A government signing checks won’t bring economic rehabilitation.

At least 800,000 Israelis are unemployed, with more added to the rolls each day. Over 1,000 virus carriers are now being discovered daily as the government contemplates drastic new lockdown measures. A NIS 100 billion ($29 billion) emergency recovery and stimulus package pieced together by panicked politicians is set to begin disbursement this coming week, adding to a NIS 80 billion ($23 billion) one launched two months ago. Both offer only a short-lived resuscitation for the faltering economy as 2020 drags through its seventh month without a separate budget law for 2021 to be passed by February. The recovery spending may be a desperately needed cushion for tens of thousands of businesses and hundreds of thousands of newly unemployed, but it won’t deal effectively with the fallout from the virus or replace the careful rebalancing of national priorities that the country needs and that only a full-fledged budget law allows. A government signing checks isn’t a sustainable model for stemming the bleeding and managing an economic rehabilitation.

Yet that desperately needed state budget bill isn’t advancing. It’s stuck in a political stalemate that saw its presentation to the government delayed twice over the past week. It was originally scheduled to be presented to the cabinet last Thursday, July 9. That was pushed to Sunday, then pushed again to next Thursday. Officials refused to commit over the weekend to July 16 as the new deadline.

The delays are not in themselves a crisis. A week’s delay is no terrible setback for a stupendously complex state budget bill reaching into the NIS 400 billion ($116 billion) range. The trouble with the delay is its cause: Treasury officials are done hashing out the numbers, but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz don’t trust one another enough to bring an agreed-upon bill to a cabinet vote.

What they want, and why

Netanyahu is demanding a one-year budget to cover the immediate problems presented by 2020, with a separate budget law for 2021 to be passed by February. Gantz is insisting on a two-year budget, as stipulated by the coalition agreement between Likud and Blue and White signed in April. Gantz has rejected the argument repeatedly, even after the Finance Ministry’s chief Shaul Meridor, Director General Keren Terner-Eyal and Accountant General Roni Hizkiyahu all concurred with Netanyahu.

But Gantz has a point too.

Gantz’s problem with the one-year budget is technical — but also fundamental. The coalition agreement states that if the government is toppled before Gantz gets to serve as prime minister, then Gantz takes over automatically as premier for the duration of the interim government until election day. It’s a stipulation meant to ensure Netanyahu doesn’t topple the government early to prevent Gantz from becoming prime minister, as it would hand Gantz the premier’s chair in such a scenario. But that automatic rotation is canceled, the agreement states, if Gantz himself topples the government by failing to vote for the state budget. Reducing the budget law from two years to one grants Netanyahu an exit ramp from his agreement; he need only pick a fight with Gantz over the 2021 budget.

Even if Gantz believes the finance officials, he’s suspicious at Netanyahu’s sudden good fortune. So, too, are Netanyahu’s allies in Likud and in the Haredi parties.

On Thursday, Shas leader Aryeh Deri, fearful of new elections that might delay the budget law, and with it delay desperately needed funds for Haredi seminaries and schools, reportedly shouted at Netanyahu during a call that he’s “pushing for new elections” and hung up on him. It was an unusual sign of tension between Netanyahu and his Haredi allies, made even more significant by the fact that Shas leaked the report about the call.

The trouble with an election

Gantz doesn’t want an election. If he fails to survive politically until November 2021 and take his seat as prime minister, his political legacy will be short and ignominious: he’ll be the man who broke up the most successful anti-Netanyahu coalition in a decade, and for what? But if he survives and becomes premier, he instantly transforms himself into the most viable contender to rally the center and left for the next election cycle – and vindicates the hard political compromises he made to sit in a government
with Netanyahu. He'll be the man who at long last, with infinite patience and political sacrifice, finally unseated Netanyahu.

Netanyahu doesn't want an election. He'd win, according to all polls since April. Israeli voting patterns show a consistent advantage to force of habit. A new MK who survives into their second term is quite likely to survive to a fifth. Most don't survive that first reelection. It's not very different with prime ministers; Ariel Sharon won a second term in 2003, and his popularity grew steadily even as his policies changed sharply.

Yet victory in an Israeli election is a function of coalition-building, not just personal success. Netanyahu's Likud might win 36 seats (according to a Channel 12 poll last week), more than twice the next-largest faction, but a right-wing coalition as a whole wins just 64 seats, not very far ahead of the 61-vote minimum majority in the 120-seat Knesset required to win the election.

All forecasts say Israel's economic situation is only going to worsen in the coming months, and Netanyahu doesn't want a referendum on his rule just when that crisis may be peaking.

The solution
How do you square the circle? How does one secure for Gantz the assurances given to him in the coalition agreement while allowing the one-year budget urged by the economists?

The answer is simple, and has already been proposed to Netanyahu by Aryeh Deri: As the one-year budget bill advances, pass another law that gives Gantz the interim premiership — the same protection he has if Netanyahu topples the government for a non-budget reason — if the 2021 budget fails.

Gantz, too, has a simple solution, though it may create problems down the road. Pass the two-year budget on paper, but with the stipulations and requirements of the 2020 budget, then immediately set to work passing an amendment to correct the 2021 portion of the law. That way, the budget has passed, the political crisis avoided down the road, and a second 2021 bill can put in place what an original 2021 budget law would have instituted.

The technicalities here can be significant. A budget law for 2021 that doesn’t reflect appropriate policies for 2021 could hurt Israel’s credit rating. And as 2020 teaches, it’s never wise to rely on any new budget law passing easily through the Knesset. Deri’s solution is probably the wiser economically, even if Gantz’s is more likely to offer political stability.

Protesters scuffle with police after a demonstration calling for financial support from the government amid the coronavirus crisis in Tel Aviv on July 11, 2020 (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

Why, then, is the fight continuing?
Why is Blue and White refusing the urging of the treasury, and even of the wholly independent Bank of Israel, for a one-year budget, and declining, too, the Deri-proposed (and Haredi-backed) change to the interim government law?

“Netanyahu is pushing with all his might for elections,” a Blue and White official told Channel 12 late last week. He called the recovery package a populist stand-in for the budget law that proves elections are coming — “throwing money at citizens in order to break up the government by March.” And he noted, correctly, that “even the Haredim know Netanyahu’s pushing for elections,” or at least suspect as much.

Likud retorted on Thursday: “All economists agree that Israel needs a one-year budget now, and immediately. While the prime minister works around the clock to create this budget alongside the coronavirus financial aid package, Blue and White is torpedoing it for political reasons.”

Not quite. Likud’s complaint was true until Deri brought his proposal to the table.

Plenty of time?
Why is Netanyahu sticking to his guns and refusing to offer the stabilizing concession that Gantz is demanding — a concession, after all, that would merely see him fulfilling his written commitments to Gantz in the coalition agreement?

Could it be that Netanyahu simply wants Gantz to stay suspicious, to keep him permanently off-guard? Netanyahu’s political needs didn’t create the one-year budget, but he’s not above taking advantage of it to play another round of petty politics.

And why is Gantz willing to push ahead with a two-year budget, which is politically sensible but, say all the experts, bad economic policy at a time when the nation needs good economic policy more than ever?

Negotiators between Likud and Blue and White say neither side wants elections. But each is willing to delay a desperately needed budget law — not so they can debate looming cuts to welfare or defense, nor over fears of a runaway deficit, but as a political maneuver. They have time, they feel. After all, the deadline for a first Knesset vote doesn’t come up till August 25. That’s six weeks away.

Meanwhile, the Bank of Israel last week updated its forecast for 2020 to negative 6% growth, the steepest shrinking of Israel’s economy in the country’s history.

China Emerges as Iran’s Biggest Defender
By Mark Dubowitz and Richard Goldberg

Israelis need to wake up to the Chinese threat.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently called on the United Nations Security Council to reimpose, or “snapback,” international sanctions and restrictions on the Islamic Republic of Iran – a terror-sponsoring regime that seeks to wipe Israel off the map.
Just as the prime minister was speaking, another country was addressing the Security Council in defense of Iran: the People’s Republic of China.

Most Israelis would be shocked to learn this. According to a December 2019 Pew research poll, 66 percent of Israelis hold a favorable opinion of China against 25 percent who hold an unfavorable view.

As support for the Chinese Communist Party plummets worldwide, Israel is one of only nine countries where positive views of Beijing recently increased.

Sino-Israeli comity is particularly evident in the economic sphere: China accounts for roughly 10 to 15 percent of the Israeli economy. Sino-Israeli trade stood at $15.3 billion in 2018, an almost 4,400 percent increase in real dollar terms since 1992.

Admittedly, other American allies have strong ties to China. Chinese trade with Germany, for example, stood at $231 billion in 2018, an almost 2,000 percent increase in real dollar terms since 1992.

But trade hasn’t made Beijing popular in Deutschland. Only 34 percent of Germans, according to the same Pew poll, hold a favorable view of China compared to 56 percent that do not. This is one of the lowest favorability ratings for China in Europe.

Something apart from commerce might be at play. Israelis love Asian culture. After their mandatory military service, many young Israelis backpack through Asia, including in China.

They bring back stories of the Middle Kingdom and how much Israelis and Jews are admired there. That stands in stark contrast to Europe where anti-Semitic attacks have soared and Israelis are often treated with hostility.

Less romantic Israelis, attuned to the vagaries of power politics, worry about America’s desire to leave the Middle East. They believe that Western Europe has already turned against Israel.

They have thus adopted a hedging strategy that includes ties with Beijing and Moscow, hoping this can translate into greater influence in a multipolar world. This would be particularly important in countering Iran.

But for any Israeli who fears a nuclear-armed Iran with advanced ballistic and cruise missiles capable of bringing a second Holocaust, China’s full-throated defense of the Islamic Republic should set off alarm bells.

Speaking at the virtual UN Security Council meeting, China’s ambassador Zhang Jun emphasized that the fatally-flawed Iran nuclear deal “is legally-binding and should be effectively implemented.”

He opposed any attempt to extend the arms embargo on Iran that is scheduled to expire this October. He vowed that China would not recognize attempts by the United States to “snapback” UN sanctions.

Even more shocking: Zhang defended recent Iranian space launches, which the United States, Europe and Israel all know are part of Iran’s development of long-range ballistic missiles. China endorsed the launches as purely commercial and scientific in nature.

China’s continued illicit barter transactions with Iran, including the import of Iranian oil in violation of U.S. sanctions, explains much of this. But, despite offers from Saudi Arabia to replace every barrel of Iranian crude, China has opted to keep the Islamic Republic and the Iran nuclear deal afloat. The question for every Israeli should be, “why?”

The answer: China stands to benefit from the expiration of sanctions on Iran. A Pentagon report warns that China (and Russia) are set to sell Iran fighter jets, battle tanks, attack helicopters, and modern naval capabilities once the UN arms embargo expires.

When missile restrictions expire in 2023, China’s long-time illicit transfers of missile-related parts will become robust and overt commercial trade. If past is prologue, Tehran will share these capabilities with its terrorist proxies like the Lebanese Hezbollah, Shiite militias in Iraq, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen.

China has already incorporated Iran into its global Belt and Road Initiative to build a transportation, energy, and communications network running from China through Central Asia and the Middle East into Europe. In fact, some reports traced Iran’s coronavirus outbreak to a Chinese infrastructure project in Qom.

Even amidst a widening pandemic, direct flights flew daily between Iran and several cities throughout China, due to pressure from Beijing. China now sees the legalized arms trade as the logical next step in its expanding this relationship.

If China embraces and protects the world’s most anti-Semitic regime – even arming it with weapons to attack the world’s only Jewish State – perhaps it’s time for Israelis to reexamine ties with Beijing. Does the People’s Republic have Israel’s best interests at heart, or is Israel a pawn on the chess board to achieve Beijing’s global ambitions?

The United States has finally grasped the threats posed by the Chinese Communist Party. Flooding them with cash and integrating them into the global economy made China’s leaders rich, but not moderate.

Israel may have had good intentions in strengthening financial and other ties. But now, Israelis need to abandon their delusions: China is supporting the Islamic Republic of Iran, a revolutionary regime that denies the Holocaust and is building the weapons to bring about another one. This is Israel’s wakeup call.

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Better to Undermine Iran’s Nuclear Program Than to Conclude Another Bad Deal

By Eli Lake

The lesson of recent explosions.

Whoever wins the U.S. presidency in November, there is a good chance he will try to negotiate a stronger nuclear deal with Iran in 2021. But events of the last few weeks show that there are better ways to frustrate the regime’s nuclear ambitions.

Both President Donald Trump and his Democratic rival, Joe Biden, favor talking with Iran. “I would rejoin the agreement and use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies to strengthen and extend it,” Biden told the New York Times last winter. Trump, meanwhile, was on Twitter last month urging Iran to “make the Big deal.”

The logic of a deal goes like this: Except for war, the only sustainable way to prevent Iran from getting nuclear weapons is to reach an agreement with its leaders. That has been the basic assumption underlying U.S. nuclear policy on Iran for the last 20 years. With the right mix of carrots and sticks, the thinking goes, Iran will negotiate away a potential nuclear weapon.

But a nuclear deal with Iran would have to rely on a partnership with a regime that oppresses its citizens, preys on its neighbors, supports terrorism on three continents and has shown contempt for international law. And the alternative to a deal is not necessarily a costly and dangerous war. The West can delay and foil Iran’s nuclear ambitions by other means.

Since late June, explosions have rocked at least three Iranian military facilities. The latest appears to have targeted an underground research facility for chemical weapons. Earlier this month, a building at Iran’s Natanz centrifuge site burst into flames.

Much remains unknown about this latest spate of explosions. A relatively new group calling itself “Homeland Panthers” has claimed credit for the attack on Natanz. Iranian officials have blamed it on Israel. David Albright, the former nuclear inspector and founder of the Institute for Science and International Security, told me his organization — which has studied satellite imagery of the facility before and after the explosion — cannot rule out that it was an accident. But “it looks more like a deliberate act,” he said.

There are several good reasons to think all of this was an act of Israeli sabotage. To start, the Israelis have done this kind of thing before. In the early 2010s, Israel’s Mossad conducted a series of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. Before that, Israel and the U.S. cooperated on a cyberattack on Natanz that sped up its centrifuges, causing them to break down.

More recently, Israeli spies broke into a Tehran warehouse and stole a technical archive of Iran’s nuclear program, demonstrating that they have “human networks that have penetrated Iran’s security structure,” said David Wurmser, a national security expert who most recently worked as an adviser to the National Security Council.

Whoever is responsible for the attack — and to be clear, the Iranians say they are prepared to retaliate against Israel, though they have yet to do so — the damage at Natanz alone has significantly set back Iran’s nuclear program. The facility there was an assembly center for more advanced and efficient centrifuges, which Iran was allowed to produce under the flawed 2015 deal. “This was a crown jewel of their program,” Albright said.

And the damage may be to more than just the centrifuges — it could also destabilize the Iranian regime itself. “The more Iran’s government looks impotent, and the impression is left the Israelis are everywhere, the more high-level Iranian officials will calibrate their survival by cooperating with Americans or Israelis, which itself creates an intelligence bonanza,” Wurmser said.

The attacks could also undermine the regime’s legitimacy among the Iranian public more generally. Sabotage of this sort shows that Iran’s leaders are not nearly as powerful and all-knowing as they say.

At the very least, the fact that someone was able to explode a “crown jewel” of Iran’s nuclear program should make clear that the civilized world can delay Iran’s nuclear ambitions without conferring legitimacy to the regime.

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Israel Can Do Much to Help Diaspora Jewry, While Spending Little

By Caroline Glick

Starting with education.

At Sunday’s government meeting, Israel’s elected leaders demonstrated their commitment to helping Jewish communities in the Diaspora. The government overwhelmingly approved a plan presented by the Diaspora Affairs Ministry to strengthen the connection between the State of Israel and Jewish communities around the world.

Diaspora Affairs Minister Omer Yankelevich heralded the move saying, “The government decision represents an acceptance of responsibility for the Jewish people, as Israel is obligated to do from the Declaration of Independence to the Nation-State Law. The framework that was approved enables us to build a stable strategic plan for the long term that won’t be dependent on the make-up of future governments.”

To be clear, as the largest and strongest Jewish community in the world, Israel is duty-bound to help the Jews of the Diaspora. Just as Jews worldwide poured their passion and money into helping Israel when it was young and vulnerable, today, Israel is morally obligated to return the favor. Between the steep rise of anti-Semitic violence and harassment from all sides of the political spectrum and the worldwide economic recession spawned by the
coronavirus pandemic, the survival of Jewish communities abroad is threatened in ways never seen before.

Having settled the issue of whether Israel should help Diaspora communities by approving the framework presented by the Diaspora Affairs Ministry Sunday, the question the government now needs to answer now is how should it help them?

The framework decision approved Sunday provides little guidance. The 10-page decision is heavy on platitudes but empty of substance. The Diaspora Affairs Ministry's press release praising the decision said that future government programs will focus on: "Formal and informal education, activities in Israel, tikun olam, innovation and technology, assessment and measurements, and common goals."

The government decision itself emphasized the need to cultivate an "honest and true partnership" with Diaspora communities.

For all their vacuousness, the ministry press release and the government decision point to two potential problems moving forward. They should be put on the table and dealt with now, before they put Israel in a position where it commits to programs that do more harm than good.

The first warning light is the ministry's inclusion of "tikun olam," as one of the main focuses of government efforts. Today, "tikun olam," or "repairing the world," is a verbal hologram. It can mean anything you want it to mean.

In classical Jewish texts, the goal of "repairing the world" is to bring about universal recognition of God's kingdom among all nations of the world ushering the Messianic age complete with the return of all Jews to Israel and acceptance of God's dominion by all humanity.

For some Jews, "tikun olam" boils down to giving charity.

But today the term "tikun olam" as most widely understood means something completely different from either its traditional definition or its more mundane conceptualization.

Today, "tikun olam" is not a religious concept so much as a political one. To work towards "tikun olam" is to act in the name of Judaism to achieve the political goals of the ideological left.

In the US, "tikun olam," is presented as the central theme of Jewish identity not to inspire Jews to embrace ritual and religious observance or to move to Israel, but to push them to work on behalf of the ideological – and increasingly revolutionary – Left.

In America today, beyond volunteering in soup kitchens and participating in clothing drives for the poor, "tikun olam" campaigns often involve agitating on behalf of non-enforcement of immigration laws, campaigning for progressive politicians, protesting President Donald Trump, and supporting the revolutionary and structurally anti-Semitic Black Lives Matter movement.

Taken together, the purpose of these campaigns and activities is to redefine Judaism – particularly in the US – as leftism. "Tikun olam" Judaism rejects the particularism of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people in favor of a universalistic vision that is increasingly hostile to traditional Judaism, to Jewish peoplehood and to the Jewish nation-state, Israel.

Given that this is how "tikun olam" is predominantly understood and practiced in the Jewish world today, Israel's announced plan to develop "tikun olam" programs raises the worrying possibility that the government will find itself dedicating public funds to projects that run counter to the public interest.

This brings us to the second problem with the framework that the government approved on Sunday. Which groups and communal leaders does Israel plan to develop "honest and true" partnerships with? Like the problem with "tikun olam," this problem relates primarily to Israel's relations with US Jewish communities.

Today, there are many forces in the United States – both Jewish and non-Jewish – that are investing astronomical sums to radicalize the Jewish community.

With many communities steeped in deep economic crisis, wealthy groups located on the leftmost edge of the political spectrum are becoming powerful actors in the Jewish community. With their deep pockets, they are able to buy massive influence over Jewish communal life. Among other things, groups like Bend the Arc have developed programs to control communities by paying the salaries of rabbis. They control curricula in day schools and Hebrew schools by among other things, requiring them to use materials provided by radical groups and by training teachers and subsidizing their salaries.

The outcry against these subversive efforts has been muted. And the lack of significant outcry among liberal Jews points to a significant problem for Israel. Under the circumstances, any group that Israel partners with will be condemned by someone. If it partners with conservative groups and philanthropists or with Orthodox Jewish outreach organizations, Israel will be condemned by the progressives. If it joins forces with liberal and progressive groups it will be condemned by conservative groups and find itself partnering with organizations and activists that oppose its efforts to strengthen the Zionism and Jewish identity of Diaspora Jewry.

So what is Israel to do?

Israel should develop true and honest partnerships with Jews on the grassroots levels of stressed and weakened Diaspora communities by providing them with services that they need and that Israel is in a position to render. There are three areas where Israel can of greatest assistance: education, religious services, and security.

As the Diaspora Ministry's program points out, particularly in the US, only a tiny minority of Jewish children study in Jewish day schools. High tuition prices
most Jews out of the system. It isn't Israel's job to subsidize Jewish day schools abroad and with Israel itself on the verge of coronavirus-induced economic depression, it couldn't subsidize them even if it wanted to.

But Israel can provide two services which could decrease costs for day schools and so enable them to reduce tuition fees and enable more Jewish families to send their children to Jewish schools.

First, Israel's Education Ministry could develop curricula and publish textbooks and other educational materials for Jewish students in the Diaspora. This wouldn't be a new program.

Decades ago, when Israel was far poorer and weaker, the Education Ministry had a department dedicated to preparing and disseminating curricula and school books for Jewish schoolchildren in the Diaspora. Textbooks included Hebrew language instruction, Jewish history, Israeli history, and religious texts. The time has come to reinstate it in the department.

Second, Israel can provide teachers. Israel has a surfeit of teachers and no problem training more. It could launch a program to train teachers to teach in Diaspora communities for a period of 3-5 years. Such a program could include scholarships in teacher accreditation programs and dedicated training ahead of relocation. Israel can subsidize the teachers' salaries or partner with philanthropists to finance their work abroad. The Diaspora communities could pitch in by providing housing for the teachers and their families and paying at least part of their salaries for the duration of their stay.

Like the production and dissemination of educational materials, by providing teachers -- in everything from Torah to mathematics -- Israel would reduce overhead costs for Jewish day schools and enable them to reduce tuition. Moreover, it would build deep, lasting partnerships and friendships between Israeli and Diaspora Jews.

One of the reasons for the precipitous drop in synagogue membership and ritual observance is costs. Today there are already extraordinary programs in Israel that train young rabbis to serve as community rabbis in Diaspora Jewish communities. The young rabbis and their families move to far-flung communities for five years where they build, organize and serve the communities. The rabbis provide religious leadership and training and religious services like supervising the preparation and sale of kosher food enabling local community members to open kosher restaurants and supermarkets.

The government should support and expand these programs. By sending young Israeli rabbis abroad, Israel will lower synagogue membership costs -- and through them the cost of living Jewish lives. These rabbis and their families will develop strong, lasting grassroots relationships between Israeli Jews and Diaspora Jewry.

The rise in violent attacks on synagogues and Jewish schools, grocery stores and other Jewish institutions worldwide over the past several years has made many Jews fearful of participating in communal life. Israel can and should help Jewish communities to protect themselves by providing them with the means to protect their institutions.

Again, at marginal cost in terms of manpower and financial outlays, Israel can and should provide training for local Jewish security officers and when necessary, provide security officers to protect Jewish institutions from attack.

By every measure, the position of Jewish Diaspora communities is deteriorating. The steep rise in anti-Semitism; the high rates of assimilation and the rising cost of membership in synagogues and tuition costs for Jewish schools amid economic turndowns all contribute to the rapid emptying out of Jewish communities worldwide; the weakening of their ties with Israel and the rise of radical forces within the weakened communities.

The government made a critical decision on Sunday. Israel has to develop and begin implementing a strategic plan to reconnect Diaspora Jewry to Israel and to Judaism. Israel has the professional and human resources to accomplish this vital goal. Given the gravity of the situation, the government must define clear methods and goals now to ensure the success of its efforts.

Promoting Religious Freedom Abroad Shouldn’t Compromise the Fight against Radical Islam

By Brenda Shaffer and Svante Cornell

Better to focus on the most serious culprits.

The Trump Administration has elevated the promotion of international religious freedom to a major component of U.S. foreign policy. President Donald Trump issued an executive order devoting additional resources to this topic and the Administration’s National Security Strategy includes upholding international religious freedom. Unfortunately, when lofty ideas are translated into government policies, they can sometimes prove ineffective or even damaging.

This downside is especially clear in U.S. policies toward promotion of religious freedom in many Muslim-majority countries, such as in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In its policies toward Muslim-majority states, the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the U.S. Department of State advocate for allowance of greater activity of Islamic extremists, many backed by Iran, as part of their promotion of religious freedom. A change in U.S. approaches to international religious freedom, especially in Muslim-populated states, is necessary before Washington dedicates additional resources to the issue.

The U.S. government promotes international religious freedom primarily via three agencies: USCIRF, the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Office led by the State’s Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
Both the USCIRF and the State Department produce annual reports on the state of religious freedom around the globe, categorizing the level of religious freedom in various states. The two reports are published within months of each other and basically mimic one another. Both single out countries which have engaged in or tolerated “particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” and which can be designated “countries of particular concern” similar to such U.S. designations for human trafficking and money-laundering. If designated, various U.S. foreign policy instruments can be applied to attempt to change the violator’s behavior, including U.S. sanctions. Thus, these reports are not just academic exercises, but can have consequences.

While these reports bear the imprimatur of U.S. government publications, the agencies that compile them base a large portion of their reporting on unverified information from various activists, non-governmental organizations, and media. USCIRF and the relevant State Department offices have very small staffs that, as the USCIRF itself acknowledges, clearly cannot independently research the state of religious freedom in every country around the world. For example, the chapters on the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia and Azerbaijan are sourced largely to a very small NGO called Forum 18. Based in Norway but registered for tax purposes in Denmark, it refers to itself as a “Christian initiative.” Still, the U.S. government publications extensively rely on this group’s reporting. Furthermore, the government reports frequently accept at face value reports by activist media groups, such as the Akhbor website in Tajikistan or the Azerbaijani language Meydan TV, and uncritically repeat claims made by self-appointed “human rights defenders.”

Following this lead, the USCIRF and State Department condemn Muslim-majority countries that attempt to combat Islamic extremist and terrorist movements and to counter Iran’s attempts to build influence in neighboring countries. The USCIRF and State Department recent chapters on Azerbaijan, for instance, refer to that country’s actions to combat the Muslim Unity Movement as “repression against believers” and lists jailed combatants as “religious prisoners.” But the movement, which receives Iranian backing and training, has been credibly linked to violence, including the deaths of two policemen; the Iranian regime hosts regular television broadcasts in Qom by a member of the Movement who escaped to Iran and regularly agitates against the West and its secular culture. Is this the type of movement for which American taxpayers should advocate?

The reports likewise criticize Muslim-majority states that do not allow foreign-trained clerics to work in mosques in their countries, oblivious to the intention of these laws, which is to prevent the spread of Iranian and other Middle Eastern extremist networks. Similarly, the reports savage countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, advocating for their inclusion in a special watch list because they mandate government review of imported religious literature. While such measures may smack of government censorship to Americans, they are some of the most important instruments these countries have to stop the spread of extremist ideology. Should the U.S. government really advocate for the full and uninhibited spread of ISIS and Iranian propaganda across Central Asia?

In working to promote international religious freedom, Washington may consider several guidelines. First, focus on the most important cases, such as China and Iran, where religious minorities are killed and imprisoned for their beliefs. For these extraordinary cases and for accuracy in reporting, it would be more useful for the annual reports not to attempt to cover, each year, every country in the world, but to focus on the most extreme violations.

Next, U.S. government publications should only report independently verified information. Reports from embassies abroad should also be verified by the embassies and not just rely on activists’ claims.

Furthermore, while the U.S. government should point out where restrictions on religion are extreme, it should also understand that a part of freedom of religion is the freedom from religion. The right to live a secular lifestyle—for example to not be forced to wear religious dress and follow religious commands—are all part of the freedom of religion. Many secular governments, especially in Muslim-majority countries, walk a fine line in their efforts to protect their societies, especially women and minorities, from religious extremists. At times, they need to limit extremists and their ties to foreign states like Iran in order to preserve the rights of the non-observer. Washington should recognize the importance of these policies as part of preserving freedom and for their contribution to broader U.S. interests.

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Even in the Face of Budget Cuts, Israel Must Maintain Its Ability to Fight a Ground War
By Gai Peri Finkel inss.org.il July 12, 2020
Learning the lesson of the Second Lebanon War.

What sort of campaign is the most important? Is it the ongoing campaign between wars, which in part is designed to prevent war, or is war itself the principal campaign? Is the IDF’s primary task to continue its force buildup and improve readiness in preparation for full-scale war? In
today's region, the opposing sides will usually prefer to stay below the threshold of full-scale war. On the other hand, there are situations that feature a chain of successive responses by the two sides with unforeseen consequences that are likely to culminate in escalation or even war. The IDF must therefore maintain its readiness for both the campaign between wars and for all-out war.

Before the Second Lebanon War, for example, the ground forces' fitness was severely affected by the 2003 budget cut. However, the theory was that the ongoing intensive operations against Palestinian terrorism would preserve the army's operational readiness. This misconception ignored the fact that fighting terrorism is different from what is likely to occur in a campaign like the one in Lebanon. Indeed, the "less than satisfactory" way, as a senior IDF officer put it, that that ground forces operated in the Second Lebanon War demonstrated that neglecting their fitness was a costly decision. The conclusion is that training the ground army for the purpose of maintaining battle fitness for an emergency requires the continuous investment of resources. This conclusion is also supported by the lessons of Operation Protective Edge in the Gaza Strip in 2014, which highlighted the same dilemma, although in a less severe way. The fact that almost the entire regular army taking part in maneuvers fought in this operation was also due to the unfitness of the reserve forces, which did not undergo the necessary training and required a long time to make them combat ready.

There were good explanations for the cuts in both of these cases. The second intifada and the economic crisis on the one hand, and the 2011 social protests on the other, resulted in a decision to cut the defense budget. The IDF, most of whose budget is inflexible and tied to payment of salaries and pensions, regular maintenance, procurement, and force buildup projects, makes cuts where it can, usually in training, based on how it assesses the risk of war.

While the value ascribed to the ground maneuver, which requires a major logistics endeavor and almost always includes casualties, faded, the importance of firepower (mostly precision, but not exclusively) rose. The reasons are obvious: airpower, for example, is available for immediate and defined action on the other side of the border, and its use falls below the war threshold. Airpower makes full use of Israel's technological and military supremacy, and utilizes precision-guided weaponry, which reduces the risk to IDF forces and uninvolved civilians.

The IDF currently possesses very effective firepower and intelligence capabilities for combined operations, and the air force is capable of attacking thousands of targets a day. These capabilities were highly impressive against the threat posed by Hezbollah in 2006 and Hamas in 2014. Then too, however, precision firepower, boosted by timely and accurate intelligence, was not enough. The enemy became accustomed to it and learned to evade it, while continuing to launch missiles and rockets at the Israeli home front. The ground maneuver and firepower did not stop the barrages against the Israeli home front, but they did disrupt and lessen them. The combination of the two is capable of bringing the campaign to a close and leading to a situation in which Israel will be able to force its terms on its enemies – a state of affairs that Israel will seek to maintain for as long as possible.

The use of firepower is essential. It injures and disrupts the enemy's operational capabilities, deprives it of strategic assets, inflicts severe and destructive damage, deters it from another campaign for years, and forces it to invest its resources in repairing the damage. On the other hand, Israel cannot afford the luxury of prolonged campaigns because of the threat to its home front posed by the enemy. Although the fighting should not be halted before Israel's firepower is used in the attacks, Israel should aim at shortening the campaign's duration as much as possible. One of the tools available to the IDF to shorten the campaign is the ground maneuver, because it poses a concrete threat to the enemy's survival and ability to function, and is likely to cause it to terminate the campaign.

What this means is that the army needs supplementary land capability, including regular and reserve forces that can be called up and used as a spearhead in a lightning land campaign that will disable and damage the military power of Hezbollah and Hamas. A ground force composed of combined combat teams smaller in size than those of the IDF's past traditional and awkward structure is needed. The old structure relied mainly on divisions as combat teams. What is needed are brigade-size forces able to move rapidly from theater to theater and conduct raids with speed, flexibility, and tight inter-branch coordination, integrating elements of firepower and intelligence, while initiating direct contact with enemy operatives and conducting effective attacks against them. These forces, which will be based on the ability to process intelligence rapidly, will be able to track down an elusive enemy that makes every effort to avoid direct contact with the army by staying protected in tunnels and bunkers.

The IDF's most recent successful land campaigns were in Operation Defensive Shield, when Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi commanded the Paratroopers Brigade, and Operation Cast Lead, when he was head of the Operations Division of the Operations Directorate. It appears that this experience taught him that a land campaign should aim to destroy the enemy's assets and military power. In his view, "If all you did was reach a certain line without destroying the rockets, anti-tank missiles, and headquarters on the way, the enemy entrenched in the urban area will continue operating as if the land operation or counterattack had no effect on it."

Even in a campaign initiated by the IDF with powerful and impressive firepower, targets lower their signature within a short time, and the enemy vanishes from the battlefield. In order to track down the enemy, attack it, and
bring it to the surface, so that it can be hit with a barrage of firepower, ground maneuver and direct contact with the enemy’s strongholds and hiding places are necessary.

The IDF must now undergo force buildup processes that address a range of scenarios – some of which are already evident – including annexation in the West Bank, a second wave of the coronavirus, an economic recession accompanied by a deep cut in the defense budget, and, as always, the possibility of an outbreak of unrest in the West Bank or a conflict in the Gaza Strip and the northern theater (and possibly both). The multi-year plan will have to create optimal readiness in the army for the various scenarios, while setting in motion force buildup processes for the future and cutting some portions of the budget. Therefore, it would be a mistake to devote most of the investment to intelligence and firepower capabilities, at the cost of preparedness and buildup of ground forces.

The previous multi-year plan, “Gideon,” which was carried out during the term of former Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, emphasized preparedness of the ground forces, “our Achilles’ heel,” as described by Major General Aharon Haliva. During Eisenkot’s term, training of ground forces increased; substantive reform was conducted in the ground forces arm, in which tens of thousands of unneeded soldiers were discharged from reserve duty; and a distinction was made in the fitness of units, with priority being given to the combat brigades, even at the expense of force buildup and procurement. In addition, the IDF’s ability to operate deep in enemy territory was upgraded through the establishment of a commando brigade. The political deadlock of the past year, however, which prevented the creation of a regular budget framework and caused a cut in training (exacerbated by the coronavirus crisis), means that the Achilles’ heel is still a weak point.

By nature, armies are conservative organizations. The fear that the army will have to engage in combat before the change is complete means that the processes of change will be relatively slow, but these must be persistent. Another variable is the inherent tension in force buildup processes between the desire to improve weak points and the desire to strengthen the IDF’s relative advantage. The difficulty in strengthening the ground forces stems from the size of this arm in manpower, combat platforms, and equipment. The cost of consolidating a quality effect is larger and more substantial that that required for procuring precision weapons. The result is that the army will usually choose to strengthen its qualitative advantage. On the other hand, the fact that the regular and reserve land army is shrinking as time goes by makes it possible to strengthen its strike forces, as was done under the Gideon plan.

Because of the expected defense budget cut, the next multi-year plan, “Tnufa” (“Momentum”), should build the most suitable plan for Israel and the challenges before it, and should in effect continue the previous multi-year plan. The threat from both the Gaza Strip and the northern front, which includes a grave threat to the home front from batteries of rockets and missiles and raiding forces designed to penetrate and operate in Israeli territory, requires making the ground forces much quicker, more flexible, and capable of operating on both defense and offense. This joins the necessary enhancement of firepower capabilities and their lethality.

Some of the measures were indeed taken over the past year. In the IDF Southern Command and Northern Command, Major Generals Herzi Halevi and Amir Baram, both originally from the Paratroopers, initiated a series of training maneuvers and threshold tests, so that all the regular and reserve IDF battalions undergo training simulating a campaign in the south and the north. These training maneuvers are important, because, as the Chief of Staff said, “If there is something significant to combat soldiers crossing the border, it is a sense of capability and confidence.” Although the test of fitness is a step in the right direction, a major investment must still be made in the ground forces, because the combination of firepower and an effective and energetic land campaign can shorten the duration of the next conflict, and also achieve a decisive outcome.

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Thomas Chatterton Williams, Wesley Yang, and many others.

But the lessons that ought to have followed the election—lessons about the importance of understanding other Americans, the necessity of resisting tribalism, and the centrality of the free exchange of ideas to a democratic society—have not been learned. Instead, a new consensus has emerged in the press, but perhaps especially at this paper: that truth isn’t a process of collective discovery, but an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else.

Twitter is not on the masthead of The New York Times. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor. As the ethics and mores of that platform have become those of the paper, the paper itself has increasingly become a kind of performance space. Stories are chosen and told in a way to satisfy the narrowest of audiences, rather than to allow a curious public to read about the world and then draw their own conclusions. I was always taught that journalists were charged with writing the first rough draft of history. Now, history itself is one more ephemeral thing molded to fit the needs of a predetermined narrative.

My own forays into Wrongthink have made me the subject of constant bullying by colleagues who disagree with my views. They have called me a Nazi and a racist; I demeaned on company-wide Slack channels where my views are open. Several colleagues have learned to brush off comments about how I’m with my views. They have called me a Nazi and a racist; I demeaned on company - wide Slack channels where my views are open. They never are.

There are terms for all of this: unlawful discrimination, hostile work environment, and constructive discharge. I’m no legal expert. But I know that this is wrong.

I do not understand how you have allowed this kind of behavior to go on inside your company in full view of the paper’s entire staff and the public. And it certainly can’t square how you and other Times leaders have stood by while simultaneously praising me in private for my courage. Showing up for work as a centrist at an American newspaper should not require bravery.

Part of me wishes I could say that my experience was unique. But the truth is that intellectual curiosity—let alone risk-taking—is now a liability at The Times. Why edit something challenging to our readers, or write something bold only to go through the numbing process of making it ideologically kosher, when we can assure ourselves of job security (and clicks) by publishing our 4000th op-ed arguing that Donald Trump is a unique danger to the country and the world? And so self-censorship has become the norm.

What rules that remain at The Times are applied with extreme selectivity. If a person’s ideology is in keeping with the new orthodoxy, they and their work remain unscrutinized. Everyone else lives in fear of the digital thunderdome. Online venom is excused so long as it is directed at the proper targets.

Op - eds that would have easily been published just two years ago would now get an editor or a writer in serious trouble, if not fired. If a piece is perceived as likely to inspire backlash internally or on social media, the editor or writer avoids pitching it. If she feels strongly enough to suggest it, she is quickly steered to safer ground. And if, every now and then, she succeeds in getting a piece published that does not explicitly promote progressive causes, it happens only after every line is carefully massaged, negotiated and cavedat.

It took the paper two days and two jobs to say that the Tom Cotton op - ed “fell short of our standards.” We attached an editor’s note on a travel story about Jaffa shortly after it was published because it “failed to touch on important aspects of Jaffa’s makeup and its history.” But there is still none appended to Cheryl Strayed’s fawning interview with the writer Alice Walker, a proud anti-Semite who believes in lizard Illuminati.

The paper of record is, more and more, the record of those living in a distant galaxy, one whose concerns are profoundly removed from the lives of most people. This is a galaxy in which, to choose just a few recent examples, the Soviet space program is lauded for its “diversity”; the doxxing of teenagers in the name of justice is condoned; and the worst caste systems in human history includes the United States alongside Nazi Germany.

Even now, I am confident that most people at The Times do not hold these views. Yet they are cowed by those who do. Why? Perhaps because they believe the ultimate goal is righteous. Perhaps because they believe that they will be granted protection if they nod along as the coin of our realm—language—is degraded in service to an ever - shifting laundry list of right causes. Perhaps because there are millions of unemployed people in this country and they feel lucky to have a job in a contracting industry.

Or perhaps it is because they know that, nowadays, standing up for principle at the paper does not win plaudits. It puts a target on your back. Too wise to post on Slack, they write to me privately about the “new McCarthyism” that has taken root at the paper of record.

All this bodes ill, especially for independent - minded young writers and editors paying close attention to what they’ll have to do to advance in their careers. Rule One: Speak your mind at your own peril. Rule Two: Never risk commissioning a story that goes against the narrative. Rule Three: Never believe an editor or publisher who urges you to go against the grain. Eventually, the publisher will cave to the mob, the editor will get fired or reassigned, and you’ll be hung out to dry.

For these young writers and editors, there is one consolation. As places like The Times and other once-
great journalistic institutions betray their standards and lose sight of their principles, Americans still hunger for news that is accurate, opinions that are vital, and debate that is sincere. I hear from these people every day. “An independent press is not a liberal ideal or a progressive ideal or a democratic ideal. It’s an American ideal,” you said a few years ago. I couldn’t agree more. America is a great country that deserves a great newspaper.

None of this means that some of the most talented journalists in the world don’t still labor for this newspaper. They do, which is what makes the illiberal environment especially heartbreaking. I will be, as ever, a dedicated reader of their work. But I can no longer do the work that

you brought me here to do—the work that Adolph Ochs described in that famous 1896 statement: “to make of the columns of The New York Times a forum for the consideration of all questions of public importance, and to that end to invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion.”

Ochs’s idea is one of the best I’ve encountered. And I’ve always comforted myself with the notion that the best ideas win out. But ideas cannot win on their own. They need a voice. They need a hearing. Above all, they must be backed by people willing to live by them.

Sincerely,

Bari

Bari Weiss’s resignation letter showed all that’s wrong with modern newsrooms

By Kathleen Parker  washingtonpost.com  July 14, 2020

Bari Weiss’s resignation letter as an opinion editor and writer at the New York Times was a brilliant biopsy of all that’s wrong with the modern newsroom, especially her own, and society more generally—a “cancel culture” that punishes “wrong thinking” and threatens freedom in the most dangerous ways.

If Weiss’s name is unfamiliar to those who avoid the Times, she would understand for the same reasons she decided to leave the newspaper. The cancel culture has resulted, she says, in the intimidation, bullying and sometimes firing of anyone who dares think or speak outside the narrow confines of the new politically correct orthodoxy.

Weiss’s resignation closely follows the June resignation of her boss and editorial page editor James Bennet, who was pushed out after his section published an op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.), in which Cotton advocated using military force to quell violent protests. This was at the height of reaction to the killing of George Floyd, as well as the more generalized embrace of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The Times’s explanation for publishing Cotton’s op-ed, fed in part by complaints by its own staffers, required two days of rumination and two people’s jobs. At first, the Times defended the decision to publish Cotton. Finally, the paper pronounced that Cotton’s op-ed “fell short of our standards.”

How could a newspaper intent on airing differing opinions and diverse voices decide that a sitting U.S. senator’s viewpoint didn’t measure up? Allowing a senator to espouse thoughts one might find objectionable is exactly the point of the op-ed page. The walk-back plainly had less to do with standards and more to do with the simple fact that Cotton thought the “wrong” thing.

As Weiss wrote in her letter to “A.G.,” the Times’s publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, who goes by his first two initials, there may well be many among the Times staff who are as concerned as Weiss about the cancel culture that now has reached America’s most influential newsroom. But they dare not say so in public. “If a person’s ideology is in keeping with the new orthodoxy,” she wrote, “they and their work remain unscrutinized. Everyone else lives in fear of the digital thunderdome. Online venom is excused so long as it is directed at the proper targets.”

When Bennet hired Weiss three years ago to help address the obvious gap between the paper’s 2016 election coverage and the country that elected Donald Trump as president, she was honored and inspired, she wrote.

“But the lessons that ought to have followed the election — lessons about the importance of understanding other Americans, the necessity of resisting tribalism, and the centrality of the free exchange of ideas to a democratic society — have not been learned. Instead, a new consensus has emerged in the press, but perhaps especially at this paper: that truth isn’t a process of collective discovery, but an orthodoxy already known to an enlightened few whose job is to inform everyone else.”

What Weiss, Bennet and others experienced was probably inevitable. I experienced early rumblings of newsroom cancellation in the 1980s when, as a columnist at the Orlando Sentinel, I wrote about feminism’s shortcomings. Judging from the reaction from some colleagues, you’d have thought I was extolling the gustatory rewards of puppy casserole. Younger women created a quiz intended to humiliate me. At the same time, other writers were slipping me notes with ideas for stories they were afraid to pursue themselves.

My offense, of course, was wrongthink, as Weiss labels it. I was a heretic, who, in a future Twitter world, probably would have been burned at the virtual stake. Though my skin today is thicker than a gator’s, thanks to that initiation rite and decades of hate mail, death threats and anonymous social media postings, I’m still grateful for Weiss’s courage and insight into the devolution of journalistic standards, as well as her rebuke of Sulzberger himself: “I do not understand how you have allowed this kind of behavior to go on inside your company in full view of the paper’s entire staff and the public.”

Sulzberger, too, is likely cowed by the wrongthink police. So is corporate America. So are our institutions of higher education. Most have decided it is not worth the
risk of certain punishment to challenge the orthodoxy of the relentless left.

But it is. The alternative is four more years of Trump, who lives in an alternate reality all his own and who in one day can tell more lies than most crooks do in a year. But

**German Intellectuals Rush to Defend a Cameroonian Anti-Semite**

*By Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld*  
*besacenter.org*

**The growing popularity of Holocaust minimization.**

The memory of the Holocaust has been under assault for decades from all sides: the extreme right, the extreme left, and parts of the Islamic world. A common tactic is to assert that the Holocaust was not unique, contrary to the Jewish claim.

Looking at the question on a purely empirical basis, the Holocaust was unambiguously a unique event. While some elements are comparable to other genocides, its combined characteristics are not. Several criteria collectively make the Holocaust an unprecedented event: the totality of the targeting (all Jews everywhere), its priority (all branches of the German state were involved in the effort), its industrial character, and its impracticality (instead of exploiting Jews for labor purposes, they were killed.)

Leading Holocaust philosopher Emil L. Fackenheim noted that the Armenian genocide was confined to the Turkish Empire. And even within that empire, not all Armenians there were targeted—for instance, those living in Jerusalem were spared. Geographical confinement also applies to the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Sudan.

As Fackenheim pointed out, the Nazis, by contrast, set out to exterminate every last Jew on the face of the earth. He said that while the Holocaust does belong to the species “genocide,” the planned and largely executed borderless extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust is without precedent and, thus far at least, without sequel. It is thus entirely appropriate to call it “unique.”

Another Jewish philosopher, David Patterson, extended Fackenheim’s view. Patterson wrote that when comparing the Shoah to other genocides,

I would go even further and insist that the Holocaust is not reducible to a case of genocide, any more than it is reducible to any other historical or political phenomenon, in the strict sense, although it certainly includes those elements. The Nazis set out to annihilate more than a people. …they set out to annihilate a fundamental principle; to obliterate millennia of Jewish teaching and testimony; to destroy the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to eradicate a way of understanding God, world, and humanity embodied by the Jews in particular.

In Germany, the debate on the uniqueness of the Holocaust became an adjunct to the recent Achille Mbembe affair. This public intellectual from Cameroon had been invited to give the keynote address at the German Triennale music festival this August. It then became known that he is an anti-Israel inciter and has been involved in antisemitic acts. A public debate followed that continued despite the cancelation of the festival because of the coronavirus pandemic.

One of a variety of claims against Mbembe was that he compared the Holocaust to apartheid, contending that the only difference between them is scale. Alan Posener, an editor of Die Welt, responded that that claim is fundamentally false: “The Holocaust was not a much bigger form of apartheid, and what is more important apartheid was not a smaller version of the Holocaust. It was not a quantitatively different process but one which was qualitatively dissimilar.”

There is an important secondary element to the Mbembe affair relating to the national memory. Unfortunately, the issue of Germany’s national memory was brought to the fore mainly by people who were doing everything they could to whitewash Mbembe’s antisemitism.

The memory of colonialism was the centerpiece of an open letter signed in May by more than 700 African scholars and artists. The letter was addressed to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. It said: “We, African intellectuals, thinkers, authors and artists condemn without reservation the lying antisemitic accusation of extreme right, hostile to foreigners and right-wing conservative groups in Germany against Professor Achille Mbembe.”

The letter’s first paragraph contained two lies. The first was that Mbembe has never made antisemitic statements, an easily disproven claim. The second was that the accusations against Mbembe came from the extreme right. In fact, the exposure of Mbembe’s antisemitism originated mostly in mainstream sources. The letter ended with the brazen demand that the German antisemitism commissioner, Felix Klein, be fired. Klein had told the truth about Mbembe’s antisemitism even before additional facts about his hate-mongering had come to the fore.

A prominent German whitewasher of Mbembe, Professor Aleida Assman, said in an interview in Die Welt: “Critics see in Mbembe a preacher of hate. I see him on the side of empathy.” This is eminently false. While Mbembe promotes “empathy” and “repairing the world,” he makes no secret of despising Israel and extends it no empathy whatsoever.

In a Deutschland Kultur radio interview on the Mbembe case, Assman admitted that she had a hard time understanding Mbembe due to his abstract philosophical tone, which sometimes turns poetic. She added that she is most interested in Mbembe’s reflections on repairing post-
colonial relationships. Another scholar who came out in support of Mbembe, philosopher Susan Neiman, whose expertise is on memory culture in a global perspective, said, when asked what her takeaway was from Mbembe’s work, that she didn’t know.

Frankfurt ethnology professor Hans Peter Hahn argued that the two experts’ offhand admission that they “haven’t a clue about Mbembe’s theories” reflects the fact that “German intellectuals allow themselves to speak about and for African authors without having read them.”

Philosopher Ingo Elbe has observed that the battle against Israel is being fought vicariously through attacks on German memory culture and its supposed provincialism. As Elbe expresses it, the post-colonial concept of memory has given rise to the false assertion that the emphasis on the uniqueness of the Holocaust creates an indifference to others’ suffering. He adds that victim rivalry must be combatted, and that the claim that Holocaust remembrance unfairly diminishes other memories downplays Black and Muslim antisemitism. It also overlooks specifically Jewish experiences that are sacrificed to a strategy of anti-racist counter-hegemony.

Another attack on the uniqueness of the Holocaust is taking place in international academia. Leading Israeli genocide scholar Israel W. Charny observes: “In the academic world an alternative has developed to the classic ‘sloppy’ denials of the Holocaust. Several scholars now propagate the explicitly false thesis that the Jews were not targeted as victims because they were Jews. What is claimed instead is that they were a minority who were persecuted by the Nazis along with other minorities.”

Charny added,

This kind of specious intellectual juggling has led to outright false statements in several articles in the “respectable” Journal of Genocide Research (JGR). The German case of Holocaust dilution or minimization is not only a German phenomenon. In one article it is claimed that the specifically anti-Jewish Wannsee Conference was not at all motivated by hatred of the Jews, but represented a policy toward European minorities as a whole, despite the fact that it was this conference that cemented the plans for the “Final Solution.”

Charny concludes, “The distorted attitude that the Holocaust is one of many genocides the German Nazi regime committed is a minimization of the basic significance of the Holocaust that a shocking number of bona fide genocide scholars have been promoting.”

There has been an explosion of Holocaust minimization in the past decade. It manifests itself in many ways, including Holocaust inversion (i.e., claiming that Israel acts like the Nazis), denial, deflection, whitewashing, de-judaization, equivalence, and trivialization, as well as other distortions that have emerged in recent years. As long as there are no broad post-Holocaust studies programs anywhere, these abuses of the memory of the Holocaust will have to be tackled one after the other.

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If you see something, send something” – editor