Hamas and Fatah Make Peace, Shattering the Fantasy of Mahmoud Abbas’s Moderation

By David Horovitz

July 3, 2020

To Palestinian leaders, anything is better than a peace plan.

At a joint press conference on Thursday, Fatah’s Jibril Rajoub and Hamas’s Saleh al-Aroui vowed to work together to resist unilateral Israeli annexation moves and “topple” the Trump administration’s Israeli-Palestinian peace proposal. “We will put in place all necessary measures to ensure national unity,” proclaimed Rajoub in Ramallah, as al-Aroui looked on, via video link, from Beirut. “Today, we want to speak in a single voice.”

Their coordination would open “a new phase that will be a strategic service to our people,” chimed in al-Aroui, adding ominously that Hamas would “use all forms of struggle and resistance against the annexation project.”

Had the bombshell event been organized by an internal opponent to Mahmoud Abbas’s rule, it would have represented an outrageous act of defiance against him.

But Rajoub’s “unity” presentation with al-Aroui — the exiled chief of Hamas’s West Bank terrorist infrastructure, and the man who orchestrated the kidnappings and killings of three Israeli teenagers in the Etzion Bloc south of Jerusalem in 2014 as they headed home from their yeshiva high schools — was not a calculated act of defiance against Abbas.

It was, rather, a stinging blow to the lingering hopes of those on the Zionist left who, in the face of years of contrary evidence, still insistently regard Abbas as a potential peace partner with whom Israel might be able to reach a dependable peace agreement. It was bitter confirmation for the consensus view in Israel, hardened in the course of Abbas’s intransigent stewardship of the PA post-Arafat, that Israel dare not risk relinquishing adjacent territory to the Palestinians under his rule. And it will bolster the positions of those, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who are ready to rule out the prospect of any accord down the road by cementing Israel’s entanglement with the Palestinians via unilateral annexation.

The Fatah-Hamas pledge of partnership declared Thursday by Rajoub and al-Aroui, who has a $5 million US bounty on his head, was approved in advance by the Palestinian Authority president. The joint event was applauded on the day itself by the PA prime minister. And it was shown on both PA and Hamas TV.

The message Abbas was sending — to a watching world but most especially to his own people — was unmistakable: Israel, and any possibility of reconciliation, out; Hamas, and terrorism, in.

A US State Department graphic of a ‘wanted’ poster showing Hamas political bureau deputy chief Saleh al-Aroui, Hezbollah’s former chief liaison to Palestinian terror groups Khalil Yusif Mahmoud Harb, and Hezbollah’s special forces commander in Syria and Yemen, Haytham Ali Tabatabai, upon the announcement of a $5 million reward for information leading to their capture, on November 13, 2018. (US State Department)

There was never any remote chance that Abbas, who chose to walk away from prime minister Ehud Olmert’s 2008 offer of almost everything the Palestinians purportedly seek — including 100% of the West Bank with one-for-one land swaps, and a shared capital in Jerusalem including a stake in the oversight of the Holy Basin — was going to engage with the Trump administration’s “Peace to Prosperity” proposal, with its far less generous, highly conditional framework for a Palestinian state.

Abbas, who warmly hosted President Donald Trump in Bethlehem in May 2017, made his strategy plain when he broke off all contacts with the administration seven months later, after Trump formally recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital — even though the presidential recognition did not specify the dimensions of Israel’s sovereignty in the city, and thus left open the possibility of Palestinian sovereignty here too.

US President Donald Trump (L) and PA President Mahmoud Abbas leave following a joint press conference at the presidential palace in the West Bank city of Bethlehem on May 23, 2017. (AFP/Mandel Ngan)

The PA chief has since underlined his rejectionism in all manner of ways, many of them directly self-defeating for his people — routinely inciting against Israeli and denying Jewish history in the Holy Land in order to persuade Palestinians that we have no legitimacy here; diverting foreign assistance to help fund salaries and payments to terrorists and their families; refusing in recent months to accept the tax payments collected by Israel on
the PA’s behalf — monies essential to the Palestinian workforce; and perhaps most benightedly, rejecting two consignments of aid from the United Arab Emirates in the battle against COVID-19 because the cargo was flown in via Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport.

Thus when various interlocutors, reportedly including Jordan’s King Abdullah, have urged Abbas in recent weeks to thwart Netanyahu’s unilateral annexation gambit by informing the Americans he was prepared to re-engage, Abbas refused to do so, instead suspending security cooperation and intensifying the PA’s anti-Israel diplomacy. He also submitted a “counter-proposal” to the Middle East Quartet — a forum comprising the US, EU, UN and Russia under whose aegis Israel has always refused to negotiate — for a demilitarized Palestinian state. But any credibility in this counter-proposal, whose full details have not yet been publicized, has now been superseded by his new alliance with Hamas, which has never wavered in its opposition to the very fact of Israel’s existence.

Plainly, the Trump administration can put aside any thought of the Palestinian leadership engaging with its Peace to Prosperity vision, notwithstanding US officials’ intermittent assurances that the proposal’s terms are not final, and that the goal is for the Palestinians to come back to the table, where they could propose changes.

It’s Time for the U.S. to Place Conditions on Aid to Lebanon

By Tamara Berens newsweek.com

Don’t bail out Hizballah.

In October 2019, an unprecedented wave of pan-sectarian protests broke out in Lebanon. Individuals of all religious backgrounds—Christians, Druze, Shiite Muslims and Sunni Muslims—denounced rampant sectarianism among the political class, which stands accused of running the country’s affairs at the behest of Iran and Syria and at the expense of the Lebanese people. The Iran-backed terror group Hezbollah—the major political stakeholder in Lebanon—was met with particular indignation from protestors, who chanted “terrorists, terrorists, Hezbollah are terrorists.”

One of the Trump administration’s chief goals in the Middle East is to counter Iranian aggression. It is therefore disappointing to see a tepid reaction by the United States to protests in Lebanon. On the eve of Lebanon’s 100th birthday, the country defaulted on its debt of $1.2 billion. Facing a perilous financial crisis exacerbated by COVID-19, with a 70 percent decline in the value of its currency, Lebanon will look to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a multi-billion-dollar bailout. As Hezbollah tightens its grip on the Lebanese government—Prime Minister Hassan Diabi is backed by Hezbollah and welcomed Hezbollah into his cabinet—it is time for the U.S. to act. The U.S. is the largest contributor to the IMF and separately donates approximately $724 million in direct aid to Lebanese institutions each year. The Trump administration has the duty and the capability to counter Hezbollah’s influence in the country.

Instead, the United States thus far opts to provide unconditional aid to Lebanese institutions that only serve to strengthen Hezbollah’s treacherous activities. Consider the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). The State Department describes U.S. assistance to the LAF—to the tune of $218 million in combined aid in 2019—as “a key component of unconditional aid to Lebanese institutions that only serve to strengthen Hezbollah’s influence in the country.

That leaves Israel with the choice between moving ahead with unilateral annexation, or maintaining the status quo — retaining its security oversight in the West Bank without expanding sovereignty, keeping the moral high ground as the would-be peacemaker open to negotiation, and choosing not to close the door on any future opportunity to separate from the millions of Palestinians. The prime minister has made his choice, and will only be more determined to go ahead with annexation now that Abbas has partnered with Hamas in the effort to deter him. And Abbas has made his choice — not merely rebuffing the Trump administration but overtly realigning the PA and Fatah with terrorism.

We can now expect the US to green light Netanyahu’s annexation plans, and probably sooner rather than later. And we wait to see how much freedom of operation Abbas intends to give to Al-Aroui and his murderous acolytes, or rather how much they will now seize — whether, that is, Israel now faces a new wave of terrorism in and from the West Bank.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his wife Sara meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas during the state funeral of late Israeli president Shimon Peres, held at Mount Herzl in Jerusalem on September 30, 2016. (Amos Ben Gershom/GPO)

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The LAF and the UN Interim Force in Lebanon are jointly charged with enforcing UN Security Council (UNSCR) Resolutions 1559 and 1701, which maintain that all militias in Lebanon should be disarmed and barred from the area between the Litani River and the Blue Line—a stone’s throw from Israel. But since Hezbollah’s bloody conflict with Israel in 2006, under the LAF’s watch it has amassed up to 150,000 rockets, missiles and mortars stationed on the border with Israel for a future war, according to analysis by the Washington Institute for Near East policy. In addition, a recent UN report reveals that the LAF impeded the UN’s access to areas where
Hezbollah is active, under the guise of a phony environmental NGO, Green Without Borders.

"UNSCR 1701 mandates that the UN Interim Force in Lebanon and the LAF work together to prevent any military activity by Hezbollah south of the Litani River," Tony Badran, research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies explains. This partnership has failed. "There is not just military activity, but cross-border military activity, infiltrating into Israel." These cross-border tunnels dug into Israel by Hezbollah are only the beginning.

The notion that the LAF is a reliable agent for securing Lebanon's sovereignty is demonstrably false, Badran says. "If you are a stakeholder—however minor—in the system, the LAF is likely not to move against you unless there is political cover for it to move against you." The LAF is under the control of the Lebanese government, itself in the grasp of Hezbollah. Indeed, there is evidence that the Lebanese military fought alongside Hezbollah in the Syrian Civil War—for example, in battles near Arsal on the border between the two countries.

Any institution that strengthens Hezbollah is in contravention of Lebanon's sovereignty. Upon its inception, Hezbollah pledged allegiance to revolutionary Iran's Imam Khomeini and vowed that there was "no alternative to confrontation" with the United States and Israel, respectively referred to as the "Great Satan" and the "Little Satan." For over four decades, Hezbollah conspired to build a "state within a state" in Lebanon. But now, this paradigm no longer applies. After Qassem Soleimani's death in a U.S. airstrike in January, Hezbollah lined the streets of Beirut with pictures of the slain IRGC-Quds Force commander and unveiled a monument in his honor. Iran is closer than ever to its desired "land bridge" between Tehran and the Mediterranean Sea. The indignation of the Lebanese people is evident from the popular protest slogan: "Here is Lebanon, not Iran."

Some hoped that the LAF would redeem itself by acting as a neutral institution protecting protestors during the ongoing demonstrations. However, according to a November 2019 report by international watchdog Amnesty International, in northern Lebanon, the LAF opened fire against "dozens of protestors staging a sit-in." Two people were "seriously injured by live ammunition," and four were "unlawfully detained for six days by the military."

If the Trump administration is keen not to repeat the mistakes made in the region under President Obama, it should take note of these failings. Obama was idle when it came to civil conflict in Syria, as well as the bloody proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen. He accepted false promises from the Iranian regime in order to secure a flawed nuclear deal for his own political legacy. But among these mistakes was also his reluctance to speak out in support of pro-democracy movements in the region. As the Arab world erupted in grassroots protests against corrupt and power-hungry sectarian governments, Obama's stance was uncertain. He snubbed the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, reportedly even ordering the CIA to sever any relationships with the protestors.

The United States recently passed sanctions on entities that do business with the Syrian regime, which will weaken Hezbollah. But the administration has exhibited indecision in other areas of importance. After apparently deciding to freeze aid to Lebanon in October 2019, Secretary Pompeo quietly released both military and economic assistance to the country a few weeks later—without any explanation.

The U.S. cannot continue to pedal the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity in Lebanon while contributing to Iranian ambitions that violate these promises. In this time of crisis in Lebanon, the U.S. should stand behind Lebanese protestors who are risking their lives to denounce Iranian encroachments on their country. The U.S. must not agree to an IMF bailout or future aid payments to the LAF unless it receives assurances that Hezbollah will not benefit from them. For the sake of both the American national interest and the Lebanese people, we must stop giving unconditional aid to Lebanon.

Ms. Berens is a Krauthammer fellow at Mosaic magazine.

Recent Explosions at Iranian Military Bases Are a Setback for the Ayatollahs’ Nuclear Weapons Quest
By Yoav Limor israelhayom.com July 5, 2020

The shadow war with Israel continues...

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of the damage at the Natanz uranium enrichment facility in Iran: in terms of its severity, how it will affect Iran's nuclear program and the broader implications pertaining to a possible Iranian retaliation against Israel.

The reports emanating from Iran over the past two days are contradictory. Initially, reports said a blast damaged a factory where advanced centrifuges were being tested, and then it was claimed that a cyberattack triggered the blaze. Perhaps we should rely on the credible sources quoted by the New York Times, who said the incident was the result of an explosive device planted at the site.

Assuming the blast was indeed intentional, it would be a tremendous success for the attacker: in terms of the intelligence compiled on the classified facility, knowledge of the activities taking place there, and ability to infiltrate the premises undetected to place a bomb precisely where it would cause maximal damage to the sensitive equipment. The bewildered and hesitant responses from the Iranian authorities not only indicate their astonishment that their secret installation was exposed and damaged, but also their incertitude regarding the attacker's identity and how exactly he was able to succeed.

Even before all the details surrounding the alleged sabotage have emerged, it appears safe to conclude this...
was the worst setback to Iran's nuclear program since its centrifuges were incapacitated in 2010 at the same site at Natanz. It was eventually revealed that those centrifuges were hit in a particularly sophisticated cyberattack via the Stuxnet computer worm. According to foreign reports at the time, the Stuxnet virus was jointly developed by the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate's Unit 8200 and the US National Security Agency. The worm targeted the supervisory control and data acquisition systems for the centrifuges and caused their collapse. The Stuxnet worm was reportedly active for close to a year before it was discovered.

In the most recent attack, centrifuges – ones far more advanced than those ravaged by Stuxnet a decade ago – were again targeted. The Iranians were testing them in preparation for eventually installing them in an underground facility at the site. They were also supposed to shorten Iran's nuclear breakout window.

The latest blow doesn't just disrupt Iran's plan to put these advanced centrifuges to work. It also reveals to the world – yet again – the scope of Iran's investment in its nuclear program as its economy buckles under US sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic, and its policies on these fronts are being met with increasing internal criticism.

Naturally, Tehran pointed its finger at Israel as responsible for the attack. We can assume that Israel has been tracking Iran's accelerated nuclear activity in recent months with a degree of concern. Similar accusations were made the previous week as well, following the explosion at the Parchin military site east of Tehran, although based on the information that incident does appear to have been caused by a technical malfunction. The Natanz blast, on the other hand, appears to be an intentional attack, and as such, Iran could seek revenge.

The quickest way for Iran to harm Israel, if it is in fact behind the attack, is through its proxies in Syria. Although these militias have been degraded recently through a string of airstrikes attributed to Israel, which according to foreign news reports destroyed various weapons systems, it remains likely that similar weapons are still in Syria or can be shipped there in relatively short order.

Over the past two years, Iran and its proxies have targeted Israel on several occasions via rocket or drone attack on the Golan Heights. In each case, Israel's air force was able to intercept the threat before it could cause damage, but there's always a first time for everything. The latest event – and the public accusations of Israel – necessitate, at the very least, raising the alert level in the north as an act of prudence.

Iran has other options for a response; via Hezbollah from Lebanon (unlikely) or by hitting Israeli targets abroad. We can assume that along with seeking revenge and trying to find those physically responsible for carrying out the Natanz attack, the Iranians will also try fixing the breaches in their nuclear defenses. History tells us they will only be partially successful in this regard because time and again their machinations are discovered – and disrupted.

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Will an Extension of Israeli Sovereignty Lead to Violent Unrest in the West Bank?  
By Hillel Frisch  
June 30, 2020  
Unlikely.

Those opposing the extension of Israeli sovereignty over parts of the Jordan Valley warn that the areas controlled by the PA are likely to erupt into widespread Palestinian violence, possibly even on the scale of a full-fledged intifada.

For over 100 years, terrorists and revolutionaries have studied why people rise up against states and state officials. Army officers and police also want an answer to this question so they can determine how to quell such uprisings.

Yet for all the interest, no one has ever determined why mass violence breaks out.

As noted by political philosopher Hannah Arendt, even professional revolutionaries who spend their days and nights trying to foment rebellions are almost always just as surprised as the targeted states when a rebellion actually breaks out.

This was the case for the 1987 intifada. The only common denominator between Israel and the PLO at the time was the surprise both sides experienced at the outbreak and spread of mass violence.

The so-called “Arab Spring” is another excellent example of how surprising these events can be.

The “Arab Spring” began when a young peddler in a peripheral town in Tunisia was fined for blocking the sidewalk with his cart, an infraction that compels pedestrians to walk around them into the street (a dangerous proposition in most third-world countries). The young peddler then immolated himself.

Not only did he burn (a terribly painful death), but so did much of Tunisia. Within four weeks, a dictator who had ruled Tunisia for over 30 years with an iron fist (albeit an able one, judging from Tunisia’s economic performance) fled for his life to Saudi Arabia.

A self-immolation led to the Tunisian revolution, but in the 40 or so self-immolations that followed in Jordan, Algeria, and Morocco, all conducted with the aim of sparking similar revolutions, none succeeded. Those people died in vain.

Why did the repetition of an act that had spurred a wave of revolutionary fervor, repeated at the height of the wave, elicit no response? Herein lies the mystery of when and why citizens rebel. No one really knows what sets off massive waves of protest.

Consider, too, the violent protests that followed the
Prospect of US Retreat from the Middle East Encourages Israel to Extend Sovereignty into West Bank
By Haviv Rettig Gur

The Jewish state is vulnerable without firm control of the Jordan Valley.

Why is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu so keen on annexation? Theories range from the psychological — he’s seeking a legacy — to the political — to distract the public from his corruption trial — to the ideological — he’s an expansionist ideologue empowered by a right-wing American administration.

Some have spoken about the “window of opportunity” represented by the remaining months of the Trump presidency — assuming, as most Israelis do, that Donald Trump is not reelected.

The question is a good one, if only because the downsides of annexation are so glaring and significant. For example, a unilateral annexation will make it harder for Israel’s longtime defenders to continue to insist that the Jewish state seeks peace with intransigent Palestinians. Israel, its detractors will say, was only ever interested in expanding its hold in the West Bank and has no intention of letting the Palestinians live free of Israeli control.

That sudden advantage for the anti-Israel side could have a real effect: hurting Israel’s diplomatic standing and weakening its regional alliances, International Criminal Court investigations of some Israeli officials, political isolation and even the threat of economic or diplomatic sanctions, a prospect made more dire by an economy already ravaged by the coronavirus.

Given the high potential costs, none of the usual run of explanations seems adequate. Even the “window of opportunity” theory is hard to understand. An annexation amounts to an Israeli declaration about the status of some territory. Trump may recognize that declaration, but would a President Joe Biden uphold that recognition in six short months? And if the latter does not recognize the declaration, what has Israel achieved by making it? Does it matter that even the Trump White House seems less than thrilled?

Netanyahu has done an exceedingly poor job explaining his thinking, which may be responsible for the proliferation of theories trying to explain it. There’s also the fact that his insistence on such a dramatic step is wildly out of character for the prime minister, who has built his
reputation and much of his popularity over the last decade on his overriding caution in matters of land, peace and war.

If the benefits seem elusive and the potential costs high, why now? Why pursue a policy so vehemently opposed by many Democrats and now so closely identified with a Republican administration unlikely to survive the November race?

‘Crumbling before our eyes’

When Israeli defense planners who support an annexation move talk about a “window of opportunity” in Washington, they mean something larger than the expected end of the Trump presidency. There is a fear that America itself is in retreat, and with it a global order that could be relied upon to ensure some measure of stability and security for a small country like Israel.

“American hegemony is crumbling before our eyes,” said Dr. Eran Lerman, a prominent conservative defense thinker who supports the annexation plan, when asked by The Times of Israel this week why Netanyahu seemed so bent on the idea. Lerman is a grizzled veteran of such Israeli debates and an important voice in the conservative camp. After 20 years as a top analyst in Israel’s military intelligence directorate, Col. (res.) Lerman became a deputy national security adviser to Netanyahu and the National Security Council’s point man on foreign policy. He is now vice president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS).

It is hard to exaggerate the effect that the sense of American retreat has on Israeli thinking. Even if the rumors of general American decline are exaggerated or premature, Washington’s retreat is more acutely felt in the Middle East because of the American pivot toward the Pacific and the strategic challenge of China. That is, the retreat here — the drawdown of troops and capabilities from the Middle East and Mediterranean and a growing unwillingness to engage and police — is a willful strategic choice. Neither a Republican nor a Democratic administration is likely to re-prioritize the Middle East in the foreseeable future.

A great deal of annexation’s downsides amount to possible fallout in international legal and diplomatic forums, from the UN to the European Union to the ICC. A lot of the underlying divide within Israel over the annexation is rooted in the debate about the relevance of those institutions sans American power.

As Lerman quipped, the rules that western European states ask Israel to follow “are in force only in western Europe.” The strategic choices Israel faces are not those of France, Germany or Britain.

In broad terms, this skeptical view holds that the global order is shaped by power, and a happy accident of history — the overwhelming power of the United States in the wake of WWII — imposed a thin veneer of moralizing legalisms on an international system still essentially ruled by hard power. That’s how Americans like to conduct their foreign policy: everything America does in the world must be couched in moral terms.

Yet this moralizing is little more than a story told by the powerful about their power; it doesn’t drive American policymaking. A hint at that fact might be gleaned from the watershed moment in the construction of the modern global order of international law and norms: the Nuremberg trials of leading Nazis in 1946. The trials claimed to set a new moral standard for international conduct — but they could only set them in a military tribunal imposed on a defeated Germany by a triumphant conqueror. It was not law or justice that defeated the Axis, it was carpet bombing and nuclear strikes.

This isn’t an academic exercise. Strip American power away from the idea of “international law” and a great deal starts to come apart at the seams. A handful of lawyers and activists threatening to sit in judgment of small wayward nations while the Chinese juggernaut operates “reeducation” camps for millions with impunity does not an international legal order make. That’s not a defense of any particular small wayward nation, only an indictment of the pretense behind international legal institutions. One of the essential elements at the heart of “law” is not merely enforcement, but equal enforcement. If the powerful need not obey, then demanding obedience from the weak isn’t “law,” it’s servitude. Law must also deliver protection; an international legal enforcement system that cannot protect is hard-pressed to make costly demands on the national security decisions of those it will not save from an enemy’s wrath.

The better world that emerged after World War II, this view argues, is an outgrowth of American power, nothing more. Genocides were stopped not when the world’s conscience was pricked, but when American power swung into action. The safe and open seaways, the stable international financial order — all these global public goods have stood on the necessary foundations of American hard power, and could not have existed without it.

Similarly, the European Union trumpets its “soft” power, but has proven over the past decade it could not influence a Syrian civil war in which it has vital interests and which would drive millions of refugees into its borders. Soft power is a fine thing. Israel desires a role in European scientific research agreements and “Mediterranean dialogue” initiatives as much as any small Mediterranean nation. But it is no replacement for hard power of the sort that could ensure a small nation’s safety as enemies multiply. Western Europe’s talk of its “soft” power sounds to the ears of many Israelis as a way to avoid noticing the fact that Western Europe spent the second half of the 20th century, including the terrifying years of the Cold War, comfortably ensconced behind an enormous and expensive American defense umbrella. Europe was protected by hard power, just not its own.

It isn’t surprising that Americans and other Westerners
sought to clothe the era of American power with the veneer of “law” and “norms.” There’s nothing new in superpowers interpreting their management of the world as a mantle of moral leadership. In all the centuries of the Roman Empire’s brutal expansions, the Roman state never stopped insisting that every conquest and every genocide was a defensive act. Americans at least had better reasons than Romans to believe their moral narratives.

In the end, a certain type of Israeli defense planner argues, while the niceties of international diplomacy and law should be respected, they cannot be relied upon as a defense strategy. As American power recedes, the idea that one can rely on international norms for safety — that Israel should plan for a better world rather than a worse one — recedes with it.

**Dangers multiply**

That’s especially true in the Middle East, where the withdrawal of Pax Americana leaves only dangers in its wake.

A Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated regime in Turkey is on the march in Syria and asserting new maritime rights in the eastern Mediterranean. Iran is briefly contained — primarily by America and by the weaknesses of its own regime. But remove America, lift the sanctions reimposed by the Trump White House, and the Shiite axis Tehran has constructed from Lebanon to Yemen is, at least in the short term, contained no more. Russia has moved into the region, as has China with its forward base in Djibouti.

This point is argued by Israeli defense planners on both sides of the annexation debate. The anti-annexationists say a dangerous region and a retreating America require bolstering alliances with conservative Sunni states like Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Annexation only makes that more difficult.

But the same vulnerability lends a new importance to the West Bank. A withdrawal from the Jordan Valley, say most Israeli defense planners, now becomes impossible to justify. A vacuum of Israeli security control in the West Bank would be used by rising enemies from Ankara to Tehran — and their proxies and ideological compatriots in Hamas, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad — to directly threaten the Israeli heartland of the coastal plain.

In other words, an Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley grows more distant as US power recedes. It isn’t Trump’s “window of opportunity” that drives Netanyahu’s thinking, but what some are calling a “window of necessity” forged by a US retreat that began long before the Trump administration. Ironically, a Biden presidency may delay the Israeli effort to lay formal claim to the Jordan Valley — and thus permanent overall security control over the West Bank as a whole — but it won’t weaken it. If Biden continues the trend of the Obama and Trump administrations in seeking to draw down American commitments overseas, he will only strengthen that Israeli resolve.

**Jordanian fears**

The conservative Israeli view of the world has its answers to the many criticisms leveled at the annexation plan.

It won’t undermine regional alliances, or at least not the ones that matter, says this camp. For the two states most vociferously and publicly opposed to the annexation, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, the alliance with Israel is a “supreme interest,” said Lerman.

“I think [Israeli control over] the Jordan Valley is important to our security, to Palestinian security — and to Jordanian security,” he argued.

That’s not a flippant comment. Since 1970, when Israeli warplanes overflew a Syrian invasion force headed toward Jordan and forced it to retreat, Jordan has in many ways been under de facto Israeli military protection. An Israeli withdrawal from the Jordan Valley leaves a glaring gap in the Jordanian perimeter, a perimeter that already includes long stretches of porous border with splintered Iraq and war-torn Syria. The alliance with Israel isn’t warm, but it doesn’t have to be. Both countries have too much at stake to worry about such niceties. A Jordan desperate for Israel to continue holding and securing its western flank should not be taken too seriously as it postures against Israel declaring that hold, so vital for Jordan itself, permanent.

**Putting the car on the road**

Annexation offers one final strategic advantage, say proponents.

“In two panels on annexation at [think tanks] JISS and INSS, we reached the same conclusion. The idea of applying Israeli law [in the West Bank] puts the [Trump plan] car on the road,” said Lerman.

That is, it transforms a theoretical plan into an operational one.

“Suddenly we saw the Palestinians wanting to go back to the negotiating table. It made the Trump plan the Israeli centrist plan. It shifted our own politics from opposing poles to a new center.”

The key point, yet again, is a question of power. “Where the Israeli consensus goes, that has resilience,” Lerman believes. If most Europeans imagine one border in the West Bank but most Israelis believe they need a different border, which is more likely to be the final result on the ground?

US President Donald Trump (center) meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (second from left) alongside Israeli Ambassador to the US Ron Dermer (left), US Vice President Mike Pence, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (2nd right) and White House adviser Jared Kushner (right) in the Oval Office of the White House on January 27, 2020. (Saul Loeb/AFP)

The Trump plan is vague. Critics, including in Israel, have assailed it from all sides. But it nevertheless provides a number of basic Israeli needs that have become vital truths for most Israelis, including control of the large settlement blocs and of the Jordan Valley.
This domestic political support is another kind of “window of opportunity.” The very existence of such a favorable plan has become a vehicle within the Israeli debate for advancing the sort of delineated defensive border that, its supporters feel, a dangerous new world demands. The debate between the pro- and anti-annexation camp, at least within mainstream Israeli discourse, isn’t about the merits of retaining Israeli control of the Jordan Valley. It is about the timing for doing so.

How Palestinian Schools Erase Palestinian Christians
By Khalil Sayegh and George Goss providencemag.com July 2, 2020

Crusaders, infidels, and foreigners.

Seventy-six percent of Palestinian Christians gave the Palestinian Authority (PA) failing marks for how schools teach the history of Christians, according to a recent survey commissioned by The Philos Project.

“Palestine has a long, rich history of Palestinian Christians,” said Khalil Sayegh, a Christian from Gaza and Philos Advocacy Fellow. “The Palestinian textbooks and curriculum, however, just choose to deny all of that.”

Sayegh shared his insights during a June 17 online discussion with Robert Nicholson, executive director of The Philos Project, and Dr. Khalil Shikaki of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), who conducted the survey.

Christians are a dwindling minority, accounting for a mere 1 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the comprehensive survey examines challenges this religious minority faces, including Israeli settlements and the PA educational system. The survey has a sample size of 995 with a margin of error of +/- 3 percent.

“The history that we learn [in school] starts with the Islamic conquest of the land,” Sayegh said. “Anything before will focus on the pre-Israelite era. I understand that. It’s trying to deny the narrative of the Torah and biblical history because this, to a certain extent, is used to justify the existence of Israel. However, this leads to Palestinian Christians looking like foreigners.”

Crusader, infidel, and foreigner are all epithets Sayegh experienced in grade school. And the survey revealed he was not the only Christian in the Palestinian Territories who had the same experience. Twenty-seven percent said that they have been exposed to racist curses or epithets, and 43 percent said that they feel most Muslims do not want them in the land.

Taught by his secular-minded father that Christians have little that distinguishes them from Muslims, Sayegh learned in school that they do. One teacher warned him of hellfire if he did not convert to Islam. While only 23 percent of those surveyed admitted to being asked to convert to Islam, 70 percent said they had at one time heard a Muslim state that Christians will go to hellfire.

So why now, when the diplomatic fallout could be so grave?

The answer for Netanyahu and his camp within the Israeli defense community: We do this now because American power is in retreat; because our enemies are on the rise; because our allies won’t really abandon us, since they need us just as much as we need them; and because if we don’t “put the car on the road” – move from theory to practice on a question of existential significance for our future – no one else will.

Palestinians Muslims who rely on the PA educational system to learn about Christianity may end up seeing Christians as foreign interlopers and crusaders, according to Sayegh. Without references to Christianity as part of schooling, Sayegh added that Palestinian Muslims could fall into the temptation of assuming that the Christians they meet arrived with the crusaders, who are often characterized as “vicious, criminal, and foreign.”

While Sayegh cites the faulty textbooks as significant obstacles for Christian integration into Palestinian society, Shikaki sees them as a way to make things better if appropriately revised.

“Thank you, Khalil, for raising that,” Shikaki said. “What we want to do now is to translate that into a discussion about what needs to be done, which is, first and foremost… for the PA to acknowledge that these are serious issues, and that they exist. I want them to begin with the school textbooks and to do this from first grade all the way up to high school, so that in every year students are able to learn their own history, the history of their own community, Christian and Muslim communities, and not ignore anything.”

Shikaki added that personal testimonies like Sayegh’s are key. “They [Palestinian students] should be able to hear people like Khalil Sayegh tell them his own personal perceptions,” Shikaki said. “What has happened with him personally. And this should be something that happens in schools openly.”

The schools are not the only PA institutions that receive failing marks from the Palestinian Christians surveyed. Two-thirds say that they have little trust in the PA government; trust in the judiciary peaks at 16 percent, and confidence in the police stands at 22 percent.

“I’m really looking for the day when I can share with my Muslim neighbors openly in public, speaking about my own experience,” Sayegh said. “I know I share it with my friends, but I’m looking forward to the day they’ll be able to come to me and say, ‘Come. Share your story.’”

The full survey of Palestinian Christians also reveals other issues, such as a credibility gap facing ecclesiastical leadership (39 percent trust Christian leaders), economic concerns as the main driver of emigration (59 percent), as
well as a growing fear of religious Salafist groups (77 percent).

Now Is Not the Time to Shorten Israelis’ Military Service
By Yoav Limor israelhayom.com

Nor should the Knesset continue to kick the can down the road.

The soldiers inducted into the ranks of the IDF starting Tuesday will be getting a surprise: their compulsory service has been shortened by two months, making their total time in the army 30 months.

It didn't happen out of the blue. The move was well-known and expected, but like everything else in Israel, its execution was dragged out, and when the target date for implementing the decision arrived, July 1, the policy took effect. Now attempts will be made to roll it back, which is why every new inductee had to sign off that he agreed to serve an additional two months if a decision were made to extend compulsory service to 32 months.

Shortened compulsory service is the result of a deal between former Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon and former Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon that set the IDF’s budget for the term of the previous chief of staff, Lt. Gen. (res.) Gadi Eizenkot, and made it possible for the military to move ahead with its Gideon multi-year work plan. The plan reduced compulsory service for men from 36 to 32 months, starting in the summer of 2015, and called for another two months to be shaved off starting in July 2020.

The Finance Ministry pushed for the decision because it wanted to bring young workers into the job market, which would lead to faster growth and boost the nation’s GDP. The ministry presented estimates showing that the move could be worth a billion shekels a year to the economy. Prior to the coronavirus crisis, when unemployment was negative and there was a lack of workers, it made sense, especially when the IDF itself admitted that it didn’t need all soldiers to spend a full three years in mandatory service.

At the time the decision was made, the IDF was worried that it could hurt its combat units. It takes time to train troops who serve in tanks or in the Shayetet; shortening the training would hurt the troops, whereas shortening their service would affect the amount of time they could be of use. The solution? "Extra compulsory service" for some 3,000 soldiers in specific positions (members of elite and commando units, as well as certain roles in various other branches) that would continue for an extra four months. For those four months, the soldiers would receive pay equivalent to what career army personnel at their ranks earn.

It wasn't a perfect solution. It also forced to IDF to open more roles to women so it could release men from combat positions. In addition to the drop in motivation for combat service and the rise in soldiers being discharged early for mental health reasons, the IDF has found itself fighting to keep up its quotas. Some combat units have had difficulty filling all their positions.

The IDF is concerned that the additional reduction to compulsory service that has now taken effect will make these problems worse. The extra-service mechanism is slated to expire next year, but even if it is extended, it might not be enough to plug all the holes. The problem is particularly acute in three sectors: combat, tech roles, and specific jobs such as reconnaissance. Everyone else – drivers, clerks, logistics workers, can be discharged early, but the three aforementioned sectors could be severely, and adversely, affected by the cut.

Eizenkot, who supported another reduction to compulsory service, thought that adding more extra service would make up the shortage. Most soldiers discharged from compulsory service would go to work, and the ones who stayed would sign off ahead of time and be paid fairly for every extra day. Even today, there are some IDF officials who think that this is a reasonable solution to the problem, mainly because it allows the IDF to dump less vital personnel and keep the soldiers it needs.

"There is no reason for us to hold onto three administration people we won't need for every one combat soldier," a high-ranking official said this week.

Current Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi thinks differently. His objection to another cut to compulsory service rests mainly to do with the shortage of combat troops (Kochavi believes that combat units should be overstaffed to 108%, to allow for a surplus during wartime), but he has other reasons, too. The way he sees it, unless a mechanism is put in place to compensate those who serve longer, the people who do the most will suffer for it, and this could hurt the ethos of equal service throughout the army of the people, and what's more – decrease motivation to serve at all, let alone in the most demanding roles.

There are other ramifications to shortening mandatory service, including the concern that reservists will have to be called up to cover the shortage of troops and concern about the military's day-to-day functioning. The IDF currently holds three annual drafts, and training drills and operations are scheduled around them. The previous four-month reduction to compulsory service allowed this framework to remain in place, but the latest two-month reduction demands new solutions because it changes the service times for all soldiers.

The IDF sees the financial aspect as minor compared to these issues. Soldiers on compulsory service are already "cheap" in terms of what they are paid, and do not comprise an undue burden on the military's budget.
According to one senior officer, the previous four-month reduction to compulsory service was supposed to be a contribution to the economy, not the army. But that was only true before coronavirus hit. Now, with over a million unemployed, it's not certain that the Treasury will want to see soldiers discharged two months earlier than planned because rather than helping generate money, they will need to be paid unemployment benefits.

Luckily for the IDF, coronavirus has postponed most of the current draft round to August. The General Staff is hoping that by then, a solution will be found that will reverse the decision. They blame the situation coming down to the wire on the political reality of the past year: three elections, a year and a half of a transition government without a budget and unable to make decisions, and too slow a response to this issue now.

Former defense ministers Avigdor Lieberman and Naftali Bennett opposed cutting the length of compulsory service. Current Defense Minister Benny Gantz supports it, but as part of a more complex approach that will include mandatory civil service for everyone. He believes that every young person should serve their country. The IDF doesn't need everyone, so something else must be found.

Gantz thinks that the IDF should choose whom it needs, for service of varying lengths for which they will be paid accordingly. The rest of the country's youth can serve in other ways: with Magen David Adom, with the Fire and Rescue Services, in hospitals, or in their communities. Thus the principle of equality will remain in place, and the same righteous young people who opt for more difficult or dangerous service will be paid more.

It's doubtful whether, given the Israeli political reality, a just solution can be reached in the short time remaining until the August draft. It's more likely that a decision will be made to freeze things temporarily, which would require agreements with the Treasury at an especially difficult time for the economy. It's a shame, because for every possible reason – security, economics, values – it is time that Israel decides what it wants from its military and from those who serve in it, and what it is willing to do to make it happen.

The Dangers of Turkey’s Anti-Western Adventurism

By Jonathan Spyer  
jpost.com  
From Somalia to Iraq, Ankara supports Islamists.

Turkish forces are at the present time bolstering newly constructed outposts in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Turks have established five positions on mountainous terrain near the villages of Shanarish and Banka, in the Zakho area adjoining the border with Turkey, since commencing an operation in the area in mid-June. Troops have been transported in by helicopter to man the new positions.

This is the latest phase in an operation that has brought the Turkish Armed Forces 30 km. inside Iraqi Kurdish territory. Operation Claw Tiger was launched on June 17, following Turkish air attacks on targets Ankara had identified as associated with the PKK at a number of sites in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG)-controlled area. The areas destroyed in the airstrikes included a number of Yazidi villages in the Mount Sinjar area. A refugee camp at Makhmur was also targeted.

Elements of the 1st and 5th Commando Brigades, both elite Turkish airborne formations, are taking part in the operation on the ground. Iranian artillery shelled the Choman area of the Qandil Mountains on June 16, in a move widely interpreted as supportive of the Turkish offensive.

Despite the considerable dimensions of the current offensive, Kurdish sources do not consider that it represents the beginning of a long-awaited general Turkish attempt to destroy the PKK in Qandil.

Rather, they see it as continuing an established pattern of ongoing Turkish operations in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, conducted without inquiry as to the wishes of the local Kurdish authorities, and intended to establish a widening Turkish military infrastructure-buffer zone in the area adjoining the border.

July 2, 2020

Turkish media reports largely concur. According to a recent article in the Hurriyet newspaper, 12 permanent observation posts had already been established in the KRG-controlled area since 2016. Hurriyet quoted Turkish security officials who depicted the PKK as seeking to establish a corridor for its forces on the Iranian border in Sulaimaniya province, via Sinjar, to the Kurdish-controlled area in northeast Syria.

Ankara considers the YPG (People’s Protection Units), which is the main force in northeast Syria, to be a franchise of the PKK. The Turkish operation, according to Hurriyet, is intended to break this corridor. It should be noted that the current deployment of Turkish forces is not sufficiently deep to cut any such notional line.

The Turkish newspaper likened the current effort to previous Turkish operations in northern Syria in 2016 and 2019 which resulted in Turkish occupation of two noncontiguous blocs of territory along the Syrian-Turkish border.

Kurdish sources, meanwhile, suggest an additional, domestic political motivation for the current operation. They note the dire state of the Turkish economy, and the consequent loss of public support, indicated in a number of recent polls, for the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party and its main ally, the far-right Nationalist Action Party. According to this perspective, the Turkish operation is intended to rally the government’s political base and to distract from socioeconomic failure.

This element notwithstanding, Operation Claw Tiger fits into an arc of Turkish military assertiveness currently extending from northern Iraq, across northern Syria, going down via the Mediterranean and via Israel, and reaching...
Effort to shore up this enclave and ensure its semi-pouring money and forces into northwest Syria, in an ethnic cleansing of Kurds has taken place. But Turkey is now remaining. In Afrin a large-scale ethnic domain. This is not only about opposing Kurdish aspirations. It is about establishing a part of Syria intended permanence. This is not only about opposing Kurdish remnants.

They are now engaged in Libya, fighting against the Libyan National Army of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. SADAT, incidentally, is currently also involved in training Sunni Islamist forces loyal to the Government of National Accord in Libya. The Africa Intelligence website and Asharq al-Awsat newspaper reported this week that the Turkish company has signed an agreement to this end with Security Side, a Libyan security company headed by one Fawzi Abu Kattaf, a Palestinian Hamas and Muslim Brotherhood supporter with close ties to Qatar.

What does this flurry of overt and semi-covert Turkish regional military assertion amount to? Can a common theme be established?

In Syria and Iraq, obviously, Ankara is, on the face of it, challenging its old PKK enemy. But there are additional layers. Erdogan was first to support the Syrian Sunni Arab insurgency. He has proved its last and most faithful ally. Western states, discouraged by the insurgency’s Islamist and jihadi nature, peeled away from it years ago. Turkey, untroubled by these loyalties because it shares them, has remained.

The enclaves in northern Syria do serve to bisect the area of Kurdish control, and in Afrin a large-scale ethnic cleansing of Kurds has taken place. But Turkey is now pouring money and forces into northwest Syria, in an effort to shore up this enclave and ensure its semipermanence. This is not only about opposing Kurdish aspirations. It is about establishing a part of Syria intended to be forever Turkish (and Sunni Islamist).

In Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, Erdogan wants to lay claim to the cause of recovering al-Aqsa from non-Muslim custodianship. Covert military support to Hamas runs alongside active soft power efforts. These are managed by the government aid agency TİKA. Tens of millions of dollars are spent each year, via projects such as the Turkish Culture Center on Hashalshelet Street in Jerusalem’s Old City.

In the Mediterranean, the interests, of course, are related to Turkey’s need for gas supplies. But the bald assertiveness of laying claim, together with the client government in Tripoli, to a massive swath of the Eastern Mediterranean and thus stymieing plans by Israel, Greece and Cyprus to pipe gas to Europe has the additional advantage for Turkey of depicting itself as the regional dominant force.

In Libya, finally, again geostrategic and ideological aspects coincide: the government of Fayez al-Sarraj is kept in place by Muslim Brotherhood-associated forces. He represents a last remnant of the hoped-for alliance which Erdogan had thought to lead, before the military coup in Egypt of 2013, the departure of the Ennahda Party from power in Tunisia and the revival of Bashar Assad’s fortunes in Syria.

So, all the way from Zakho province in northwest Iraq to Tripoli on Libya’s African coast, Turkey is flexing its muscles.

It is an independent, ambitious foreign policy, with not the slightest nod to the “pro-Western” and “pro-NATO” orientation that Turkey’s Western apologists like to recall. It has its origin in a combination of nationalist assertiveness, tinged with Ottoman-era nostalgia, and the ambitions of Muslim Brotherhood-style Sunni political Islam.

This is a potent mix, which is not required to place itself before the judgment of the Turkish voter until 2023. As of now, its main impact is an arc of destabilization, stretching across land and sea from Iraq to Libya.

Mr. Spyer, director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, is the author of Days of the Fall: A Reporter’s Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars.

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**Ilhan Omar’s New Book: More Questions Than Answers on Scandals**

**By Alex VanNess**

clarionproject.org

Congresswoman Ilhan Omar’s new book, *This is What America Looks Like: My Journey From Refugee to Congresswoman*, is both gripping and controversial.

Already, questions have arisen as to whether she complied with House ethics rules, which prohibit House members from receiving book advances.

The memoir recounts her life story starting from her early childhood in Mogadishu, Somalia. She relates her harrowing journey as a refugee, escaping her war-town homeland and eventually arriving in America.

Her first days in America were filled with disgust and disappointment at the sight of garbage and the homeless in New York City. “This isn’t America,” a young Omar exclaimed.

She tells how her first years in America were filled with getting into fights and spending most of sixth grade in detention. Her high school years were apparently far less violent.

It was also during high school, at the age of 16, that she met her first husband, Ahmed Hirsi, two years...
her senior.

In a statement she made in 2016 before she was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, she said that in 2002 when she was 19, she and Hirsi (whom she called the “love of my life”) applied for a marriage license, “but we never finalized the application and thus were never legally married.”

“The idea of two people confining themselves in a legal and social construct because they entered into the metaphysical state of love always struck me as bizarre,” Omar writes regarding the concept of marriage.

She and Hirsi remained together for the next six years, during which time they had two children together, before splitting up (for the first time).

In 2009, she married Ahmed Nur Said Elmi, a man alleged to be her brother. Accusations that she married Elmi so that he could immigrate to America have swirled around for years. The FBI even got involved in investigating this possible immigration fraud.

Omar previously stated that their relationship “ended in 2011 and we divorced in our faith tradition.” Their legal divorce did not happen until 2017 when she filed the papers.

Meanwhile, Omar and Hirsi reconciled, had another child together and were legally married in 2018 shortly before Omar entered the U.S. Congress as the representative of the 5th district in Minnesota.

Omar recently divorced Hirsi and married her longtime political consultant Tim Mynett, after weathering documentation that the two had been having an affair for quite a while.

Omar’s love life has, understandably, been filled with long-running allegations of misconduct that have yet to see resolution (legal or otherwise). Thus, one would expect that there would be a section in her book providing new and detailed information to debunk these scandals.

Her coverage, however, was far from comprehensive.

In the book, Omar claims that during that period of her life when she split from Hirsi (the first time), she had a “Britney Spears-style meltdown,” which included her shaving her head as well as eloping with Elmi.

She writes that they were together for such a short amount of time that she “wouldn’t even make him a footnote in [her] story” if it weren’t for all the allegations surrounding the marriage.

Later in the book, Omar spends some time trying to dismiss the accusations — mainly by attacking the platform where they first appeared, saying that those who first accused her “would have gone to the Star Tribune with it. Not the Somali Spot” if they were true.

Various fact checkers, including Snopes and PolitiFact, have been unable to dispel these charges, and while Omar denies them, she adds no new details to prove her position.

Omar highlights in the book her meteoric rise to political stardom. Starting as a volunteer on the Minnesota state senate campaign of Mohamud Noor, Omar later joined multiple Democrat causes in the state.

Eventually she was elected to the state legislature, beating out an incumbent of over 40 years and gaining a spot in the party’s leadership.

She recounts what led her to run for Congress after spending less than one term in the state house. She describes a phone call with Keith Ellison, who reached out to suggest that she run for his seat which he was leaving to run for the state’s attorney general.

Trying to dispel rumors that she hates Israel and the Jewish people, she writes about her infamous “It’s all about the Benjamins baby” tweet, where she engaged in antisemitic tropes and suggested that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) is bribing lawmakers to be pro-Israel.

She highlights her apology for the tweet — “You can’t take away the past; you can only add to the narrative,” writes Omar – yet portrays it as a onetime event from which people should just move on.

However, she conveniently forgets that:

- In 2012, she tweeted that Israel had “hypnotized the world.”
- She regularly promotes the antisemitic Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement.
- Has invoked duel loyalty tropes and accused American Jews of “allegiance to a foreign country.”
- Along with fellow member of “The Squad” Rashida Tlaib, she planned a trip to Israel and Palestinian controlled territories in conjunction with the group Miftah, a group that published a blood libel accusing Jews of using the blood of Christians to make matzos and republishing an article claiming Jews control the news media.

Overall, Omar’s memoir is interesting and gripping, and if you knew nothing about her — her antisemitism, campaign finance issues and marital scandals — you would most likely walk away being enamored with her. But that is kind of the goal.

Mr. VanNess is a Research Analyst for the Clarion Intelligence Network and Principal at the Carmine Strategic Intelligence Group.

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Lucy Dawidowicz: Dispassionate Historian and Bold Defender of Jewish Interests
By Harvey Klehr
mosaicmagazine.com

An engaging and revelatory new biography is a necessary reminder of the Jewish historian’s important place among 20th-century American intellectuals.
In any given generation, there are only a handful of thinkers who can cogently challenge every unthinking piety and every conventional foolishness that passes for wisdom, and yet are neither cranks nor curmudgeons. For post–World War II American Jewry, Lucy Dawidowicz was just such a figure; and rarer still, she was at the same time a rigorous and gifted historian. She witnessed and chronicled the last year of Jewish Vilna, helped return one of the greatest collections of Jewish books and documents to Jewish hands, aided Jewish refugees in post–war Europe, wrote one of the landmark accounts of the Holocaust, and anticipated many of the ideas of the neoconservative movement.

Dawidowicz’s unorthodox perspectives stemmed in part from a fierce independence of thought, and in part from her exposure during her formative years to the rich mental world of East European Jewry and the time she spent in Europe just before and just after the Holocaust. Now, in a new biography From Left to Right: Lucy Dawidowicz, the New York Intellectuals, and the Politics of the Jewish History, Nancy Sinkoff, a professor at Rutgers University, tells the story of Dawidowicz’s intellectual evolution.

Like many of the New York intellectuals lionized in scholarly and popular accounts, Dawidowicz was born in an economically precarious immigrant family in the Bronx, just before World War I. She attended New York’s free public colleges, in her case, Hunter. And she was immersed in the world of socialism. By the time she died in 1990 at the age of seventy-five, she had written several books that had attracted wide attention, most notably The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe (1967) and The War against the Jews, 1933–1945 (1975), and published more than 50 articles in Commentary on themes ranging from American Jewish politics to the role of religion in American life.

Notwithstanding this rich intellectual legacy, Dawidowicz has been largely ignored in accounts of her generation of Jewish thinkers. In Sinkoff’s view, she “lacked the academic pedigree, the universalist bona fides, and the requisite ‘feminine capital’ to be accepted into the inner circle” of the New York intellectuals for many years. As Sinkoff shows, this omission is undeserved. Not only does her subject’s scholarly work remain necessary reading for layman and expert alike, but her trenchant observations of the contemporary American Jewish scene are strikingly relevant for American Jewry today.

In contrast to the liberal cosmopolitanism of her contemporaries, she emphasized Jewish particularity and continuity, and had a gnawing skepticism about the consequences of the Enlightenment—not to mention socialism or mid-century American liberalism—for the survival of the Jews.

Not until the rise of the New Left in the 1970s and the new anti-Semitism and hostility to Israel it engendered did her focus on Jews attract the attention of her peers. But that very particularity put her at odds with a new sensibility taking root among American intellectuals that downplayed the uniqueness of the Holocaust, redefined Jews as “whites” who had benefited from, and even contributed to, American racism, and insisted on comparing Israel to Nazi Germany. Her refusal to yield an inch to such arguments cost her many old friends and allowed others to dismiss her singular contributions.

Dawidowicz’s political journey, from a flirtation with the Young Communist League while in college to the milieu of Jewish socialism, then to New Deal liberalism and finally to support for Ronald Reagan, was similar to that of several of her friends. Yet, as Sinkoff documents, her experiences in Eastern Europe on the eve of World War II and in occupied Germany in its aftermath, not the radical eruptions of the New Left in the late 1960s and early 1970s, were the raw material that enabled her to articulate themes that would later come to be called neoconservatism.

Sinkoff credits Dawidowicz’s childhood immersion in the Sholem Aleichem schools, camps, and youth movement—vibrant, socialist-tinged, secular, and Yiddishist—with inoculating her against Communism. She was selected to study for a year in Vilna (then Polish Wilno, now Lithuanian Vilnius) at the headquarters of the Jewish Research Institute, better known as YIVO, and set off in August 1938. Studying for a year in the heart of the Ashkenazi Jewish world in the moment before its destruction, she experienced directly both the virulent anti-Semitism of Polish society and the desperate efforts of Jewish intellectuals to preserve Jewish national cohesion in the face of attacks from both a nationalist right that regarded the Jews as an existential challenge to national identity, and a Communist left that saw them as impediments to international solidarity.

For the next 50 years, she would wage an unrelenting battle against the two totalitarian ideologies that could not abide a thriving independent Jewish presence: the first, a hideous direct assault on Jewish lives motivated by racial anti-Semitism and the second, a universalistic demand that Jews abandon their culture and religion.

She left Poland just days after war broke out, travelling by train through Germany and boarding a boat for America on September 16, 1939, a week after the Red Army had occupied Vilna. Working for YIVO in New York during the war, she and her coworkers were focused on the fate of friends and colleagues caught in Poland. Many did not survive, and those who did “had lost children, wives, parents, their dearest friends.” Among them was her future husband Szymon, whose first wife and two children perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. But Dawidowicz chafed at being treated more as a clerk than to, American racism, and insisted on comparing Israel to Nazi Germany. Her refusal to yield an inch to such arguments cost her many old friends and allowed others to dismiss her singular contributions.

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In 1946 Dawidowicz went to Germany to work with Jewish refugees for the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Among those she aided were passengers on the Exodus, a ship filled with concentration-camp survivors attempting to evade the British blockade of Palestine, who were turned back and interned in Germany. But much of her time was spent trying to get portions of the YIVO archives and library recovered from Nazi storage facilities repatriated to New York. Her doggedness and refusal to kowtow to Allied occupation officials and competing supplicants for the material were essential to the eventual transfer of the bulk of it to YIVO’s new library and archive in New York. Despite her crucial role in this endeavor, YIVO leaders conspicuously avoided giving her credit, and Sinkoff confesses puzzlement about the snub.

From 1949 to 1969 she worked as a researcher at the American Jewish Committee (AJC), where she developed strong attachments to Milton Himmelfarb, Nathan Perlmutter, and Norman Podhoretz, all of whom would later share her growing unease with the comfortable liberal, secular assumptions that characterized the organized Jewish community for two decades after the end of the war.

Anti-Communism was one of her core commitments. Afraid that the perception that Jews favored Communism would encourage anti-Semitism—just as it had in Europe—Dawidowicz, with her expertise in Yiddish, led the AJC’s battle to isolate the Yiddish-speaking Communists, fought efforts in the Jewish community to defend the Rosenbergs, and publicized all manifestation of Soviet anti-Semitism. Sinkoff ably summarizes the concerns in the American Jewish community about the Rosenberg case and credits Davidowicz with accurately analyzing their guilt and their own responsibility for their death sentences, since they preferred to be martyrs. In a rare misstatement, however, Sinkoff adds that their co-defendant, Morton Sobell, pleaded guilty and received a lesser sentence. He did not, and escaped the death penalty largely because he was not implicated in atomic espionage.

Her second research focus was black-Jewish relations. While the AJC allied with other liberal organizations to oppose segregation, ensure voting rights, improve economic conditions, and provide better housing and schools for American blacks, Dawidowicz’s careful studies and reports for the organization warned that issues surrounding affirmative action, quotas, and school integration were creating tensions between the two minorities, while the growth of black nationalism was bringing anti-Semitic rhetoric into the public domain and the growing violence in American cities after 1965 was threatening Jewish safety.

Still another issue of concern was the role of religion in American life. While the AJC, like many Jewish organizations, had applauded the idea of an iron wall between church and state, Dawidowicz had growing reservations about the wisdom of such a position—once quipping that she “would prefer to see a crèche on West 42nd Street than to look at what’s there now”—even as she was assailed by doubts that the secular Yiddish culture in which she had been immersed for all her life could ensure a viable Jewish future.

It was not a new worry. As far back as her year in Vilna, one of her mentors there had been doubtful that secularism and Yiddish would be enough to sustain Jewish continuity. American Jews, she concluded, were losing their connection to Jewish culture and the Jewish past. The secular culture on which she was raised had myriad connections to Judaism. Even as they rejected religion, secular Jews were still nourished by Judaism’s language, rituals, and historical culture. But, after a generation or two, with the roots shriveled, she feared the plant would die. As she put it, with her characteristically pungent prose:

We have witnessed the rise and fall of at least two generations of Jewish secularists. They have lived off the capital of traditional Judaism and have by now exhausted their patrimony. It may be my own idiosyncratic view, but I believe that it is no longer sufficient to be a Jew just by supporting Israel (though that is a sine qua non for being a good Jew) or by being sentimental about Yiddish or by attending a bagels-and-lox UJA meeting.

That insight led Dawidowicz to embrace Judaism, regularly attend an Orthodox synagogue, and keep a kosher home, even as her husband remained a steadfast secular Bundist. He consented to their holding a two-person seder, but resolutely refused to attend communal religious services. How they successfully navigated such basic disagreements remains a mystery—a fact that Sinkoff attributes to Dawidowicz carefully guarding her privacy. Their devotion to one another never slackened, and she tenderly cared for him until his death from stomach cancer in 1979.

Her first book and her growing reputation as a public intellectual led to her leaving the AJC for a chaired professorship at Stern College of Yeshiva University, where she soon began to teach one of the first courses on the Holocaust in American higher education. The War against the Jews, her seminal book on the subject, took issue with the dominant academic interpretation of the Holocaust that saw the eradication of the Jews as a byproduct of Nazi totalitarianism. In sharp contrast to the political scientist Raul Hillberg and the philosopher Hannah Arendt—who saw an impersonal state embracing genocide for largely bureaucratic reasons—Dawidowicz emphasized Hitler’s ideological fervor and insisted that his chief aim in World War II was to destroy Jews at all costs.

Precisely because she came to her study of the Holocaust from a deep devotion to European Jewish civilization, Dawidowicz was unspiring in her criticism of those who attempted to blame Jewish leaders, either in Europe or the United States, for their actions or inactions. Some members of the Jewish councils in occupied Europe might well have behaved badly, she argued, but their
reaction to an unprecedented catastrophe deserved empathy and understanding. She was particularly harsh about Arendt, whose scorn for East European Jews permeated her widely read account of Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem that argued the Jews had collaborated in their own destruction.

Dawidowicz was also scornful of efforts to romanticize East European Jewish life such as Fiddler on the Roof, insisting that the popular musical contributed to the misconception that it was “forever frozen in utter piety and utter poverty,” and ignored just how remarkably variegated Jewish civilization in Eastern Europe was. Among other points she made was that the easy identification of Jews with liberal values was a vast oversimplification of the complexity of East European Jewry. With her anthology The Golden Tradition, she provides a powerful corrective, allowing this lost Jewish world—from proto-Zionist intellectuals to hasidic journalists to secular Yiddishist polemicists—to speak to an English-language audience in its own voices.

Dawidowicz was engaged in virtually every controversy that roiled the Jewish community beginning in the 1960s. As Sinkoff shows, she was fiercely independent and unafraid to stand alone. She was the only member of the 34-person Holocaust Commission established by President Carter and chaired by Elie Wiesel to refuse to sign the final report. Her resignation from the Commission was prompted by a concern that efforts to universalize the Holocaust and equate the non-Jewish victims of World War II with the campaign to exterminate Jews distorted what had happened.

Her conclusions, often controversial, sometimes were mistaken. Her experiences in Europe had left her with a lifelong suspicion of populist movements, and an appreciation for the decisions of Jews to turn to legal authorities for assistance. Together with her admiration for Franklin Roosevelt, this inclination led her to attack harshly the efforts of Peter Bergson to press FDR into doing more to save European Jews and to defend Rabbi Stephen Wise, accused of allowing his friendship with the president to mute his own voice. While Sinkoff defends Dawidowicz, noting that she was correct about the relative powerlessness of the American Jewish community, she errs in claiming that her defense of FDR “has also been largely accepted by the most recent books on the subject.”

The most recent, by Rafael Medoff, makes a powerful case that the president so beloved by American Jews harbored nasty anti-Semitic views that influenced some of his key decisions, costing many Jewish lives.

By the late 1980s Dawidowicz had abandoned a projected account of Jewish life in America for which she had accumulated copious research notes. She was instead engaged in completing her haunting account of her years in Europe, From That Time and Place: A Memoir, 1938-1947, published in 1989, just a year before her death. Her reflections on her approach to writing this book say much about her attitude to her work as a whole:

In trying to bridge that abyss between past and present, the memoirist is obliged to arm himself against sentimentality, to guard against nostalgia. I was constantly aware of the desire to idealize that destroyed world, but I tried to discipline myself to portray Vilna as it was, without retouching, without removing the warts and blotches of historical reality.

At the same time, she insisted that “it was indeed possible, in writing about one’s own people, for a historian both to maintain critical objectivity and to hold fast to an inner perspective, an empathetic understanding of their trials and travails, their passions and ambitions.” It was her constant effort to walk this tightrope between the rigors of scholarship and her personal investment in the fate of the Jews that was the source of Dawidowicz’s genius. In one essay, she asked “What is the use of Jewish history?” Her writings themselves might be the best answer.

Sinkoff’s engaging and revelatory biography is a reminder of Lucy Dawidowicz’s important place among 20th-century American intellectuals. She may have been forgotten by intellectual historians, but her works should, and hopefully will, continue to find their place on the shelves of those who care for the truths of the Jewish past and who want to strengthen the prospects of the Jewish future.

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