely, he believes. Yet, in Egypt’s volatile political climate, nothing can be ruled out. Like the mummies of Hollywood, issues long buried have a way of rising again, wreaking havoc whenever and wherever they can.

MOST RESPECTED SIR

During the salon, friends drop by and a few also leave. He has been pulling cigarettes out of his jacket at regular intervals all night, his companions competing for the honor of lighting them.

At about 9 pm, Mahfouz asks Zaki, “What time is it?” To which Zaki responds, “We still have ten minutes”, and Mahfouz nods. “Aah,” he says, and settles back in his seat with a look of expectant satisfaction on his sphinx-like face.

And at 9:30, the appointed hour having come round at last, he stands up.

Someone helps him put on his coat again, and all the members of the *nadwa* file out together. Mahfouz, always in the company of his volunteer driver and his State-supplied plainclothes guard, and perhaps one or two friends, goes back home for dinner. This loyal little band is gathered around a man whose only weapons are his vast arsenal of books, and the spirit that a would-be killer’s knife evidently only made stronger. But still it is continually tested and he is never allowed to rest on a lifetime of extraordinary laurels. *

RAYMOND STOCK

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