

As the PA and Jordan foment riots, Israeli Arab imams preach peace

By Evelyn Gordon

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Most Israeli Arabs shun violence. Indeed, just last month, defense officials reported that terrorist activity among Israeli Arabs—never high to begin with—has dropped sharply.

At first glance, Sunday's Arab riots on the Temple Mount fit nicely into the media storyline that Israel's "extremist right-wing nationalist" government is undermining relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. Yet the most notable element of those riots was how many Israeli Arab religious leaders rejected the Jerusalem Waqf's all-out effort to foment them. In mosque after mosque throughout Israel, imams preferred to send a message of peace, thereby underscoring the true story of the past few years—not a breakdown of Jewish-Arab relations, but growing Arab integration.

The Jerusalem Waqf, which runs the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, isn't Israeli at all. It's jointly controlled by Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, and diligently disseminates both countries' anti-Israel incitement. Hence it's no surprise that anti-Israel riots periodically erupt there.

On Sunday, it sought to exploit a calendrical anomaly: The Jewish fast of Tisha B'Av coincided with the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha (Feast of the Sacrifice). Since both holidays commemorate events that occurred on the Mount (Abraham's sacrifice of Ishmael, in Muslim tradition; the destruction of the First and Second Temples, in Jewish tradition), some members of both faiths like visiting the mount on that day. The Waqf therefore called a mass prayer rally at Al-Aqsa to prevent Jews from "defiling" it with their "filthy feet," as Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas once famously said.

To ensure mass attendance, it took two unusual steps. First, it ordered all other Jerusalem mosques closed on Sunday, so that Jerusalem Muslims who wanted to attend services on one of the holiest days of the Muslim year would have nowhere else to go. Second, it asked imams throughout Israel to spread the message to their congregants.

So Haaretz decided to ask some imams what they thought of this. Here are some of the responses:

"Gathering in a religious space is not meant to cause escalation, much the opposite, we stress that we all must live in peace," said Sheikh Mohammad al-Quran, imam of Kseifa's mosque, adding that sermons and prayers at his mosque would focus on alms to the needy and the growing problem of violence within the Arab community.

Ahmad Abdullah, imam of Ein Naqquba's mosque, said that Friday's prayers were mainly spiritual preparation for Saturday's fast, which precedes Sunday's holiday. "The

topics brought up in the mosque are at the discretion of the imam," he added.

Sheikh Amar Walid, imam of Kafr Qassem's mosque, said Eid al-Adha is meant to foster unity among peoples and deter violence, and that violence within the Arab community would top his agenda that Friday, as it does every Friday. Then, referring to last week's murder of a 19-year-old Jewish yeshiva student by Palestinians, he added, "We are tired of the conflict, we need to end it already, the idea behind slaughtering an animal for the Feast of the Sacrifice is that it is upon us to avoid bloodshed among people."

Nor are these imams unusual; most Israeli Arabs shun violence. Indeed, just last month, defense officials reported that terrorist activity among Israeli Arabs—never high to begin with—has dropped sharply (with the worrying exception of the Bedouin community, where it's on the rise). In 2015, Israel arrested 120 Israeli Arabs suspected of terrorist activity. By 2018, that number had halved to just 60 arrests.

No less significant, Israeli Arabs increasingly identify as Israeli. In one survey conducted shortly before Israel's April election—nine months after the passage of the controversial nation-state law, which critics wrongly claimed made Arabs second-class citizens—46 percent of respondents self-identified as "Israeli Arab," 22 percent as "Arab," 19 percent as "Israeli Palestinian" and 14 percent as "Palestinian." Thus 65 percent included "Israeli" in their self-definition, almost double the 33 percent who included "Palestinian." And the most integrationist option, "Israeli Arab," was chosen by more than twice as many people as the second-place contender. This is a sharp contrast to how Israeli Arabs self-identified a decade ago.

The same survey found that 76 percent of Israeli Arabs termed Jewish-Arab relations in daily life "mostly positive," while just 18 percent termed them negative. Moreover, fully 94 percent recognized the existence of a Jewish people, unlike the Palestinian Authority, which vehemently denies Jewish peoplehood. And in a separate poll, a majority of Arab respondents said they were "proud to be Israeli."

Equally notable is the recent change in Arab voting patterns. In April's election, 30 percent of Arab voters cast ballots for Jewish parties, almost double the 17 percent who did so in 2015. Granted, this was partly to protest the petty bickering that led Arab parties to dismantle their joint ticket; now that the Joint List has reconstituted itself, many Arab voters may return to it in September's do-over election. But some experts think the movement towards

Jewish parties could actually intensify, and so do the parties themselves: Left-leaning parties are courting Arab voters in a manner that Thabet Abu Rass, co-director of the Abraham Initiatives coexistence organization, termed “unprecedented.”

“The center-left Zionist parties are basically going over the heads of the Arab parties to appeal directly to Arab voters in a very genuine manner,” he said, “and that is because they have identified the growing frustration of Arab voters with the parties that are meant to represent them.”

Even more surprising, some center-rightists have urged their parties to do the same. Former Benjamin Netanyahu aide Nathan Eshel and Israel Hayom columnist Professor Eyal Zisser both recently published columns arguing that the time is ripe for this since repeated polls

have shown that Arab voters overwhelmingly prioritize domestic issues—jobs, crime, education and housing—over the Palestinian conflict. And successive Netanyahu governments have worked hard to address such issues in the Arab community.

None of this means there aren’t real problems in Arab-Jewish relations, including unconscionable anti-Arab broadsides by too many rightist politicians and vicious anti-Israel incitement by Arab Knesset members and Islamist clerics. But overall, the story of the past decade—under Israel’s “most right-wing government ever”—has been one of increasing Arab integration. Whatever government is formed after September’s election must continue that trend.

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Hamas’s Plans for the New Ceasefire? Loading Up on Guns and Missiles

By Khaled Abu Toameh

gatestoneinstitute.org

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Peace is just a chance to reload.

As Egypt, the United Nations and other parties are pursuing their efforts to prevent an all-out military confrontation in the Gaza Strip, Hamas and its allies are forging ahead in their development of various types of weapons with which to attack Israel.

The Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad, the second largest armed group in the Gaza Strip after Hamas, recently revealed how it has managed to upgrade the rocket launchers that are being used to attack Israel.

According to the Islamic Jihad’s military wing, Al-Quds Brigades, it began developing its rocket launchers in 2007, when Hamas violently seized control of the Gaza Strip after overthrowing the regime of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Twelve years seems like a good time to take stock. What are the achievements of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip? They boast about three: improving military capabilities, smuggling weapons and investing millions of dollars in constructing terror tunnels. Iran’s money goes to the Hamas and Islamic Jihad war machine -- nothing else. Not hospitals, not schools, and not jobs for unemployed Palestinians.

Take, for example, a report released this week by Islamic Jihad’s Al-Quds Brigades, which presents the development of rocket launchers as one of the group’s major achievements in the past 12 years. “The rocket launchers of the Al-Quds Brigades will remain one of the most important elements of the power we possess,” the report boasts. “The rockets will continue to serve as a nightmare haunting the leaders of the [Israeli] enemy.”

The report says that since the inception of the Islamic Jihad, it “has used many weapons and missiles, including knives, bombs, submachine guns, explosive belts and homemade rockets.”

The report adds that the group has over the years made significant achievements in the field of

manufacturing and developing missiles to a point where it is now capable of using modern rocket launchers to attack “Zionist cities and settlements.”

According to the report, the Al-Quds Brigades conducted its first test on the rocket launchers in January 2007, six months before the Gaza Strip fell into the hands of Hamas. “The engineers of the Al-Quds Brigades have since been introducing improvements on this weapon,” it said.

Four years later, the report reveals, the group introduced its advanced truck-mounted rocket launchers. Then, it used the trucks to launch five Grad missiles at Israel.

In 2012, the Islamic Jihad says it upgraded the missiles to include C8K rockets that were fired at Israeli towns and cities near the border with the Gaza Strip. Two years later, the group managed to increase the range of its rockets, and for the first time targeted the city of Netanya, north of Tel Aviv, according to the report.

Islamic Jihad says that its rockets are today capable of striking Ben Gurion Airport, the Nuclear Research Center in Dimona, the Haifa Oil Refineries and Ashdod Port. The group’s message to Israel: “The circle of fire is expanding.” Islamic Jihad’s latest threats coincide with statements by the group’s leaders that Israel had better abide by the terms of ceasefire understandings reached earlier this year with the Gaza-based factions. This is interesting. On the one hand, Islamic Jihad wants Israel to commit to these understandings. On the other hand, the group is saying that it is continuing to manufacture and upgrade new types of weapons that will be used to attack Israel.

It seems, then, that for Islamic Jihad and Hamas, the ceasefire understandings, reached under the auspices of Egypt and the UN, are meant to give the Gaza-based groups a chance to continue building their military capabilities without having to worry about Israeli retaliatory measures.

Apparently, Islamic Jihad and Hamas do not perceive the ceasefire as an opportunity to improve the living conditions of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. From all accounts, they are not planning to seize the lull in the fighting to brainstorm on ways to lower the crippling unemployment rate or raise the abysmal standard of living. Such features of basic decent governance have not found their way onto the agenda of these two groups for the past 12 years. And evidently, they are not making it onto the agenda in the foreseeable future. No time for that: the leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad are otherwise occupied -- with the destruction of Israel; the Palestinian people be damned.

While Hamas and Islamic Jihad are talking to Egyptians and UN envoys about a ceasefire with Israel, the leaders of the two groups are also continuing to seek financial and military support from Iran to prepare for war against Israel.

Last month, a senior Hamas delegation, headed by military leader Saleh Arouri, visited Tehran and met with Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Iranian media quoted Khamenei as expressing satisfaction over the "progress" the Palestinians have made in the past few years. The "progress" Khamenei is talking about is not related to the building of a new hospital or school or a medical breakthrough in the Gaza Strip. Instead, the "progress" the Palestinians have achieved -- according to Iran's Supreme Leader -- is that "while the

Palestinians used to fight [Israel] with rocks, today they possess precise rockets."

Arouri, for his part, was quoted as saying during his visit to Tehran that the "Palestinian resistance and Iran are in one front in facing Israel."

Obviously, Hamas and Islamic Jihad believe that they can have it both ways and continue to play everyone for fools. The same Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders who are telling the Egyptians and UN envoys that they are keen on maintaining the ceasefire understandings with Israel are also begging Iran for the resources to step up their attacks on Israel. Yet the Egyptians and UN envoys prefer not to see the double-dealing.

The Egyptian and UN mediators, in failing to call out the leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad for their deception and conflicting messages, are permitting the two groups to deploy the ceasefire with Israel as a cover to prepare for the next war.

If and when the next war erupts in the Gaza Strip, the mediators will not be able to say that they were surprised. All these mediators have to do is turn half an ear to what the leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad and their patrons in Tehran are saying to understand that the Gaza-based groups are dead-set on inflicting as much damage on Israel as possible. As per standard operating procedure, the biggest losers of all in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip will be the Palestinians.

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Hizbollah Is Gaining Support from Christians, Sunnis, and Druze

By Michal Kranz

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Iran's Lebanese rainbow coalition.

Abu Hadi is not a typical Hezbollah fighter. Although he hails from Shiite-majority south Lebanon, he comes from a Sunni family. Back in 2011, he joined Hezbollah's Resistance Brigades, units made up of mainly non-Shiite fighters. After voluntarily converting from Sunni Islam to Shiism, he joined the main Hezbollah corps in 2014. He said recently that he was not the only convert, and he pointed out that the monthly salary for fighters in Hezbollah was more than double the amount given to fighters in the Resistance Brigades. Still, he maintained, he joined the corps for ideological reasons.

Abu Hadi is a veteran of Hezbollah's corps today, but his story and those of fighters like him highlight the group's inroads with Sunnis and other religious groups across Lebanon in recent years. As Hezbollah has set its sights on cross-sectarian, national-level power as a political party as well as a militant group, support from non-Shiite communities has become an ever more important part of its calculus. It has been able to capitalize on feelings of popular discontent among all of Lebanon's sects and today enjoys more influence among Christians, Sunnis, and Druze than ever before.

Founded as a Shiite fundamentalist organization in the mid-1980s, Hezbollah released an amended manifesto in

2009 that de-emphasized its Islamist background and underscored its interest in Lebanon's stability and the fight against Israel. By this time, the group had already been working to facilitate cooperation with other sects, signing a memorandum of understanding with the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a Christian-majority party, in 2006.

But it wasn't until the May 2018 parliamentary elections that Hezbollah was able to significantly increase its influence among non-Shiite sects in parliament. Not only did the elections that year see Hezbollah's bloc gain seats, but the FPM, still its ally, became the most powerful Lebanese Christian party. In addition, a group of six pro-Hezbollah Sunni deputies were elected to parliament, and the traditionally dominant anti-Hezbollah Sunni party, the Future Movement led by Prime Minister Saad Hariri, lost a third of its seats.

"We are very delighted with the victories our allies in the Sunni community have made," a Hezbollah official told me in Beirut's southern suburbs. "You don't have the Future Movement being the only bloc for the Sunnis." Hanin Ghaddar, a researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, concurred that deep disappointment with the Future Movement has left Sunnis with few political options.

“On the street, you can tell that the Sunnis are headless today,” Ghaddar said. “They do not feel that they have someone to represent them, because Hariri is no longer supported by Saudi Arabia, but also because Hariri has been compromising a lot. It doesn’t translate well.”

Minister of State for Foreign Trade Hassan Mrad, a pro-Hezbollah Sunni candidate who was appointed to Lebanon’s cabinet in 2019 at Hezbollah’s insistence, confirmed that in places like the Beqaa Valley, which he represents, support for Hezbollah-backed Sunnis stems from anger with the Future Movement. He said that Hezbollah is supporting him and other anti-Hariri Sunnis to gain backing from the Sunni community in order to advance their national strategy.

Sheikh Maher Hammoud, the imam of the Quds Mosque in Sunni-majority Sidon and perhaps the most influential Sunni advocate for Hezbollah and its allies in the city today, puts the support of Sunni communities for Hezbollah at “at least a third.” According to a pair of surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, favorable views of Hezbollah among Lebanese Sunnis rose from 6 percent in 2013 to 9 percent in 2014. Since then, data on the matter has been scant, but the election of Hezbollah-allied Sunnis to parliament in 2018, who replaced Future Movement deputies in three key seats, suggests that the numbers have likely grown. Ghaddar said that while by and large Sunnis still have mixed feelings about Hezbollah, the group’s outreach strategy in the community is working.

Hezbollah’s outreach to Sunnis may still have a way to go, but Christians have embraced and accepted Hezbollah to a much greater degree.

Hezbollah’s outreach to Sunnis may still have a way to go, but according to Ghaddar, Lebanese Christians have embraced and accepted Hezbollah to a much greater degree. With FPM founder Michel Aoun’s ascension to the presidency in 2016 and the party’s large gains in 2018, Hezbollah’s outreach to the Christian community has yielded real political dividends.

Their partnership has been bolstered further by common cause on the Islamic State, Syrian refugee returns, and other issues.

Many Christian minorities live along Lebanon’s frontier with Syria. After the Islamic State captured the town of Aarsal in 2014, the neighboring town of Ras Baalbek, one of several Christian enclaves in the northern Beqaa Valley, found itself on the front lines of the conflict. Locals formed security patrols to protect themselves from the new threat, sometimes with the backing of Hezbollah, which is the dominant force in the area.

Hezbollah played a role in the Islamic State’s defeat in the Beqaa Valley in 2017. But despite the Lebanese Army’s more prominent role in the campaign, Hezbollah has leveraged its involvement to add to its credentials as the defender of Lebanon’s minorities—a claim that the group’s Christian allies have repeated. “Hezbollah defended not only Shiite when they were fighting against

[the Islamic State],” said Elie Khoury, the vice president of the FPM’s Youth and Sports Sector. “They defended Christians, Sunnis, Shiite, and Druze, and all Lebanese.”

The frontier has also seen a vast influx of Sunni refugees from Syria. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Beqaa Valley hosts over 340,000 registered Syrian refugees as of July of this year—the largest share of any of Lebanon’s regions. Christians and Shiites alike want to see those migrants return home. In addition to a combination of demographic anxieties and economic concerns, the dominant parties representing both religious groups in parliament have a favorable attitude toward the Syrian regime, which has recently been trying to entice refugees to return home.

Other causes unite some Christians and Hezbollah as well. Fadi Salloum is a Christian and works as the public notary in Yaroun, a village that is one-third Christian and two-thirds Shiite. Yaroun sits right on the Blue Line separating Lebanon from Israel, and Salloum recounted the village’s experiences during both the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon that lasted from 1982 until 2000 and during the subsequent 2006 war with Israel. “The Israeli enemy destroyed the church,” Salloum said of the 2006 war. “The cemeteries—destroyed, in the Christian areas and in the Muslim areas. Our enemy is the same.” Salloum said he stands with Hezbollah and asserted that all Christians in the area do as well.

Of course, some Christians remain skeptical. Menaam Mehana, Ras Baalbek’s mayor, said that the joint fight against the Islamic State was a marriage of necessity. But now, the Rev. Ibrahim Nehmo, the priest leading the town’s St. Elian Greek Catholic Church, said he feels Lebanon’s Christian parties have left people here behind. “All of them have left this area for Hezbollah’s policy,” he said. “We are with Hezbollah in general coordination, but this does not mean submission.” Nehmo added that the Christians of Ras Baalbek today are not seeking to challenge Hezbollah’s presence.

Another group feeling such growing pains may be the Druze. Since 2018, Hezbollah’s primary Druze ally, the Lebanese Democratic Party led by Talal Arslan, has been steadily asserting itself in the Druze community, which remains dominated politically by the anti-Hezbollah Progressive Socialist Party (PSP). Shortly after the 2018 elections, a confrontation between supporters of the two parties resulted in the death of a PSP supporter, and in early 2019, Arslan entered into an alliance with another anti-PSP politician, Wiam Wahhab, whose supporters had allegedly fired upon PSP leader Walid Jumblatt’s mountain palace in late 2018.

On June 30, though, a shootout involving the PSP left a Lebanese Democratic Party-affiliated minister’s bodyguards dead. It was a sign that Arslan and his political allies had rocked the status quo too much in the Druze political arena. While both Druze camps have support in the community, Jumblatt continues to hold a tight grip

over the sect's affairs. Fatigue with his party's primacy has given Hezbollah and its allies a way in, but Druze people have historically avoided falling into disunity over partisan affairs, making Hezbollah's job more difficult.

As sanctions from the United States and other countries have piled up, Hezbollah's coffers have been drained. One Hezbollah official said that support from Lebanon's sects would continue with or without financial assistance. Ghaddar, however was skeptical, saying that financial investments have played a key role in furthering Hezbollah's influence among the Sunni community in particular.

Regardless of what the future holds, it is clear that Hezbollah is prioritizing expansion to non-Shiite groups.

In His Campaign for the Upcoming Election, Netanyahu Turns against the Hard Right

By Haviv Rettig Gur
Beyond the blocs.

timesofisrael.com

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It's usually a bad idea to bet against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's electoral prowess. Surrounded by detractors on left and right, disliked by large swaths of the population, and recently facing the prospect of graft charges, the Likud leader has proven himself an unstoppable political juggernaut, and the shrewdest navigator of Israel's chaotic politics in recent memory.

That's an easy conclusion to reach after four consecutive Likud election victories, which last month made Netanyahu the longest-serving Israeli prime minister in the country's history.

His success has several intertwined causes. Among these are a left that has yet to find a compelling political narrative to replace the Oslo peace effort of the 1990s after its collapse in the 2000-2004 Second Intifada; a Likud rank and file known for its loyalty to the party leader (Likud has had just four leaders since Israel's founding); a demographic shift in recent decades in favor of the more conservative subcultures in Israeli society, especially Haredim and the national-religious community; and more.

But all of that shouldn't diminish from the most salient factor that has driven Netanyahu's victories: the man himself. At key points over the past decade, it was more often than not Netanyahu's own decisions and tactical insights that ensured his victory. He decided when to run a campaign appealing to centrist voters, and when to lean rightward to shift the coalition math in another direction. It was he who engineered alliances with other parties, such as the union with Yisrael Beytenu for the 2013 election, chose the election days in 2015 and 2019, and orchestrated many of the public fights and crises that set the agenda during the campaigns. He is not just his party's leader, but also its main political strategist and campaign manager.

That long record of political competence is the backdrop to the stunning setback Netanyahu was dealt when he found himself unable to pull together a coalition after the April 9 race. Though the wrench in the works was Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman's ultimatum

And its success in doing so has helped the group to rhetorically minimize its sectarian origins and speak to Lebanon's future as a whole.

"We all know that whether we like it or not, Hezbollah controls the country," Adel Arslan, Talal's nephew who opposes the older Arslan politically, told me. "They did not just infiltrate." They also filled the gaps. And "when you fill the gap, that's when it's dangerous. And this is the situation."

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about an ultra-Orthodox enlistment law, among other demands, the failure was Netanyahu's. As the whole country watched, he let the coalition talks drag on to the last possible day without result — not a single party had signed a coalition agreement by the time Netanyahu gave up on the 21st Knesset on May 30. Ensnared atop a 35-seat Likud, its best showing since 2003, Netanyahu nevertheless failed to force his will on a five-seat Yisrael Beytenu, or to draw meaningful concessions from the ultra-Orthodox. And in the last hours of May 30, he turned to the six-seat Labor party, offering no less than the vaunted defense and finance ministries in a desperate gambit to save his premiership.

The legendary political acumen of Benjamin Netanyahu was nowhere to be found in those proceedings. And the fallout, including the new elections on September 17, have left him weaker than before — and angrier.

Less than forty days to the election, his election strategy is slowly coming into focus, an amalgam of aggressive, brooding and bullying tactics, from turnout-depressing vilification of his opponents and the deployment of hundreds of cameras to polling stations in Arab communities, to fear-mongering among his base over the prospect of a left-wing victory. But none of that, however distasteful, is really new. What's new this time around is Netanyahu's focused and decisive turn against the right.

Abandoned by ostensibly right-wing Yisrael Beytenu, pressured ceaselessly by the United Right, he no longer has any interest in propping up the parties that might form a future right-wing coalition, focusing his campaign instead on urging right-wing voters to leave other rightist parties and vote Likud.

Thus, in June, Netanyahu pushed through Likud's institutions the merger with the four-seat Kulanu party, led by former Likud minister Moshe Kahlon. The logic of the move for both men is clear. Kahlon, at four seats, only slightly ahead of the 3.9-seat minimum for entering the Knesset, has avoided being politically erased. Netanyahu, meanwhile, has folded into his ranks one of the wildcards

of the race, a man who urged a unity government in 2015 when Kulanu won 10 seats. Running separately, or in a union with some other right-wing party, Kahlon might net more seats for the right as a whole, but Kahlon could not be trusted to back Netanyahu the day after the election.

The trade-off here is clear. In the last two elections, polls have shown that large numbers of Kahlon's voters voted for him in an emphatic attempt not to vote Likud. When Kahlon is no longer a possibility, most of those votes presumably don't turn to Likud, but go to the centrist parties from whence they first came before the 2015 race. When he sat in a right-wing coalition, Kahlon represented a net transfer of centrist votes to a right-wing government. While some part of Kahlon's rightist voters may now vote Likud, those centrist votes are likely lost now to the future right-wing coalition.

Ironically, Netanyahu has begun to couch his campaign at the right's expense as a defense of the right.

Thus we find many of Netanyahu's most dependable supporters, such as the columnists and journalists in the Sheldon Adelson-owned Israel Hayom daily, demanding that he commit publicly that he won't establish a unity government with Blue and White.

"Netanyahu – commit to a right-wing government," read the title of one such column by Israel Hayom's Mati Tuchfeld earlier this week, which the newspaper, apparently distraught at the prospect, put on its front page.

That column earned a response from Netanyahu, which the paper ran as a "response column" on Wednesday, also on the front page. The "column" is more Twitter post than oped, a series of campaign talking points strung together apparently haphazardly, to the point that some sentences repeat almost verbatim the point raised only a sentence earlier. It is, in other words, a political ad being carried in a Netanyahu mouthpiece. But to those seeking signals of Netanyahu's political thinking, such ads are more valuable than any lengthy prose full of dissembling and apologia.

The ad/column's message is confused: "Only a right-wing coalition: There won't be a unity government," its headline declares. Right-wing voters "must wake up" and "must vote Likud — only Likud," it adds.

It is hard to square this focus on voting for Likud alone with Netanyahu's promise of a right-wing government, since every poll by every pollster has shown the same thing for the past month: Likud will not, in all likelihood, be able to form a right-wing-only coalition if the rest of the right doesn't grow.

Netanyahu goes on: "My commitment is clear: to form after the elections a strong right-wing government, that will continue to lead the state of Israel to unprecedented achievements and will safeguard the security of Israel's citizens. That's my commitment to Likud voters. There won't be a unity government."

But he then rails again against voting for other right-wing parties: "Anyone who doesn't vote Mahal [the letters

on Likud's ballot paper] — in effect votes for the toppling of the right-wing government and the establishment of a leftist government headed by Lapid and Gantz."

Liberman, the prime minister warned, plans to recommend Benny Gantz for prime minister. Only a large Likud, larger than Gantz's Blue and White, "will ensure that we are tasked with forming a government, and will deny Liberman the possibility of dragging us to a weak leftist government headed by Lapid and Gantz."

And in case you still didn't grasp that this was his main and only point: "We must not repeat the mistake of the last election, when right-wing voters lost seven seats to parties that didn't pass the electoral threshold."

On Friday, the prime minister doubled down yet again, posting a Facebook live video stream that hardly bothered to pretend he was aiming for a broader right-wing bloc. "Anyone who votes for another right-wing party that could pass the electoral threshold, and it does pass, in the end makes Likud smaller.... Anyone who says, 'I want Netanyahu as head of a right-wing government,' must vote Likud, and not say to themselves, 'I'll give this [vote] to someone else and make sure, or hope, that they pass the threshold and then also recommend Netanyahu.' I'm hearing the stuttering [on that point] by our friends over there on the right."

The message is astonishing, and completely new: No one ensures a right-wing government except me, Netanyahu. Even the far-right may not recommend me, and so would usher in a left-wing government.

It is rendered all the more astonishing after Likud MK David Bitan, a Netanyahu ally and loyal footsoldier, confirmed on Thursday media reports that said Netanyahu had told Likud activists he would turn to Gantz and ask him to join his next coalition, but without the Yesh Atid portion of the Blue and White alliance. "We have no problem going with Gantz — but without Yesh Atid," Bitan told Radio Drom, referring to Yair Lapid's party.

Who to believe? Netanyahu, or Netanyahu? Is a vote for Netanyahu's Likud really a vote for a right-wing government, whereas a vote for United Right is not?

Here lies the heart of the new strategy: the right-wing "bloc" be damned. In the end, Netanyahu believes it is a Netanyahu government that matters, not a rightist one. Those who support him for his policies and accomplishments may understand that view, but it conflicts directly with Netanyahu's promise that he'll only lead a right-wing government.

As the prime minister pivots to a campaign at the right's expense, ironically egged on by unwitting supporters in Israel Hayom and elsewhere, the rest of the right has responded with growing bitterness and the accusation that Netanyahu is doing his utmost to ensure the very thing he so vehemently forswears: a centrist national-unity coalition.

As United Right chair Ayelet Shaked said Friday in response to Netanyahu's post, it is Netanyahu, not his

“friends over there on the right,” who is “stuttering” — “stuttering with [former Labor leaders] Gabbay and Herzog, and [former leftist coalition partners] Livni and Barak.”

Netanyahu has often and happily joined forces with centrist and left-wing parties in recent years, as witnessed in his attempt to bring Avi Gabbay into his coalition as recently as May 30. But that was no mere fluke born of the desperation of the moment. Netanyahu was in open talks with then-Labor chief Isaac Herzog in 2016 to bring him into the government. Labor actually sat in Netanyahu’s coalition from 2009 to 2011, and then for another two years as the splinter faction Independence, after then-Labor chief Ehud Barak broke away from his own party over a leadership challenge.

Similarly, in the 2013 government, Yesh Atid, now a major part of the Blue and White party, and so an integral pillar of the supposed “center-left bloc,” held the finance, education, welfare, health and science portfolios under Netanyahu. Hatnuah, Tzipi Livni’s left-wing faction that disbanded ahead of the April 2019 race, also sat in that government, holding the justice and environmental protection portfolios. That is, as recently as four years ago Netanyahu was happy to place much of the government’s domestic policy in the hands of what he now depicts as an untouchable “left.”

Netanyahu’s long record of such centrism includes his votes in favor of the Disengagement from Gaza in 2004, or, as prime minister in the late 1990s, his implementation of the withdrawals from Palestinian population centers stipulated in the Oslo peace accords.

In short, those parts of the ideological right not enamored with the man himself are smelling a trick, a betrayal being prepared for them by a man with more flexible principles than his campaign will admit.

“More and more indications are showing us that Netanyahu plans to form a leftist government,” Transportation Minister Bezalel Smotrich, No. 3 in the United Right party, charged in a Twitter post as early as Tuesday.

“That’s why he wants us small and weak,” Smotrich went on. “Only if we’re big and strong can we ensure he has no choice but to form a right-wing government. The United Right will keep Netanyahu on the right.”

Eli Ben Dahan, the deputy defense minister from Jewish Home who ran on the Likud list in April as a concession by Netanyahu to give the far-right another Knesset slot, also slammed Netanyahu’s campaign.

“Without an ideologically rightist party to the right of Likud, we will find ourselves with Likud in a national unity government with the left,” Ben Dahan said Thursday. Such a union “will surrender parts of the land of Israel” in a peace deal with Palestinians, he warned, showing that Netanyahu isn’t the only politician willing and able to play with voters’ fears and anxieties.

“We cannot let that happen,” Ben Dahan concluded.

Israeli pundits often think about election arithmetic through the lens of left or right, the supposed “camps” or “blocs” of Israeli political life. Each time a major news outlet posts a new poll, it includes a pie chart or bar graph showing the “total size” of a “right-wing-and-Haredi bloc” and a “center-left-and-Arabs bloc.” No single party has ever won a Knesset majority, the thinking goes, so the race isn’t actually won by the largest faction, but by such like-minded alliances.

The trouble with this way of thinking is that Israeli politicians do not really behave this way, and Netanyahu least of all. He has shown himself entirely comfortable incorporating the left into his coalitions, and even ceding major agencies and policies to make that happen.

If the collapse of the last coalition talks proves anything, it is that lumping the ultra-Orthodox with the right also doesn’t reflect electoral reality; it is right-wing Yisrael Beytenu, and not the centrist secularists of Yesh Atid, that torpedoed the formation of that coalition over its demands of the Haredim.

Nor does the lumping of the Arab-majority parties with the center or left reflect Israeli political reality. It is true that Arab parties once famously backed the Rabin government’s efforts to push the Oslo accords through the Knesset, but such examples are exceptions, not the rule. Arab parties are not generally disposed to backing leftist or centrist Jewish-majority parties just for the principle of the thing, and have never joined a ruling parliamentary coalition. Indeed, they have proven as likely to cooperate with the right as with the left, if not in their rhetoric then in their politicking and legislation.

Thus the Arab parties joined with Netanyahu in the June Knesset vote forcing a new election, a vote Netanyahu desperately needed in order to avoid having to surrender his premiership to another MK. Shortly after that vote, Netanyahu’s closest political fixer and confidant Natan Eshel — Likud’s lead negotiator in the failed coalition talks in May — penned an oped in the left-wing Haaretz daily urging cooperation between the Israeli right and the Arabs. “We must join our fate to that of Israel’s Arabs,” he wrote, and urged “full cooperation” between the right and the Arab community, and even “a partnership in leading the country.”

With Netanyahu reeling from the failure to form a coalition, the oped was a not-so-subtle wink at the Arab parties, telling them they will find a sympathetic ear in the premier — a leader running an unabashed fear-mongering campaign against the Arab community, complete with secret body cameras in Arab polling stations — as long as they don’t back Gantz for prime minister.

Instead of counting artificial “blocs,” prognosticators would be better served thinking about possible coalitions, which can and do straddle the political divides and are the real engine of victory in an Israeli election.

People walk by election campaign billboards showing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left, alongside Blue

and White party leaders, from left to right, Moshe Ya'alon, Benny Gantz, Yair Lapid and Gabi Ashkenazi, in Tel Aviv, April 3, 2019. Hebrew on billboards reads, left, "A strong Likud, a strong Israel," and on the right, "Every vote counts, Blue and White victory." (AP Photo/Oded Balilty)

Netanyahu faces a tricky confluence of electoral realities: the rise of Liberman as a champion of secularists and the liberal right, the abiding strength of Blue and White in the polls that continues to threaten his lead, the loss of Kulanu for the right, and the United Right alliance

How a Secular Woman from Tel Aviv Rose to the Top of Israel's National-Religious Political Bloc

By Sam Sokol

jpost.com

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The story of Ayelet Shaked.

Late last month, as Israel prepared for yet another round of elections, Ayelet Shaked ascended to the leadership of the United Right, a joint list comprising the primary factions representing the nation's religious Zionist community.

While women have led Israeli political parties, none has ever risen to the pinnacle of political power in a bloc representing the traditionally patriarchal Orthodox community.

And even more remarkable, the 43-year-old mother of two is a secular Jew from Tel Aviv.

So who is Ayelet Shaked and how did she overcome decades of political tradition?

Growing up as a middle-class child in the Tel Aviv of the 1980s, Shaked could have been expected to develop into a left-leaning Labor or Meretz voter, a proponent of two states and liberal policies. But as Shaked told *The New York Times* in 2015, she experienced a personal revelation at the age of 8 when she watched Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir debate an opponent on television: She was swayed by his nationalistic perspective.

During their mandatory military service, some Israelis tend to shift to the right, at least for a while, and a stint as an instructor in the storied Golani infantry brigade helped Shaked strengthen her conservative political outlook.

"I just realized there will not be a solution right now," she told *The Times*.

Like the coalition she represents, Shaked is staunchly pro-settlement and hawkish on defense.

Although she studied computer engineering and began her career working for Texas Instruments, Shaked pivoted to politics in 2006, going to work for then-opposition leader Benjamin Netanyahu as his bureau chief. She brought along with her the future Jewish Home party head and frequent collaborator Naftali Bennett, helping him make a similar transition from high tech to the dog-eat-dog world of Israeli parliamentary politics.

The two worked for Netanyahu for four years but left following a reported falling-out with his wife, Sara. In 2012, Bennett and Shaked entered the world of right-wing, pro-settlement politics. That was the year that Jewish Home — a party composed of the old National Religious Party and several smaller right-wing factions — held its

to his right coalescing without the extremist factions Zehut and Otzma Yehudit, likely leaving perhaps three or four Knesset seats' worth of rightist votes outside the next Knesset.

Netanyahu's response is simple and straightforward: abandon the right, secure a Likud lead, and worry about the next coalition's makeup and policies only after victory is secured on September 17.

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first open primaries. Bennett, religiously modern Orthodox and politically hawkish, entered the Knesset in 2013 at the top of its list. Shaked took its fifth seat.

By the 2015 primary Shaked, having only finished her first term in the Knesset, was popular enough with the party base that she came in second behind Bennett, establishing her position as a leader of the nationalist camp. In a party traditionally led by older, gray-haired men, Shaked at 39 not only was an ideological torchbearer but literally a fresh face: a young, stylish woman.

A stint as the country's justice minister under Netanyahu further cemented her popularity. With mixed success, Shaked sought to overhaul an activist judiciary that in her view handcuffed the military and undermined the right-wing elected government. She also helped pass a controversial bill that defined Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Supporters said it made an obvious reality into law, while opponents attacked it for prioritizing an ethnic identity over democracy.

Her critics say she is a threat to that democracy.

"While Shaked was 'polite,' she was also a bulldozer that would run roughshod over liberal democracy," Tamar Zandberg, a lawmaker representing the liberal Meretz party, said in a Facebook post. Her attempt to remake the judiciary is "not a misunderstanding of what democracy is, it is a desire to destroy it and establish the Jewish state, the settlements, and Jewish supremacy instead of the state of equality."

In March, Shaked's team produced a mock perfume ad featuring "Fascism by Ayelet Shaked" in which she posed like a model while a narrator taunted her liberal critics.

Whatever it takes to win

Both her effectiveness as a politician and Jewish Home's move toward open primaries helped Shaked advance in the religious sector, according to Yair Sheleg, who researches the religious Zionist sector at the Israel Democracy Institute.

In many ways, he said, its followers consider the nationalist aspect of religious Zionism — settling all of biblical Israel, asserting Israel's Jewish character — as more fundamental than the religious aspect. Many leaders in the community "can live with Shaked as the leader because she brings many more voters" than other politicians.

“They are nationalists. They want a right-wing camp to win in the elections and if a secular woman can bring these results, so let it be a secular woman in the leadership,” Sheleg said, adding that since the United Right is technically a bloc and not a united party, it is easier for many Orthodox politicians to see Shaked’s role in pragmatic terms. After all, they retain control of their factions.

The more moderate religious sectors of Israeli society have increasingly supported a greater role for women in national life. A more traditionalist faction called Chardal, or Zionist ultra-Orthodox, comprises only about 12-15 percent of the national religious community. And some of that group may very well end up voting for smaller arch-nationalist factions like Jewish Power.

Sheleg said that the traditionalist Chardal sector doesn’t represent the mainstream. Shaked got an opening, he said, once the average voter, rather than the rabbis and older generation of religiously conservative activists, could vote for party leaders.

“The answer depends on who you ask, but Ayelet Shaked seems to have a good deal of acceptance across much of the national religious sector,” agreed Yehoshua Oz, senior adviser at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security.

“Of course, the national religious camp is far more complex than some assume,” he continued, citing a 2014 Israel Democracy Institute study showing that “21 percent of Israelis identify as part of the national-religious sector, and that group has a lot of variety in their views and beliefs across a number of issues.”

“What does seem to unite the national religious are political issues, such as considering themselves right-of-center and believing the Law of Return should [extend citizenship only] to those who are Jewish according to Jewish law,” or halacha, he said.

Shaked declined an interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. But one source close to Shaked’s inner circle agreed with Sheleg, saying that Shaked is “very focused and productive,” and worked hard to become “a consensus figure between the parties” in her political camp.

“A lot of people see it as a paradox,” the source said.

A Recent Missile Test Shows the Potential of U.S.-Israel Military Cooperation

By Jacob Nagel And Jonathan Schanzer

thehill.com

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From intercepting missiles in space to stopping them with lasers.

Israeli and U.S. missile defense agencies just completed, together with their leading defense industries, a successful test of the new Arrow 3 interceptor. While the Israeli Air Force declared the system operational almost a year ago, these tests now serve as a clear indication to enemies — notably Iran — that Israel’s multi-layer missile defense system has the country covered.

Israel began to develop its multilayered missile defense in the 1990s, following the first Gulf War, when Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein fired Scuds at the Jewish state.

“You see this secular woman from Tel Aviv as the head of a list by and large filled with religious Zionists, but if you speak to each and every one of these people you’ll see they have a great deal of respect for her and, if anything, feel more comfortable with her at No. 1 than many of the alternatives.”

Conversations with people close to Shaked painted a picture of a woman willing to listen to the unique ideological needs and demands of her constituents, and respect their unique sensibilities. For instance, while she is not personally religious, Shaked makes a point of not giving interviews on Shabbat or publicly eating in non-kosher restaurants.

Shaked “believes in [creating] connections and quiet and thorough work behind the scenes,” another source who used to work closely with Shaked told JTA. “Although Ayelet is secular in her personal life, she has great respect for Judaism and rabbis, and she has fought for these values, certainly in the context of the settlement of the Land of Israel.”

New elections, a second chance

After the Knesset elections in April, however, Shaked’s star appeared to be falling. She and Bennett had split off from Jewish Home to form the New Right party, a secular-religious-nationalist faction. It failed to pass the electoral threshold and gain seats in the parliament.

But after Netanyahu failed to build a governing coalition and new elections were called, Bennett and Shaked threw themselves into rebuilding the right-wing coalition they had abandoned. Despite opposition from the national religious sector’s more conservative quarters (one prominent rabbi publicly asserted that “the complex world of politics is no place” for a woman), polling showed she was the most popular of the candidates to lead the new reunited right. After tough negotiations, Jewish Home leader Rabbi Rafi Peretz stepped aside.

“We agreed that out of national responsibility and concern for a right wing government and the religious-Zionist [community] Ayelet will head” the United Right, Peretz explained in a tweet.

Shaked’s ascent seems to working its magic for the right: A recent poll shows the United Right winning 12-13 seats in the next Knesset.

Washington positioned Patriot missiles in the country to intercept them, but several Scuds landed, causing damage and casualties. This prompted Israel, with generous U.S. support, to begin construction of the missile defense architecture Israel boasts today.

Over decades of development, the Israeli multilayer system currently consists of four operational layers: Iron Dome (short-range), David’s Sling (medium-range), Arrow 2 (longer range), and now Arrow 3 (very long range). Other lower layers, including the use of lasers, are being discussed among Israeli officials or are already under development.

Iron Dome is often touted as a brilliant technological achievement for its ability to accurately and affordably target short-range rockets fired by Hamas and other terrorist groups out of the Gaza Strip, thereby granting Israeli policymakers the time and space to respond judiciously. But Israel's most important strategic needs are met by the new Arrow 3 system. This system provides Israel with the ability to defend against long-range, advanced Iranian missiles like the Shahab 3. It allows for exo-atmospheric interception high in space, offering Israel ample time to defend itself. Unlike other missile defense systems, the Arrow 3 also gives Israel the capability and flexibility to better deal with nuclear warheads, and to do so with impressive interception rates.

Israel received permission by the Pentagon to run a series of tests in Alaska, simulating a range of threats — most notably from Iran. According to reports, the system met or exceeded expectations, and the Israeli defense establishment is now unambiguous about the country's deterrence and defense capabilities.

American and Israeli coordination in missile defense has been important for both sides. The joint development of the Arrow 3 underscores this. Other Israeli missile defense technology has recently proven to be very valuable to Washington. The U.S. Army recently signed an agreement to acquire two Iron Dome batteries for testing and possible broader acquisition. In the coming weeks, the Marines are going to test the system, as well.

David's Sling, jointly developed by Rafael and Raytheon for middle range threats and against cruise missiles, may ultimately serve the needs of the U.S. and its allies in places like Poland, Japan, and South Korea, to

Four Israelis score big in windsurfing world championship

By Brian Blum

israel21

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Young sailors came home with gold, silver and bronze medals from RS:X Youth World Championship in St. Petersburg.

Israeli windsurfers took home gold, silver and bronze medals at the recent RS:X Youth World Championship in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The Israeli champions — all of whom are under 19 years old — include Eyal Yohay Zror, Daniel Basik Tashtash and Reuven (Roy) Hillel, who won the gold, silver and bronze medals, respectively, in the men's competition; and Naama Greenberg, who won the bronze medal in the women's division.

The competition, which took place over five days, included 104 competitors from 19 countries. The participants initially had to contend with unusually weak wind conditions.

"Racing in such wind conditions is a real art," writes Alexy Zhirov in *Sail World*, "not as graceful as a ballerina, but with an equal amount of strength and balance required."

name a few, particularly if its missile (the Skyceptor) is paired with the Patriot system. Indeed, the key to effective missile defense is adaptability and multiple layers.

Lasers are likely to be an important part of the next frontier in missile defense. Of course, scientists have been predicting this for decades. But in recent years, the technology of solid state lasers has made strides. Still, it is not yet ready for deployment. And even when it is, it won't be applicable for upper layers of defense. If anything, lasers are expected in the coming decade to be particularly effective at the short range as part of an existing system, like Iron Dome. And while it may be expensive to build a laser interceptor, it will likely not be as expensive to operate, particularly when compared to the cost of the kinetic interceptors.

Missile defense will continue to be one of the largest expenses in Israel's military budget. This is because of spike in missile and rocket threats posed by Iranian proxies. The terrorist groups specifically aim to target Israel's civilian population. This challenge will continue to prompt continued Israeli innovation. This, in turn, would spark close cooperation and technological sharing between Israel and the United States.

Of course, America does not face the same threats that Israel does on its borders. But some of Israel's missile defense solutions can help augment or improve the systems deployed in the United States. Moreover, such cooperation sends a clear message to common foes, like Iran, that new and effective missile defense solutions are the result of an alliance that is multi-layered, as well.

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By the final day, however, the wind was back to normal.

The Israelis beat out contenders from Russia, Greece and France. Zror and Tashtash describe themselves as "best friends" yet they wound up competing against each other for the top spot.

"We are used to competing with each other, so it's not so difficult," Tashtash said. "We communicate before the races and enjoy the victories of our teammates. Each of us had a plan to do his best. During the race, I did not think about my friendship with Eyal at all."

Tashtash added that Israelis "are the best windsurfers in the world. We train with each other, so it's not so difficult for us in the races."

In addition to the competition, a charity competition was held over the weekend, with proceeds going to the AdVita cancer fund..