Meet Mohammad al-Issa.

For years, Saudi Arabia worked tirelessly to export Wahhabism, its home-grown strain of intolerant Islam, to Muslim communities worldwide. It poured many billions of dollars into funding mosques, schools, and cultural organizations that promoted Islamist extremism — an extremism capable of turning murderous, as Americans learned on Sept. 11, 2001, when 19 Al-Qaeda terrorists, 15 of them Saudi citizens, murdered thousands of people.

Given the link between Saudi Arabia's monarchy and the rise of radical Islam, Muhammad Al-Issa might not be your idea of a typical Saudi cleric.

The 55-year-old secretary general of the Muslim World League, a graduate of Imam Muhammad bin Saud University with a degree in comparative Islamic jurisprudence, has become a leading exponent of moderate Islam. Al-Issa vigorously criticizes religious extremism and vocally supports interfaith cooperation. He has been hailed by Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Catholic archbishop of New York, as the “most eloquent spokesperson in the Islamic world for reconciliation and friendship among the religions” and extolled by the president of the Mormon church, Russell Nelson, as “a peacemaker [and] a bridge-builder.”

Especially notable has been Al-Issa’s insistence on condemning hate crimes against Jews, including the lethal synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and Poway, Calif. In January he led a Muslim delegation to Auschwitz, then published a column calling Holocaust denial a “crime” that should appall true Muslims. This month, speaking from Mecca to an online conference on anti-Semitism, he said he had made it his “mission to work with my brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith” to advance inter-religious harmony, and “to confront the extremists … falsely claiming inspiration from our religious texts.”

Clearly it is significant that a Saudi religious leader and politician (Al-Issa was his country’s minister of justice from 2009 to 2015) is impassioned in defense of religious tolerance and so strongly opposes “political Islam,” or Islamism — the supremacist doctrine that all societies must be ruled by uncompromising Islamic law. Al-Issa’s moderation and open-mindedness are 180 degrees removed from the totalitarianism of the Taliban, ISIS, Nigeria’s Boko Haram, or the hard-line regime in Iran.

Yet Al-Issa’s views haven’t prevailed in his own land, either. Saudi Arabia is among the most unfree nations on earth, particularly for religious minorities and dissenters. Dissidents, reformers, and human-rights activists are frequently arrested, imprisoned, or brutalized. The grisly murder of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul shocked the world. There have been real reforms in Saudi Arabia in recent years, but the country is still far from anything resembling Al-Issa’s vision of openness.

Winston Churchill described Russia in 1939 as “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” But, Churchill added, “perhaps there is a key.” If the same is true today of Saudi Arabia, perhaps the key to its internal contradictions is that Islamism is in retreat — not just in Saudi society, but across much of the Muslim world.

Writing in the Globe four years ago, Daniel Pipes, president of the Middle East Forum, suggested that there were two weaknesses that might bring about an unraveling of the Islamist movement. One was internecine fighting among Islamists themselves — the classic dynamic of one-time allies turning on each other as they compete for dominance. Of that there have been examples aplenty, such as the falling out in Turkey between Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the religious leader Fethullah Gülen, or the bitter clash in Iran between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

But “the bigger peril for the movement,” Pipes wrote, was rising unpopularity — “as populations experience Islamist rule firsthand, they reject it.” He pointed to the widespread antipathy of ordinary Iranians to the theocratic regime in Tehran, and to the massive demonstrations in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

Today, there is a profusion of indications that Islamism is losing its grip.

“Across the Arab world people are turning against religious political parties and the clerics who helped bring them to power,” the Economist reported in December. In Iraq, Lebanon, and other Muslim-majority countries, the Arab Barometer polling network finds a notable drop in trust for Islamist political parties and the clerics who helped bring them to power, among Islamists themselves — the classic dynamic of one-time allies turning on each other as they compete for dominance. The Turkish analyst Mustafa Aykol writes that there has been a backlash to Islamism in the form of “a new secular wave breeding in the Muslim world.” Another Turkish scholar, sociologist Mucahit Bilici, concludes: “Today Islamism in Turkey is associated in the public mind with corruption and injustice.”

The 2019 Arab Youth Survey, a study of 3,300 men and women between 18 and 24 in the Middle East and North Africa, found that two-thirds believe “religion plays too big of a role in the Middle East” and 79 percent believe that “the Arab world needs to reform its religious This may be what is unfolding, ever so gradually, in Saudi
Arabia: a halting shift to moderate Islam in what was the world’s foremost exporter of radical Islam. There are no guarantees; this may be only a lull between storms. But the rise of so outspoken a Saudi moderate as Muhammad Al-Issa offers reason for encouragement. For decades, Saudi Arabia peddled a version of Islam that was repressive and narrow-minded. Let us hope it now works just as assiduously to promote Al-Issa’s message of tolerance, peace, and empathy, and thereby cultivate the very best in Muslim tradition.

The U.S. Has the Legal Tools to Maintain the Arms Embargo on Iran—if It’s Willing to Use Them

By Benny Avni

nysun.com

June 30, 2020

Snapback.

For the Trump presidency, the end is nigh. Or at least that’s what America’s “partners” believe as they consider the question of Iran.

On Tuesday, the United Nations Security Council convened to contemplate that question, but rather than Iran it was America that they placed in the dock. At the U.N., it seems, America’s power quickly wanes. Diplomats privately say they’d rather await a Democrat in the White House than fall behind the current president’s “America first” agenda — especially when it comes to Iran.

Russia’s envoy here, Vasily Nebenzya, said in respect of the 2015 nuclear deal, America’s “unilateral” actions “remove any incentive for Iran to comply.” Mr. Nebenzya’s remarks Tuesday were so full of scorn that one would be forgiven for wondering what ever happened to the purported special relations his boss maintains with Mr. Trump, which, once again, is all the rage in Washington.

The most visible guest at Tuesday’s virtual parley was Secretary of State Pompeo, who showed up in the Zoom-like session to urge council members to extend an Iran arms embargo, due to expire in October. “This Chamber has a choice,” he said. “Stand for international peace and security, as the UN’s founders intended, or let the arms embargo on the Islamic Republic of Iran expire, betraying the U.N.’s mission and its finest ideals.”

A former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mr. Pompeo detailed looming threats to the region and the globe if Iran were allowed to resume the legal purchase and sale of sophisticated weapons. Yet, Mr. Pompeo failed to add an “or else” to his plea. Whether he was intimidated, or worse, tacitly acknowledged the administration is out of gas, is anyone guess.

The dog that didn’t bark in Mr. Pompeo’s speech, the “or else,” is known as snapback. Legal eagles at the State Department contend America can trigger that mechanism, included in the 2015 Security Council resolution that endorsed that year’s Iran nuclear deal. In background briefings, administration officials say America would unilaterally invoke that mechanism, reverting to the international sanctions that existed prior to the 2015 resolution, unless the council acts on the arms embargo before October.

Resolution 2231 removed several prior sanctions painstakingly built up for decades as Tehran continued to acquire nuclear capabilities and act aggressively in the region. Resolution 2231 also contained a series of sunset provisions that gradually ease restrictions further. The first of those, the removal of an arms embargo, is due to expire weeks before our presidential election.

Mr. Pompeo’s Tuesday speech was designed to publicly launch negotiations on a proposed American resolution that would extend the arms embargo indefinitely. The proposed resolution, distributed to council members last week, is widely expected to be vetoed by Russia or China, or both. That is why it would have been best had Mr. Pompeo explicitly spelled out America’s intention to, in that case, trigger snapback.

After all, in selling the Iran deal to the American people, officials in President Obama’s administration promised that America could unilaterally reimpose all sanctions at any time it detected Iranian non-compliance. As the UN top political official, Rosemary DiCarlo, told the Council Tuesday, Iran violated the arms embargo by smuggling missiles in the region.

Iranian-made rockets were used by Yemeni allies to attack Saudi Arabia, she noted. Earlier, the International Atomic Energy Agency additionally reported Iran failed to cooperate with its inspectors, which violates its obligations as well.

Yet, Mr. Pompeo failed to even say the word “snapback.” Other council members certainly did. As Communist China’s ambassador, Zhang Jun, put it, America “is no longer a participant and therefore cannot” trigger the snapback mechanism. Germany’s UN ambassador, Christoph Heusgen, immediately volunteered, “I would like to align myself with what China said.”

Even Britain, America’s closest ally, joined the chorus. Yes, acting ambassador Jonathan Allen said “the planned lifting of arms restrictions on Iran in October would have major implications for regional security and stability.” He also maintained, though, that America’s “unilateral attempts to trigger UN sanctions snapback would be incompatible with our current efforts to preserve” the Iran deal.

So Mr. Pompeo urged the Security Council to act without spelling out America’s next step if it doesn’t. At the same time, council members warned America not to do that which Mr. Pompeo failed to threaten.

As a former Trump aide now with the Foundation for Defense of Democracy, Richard Goldberg, twittered, “Anyone watching today’s UN Security Council virtual circus would be right in questioning why the State Department keeps delaying the snapback of UNSCR 2231. The US has a right to snapback. Use it to end all dangerous sunsets. Stop dragging this out.”
Iran Is Inching toward Acquiring Nuclear Weapons. What Can Be Done?
By John Hannah

In less than four months, it will have enough uranium to build a bomb.

In early June, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released two reports on the Iranian nuclear program. They make for worrisome reading. A year into its decision to start breaching the constraints imposed by the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, otherwise known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran has begun crossing some important thresholds that dangerously reduce its breakout time for developing a nuclear weapon. As it does so, the specter of a possible military strike to destroy Iran’s nuclear project will inevitably reemerge.

In May 2019, exactly one year after President Donald Trump’s decision to abandon the JCPOA and reimpose crippling U.S. sanctions, President Hassan Rouhani announced Iran’s intention to stop observing some of its JCPOA commitments. Rouhani described the gambit as an effort to force the deal’s European participants (Germany, France, and Britain) to take steps to ensure that Iran would reap its economic benefits—either by convincing the Trump administration to relax its maximum pressure campaign or by circumventing U.S. sanctions and continuing to do business with Iran themselves.

Neither happened. In response, Iran has been good to its word. It has proceeded to violate incrementally one after another of the JCPOA’s restrictions—exceeding limits on its uranium stockpile, enriching beyond 3.67 percent to 4.5 percent, conducting research and development on additional advanced centrifuges, and resuming enrichment at the underground Fordow nuclear facility. At the same time, Iran insists that it has not withdrawn from the JCPOA and is prepared to reverse its violations once the U.S. comes back into compliance by unwinding sanctions. Importantly, the IAEA has thus far been allowed to continue its extensive inspections regime authorized by the JCPOA.

But those inspections paint an increasingly alarming picture. For the first time since the JCPOA went into effect, Iran earlier this year amassed enough low enriched uranium (LEU) to produce a single nuclear weapon. This key threshold significantly reduces its estimated breakout time—i.e., the time it would take to produce enough highly-enriched uranium (HEU) for one atomic bomb. The fact that the majority of Iran’s LEU stockpile is also now enriched up to 4.5 percent further reduces its breakout time by as much as 15 to 20 percent, according to the highly-respected Institute for Science and International Security. Based on the IAEA’s most recent report on the JCPOA, the Institute now calculates that in a credible worst-case scenario, Iran’s breakout time could be as low as 3.1 months and as high as 3.9 months.

As Iran’s step-by-step breaches of the nuclear deal persist, the trajectory over the coming months is likely downward still toward even shorter timelines.

As a point of comparison, just before the JCPOA’s restrictions went into effect in January 2016, Iran’s breakout time was commonly assessed at around two months. Before an interim nuclear deal in November 2013 that neutralized Iran’s stockpile of 20 percent enriched uranium, it had been closer to one month. With implementation of the JCPOA’s limits, the administration of President Barack Obama claimed that the timeline had been extended to over 12 months. For its part, the Institute for Science and International Security estimated that the breakout time under the JCPOA was actually closer to eight months—based on the reasonable assumption that in any breakout scenario Iran would not just bring back thousands of older, less efficient IR-1 centrifuges that had been put in storage, but also the 1,000 next-generation IR-2 centrifuges that were mothballed under the deal.

It’s important to note that breakout estimates do not include the additional time that Iran would need to convert weapons-grade HEU into an actual bomb, much less develop a reliable warhead that could be delivered on a ballistic missile. That said, there’s a high likelihood that this work would be conducted at difficult-to-detect secret sites, perhaps in parallel with a ramp up in Iran’s enrichment program rather than sequentially. Indeed, as reflected in the so-called nuclear archive that Israel secreted out of Iran in 2018, many relevant activities related to weapons work may have been going on for years—possibly even up to the present.

It’s in that context that the second IAEA report issued this month regarding Iran’s compliance with its safeguards obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is especially troubling. The Agency noted “with serious concern” that for four months, Iran has been denying inspectors access to two undeclared sites and has refused for almost a year to clarify questions “related to possible undeclared nuclear material and nuclear activities.”

According to the Institute for Science and International Security, the IAEA was led to seek access to the two sites (both of which have been effectively razed) at least in part on the basis of environmental sampling it did at an open-air warehouse in Tehran in January 2019 that revealed the existence of manmade uranium particles. The warehouse had never been declared by Iran and was only revealed to the IAEA by Israel in the summer of 2018, another revelation of the nuclear archive. Though Iran rapidly destroyed the warehouse and attempted to sanitize the area, the uranium particles were found, raising the concern that Iran could be hiding undeclared nuclear material today. The fact that the two sites targeted for
inspection are both suspected of having connections to the Amad program—Iran’s crash effort in the early 2000s to develop up to five nuclear weapons—dramatically raises the stakes.

The concerns are obvious. Where is the undeclared nuclear material today? What happened to the equipment that was present at these sites before they were razed? And do the activities related to nuclear weapons development that were taking place there in the past continue today at other secret locations? It should be clear that these are not purely issues of historical curiosity, but urgent matters of current concern, raising as they do the distinct possibility that Iran might presently be conducting activities related to nuclear weapons.

To sum up: on the one hand, in its declared nuclear program, while by no means racing toward a bomb, Iran is systematically reducing its breakout time; on the other hand, there are growing concerns that Iran may be concealing both undeclared nuclear material and nuerar-related activities. Put them together, and it’s an especially troubling combination that inevitably raises the uncomfortable question: What happens if the situation continues to worsen?

The IAEA Board of Governors passed a resolution on June 19, calling on Iran to provide prompt access to the two sites. If Iran’s obstinance continues, the IAEA board could find Iran in violation of its NPT obligations and refer its file to the United National Security Council for possible action. That would almost certainly strengthen the Trump administration’s contingency plan to “snapback” all Security Council sanctions unilaterally for Iran’s violations of the JCPOA—which, importantly, incorporates its pledge to adhere to the NPT’s Additional Protocol.

Of course, the hope is that significant increments of additional economic pressure will stay Iran’s nuclear advancement, if not convince it to at least change course, and take up Trump’s offer to negotiate a better deal. But given the reality that more than 19 months of devastating sanctions have so far failed to induce any positive changes in Iranian behavior, serious consideration needs to be given to the possibility—perhaps even the likelihood—that ratcheting up the economic pain even further will fare no better in convincing Iran to halt its nuclear escalation.

So what then? For Democrats and their likely nominee, former Vice President Joe Biden, should they enter office next January the answer seems straightforward: Try to stabilize the deteriorating situation through a rapid return to the JCPOA, trading some form of sanctions relief for a reversal of Iran’s nuclear violations. That, of course, is anathema to the Trump administration, a complete repudiation of its historic decision to abandon Obama’s nuclear deal in the first place and a dagger through the heart of its maximum pressure campaign.

This invariably leads back to the possibility of a military strike to stop Iran’s nuclear advancement should it proceed apace. Two years ago, when Trump announced his withdrawal from the JCPOA and his intent to reimpose sanctions, he seemed to hint as much, warning that “If the regime continues its nuclear aspirations, it will have bigger problems than it has ever had before.” The next day, he amplified the threat: “I would advise Iran not to start their nuclear program. I would advise them very strongly. If they do, there will be very severe consequences.”

At the time, I wrote that “Surely, the president and his advisors understand that one likely consequence of killing the deal and reimposing sanctions is that Iran might begin expanding its nuclear program again.” After posing the question of what Trump would do if Iran called his bluff before sanctions have their intended effect, I concluded that “It goes without saying that absent a rock-solid commitment to move militarily against Iran’s nuclear program in short order should it prove necessary, the president’s decision to cramer the Iran deal prematurely really would constitute not just a major gamble, but extreme diplomatic malpractice.”

Well, here we are. Iran had responded to Trump’s maximum pressure by expanding its nuclear program and significantly reducing its breakout time, bringing it much closer to the 2-month timeline that existed before the deal than to the 8 to 12-month one that existed at the time Trump left the JCPOA. But there’s no indication whatsoever, at least not yet, that the administration is starting to contemplate actions other than further sanctions to reign in Iran’s nuclear expansion. Given how incremental Iran’s violations have been to date, that’s likely to remain the case at least until the U.S. elections in four months. Barring any dramatic new breaches by Iran, Trump is probably safe waiting until then before taking up any possible military options. If he wins, he can deal with it in a second term. If he loses, it will be Biden’s problem.

It’s worth noting that Israel’s calculation could be different. Waiting until the U.S. elections pose real risks in terms of Israel’s own military option against the Iranian nuclear program. While not unthinkable in the event of a Biden victory and America’s return to the JCPOA, it would be infinitely more difficult in the face of strong opposition from a newly-elected president. By contrast, while clearly leery himself about getting the United States into another military conflict in the Middle East, Trump would likely be sympathetic to Israel taking matters into its own hands. In John Bolton’s recent book about his tenure as Trump’s national security advisor, he reports that in 2017, before he joined the administration, Trump urged him to “tell Bibi [Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister] that if he uses force [against Iran’s nuclear program], I will back him.”

In addition to assured U.S. support, an Israeli strike before the U.S. elections would also occur at a time of especially high Iranian vulnerability. Iran’s economy is already on its knees. It’s been further ravaged by one of the world’s worst outbreaks of COVID-19. Its population
is deeply disgruntled and restless. It’s most elite military force, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force, has yet to regain its footing after the targeted killing of its longtime commander, Qassem Soleimani, in a U.S. drone strike. And its most powerful proxy is that Hezbollah is still licking its wounds after its costly involvement in Syria’s civil war and preoccupied with the catastrophic implosion of Lebanon's economy, but possibly the entire state. While the attendant risks of any military action against the Iranian nuclear program will be formidable under any circumstances, from Israel's standpoint, they may be far more manageable today in light of the unprecedented stresses that the Iranian regime is experiencing.

That said, between an exclusive reliance on additional sanctions and a dangerous military strike, there may still be room for coercive diplomacy to play an important role. Specifically, the United States, Israel, or preferably both could communicate to Iran a set of red lines regarding its current nuclear expansion that, if crossed, would dramatically increase the likelihood of a forceful response. They might include starting to enrich uranium to 20 percent again, ending or seriously curtailing the IAEA inspection regime, or abandoning its obligations under the NPT.

Notably, in a speech at the United Nations in 2012, Netanyahu famously held up a cartoon bomb, drew a red line (literally) at the point on the diagram when Iran would accumulate enough 20 percent uranium for one nuclear weapon, and made clear that Israel would act to stop Iran should it reach that point. While Netanyahu was widely mocked for the stunt, it’s well worth remembering that, afterward, Iran went out of its way to make sure its stockpile of 20 percent uranium never approached his redline. Deterrence worked.

The IAEA’s recent reports should serve as a wake up call. While the world’s attention has been focused elsewhere, the Iran nuclear clock has begun ticking again. Slowly, deliberately, a new crisis is brewing. Even as the Trump administration continues to hope that its current strategy of maximum economic pressure will work fast enough to avert it, the administration urgently needs to be developing an answer to the question: What if Plan A doesn’t work?

Mr. Hannah, senior counselor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, served as national security advisor to former Vice President Dick Cheney.

Visit suburbanorthodox.org for the current issue.

New Egyptian Survey Data Show a Combination of Apathy and Hostility toward Israel
By David Pollock

A third of Egyptians think Israelis and Palestinians are equally at fault.

New data from a rare independent opinion poll show that the Egyptian public is much more concerned about domestic problems, including public health, than any foreign policy issue. And when it comes to foreign affairs and U.S. policy, only a third put the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the top of their priority list.

Eighty-five percent of Egyptians agree with the statement: “Right now, internal political and economic reform is more important for our country than any foreign policy issue, so we should stay out of any wars outside our borders.”

Relatively Low Interest, and Even Lower Expectations, on Israeli-Palestinian Issues

More surprisingly, on foreign policy, only a third of Egyptians now rank “pushing for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” in first place as their priority for U.S. engagement in the region. The majority of responses to this question are split between U.S. action on Iran, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. And a third of Egyptians say that “the Palestinians and the Israelis are both to blame for their continuing conflict.”

This pattern is likely due in part to the Egyptian public’s very low expectations for progress on the Palestinian problem. A mere 16% have even “somewhat positive” expectations of the new Israeli government elected this spring. And even fewer, just 9%, have a favorable opinion of the Trump peace plan.
There is also very little popular support for further “normalization” with Israel. A mere 6% agree that “people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so.” By contrast, half the Egyptian public “strongly disagrees” with that assertion.

**Coronavirus Crisis Concerns, Both Domestic and Foreign**

Fully three-fourths of Egyptians say their government is currently doing “too little” to ensure “people’s health and medical care.” At the same time, many Egyptians blame outside parties for the disease as well. Nearly half (45%) agree with the proposition: “The Coronavirus is something our foreign enemies deliberately started.”

**Government Also Gets Low Marks in Other Areas**

By somewhat smaller majorities, Egyptians also say their government is failing them in the three other domestic policy issues polled. Fifty-nine percent say Cairo is doing “too little” in “maintaining law and order in our public places.” Sixty-four percent say the same about “preventing religious extremism in our society.” And in an intriguing meta-question, a larger majority (68%) agreed with the statement that the Egyptian government does too little in “paying attention to public opinion about its policies.” Polls in the past few years have also shown widespread complaints about corruption, economic conditions, and lack of equity in sharing civic obligations.

**So Why No Uprising in Egypt?**

Compared with the Egyptian majority’s recent dissatisfaction with their government’s policies, there is less popular appetite for mass protests against it. Opinions on protests are split: 42% say “it’s a good thing we aren’t having big street demonstrations here now the way they do in some other Arab countries,” yet somewhat more, a surprisingly high 54%, disagree with that assessment.

At the same time, an equally narrow majority of Egyptians, (54%), also agree with the notion: “When I think about what’s happening in Yemen or Syria, I feel that our own situation is not so bad.” And only a third expect any positive results from “the anti-government protests in Iraq and Lebanon.”

Half of Egyptians Still Call U.S. Ties Important, Ahead of Russia But Just Behind China

Even though very few Egyptians like the Trump Peace Plan, many more (49%), as in previous years, continue to say that good relations with the U.S. are important for their country. China now registers in the same league (53%). Interestingly, Russia lags somewhat in this category (39%), despite recent arms and business deals with Cairo and closer coordination on the Libyan civil war right across the border.

**Some Popular Concern About Libya, Yet Mixed Views of Turkey**

Asked about their top priority for U.S. Mideast policy, a quarter of Egyptians now pick “finding a diplomatic settlement for the wars in Yemen and Libya”—in second place behind resolving the Palestinian issue (35%). At the same time, views on Turkey, Egypt’s main outside opponent in Libya, are unexpectedly divided. The majority (58%) say good ties with Turkey are not important for Egypt. But a substantial minority (39%) of Egyptians disagree, calling good relations with Ankara at least “somewhat important” for their own country.

**Divided Opinion on Qassem Soleimani’s Killing, with Iran a Low Priority**

About a third of Egyptians say that the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani last January will have positive effects on the region; but around the same
proportion foresee negative effects. An unusually high 30% say that they don’t know enough to voice a view either way. Asked to pick their priority for U.S. policy in the region, just 19% choose “working to contain Iran,” compared with diplomatic efforts in other conflict arenas: Palestinian-Israeli (35%), Libya and Yemen (24%), or Syria (15%). More generally on Iran and its regional militias, previous polls have proved that most Egyptians side with their government in opposition to them: Iran itself, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and even Ayatollah Khamenei personally.

Public Wants Rapprochement with Qatar, but not Syria

On a couple of other, more sensitive regional issues, however, the Egyptian public appears mostly at odds with its government’s position. Three-quarters say “the way to solve our disputes with Qatar is for both sides to compromise in order to reach an agreement.” This high proportion is similar to that recorded in a 2017 poll, soon after that dispute first erupted.

In sharp contrast, just 10% of Egyptians agree with the following on Syria: “We should accept the reality that Bashar al-Assad will stay in power in Syria, and restore full relations with his government.” At the official level, so far, the Egyptian government has not done so—and if it pays more attention to its own public’s opinion than they think it does, it will keep its distance from Assad going forward as well.

Methodological Note

These findings are from a commercial survey, conducted by a highly credible regional firm in late May/early June 2020, among a representative national sample of 1,000 Egyptians. The survey comprised face-to-face interviews, selected according to standard random geographical probability procedures. The author has extensive personal experience with this company’s high standards of integrity, technical proficiency, and quality controls. The statistical margin of error for this sample is approximately 3%. Additional methodological details are readily available on request.

Mr. Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.

Germany’s Long Record of Appeasing Palestinian Terror

By Eldad Beck

And the open anti-Semitism that accompanied it.

On Tuesday, Feb. 10, 1970, an El Al flight took off from Israel, headed for London. The plane was carrying 52 passengers and 11 crew members. Passengers included actress Hannah Meron and actor Assi Dayan, the son of then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan. Meron and Dayan were going to audition for "Fiddler on the Roof."

At 12:30 the plane stopped in Munich for a connection, and 34 passengers got off. After a short wait in the terminal, the rest of the passengers got on a bus that would take them back to the aircraft. All of a sudden three Arab terrorists boarded the bus, armed with grenades and guns. They tried to hijack the vehicle. Captain Uri Cohen took down one of them, and the grenade the terrorist was holding exploded and blew off his hand. The German bus driver ignored the shouts not to allow the terrorist to board the bus. He opened the doors, and some of the passengers managed to get off, but then one of the terrorists threw a grenade inside the bus. Arie Katzenstein, 32, threw himself on the grenade – saving everyone else, but losing his own life. A total of 11 passengers were wounded, including Meron, who lost her left leg.

The three terrorists – two Jordanians and an Egyptian, all members of Dr. Issam Sartawi’s Action Organization for the Liberation of Palestine – were captured by West Germany’s security forces. They said they had planned to hijack the aircraft to Libya and demand that Israel release dozens of security prisoners in exchange for the hostages. The terrorists’ trial was repeatedly postponed, supposedly for bureaucratic reasons, but really because Germany was in no rush to hold a trial that posed a security risk. All three were released in September 1970 as part of a deal between West Germany and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine that followed the hijacking of three passenger aircraft. Their release paved the way for the slaughter of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

A new study about the West German foreign ministry’s attitude toward Israel from 1967-1979 exposes how West Germany buckled to Palestinian terrorism and the key role West German diplomacy played in the country adopting a kid-gloves policy toward the Palestinians.

Author of the study Dr. Remko Leemhuis, acting director of the Ramer Institute for German-Jewish Relations at the American Jewish Committee in Berlin, says that "the Palestinians learned very quickly that in Germany, like other countries, terrorism paid off, and when they extorted the West German government, it would give in."

"That conclusion clearly comes from conversations that representatives of the federal foreign ministry held with representatives of the Palestinians. Despite the Palestinians’ friendly conduct, they made it clear that if the people they were talking to didn't do what the PLO wanted, the Palestinians couldn't promise that there wouldn't be more terrorist attacks on German soil. The German side was afraid of that.

"What is horrifying to me is that the German Foreign Ministry never held any discussion about finding a firm response to the Palestinian extortion. No one said, 'We won't let terrorists or Palestinians extort us.' They threw up their hands and freed terrorists."

Leemhuis says Germany could have responded differently.
"I found a document from the American State Department that stated explicitly that the US could talk to the PLO, but for that to happen, it had to meet certain conditions, such as recognizing Israel's right to exist," he says.

When West Germany and Israel launched diplomatic relations in May 1965, most Arab countries severed ties with Bonn and approached East Germany, instead.

Leemhuis says that establishing relations with Israel was a "disaster" for West German foreign policy.

"Official talk about balanced relations with Israel and Arab states was a trick intended to hide the [German] foreign ministry's true position, which was biased in favor of the Arabs," he says.

"The Arabs controlled the most important resource for the world economy, oil, whereas the small Jewish state didn't have much to offer. What's more, Israel was a liberal democracy, and all the Arab states were dictatorships who were making daily threats to wipe it out. So even then, it wasn't really possible to treat the two sides equally."

Arab terrorism against Israel, via Palestinian organizations, increased after the Arab countries that fought Israel were trounced in the 1967 Six-Day War. The terrorist groups focused on attacks outside Israel's borders, hoping to shake up its international position. The first such attack on West German soil was perpetrated in September 1969, when terrorists threw a grenade at the Israeli Embassy in Bonn. Luckily, no one was wounded.

Five months later, the El Al plane was attacked in Munich, heralding the start of Palestinian air terrorism in Europe. Only 11 days after the attempted hijacking in Munich, a bomb exploded in the cargo hold of an Austrian airplane that took off from Frankfurt and was headed to Tel Aviv, with a stopover in Vienna. The pilots managed to land in Frankfurt and avoid a major disaster. Terrorists also sent a bomb through the German postal system that was supposed to be sent on an El Al flight. But the package was placed on a Swissair plane and detonated in Swiss airspace, killing 74 passengers and crew.

Three days later, Germany's ambassador to Jordan reported that one of his aides had met with Issam Sartawi. The ambassador wrote that he had approved the meeting so that Germany could "better assess the danger that Sartawi's organization posed to German citizens in Jordan."

Sartawi expressed regret at how the attempted hijacking in Munich had played out, but said that his organization had chosen West Germany because it was very "pro-Israeli" and stressed that the attack had been designed to force the West German public to re-think the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that he could not guarantee that his group would not decide to buck his instructions and carry out more attacks there.

The embassy aide promised to take steps to ensure that the German media did not report attacks by Sartawi's organization "inappropriately" and did not spread suspicion of Arabs and Palestinians.

German diplomacy waved a white flag. Sartawi ended the meeting with a tempting offer, expressing his willingness to avoid more attacks on German soil and against German institutions if the three members of his group who were arrested in Munich were released.

A short while later, Israel's foreign minister, Abba Eban, paid his first official visit to West Germany. He urged his hosts to hold Arab governments accountable for their support for the PLO and its terrorist activity. A few days passed, and Germany's ambassador to Jordan met with King Hussein. According to a report he sent to the German Foreign Ministry, he did not devote a single word of the meeting to the fact that Jordan was hosting the terrorist organization that had attacked the El Al plane in Munich.

In July 1970, that same ambassador met with a senior official in the Fatah organization. Leemhuis is almost certain that the Fatah official was Ali Hassan Salameh, who would eventually become a leader of the Black September group, which murdered the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics.

Ali Hassan Salameh

The ambassador reported that he had told Salameh that Germany had stopped all weapons shipments to Israel and that the Germany government, particularly then-Chancellor Willy Brandt, were consistently working toward a neutral German position in the Middle East and that the government wanted to show the Palestinians that it desired good relations with them.

Palestinian terrorist attacks were not limited to Germany. In July 1970, terrorists from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked an Olympic Airlines plane, demanding the release of seven terrorist imprisoned in Greece. Athens gave in. That September, the PFLP hijacked three more planes – TWA, Swissair, and Pan Am flights – to secure the release of terrorists. Two of the three hijacked planes were forced to land in Anman, as was a British plane that was hijacked later that month.

Terrorists were holding American, Israeli, German, and Swiss citizens hostage in Jordan. The separated the Jews from the rest of the passengers and demanded that terrorists imprisoned in Israel and in western Europe be released. The German government immediately signaled its willingness to meet their demands, and even pressured Israel to cooperate, sending a diplomat to meet in London with a representative of the World Jewish Congress, where he voiced concern that the deal did not include the Jewish and Israeli hostages.

Fearing a military mission to free the hostages, the terrorists moved them to various secret locations and blew up the aircraft. Attempts by the Red Cross to mediate failed, and the clock was ticking to a clash between the Jordanian army and the Black September group.
The German government decided to send the secretary-general of the ruling social-democratic party, Hans-Jurgen Wischnewski, a fervent supporter of the Algerian independence movement who had extensive connections in the Arab world, to Amman. Jerusalem saw him as pro-Arab. After a Red Cross delegation left Amman, Wischnewski met with Abu Maher Ghnaim, one of the founders of the PFLP, who informed him that his group was willing to negotiate with each of the countries involved, separately.

Wischnewski urged Brandt to make an immediate announcement that Germany would be releasing the terrorists behind the Munich attack. Germany's ambassador to Jordan also kept up the pressure.

On Sept. 30 the terrorists were let out of Germany. From 1968-1984, 48 of the Palestinian terrorist attacks in Europe were carried out on German soil. The deadliest was the slaughter of the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972 by eight members of Black September.

The man responsible for the planning and execution of the attacks was the man Germany's ambassador had met within Jordan, Ali Hassan Salameh.

Then-director of the Mossad, Zvi Zamir, who had been sent to Germany to track the attempts to rescue the athletes, asked his German counterpart what the German authorities intended to do with the terrorists who remained alive, since the Palestinians could hijack a Lufthansa plane and force the Germans to free them. The head of Germany's spy agency said he couldn't guarantee that scenario wouldn't occur.

During the attack on the Olympic village, Brandt publicly criticized Arab nations, but his foreign minister, Walter Schell, rushed to clarify that the attack was "one instance" of terrorism for which the "governments of certain countries were not responsible."

The day after the murder of the Israeli athletes, Germany's ambassador to Egypt, Hans-Georg Stelzer, sent a long letter to his superiors in which he recommended that Germany refrain from any harsh criticism of Arab countries, because they had no influence on acts of terrorism.

In a later message, Stelzer even asked that Germany show understanding of the terrorists: "Even if we must condemn the actions of the Munich terrorists, the Arab position must be understood ... they see idealistic young people who were acting out of desperation at the crisis situation in their homeland."

Leemhuis cites the "coldness and lack of empathy" with which the German authorities responded to the Munich Olympics massacre.

"They said, 'Life goes on,' without any feeling for the significance of the attack and its historical importance to the Israelis. The documents don't show an ounce of any horror, or that any of the functionaries in the Foreign Ministry opposed the official approach and wanted to demand that the Palestinians be held responsible," he says.

"They [the Foreign Ministry] knew that Black September was part of the PLO, and that in contrast to Yasser Arafat's lies, the organization did not operate on its own. But none of that made any of the German diplomats pull away; it made them want to talk with the PLO, thinking that by doing so they could prevent terrorist attacks in Germany. That idea has guided all of [Germany's] contact with the PLO," Leemhuis observes.

Leemhuis discovered a document from October 1972, issued less than a month after the massacre, which clearly shows that the German Foreign Ministry knew about Black September's ties to Fatah and that the new terrorist organization was designed to provide camouflage that would allow Fatah to avoid responsibility for terrorist acts committed by its members.

"The Fatah leadership wants to avoid any harm to the esteem in which it is held, to its good name, and to its stature," the document reads.

The interior minister of Germany at the time, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, outlawed activity by Palestinian student activists and deported hundreds of illegal Arab residents, as well as ordering strict border checks for Arab citizens entering West Germany. But the Foreign Ministry opposed these steps and they were eventually canceled.

According to Leemhuis, "The Foreign Ministry wasn't worried about relations with Israel at all, just with the Arab image in West German media. There was no sense of guilt about the negligent developments that led to the deaths of nine athletes in the failed rescue attempt [two others were killed in the Olympic village itself]. The prevailing belief was that Germany had done everything correctly, no mistakes. Even Israel's response was relatively placating. Golda Meir was very careful in her criticism," he notes. (Meir was very close to Brandt and did not want to endanger his chances of re-election in November of that year).

It took little time for Zamir's prediction to be fulfilled. On Oct. 29, 1972, Palestinian terrorists indeed hijacked a Lufthansa flight that was en route to Frankfurt from Damascus, with planned stops in Beirut, Ankara, and Munich. The hijackers demanded that the three terrorists arrested after the murder of the Israeli athletes be freed. The West German government agreed that same day, and the three were flown to Libya. The terrorists let the hostages go.

Even today, some claim that the hijacking had been coordinated between the PLO and the German government as a way of allowing the Germans to avoid trying the terrorists in court. Leemhuis has found no confirmation of that theory, but says that in 2009, one of Brandt's close advisors told a German paper that he saw the idea as "legitimate."

The day the terrorists were released, the director of the Middle East Desk in the German Foreign Ministry sent a telegram to the Israeli government which read, "In regard to the accusations that our government has given in
to the Palestinian guerrilla fighters and is thereby encouraging more actions of this type, it should be said that the federal government cannot make a decision that would put the lives of the passengers and crew of the hijacked plane in danger."

The telegram ended with the observation: "These are the results of a conflict, and both sides have a responsibility to reach a solution."

Israel was outraged that the terrorists had been freed. Eban summoned the German ambassador to Israel for a rebuke, telling him that Germany had handed the terrorists a "great victory."

As this was unfolding, the Israeli ambassador to Germany, Elyashiv Ben-Horin, was summoned to a meeting with the German foreign minister, who told him that West Germany's policy on the war against terrorism had not changed, but that the government had no choice other than to release the terrorists.

Germany's capitulation paved the way for formal relations between West Germany and the PLO, which demanded a mission in the West German capital, to be housed in the offices of the Arab League.

The Palestinians also asked the Germans to help fund the PLO. A telegram sent on Feb. 28, 1973 by Helmut Radius, head of the Middle East Department in the German Foreign Ministry, ordered the transfer of 50,000 marks to support the Wafa news agency, which disseminated Palestinian propaganda. Radius also issued instructions that the purpose of the funds be hidden to avoid diplomatic complications, although there is no confirmation that the money was actually transferred.

None of the German diplomatic correspondence made any mention of the Holocaust. According to Leemhuis, "historical responsibility did play any role in the German Foreign Ministry's position toward Israel. After the compensation agreement of 1952, the German diplomats said, 'That's it, the matter of the Holocaust is closed. We paid, and from this moment on, history will not play any part.'"

Leemhuis also points out anti-Semitic accusations made at the time that Israelis and Jews wanted to profit from the Holocaust, after Israeli diplomats made repeated references to Germany's history with the Jews.

"It shows the coldness that characterized German foreign policy, as well as the ignorance about the suffering of the survivors and about historical responsibility. It's chilling to see how soon after the Holocaust the German diplomats moved on, while stressing the historic trauma that the establishment of the state of Israel caused to the Arabs. In other words, history played a role as it met their needs," he says.

When Israel Hayom asks Leemhuis whether the fact that many West German diplomats lived Nazi Germany influenced this approach, he says that while he has not looked into the personal background of the diplomats, "when you read their anti-Semitic comments, it's obvious that the influence of the Nazi period played a role."

"The open anti-Semitism in the documents surprised me. The functionaries felt they could write these things, knowing that it wouldn't bother anyone. And who knows what they said about Jews and Israel in conversation … I was amazed that there was no objection to these positions. The Six-Day War, the attacks in Munich, the Yom Kippur War … none of these changed their thinking," he says.

The Ultra-Orthodox World's Non-Zionist Zionist Revolution
By Batsheva Neuer mosaicmagazine.com

Even as mainstream American Jews have become more skeptical of Israel, another group is quietly shedding its long-held reluctance to embrace the Jewish state.

Over the last fifteen years, mainstream American Jews have moved famously leftward on Israel. Some have dropped out of Zionism altogether; others have attempted to redefine what it means to be Zionist so as to include a healthy—at times too healthy—dose of criticism for the Jewish state.

But in a less heralded reverse development, another American Jewish demographic has been busy redefining what it means to be non-Zionist, and not in the way you might think. This group harbors warm affection for the Jewish state, and, where mainstream Jews increasingly approach Israel as an abstraction, as a matter of ideology, or as a totemic signifier, this group approaches Israel not as an ideological project but as a concrete, practical reality.

The group is American ultra-Orthodox Jewry. For a long time they’ve been construed as non- or even anti-Zionist, and perhaps for good reason—after all, as a community they don’t mark any official observances of Israel; they won’t celebrate Israel’s Independence Day, they won’t participate in New York’s iconic Celebrate Israel Parade, and they refrain from including the prayer for the state of Israel in their liturgy. But a look at their daily lives tells a more nuanced story: the story of a group largely supportive of the Israeli government, enthusiastic about Israel’s achievements, and that sees its future as inextricably bound up with that of the Jewish state. One might even go so far as to say that the ultra-Orthodox community is the most pro-Israel Jewish community in America—and, again, all without explicitly identifying as Zionist.

Moreover, thanks to low rates of intermarriage and high rates of birth, it is a group projected to be the dominant majority of American Jews the end of this century. If those projections prove true, the ultra-Orthodox community and its affiliates will be critical architects of the Jewish landscape and a key Jewish voice in the U.S.-Israel alliance. To ignore them is a pity and a
strategic error, for that alliance, in addition to the Jewish future, could well be in their hands.

Who are these non-Zionist Zionists? I'll focus here on a subset of ultra-Orthodoxy known as the yeshivish community, because it's what I'm most intimately familiar with. But most of what's said here goes for the ultra-Orthodox community at large. Most American Jews have probably never heard the term yeshivish, which refers to a society centered around Torah study, that is, “the yeshiva world.” Jews who wear black hats are lumped together in the mainstream media as “ḥasidic,” an imprecise demographic cast somewhat as a relic of the past. The yeshivish community—very much vibrant and growing—is the non-ḥasidic subset of the ultra-Orthodox world, with American outposts in cities such as Lakewood, New York, and Chicago. While they may look ḥasidic to the untrained eye, there are major distinctions between the communities such as liturgical texts, prayer times, and even standards of kashrut.

Hasidic Jews descend (either literally or figuratively) from the followers of Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), known as the Ba’al Shem Tov, a teacher, mystic, and folk healer. Based in Medzhybizh in today’s western Ukraine, he and his disciples infused their teachings with kabbalistic themes that had traditionally been reserved for a pious religious elite. With a focus on immanence over transcendence, worship through corporeality, and direct communion with God, the movement challenged many religious and social norms and was seen as an affront to the tradition. Today, ḥasidic communities across the globe are divided into various sects, often named after their European towns of origin, each of which follows its own rebbe, or holy leader.

By contrast yeshivish Jews view themselves as the intellectual descendants of Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797), a vehement opponent of the ḥasidic movement. His followers, who focused on the centrality of Torah study, came to be known as Mitnaggedim or “opposers.” Because of their different customs and cultures, rarely do the two groups intermarry.

While the yeshiva community is represented by the Agudath Israel of America—the umbrella organization for all ultra-Orthodox Jews in America—it is anything but a monolith. Some members lead insular lifestyles immersed in Torah study, and others participate completely in the modern world. And though secular studies are subservient to Torah, many yeshivish Jews go on to college to become professionals and even leaders in their fields. The community’s growth in America began in earnest after the Shoah, with floods of Jewish refugees arriving in hope of rebuilding a lost world. Not only have they flourished, they have done so at exponential rates, as have their ultra-Orthodox brethren. The 2013 Pew Study found that 79 percent of ultra-Orthodox American adults are married. A UJA-Federation study confirmed the trend, reporting that the community in New York has three times the amount of children as non-Orthodox Jews, with the mean number of children for yeshivish women ages 35-44 in the New York area over 5 (by contrast it is 2.5 for Modern Orthodox Jews and 1.3 for non-Orthodox Jews).

What is the yeshivish position on Zionism? What are its roots and what is now driving growing number of yeshivish Jews to embrace the state of Israel, an entity once cast as treyf, unkosher? To answer this requires going back over a century, to a time when the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine was for some Jews a distant dream and for others a theological nightmare.

It is somewhat ironic that one of the greatest theological dilemmas posed to the Orthodox community at the turn of the 20th century was the return to Israel. For thousands of years, pious Jews prayed eastward—to go eastward. Jewish liturgy is replete with mention of returning to Israel; according to Jewish law, not a single slice of bread can be eaten without recalling Jerusalem.

But when a secular Viennese journalist-turned-Jewish-activist named Theodor Herzl paved the way for practical Jewish immigration in the form of a political program he was met with heavy pushback from East European religious authorities. Their resistance was both theological and practical.

Theologically, they pointed to a distinction between Israel as a political entity (m’dinat Yisrael) and the land itself (Eretz Yisrael). While the land was inherently holy and worthy of Jewish settlement—in truth, Jewish presence in Israel’s holy cities never ceased—a future state was to be divinely and not humanly mandated and orchestrated. Jewish tradition did not recognize a sovereign state prior to the coming of the messiah and such a construct was an affront to the tradition, to the messiah, and to God.

On a practical level, Zionism and its leaders were perceived as a threat to traditional Judaism. The movement, led largely by secular Jews, operated at a time when shtetl life was in decline, when the pull of religious orthodoxy was losing its grip to such burgeoning ideologies as Bundism, Communism, and Zionism. All three denigrated and to varying degrees sought to dissolve the traditional Jewish way of life. While much of the Zionist aversion to religion stemmed from the slightly earlier Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, which emphasized reason over faith, the early Zionists were also motivated by a unique, revolutionary desire to assert “the new Jew”—a metamorphosis that necessitated rejecting the old one. If the old Jew was pious, fearful, and dependent on Gentile rule, the new Jew would be modern, bold, and self-sufficient. Man, rather than God, was master of his own destiny.

Traditional Jews didn’t exactly take this challenge sitting down. In 1912, they established the Agudath Israel, a federated system for East European and Western Orthodox circles that objected to these modern Jewish
movements and ideologies. (Agudath Israel of America opened twenty years later.) In 1920, the Polish-born Orthodox rabbi Menachem Kashish (whose opinions on Zionism would shift dramatically after the Six-Day War) summed up his community’s outlook in a booklet stating that “according to Torah law, one should not aid the Zionists who openly violate religious principles . . . in working towards the settlement of the Land of Israel.”

This idea was to be echoed in other religious publications and became the party line of Agudath Israel. A 1931 letter serves to outline the organization’s formal position on Zionism:

While we affirm the imperishable nature and the actual perpetuation of the Jewish nationality and the indestructible bond between the Jewish people and its homeland, we reject from the depths of our conviction the secularization of the Jewish people undertaken by Zionism and regard the Zionist maxim that religion is a personal matter as a betrayal of the universal, historical task of God’s people and the Divine revelation. In the sense of Jewish tradition, Palestine is to us a Holy Land in which Jewish life and a national Jewish home can rise only when the authority of the Jewish religious law which still lives today is acknowledged in its entirety within that home.

In other words, Jews have a connection to the Land of Israel, but any formalization of that connection at the level of state-building or ideology was anathema, especially if it was to be devoid of religious law. This would be the group’s position for the remainder of the pre-state period. It didn’t last long. Within a few years, the Shoah would cast its shadow over Europe’s Jews, and Agudath Israel, like much of the world, would be forced to reconcile with some form of support for a Jewish state.

In June 1947, its representatives met with David Ben-Gurion and issued the organization’s basic requirements in exchange for its participation in the project of establishing Israel: religious control over marital law, national Sabbath observance, national observance of kashrut, and autonomy in Jewish education. Ben-Gurion made no guarantees; ten days later a letter—the famed “status-quo” letter—arrived at the Agudath Israel’s offices aimed at placating the organization. But besides a commitment to instituting Sabbath as the legal day of rest, the letter’s commitments were vague, and the official platform on Zionism did not change.

Nonetheless, recognizing the historical grandeur of the creation of modern Israel, in practice organization’s hard line softened: in 1948, its representative joined those signing the Declaration of Independence, and the party subsequently joined the Provisional Government.

It would be overly simplistic to say that “the rest is history.” Ben-Gurion’s solution was in some respects a decision not to decide, a sociopolitical compromise rather than a principled and clear decision. Thus, from marriage to conscription, many of the basic arrangements pertaining to religion and law made during Israel’s formative years still vex and divide segments of Israeli society and the Jewish community abroad, including within the yeshiva world.

For all that, the ultra-Orthodox today—both in Israel and in America—are far less vexed by Israel and Zionism than they used to be. Key issues still await resolution, but there has been a dramatic shift with regards to the state of Israel transpiring on the ground. This shift is largely pragmatic rather than doctrinal. One will not find any incorporation of sentiment for Israel into the practices or liturgy of yeshivish congregations, such as Sabbath prayers for the state and its army, as you might find in Modern Orthodox or National Religious communities. But over the last seven decades there has grown a deep-seated attachment to the Jewish state—reflected both in content and spirit—that is found in almost no other American Jewish demographic.

The historian Simon Dubnov charted Jewish history as a chain of migrating centers that arose, thrived, declined, and rose again elsewhere, from ancient Babylonia to medieval Germany to Spain. In Dubnov’s time, the most recent of these centers had been the spiritually vibrant, Yiddish-speaking communities of Poland and Russia. But the Nazis destroyed that center, and took Dubnov’s own life before he could witness the next link in the chain: the state of Israel. All of American ultra-Orthodoxy now leans in that direction. Israel is its center of gravity, not Europe and not America. Therefore, it has become nearly impossible for ultra-Orthodoxy to remain committed to its anti-Zionism, or even its non-Zionism.

To substantiate this claim, look through the major English-language ultra-Orthodox publications. From Mishpacha to Yeshiva World News to Ami to Hamodia, a common picture emerges: Israeli news is almost always featured on the cover. An Israeli tech mogul or innovation is highlighted, an Israel advocate is profiled, advertisement pages are filled with the hottest Jerusalem real-state buys and most exclusive Israeli seminaries.

The shift of centers is particularly visible for the yeshivish community. After the death of several leading yeshivish rabbinic authorities, such as Rabbis Moshe Feinstein and Yaakov Kaminitzky of New York and Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman of Baltimore, the community’s leadership shifted to the late Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv followed by the late Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinmann, both of whom were based in Israel. Today its leadership is still largely ensconced in Israel, led by Rabbi Chaim Kanievsy. While the Council of Great Torah Sages still sits in the United States as the policy-making branch of Agudath Israel of America, the yeshivish authorities in Israel are generally acknowledged as higher in stature than their American counterparts.

Indeed, it is more prestigious for a young yeshivish man studying at institutions such as Mir and Brisk—both elite Israel-based yeshivas—than anywhere else (with the possible exception of Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood,
The yeshivish community now expects most, if not all, students of both sexes to spend at least a year after high school in Israel. Newly married couples are similarly encouraged to spend their first year of marriage in Jerusalem.

This goes for life as a whole: it revolves around frequent visits to Israel. Anyone visiting Jerusalem during the three pilgrimage festivals—Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot—would be hard pressed not to notice the number of black-hatted Jews at restaurants, cafes, and pilgrimage sights chattering away in English; for the most part, they are members of the American yeshiva world. On a recent El Al flight to Israel I noticed that most of the passengers were young yeshivish families, returning to Israel to study indefinitely in yeshiva.

Thus, for yeshivish families in America, Israel’s safety and security is not only paramount, it is also personal.

Part of thereof-centering around Israel is owed to the involvement of Israeli Haredim at the highest levels of government. Israel’s multi-party parliamentary system (thirteen parties in the last election alone) ensures that every segment of society is represented. The Haredi parties have been an integral force in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s coalition for the last decade. Why? Netanyahu might not be the harbinger of the messiah, but he is the steward of welfare for the ultra-Orthodox community. In turn, the Haredim are now both cognizant of their political power and unhesitant to flex their political muscles.

The roots to this deeper political involvement date back as far as 1977, when Menachem Begin asked Agudath Israel to join his coalition, and they accepted. But their role as a major political force began in 1990 (the twelfth Knesset). The day-to-day transactional politics have had the side effect of bringing the Haredim closer to a Zionist worldview. “The state’s ḥaredi representatives are well entrenched in governmental affairs and most of the ḥaredi citizenry is invested in Israeli politics, which, in addition to the growth of the community, has created a more “Zionist” ḥaredi identity (using “Zionist” very loosely, of course) in Israel as well,” says Avi Shafran, Agudath Israel’s director of public affairs.

Indeed, according to him, there is considerably less mistrust of a Jewish state as a concept than there may have been before, and for many years after, Israel’s establishment. Israel’s support of its religious citizens’ needs and of its yeshivas (support which has been assailed by some Israeli politicians here and there but continues) has certainly helped propel that change. As has the growth of the Orthodox community in Israel, since increased numbers make Ḥaredim a stronger part of the Israeli citizenry, and one that feels more secure in that role.

Another factor that has helped weave Ḥaredim closer to Israel is the rapidly rising rate of employment. Between 2003 and 2015, the number of ultra-Orthodox men with jobs jumped from 36 percent to 50 percent, and the number of women from 51 percent to 73 percent. In recent years, religious organizations such as AvraTech and Kamatech have sprung up whose goal is to integrate Ḥaredi men into the high-tech sector, all while keeping carved out time for Talmud study, and maintaining their overall religious lifestyle.

On a very basic level, then, the acceptance of Israel as a political entity by the American ultra-Orthodox rests on the demonstrative success of their Israeli cousins. Agudath Israel’s post-war worries of mass secularization never materialized. Just the opposite: there are more students studying full time in yeshiva today than in any other period in Jewish history. Ḥaredim are integrated into the workforce and even in the army without the collapse of ultra-Orthodox tradition. By and large, Ḥaredim lead lives dedicated to ancient principles in one of the world’s most modern states.

Taking all of this into account, when it is said that the ultra-Orthodox community is anti-Zionist or non-Zionist, one cannot help but wonder: what is its staunch support of the state of Israel if not something approaching de-facto Zionism?

While the self-styled “pro-Israel, pro-peace” group J Street was lobbying in favor of the nuclear deal reached with Iran in 2015, Agudath Israel stood with the Israeli government in opposing it. Likewise, the ultra-Orthodox group lobbied Congress in favor of the Taylor Force Act, aimed at stopping American economic aid that funds terrorists; J Street opposed the bill, arguing it would increase Palestinian “deprivation and despair.”

The yeshiva world is a robust Jewish demographic in America that is emerging as the new pro-Israel community. The easing of the worries that once restrained its support has provided fertile ground for its de-facto Zionism to grow. While Zionism may not be doctrinal for the yeshiva world in the way that it is for Israel’s National-Religious camp, a new doctrine is forming based on an appreciation of Israel’s centrality to Jewish life.

As mainstream American Jewry veers leftward leaving a pro-Israel vacuum, the yeshiva world is beginning to fill the gap. Those interested in protecting Israel’s future would therefore be well advised to form strategic relationships with the yeshivish community by bolstering its involvement in pro-Israel advocacy groups, encouraging its political engagement, and training its lay leaders to raise their voices. The future is all of ours, but the Jewish future may well be theirs.

Ms. Neuer is a writer and teacher of Jewish thought living in New York City.

Current issue also available at suburbanorthodox.org.

If you see something, send something” –editor