

Why Balkan Embassies Should Matter to Israel

By Lahav Harkov

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Kosovars and Palestinians in fact have little in common.

Israel's recognition of Kosovo on Friday came as somewhat of a surprise, after over a decade of ignoring overtures from Pristina.

When Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008, Jerusalem declined to follow the lead of many of its allies, including the US, in recognizing it. Israel was among other countries involved in territorial disputes, such as Spain, Cyprus and Georgia, in declining to recognize the fledgling Balkan state.

Kosovo offered to open an embassy in Jerusalem in exchange for recognition in 2018, but Israel's official position was that it did not want to risk its strong relationship with Serbia – though plenty of countries that recognize Kosovo still have good ties with Belgrade.

The bigger reason why Israel was wary of ties with Kosovo was because of a concern over setting a precedent for the Palestinians.

Kosovo unilaterally declared independence, and for Israel to support them doing so could be seen as a nod to other countries to recognize a Palestinian state.

Officially, the Palestinian Authority does not recognize Kosovo, with its Ambassador to the UN Riyad Mansour arguing the Palestinians are under a “typical foreign occupation which cannot be compared to the issue of Kosovo.”

But in the immediate aftermath of Kosovo declaring its independence, PA President Mahmoud Abbas's adviser Yasser Abed Rabbo said the Palestinians should unilaterally declare independence, as well.

“Kosovo is not better than us,” he said. “We deserve independence even before Kosovo.”

In practice, the PLO declared a state decades ago, and the PA followed Kosovo's model to unilaterally join numerous international organizations.

Much has been made about US President Donald Trump inserting Israel into a Kosovo-Serbia agreement that really had nothing to do with Israel. It's clear that the signing at the Oval Office of a relatively unmonumental economic agreement between the two countries is part of Trump's election campaign efforts to show he is a dealmaker. And with such a positive response to normalization from Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Trump signaled to his Evangelical base once again that he is a friend of Israel.

Yes, Israel wants to make its greatest ally happy. But that still doesn't answer the question of what this agreement means for Israel and the Palestinians.

What changed on Friday that made Israel give up on this principled position?

Call it diplomatic realism.

The past few weeks have shown that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu believes in the adage that a bird in the hand is better than two in the bush.

First he gave up – temporarily or not, as remains to be seen – on extending Israeli sovereignty to parts of Judea and Samaria, something that was unclear the Trump administration would approve, though, paradoxically, part of their own peace plan.

Instead, Netanyahu went for something concrete that he could gain for Israel immediately, peace with the United Arab Emirates.

Now, Netanyahu once again is giving up on a theoretical benefit – not sending the wrong message – for something Israel wants now, two more embassies in Jerusalem, including the first from a Muslim-majority country.

Admittedly, the “bird in the hand” view of things is one the White House has been pushing. The Trump administration preferred to avoid the international backlash of supporting annexation so close to the presidential election, and went with moves that can present Trump as a peacemaker.

But, as we saw with the Iran deal, Netanyahu knows how to stand up for Israel's interests when he feels they are under threat, even when it means taking on American policies. Which means that in this case, his analysis was that the benefit outweighs the costs.

When it comes to Kosovo setting a precedent for the Palestinians, the damage is already done; “Palestine” is already a member of myriad international organizations.

Plus, there is a key difference between other countries recognizing a Palestinian state at this juncture, and Israel recognizing Kosovo now. The leaders of Kosovo and Serbia were in the same room negotiating with each other, something you could not have said about Netanyahu and Abbas since 2009. Kosovo and Serbia signed agreements to cooperate. It's not a final status agreement, but it's a step in that direction.

Israel can now point out that this agreement included their recognition of Kosovo, which means it's not a unilateral move at all.

And in exchange, Israel gets two more embassies in Jerusalem.

For anyone who shrugs off this move, they can only look at the “concern and regret” of the foreign policy mandarins in Brussels to see that it is enough of a significance to turn the tide in Israel in Kosovo's favor.

Turkey's Increasing Belligerence, and What It Means for Israel

By Yaakov Amidror

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Ankara's aggression towards its neighbors could bring it into conflict with the Jewish state.

Heightening tensions over energy reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, which recently led to a collision between Greek and Turkish warships, have cast renewed attention on Turkey's aggressive regional policy.

The country hosts senior Hamas operatives and allows them to plot terrorist attacks against Israel from Istanbul. It sent troops to Qatar after Doha was accused of supporting terrorism by Arab countries and blockaded. It attacked Kurds in Syria who helped the United States fight ISIS. And it threatened to cut ties with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the recently announced peace deal with Israel—even though Turkey has an embassy in Tel Aviv.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has extended this belligerent approach to the Mediterranean, sending soldiers to war-torn Libya and tipping the scales in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced Government of National Accord (GNA), which is fighting the Egypt and UAE-backed Libyan National Army. He reached a maritime agreement with the GNA to delimit their exclusive economic zones (EEZ), which utterly ignored the rights of Cyprus and Greece—the latter of which is Turkey's NATO ally.

Both countries are threatened by Turkey's attempts to turn swaths of the Mediterranean into the Turkish Sea. Ankara is using this dubious deal to legitimize energy explorations in areas that, by any measure of international maritime law, are Greek and Cypriot economic waters, and is threatening to use its navy against anyone who tries to intervene—even though this would be a gross violation of international law.

This situation is made possible by the weakness of the European Union, which is unable to act unanimously even when member states are confronted by a hostile neighbor and the United States fails to exert its influence. Erdoğan has learned that the use of force pays off unless the other side is willing to respond with greater force—like Israel, for example.

What motivates Turkey? While the country is recovering relatively well from the coronavirus pandemic, it continues suffering from an ongoing economic crisis. Erdoğan appears to feel that his aggressive policies, which are reminiscent of Ottoman behavior, have broad domestic support. He seems to sense the weakness of

other powers in the region, especially the EU, and he wants to expand his country's influence at the expense of others in the Mediterranean—which, without U.S. backing, are left largely defenseless.

The massive intervention of the Turkish army in Libya poses an immediate threat to Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Erdoğan has become the informal leader, is the regime's biggest enemy. There is also real disdain for the Turks in Egypt, which was once under Ottoman rule, and tensions between the parties were acute even before the latest developments. Egypt has thus far refrained from sending troops to counter Turkish influence in Libya, in part due to its current dispute with Ethiopia over the Nile River. Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi must decide what endangers him more and act accordingly.

Aside from a recent statement in support of Greece, Israel has so far not been involved in either conflict. Libya is far from Israel, and Turkey does not threaten to infringe on Israel's EEZ in the Mediterranean. Turkey's claims overlap those of Greece and Cyprus. The friction between Israel and Turkey these days concerns Ankara's support for Hamas, as well as its efforts to gain influence among Palestinians by investing in eastern Jerusalem. When Erdoğan turned the Hagia Sophia back into a mosque, there was talk that the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem was next in line to be liberated—but Turkey has been wary of using force in the Israeli context since the 2010 Mavi Marmara fiasco.

However, Israel has clear plans to connect to Europe via a gas pipeline and power cable that are supposed to pass through Cyprus. Will Turkey try to interfere with these projects, on the basis that they cut into the EEZ that Ankara established with the support of the GNA? That would be a Turkish invitation to a military confrontation with Israel, which will not hesitate to defend its vital interests in the Mediterranean.

Regardless, it seems that the eastern Mediterranean may degenerate into an armed conflict with or without Jerusalem's involvement—an unfortunate reality made possible by European incompetence, American indifference, and unrelenting Turkish aggression.

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Why America Should Seek to Come to Terms with Turkey

By Michael Doran

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A Turkey problem, not an Erdoğan problem.

Even a kerfuffle can reveal a strategic blunder. In December 2019, the New York Times editorial board taped an interview with former Vice President Joe Biden. A segment dealing with US-Turkish relations did not make

the final cut, but eight months later, on August 15, 2020, it surfaced on the internet and sparked outrage in Turkey. Biden was especially critical of Turkey's policies towards the Kurds and Russia, for which, he insisted, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan must “pay a price.” The

United States, he continued, should cultivate “elements of the Turkish leadership” in order to “embolden them...to take on and defeat Erdoğan.” Biden’s words evoked images of an American-sponsored coup d’etat, though he hastened to clarify that he was calling for the Turks to remove their president through an “electoral process.”

İbrahim Kalın, Erdoğan’s spokesman, responded to Biden directly. “The days of ordering Turkey around are over,” he wrote on social media. “But if you still think you can try, be our guest. You will pay the price.” Prominent opposition figures echoed Kalın’s sentiments. These included, most notably, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Istanbul, whom Biden had singled out as the kind of rival to Erdoğan that America should “embolden.” The era of foreign meddling in Turkey’s democracy had ended, İmamoğlu said. “We condemn it.”

Lining up Erdoğan’s greatest rivals in support of him is no mean feat. Turkey is as polarized as America, and Erdoğan’s approval rating is low, hovering just above thirty percent. Still, Biden’s achievement, though impressive, is not unprecedented. Time and again over the last five years, American leaders have demonstrated a talent for unifying the Turks in opposition to the United States while remaining blissfully unaware of the impact of their words. What accounts for this Magoo-like obliviousness?

The answer: a pervasive misdiagnosis of the problem. For years now, the national security community in Washington has told itself a story that, by exaggerating the personal responsibility of Erdoğan for the crisis in US-Turkish relations, blinds it to the truly important factors. The story is laden with moralizing buzzwords: Erdoğan is the new “caliph,” and his “neo-Ottoman” and “Islamist” ambitions, to say nothing of his “authoritarian” and “kleptocratic” character, have set Turkey on a collision course with the United States. Regardless of what one thinks of Erdoğan, his policies that have most enraged Washington—such as launching a military offensive last fall to drive American forces away from the Turkish border or buying the S-400 anti-aircraft system from Russia—have enjoyed very broad domestic support, precisely because the Turkish public reviles the policies of the United States.

In short, America does not have an Erdoğan problem; it has a Turkey problem. And that is a problem largely of its own making.

The prolonged crisis in US-Turkish relations intensified significantly in the fall of 2015, against the backdrop of the Russian-Iranian military offensive in Syria. The primary aim of the campaign was to retake Aleppo, located just forty miles south of the Turkish border. Standing between the Russian-Iranian alliance and its strategic target was Erdoğan, the main foreign backer of the anti-Assad rebels. Which side was the United States on?

Without admitting it publicly, President Obama had long been tilting toward Russia and Iran. Negotiations

over the Iran nuclear deal ended in July 2015. “Implementation Day,” on which the agreement came into full effect, was scheduled for January 16, 2016. Obama regarded this deal as a dramatic new opening to Moscow and Tehran, an initiative that he hoped would grow into a broad strategic accommodation, including cooperation on regional security matters. He intended Syria to be the proving ground of his new style of diplomacy. Turkey’s support for the anti-Assad rebels, however, was pulling the United States in the direction of enmity with the Russian-Iranian alliance. In Syria, Biden had said in 2014 to a group of Harvard students, “our biggest problem [is] our allies.” He explicitly identified Turkey as a problematic actor.

Obama zealously avoided any action that would impede the march of the Russians and the Iranians on Aleppo. Thus, when a Turkish pilot downed a Russian fighter bomber on November 25, Obama did not support Turkey as a NATO ally struggling to contain Russia. Instead, he adopted the pose of a neutral mediator, seeking to help third parties sort out their differences. This impartiality contrasted sharply with the unwavering support that Russian leader Vladimir Putin was giving to his Syrian ally.

At the same time, Washington began to pressure Ankara to seal Turkey’s border with Syria, a step that would cut the supply lines to the rebels in Aleppo. The horrific terrorist attacks carried out by the Islamic State in Paris on November 13 offered Obama an opportunity to twist Erdoğan’s arm. The attacks, which killed some 130 people, generated outrage throughout Europe. In an interview for the Wall Street Journal two weeks after the Paris attack, a senior American official described the message that Obama’s team was sending to the Turkish government. “The game has changed. Enough is enough,” the official said. “The border needs to be sealed. This is an international threat, and it’s all coming out of Syria and it’s coming through Turkish territory.” The official publicly warned Ankara of “significant blowback” from European powers if Turkey failed to close its border entirely.

This public shaming of Turkey helped fix in the European and American mind the image of Erdoğan as a stealthy patron of the Islamic State. To be sure, Erdoğan did not regard the defeat of the Islamic State as a top priority, but that was a mistake that many other leaders had also made—including Obama himself, who once famously dismissed the terrorist organization as “the JV team.” Nevertheless, for Erdoğan and the entire Turkish national-security community in Ankara, Turkey had a different overriding priority in the Syrian civil war: namely, to prevent the rise of Rojava, an autonomous Kurdish statelet run by the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK).

Abdullah Öcalan founded the PKK in 1978. Six years later, he launched a terrorist insurgency with the goal of turning Eastern Turkey into an independent Kurdish state. In the 1980s, Öcalan partnered with the Soviet Union and Syria, which offered him sanctuary and a base from which to harass Turkey. In the late 1990s, the Turks captured and

imprisoned Öcalan, who, thanks to the cultish reverence that his followers accord him, continues to function even from his prison cell as the PKK's ideological guide. The character of Öcalan's movement has shifted over the years, but in one form or another his war has continued down to this day. In total, approximately 40,000 people have died in the conflict.

The disintegration of the Syrian state offered the PKK a new opportunity. Throughout 2013 and 2014, the PKK's Syrian arm, "the Peoples Protection Units," or YPG, established control of the Kurdish cantons all along the Turkish border, proclaiming an autonomous political unit with its capital in Qamishli. Ankara, for its part, regarded this development as profoundly threatening to the territorial integrity of Turkey—and with good reason. The PKK openly presents Rojava as the southern part of a much larger polity that will encompass all of Eastern Turkey. As Kurdish autonomous regions sprang up in Syria, a number of Kurdish towns in Turkey also proclaimed their autonomy.

Historically, the United States has respected the Turkish assessment of the threat. But as Obama negotiated his way through the labyrinth of the Syrian civil war, he broke with precedent and allied the United States with the PKK, by selecting the YPG as its main partner for combating the Islamic State. American airstrikes in support of YPG operations began in Fall 2014; by early 2015, American special forces were embedded with YPG units. This choice enraged virtually all Turks and sowed the seeds of a future Turkish-PKK conflict.

To understand how and why Obama did this, a brief examination of relations between the PKK and the Assad regime is warranted. By the end of 2011, the civil war in Syria had generated conditions favoring a renewal and updating of the historical partnership between the PKK and Damascus. As the power of Damascus swiftly deteriorated, Bashar al-Assad sought to marshal all available forces to preserve his positions of strength in what his supporters were now calling "vital Syria," the spine of Sunni Arab cities in the western part of the country: Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Damascus, and Deraa.

Saving vital Syria required abandoning all other areas—a strategy that risked losing the north and east of the country to the anti-Assad rebels and to Turkey. But the PKK's Rojava project offered an alternative. What if Assad were instead to facilitate PKK dominance over them? In principle, he was no lover of Kurdish autonomy schemes, but he was weak and desperate, and the PKK had several attractive characteristics: it was anti-Turkish; it did not seek the total destruction of his regime; and it would prevent territory under its control from serving as a safe haven for anti-regime rebels.

Sometime at the end of 2011, Assad reached an agreement with the PKK over a loose alliance. According to some sources, Qassem Soleimani, the former head of the Qods Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, played a role in brokering the deal. However it came about, the

PKK created a Syrian militia, the aforementioned "Peoples Protection Units," or YPG, in order to carry it out on the ground. In sum, the PKK entered the Syrian civil war in alignment with Damascus—and by extension, with Tehran and Moscow. In late 2015 and early 2016, Russia and Iran worked with the YPG, operating out of Afrin, northwest of Aleppo, to cut the rebels' lifeline to Turkey. Aleppo was now besieged on all sides.

For Ankara, this was a double blow. Not only did it presage the ultimate fall of Aleppo, but it raised the prospect that the Kurdish cantons in Eastern Syria might link up, in a geographically contiguous fashion, with the cantons in the West. That prospect grew all the more real because, while the Russians and Iranians were working with the YPG in the West, the Americans were expanding its power and geographic reach in the East.

Obama's embrace of the Syrian arm of the PKK had all the makings of a major political scandal, not least because the United States government designates the PKK as a terrorist organization. To cover its tracks, Washington rebranded the YPG, calling it now the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). To be sure, the SDF also included Arab elements, but its hardcore fighting units came directly from the YPG, as did its leadership. The commander of the SDF goes by the alias of General Mazloun Abdi. His real name is Ferhat Abdi Şahin: a lifelong member of the PKK and a close personal associate of Abdullah Öcalan. In the Kurdish areas under his control, he uses the SDF to impose a PKK monopoly over Kurdish political life.

By giving the PKK a fake identity, Obama successfully fostered the impression in the United States that the American-led campaign against the Islamic State was completely independent of the Russian-Iranian campaign to shore up Assad. In truth, however, a key attraction of the YPG was its status as a Russian-Iranian proxy. Obama's partnership with it assured Moscow and Tehran that the United States was solely interested in destroying the Islamic State and harbored no intention to support those, like Turkey, who sought to block the Russian-Iranian march on Aleppo. Even more, Obama was effectively shutting the Turks out of the Syrian game, thus giving Russia and Iran a free hand.

Seen from Ankara, therefore, Obama's embrace of the YPG was ominous. Who would ever have predicted that Washington would assist, in parallel with Tehran and Moscow, the PKK's Rojava project? The Turks complained often and loudly to the Americans, who fobbed them off with the meaningless assurance that America's relationship with the YPG was "temporary, tactical, and transactional."

But the permanent consequences were obvious to the Turks. Ankara was particularly concerned lest the United States assist the YPG in establishing a presence west of the Euphrates, where it could establish a land bridge between the Kurdish cantons of Eastern and Western Syria, which are otherwise separated by long distances and significant Arab areas of settlement. The United States first promised

not to deploy the YPG west of the Euphrates, then broke the promise in the spring of 2016, by facilitating the YPG conquest of Manbij. To assuage Turkish anger, Vice President Joe Biden flew to Ankara and delivered a public guarantee that YPG forces would not remain in Manbij. “We have made it clear to Kurdish forces that they must move back across the river,” Biden said. “They cannot and will not get American support if they do not keep that commitment. Period.”

Biden made that promise in August 2016. A year and a half later, the *New York Times* reported that the local governing body in Manbij, which was established with the indispensable aid of American military power, “is modeled on principles of the Kurdish separatist leader, Abdullah Öcalan,” whose photograph is prominently displayed in the office of the council’s spokesman. Under Washington’s “temporary” protective umbrella, the PKK has increased its military might and expanded its geographical reach beyond its wildest imagination.

And it has also gained in international legitimacy. For the first time ever, the PKK now enjoys, through its YPG and SDF personas, support both in the American military and in Congress. As a result, each of the several Turkish military interventions in Syria have been met with a chorus of condemnation on Capitol Hill based on the absurd notion that the bogeyman Erdoğan is pursuing an “Islamist” and “neo-Ottoman” agenda characterized by hatred of “the Kurds.” In fact, these Turkish military operations have been limited in scope, designed purely to prevent the PKK from establishing a contiguous statelet, and have enjoyed the support of a broad spectrum of Turkish public opinion, including secularists.

Biden’s December 2019 remarks to the *New York Times* editorial board signalled that the bogeyman analysis of Turkish foreign policy has now found its way into the domestic American debate during this season’s contest for the presidency. The exaggerated focus on Erdoğan is politically useful to Democrats because it places Erdoğan alongside Hungary’s Victor Orban, Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, and Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu as a member in a fictive coalition of dangerous authoritarian leaders supposedly led by President Donald Trump.

This development is regrettable. When Biden talked of encouraging “elements” to unseat Erdoğan, Turks immediately recalled that the last such attempt was led from a command center in the Pocono mountains of

Pennsylvania, where Fethullah Gülen, the guru-like leader of a religious movement, has been residing since 1999. A majority of Turks hold Gülen responsible for the July 2016 coup attempt that killed 251 people. Before taking up his current position as the State Department’s point man on Syria, Ambassador James Jeffrey stated that it is “embarrassing” that Mr. Gülen “is sitting here in the United States.” Is it an accident, many Turks ask, that the United States both supports the PKK and refuses to extradite a coup plotter whose cultish followers were embedded in the Turkish military? Is the United States secretly seeking to crack Turkey apart?

Biden’s remarks validate such queries. They sow deep distrust of American motives and set the United States at odds with the sentiments of most if not all of Turkey’s national security experts, to say nothing of public opinion, thereby imperilling the search for a strategic accommodation with Ankara. But arriving at such an accommodation should be seen instead as a top priority of American foreign policy—as the key to managing the central contradiction in American policy toward the Middle East. On the one hand, talk of withdrawing from the Middle East is rife on both sides of the political aisle, and the American public has no tolerance for significant military commitments. On the other hand, if the United States leaves the region, Russia, China and Iran will fill the ensuing vacuum. America is thus betwixt and between.

Obama’s answer to this dilemma was to attempt to co-opt Russia and Iran—on the theory that Tehran and Moscow shared with the United States a large number of interests, first and foremost being the desire to contain radical Islamic movements like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. That effort, however, was misguided, because both Russia and Iran are opposed to the American security system.

If America is to build an order that will safeguard its interests on the ground, it must work with countries that are stable, self-confident, and capable of projecting power. Turkey is at the top of the very short list of states that meet those criteria. Working with it productively requires respecting its own understanding of its greatest security threat, the PKK. America’s failure to do so has done untold damage to the US-Turkey partnership, with adverse consequence that extend far beyond Syria.

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Israel’s national imperative: ‘Keep your powder dry’

By Martin Sherman

jns.org

While the normalization with the UAE could definitely entail significant benefits for Israel, it is still somewhat premature to celebrate the onset of lasting amity—rather than enmity—in the region.

“...The purpose of keeping powder dry is to be able to blaze away at the proper time. Thus, the phrase ‘keep your powder dry’... carries an implicit, most ominous threat: ‘...be prepared to blow the enemy’s head off at the

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propitious moment.”—William Safire, “Keeping Your Powder Dry,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1997.

“...it’s impossible to understand the reality we face today, without knowing the history of Hebron.”—Tzipi Schissel, curator of the Hebron History museum, on the brutal 1929 Hebron Massacre of Jews by their long time Arab neighbors.

The emerging normalization agreement with the

United Arab Emirates (UAE) has ignited hopes among many that it will be a harbinger of further amiable relationships between Israel and additional “moderate” Sunni states across the region.

A challenge to past perceptions?

While the normalization initiative certainly could entail significant benefits for the Jewish state, including a “knock-on” effect, inducing other Mideast countries to follow suit, I recently cautioned that it is still somewhat premature to celebrate the onset of lasting amity—rather than enmity—in the region.

Numerous pundits (or is that “pundits”?) have set out their preferred preconditions for a lasting peace, only to have their prescriptions upended by recalcitrant realities.

In some ways, the Israel-UAE initiative has indeed challenged widely accepted “wisdom” regarding peace, and the absence thereof, in the Middle East. Thus, a little over three years ago, on the website of Commanders for Israel’s Security, former head of the Mossad, Tamir Pardo, declared: “Popular hostility in Muslim countries resulting from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has made normalization with Jordan and Egypt impossible, and has rendered anything other than secret agreements with other Arab countries impossible. The Palestinian issue serves as a categorical limitation on the establishment of formal relations between Arab states and Israel.”

Clearly, the move toward normalization between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem severely undercuts the rationale underlying Pardo’s diagnosis. Indeed, although Emirati leaders have paid ostensible lip service to the “Palestinian cause,” the apoplectic rejection and incandescent rage with which the initiative was greeted by the Palestinians clearly indicates that their “cause” has been relegated in Arab priorities and is no longer a focal rallying point for the Arab world.

The “people-to-people” peace paradigm

In the ongoing discourse on peace and its determinants, it has become common—and fashionable—to claim that to create a sustainable peace, it is not sufficient to conclude a “political peace”—i.e. a compact between governments/regimes. Peace, according to this school of thought, must be between the peoples of erstwhile adversarial collectives.

This is a perspective that is not confined to the Israeli-Arab conflict and is propounded for the resolution of hostilities in other parts of the globe—such as Central and East Asia.

Thus, in a piece entitled, “People-to-people contacts seen central to peace,” Pakistani journalist S. Mudassir Ali Shah reported on discussions in a 2018 conference in Islamabad, under the banner of “Festival for Peace and Regional Convergence,” where participants concluded: “Increased people-to-people contacts among Central Asian states are necessary to achieve lasting peace and prosperity in the region.”

This was a view echoed by a senior Pakistani delegate, who stated: “People-to-people contacts are essential to

bring the regional states closer.”

Testifying to the wide-spread prevalence of the idea is the fact that a quick Google search for “Peace” + “people-to-people-contacts” will yield more than 50 million hits, referring to cases of unrest across the globe and how they may be mitigated by inter-personal contacts.

“People-to-people” peace: The deceptive allure

Of course, the allure of the “people-to-people” peace paradigm is understandable for peace-seeking publics. Indeed, beyond its obvious emotional appeal, it has a certain internal logic to it. After all, if members of rivalrous collectives—such Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs—get to know each other, form amicable interpersonal ties, even bonds of friendship, this should work to break down barriers of animosity, undermine mutual suspicion and dispel negative stereotypes.

This all sounds very reasonable—and indeed, Mossad head Pardo embraced it in his previously cited address, asserting: “At the end of the day, a peace agreement derives its strength from an understanding between peoples, not an accord between governments.”

This parallels the sentiments expressed in a 2019 Hoover Institute paper, *Israel-Palestine Peace Is Possible*, by Dan Kurtzer, former US ambassador to Israel (2001-2005): “One important, but undervalued element in all past peace efforts has been people-to-people engagement, that is, activities that bring ordinary people together to overcome mutual distrust and to build understanding at the grassroots level.”

Indeed, the friendly attitude shown towards Israel and Israelis, together with the well-disposed manner in which the 3,000-strong resident Jewish community is treated in the UAE has been cited as the basis for the belief that, for the first time, Israel and an Arab country are on the cusp of a warm peace—significantly different from the grudgingly cold peace that prevails with Jordan and Egypt, which resemble non-belligerency accords rather than a harmonious peace.

However, as sensible and sober as these views appear, experience has shown that the credence placed in the durability of amiable people-to-people ties, is at times, decidedly at odds with reality.

Iran becomes inimical

In recent decades, there have been at least two major instances in which changes in governments have totally washed away any congenial impact of previously multi-faceted people-to-people contacts with Israelis. These are the cases of Iran and Turkey—which I have discussed in a recent column. But because of their centrality to the current discussion, I will present the facts once again—and hope readers will understand the rationale for my repetitiveness.

From the early 1950s to the late 1970s, until the fall of the Shah (1979), Israel and Iran conducted very close relations. Following the 1967 Six-Day War, a major portion of Israeli oil requirements were provided for by Iran. Moreover, Iranian oil was shipped to European

destinations via the joint Israeli-Iranian Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline. There was brisk trade between the countries. Israeli construction firms and engineers worked extensively throughout the country. Israel's national air carrier, El Al, operated frequent direct flights between Tel Aviv and Tehran. Iranian-Israeli military links and projects were largely classified but were reportedly extensive—possibly including missile development.

The scale and scope of the Israeli-Iranian collaboration are dramatically illustrated by the words of Yaakov Shapiro, the Defense Ministry official in charge of coordinating the negotiations with Iran from 1975 to 1978: “In Iran they treated us like kings. We did business with them on a stunning scale. Without the ties with Iran, we would not have had the money to develop weaponry that is today in the front line of the defense of the State of Israel.”

Turkey turns truculent

Turco-Israeli relations followed a somewhat similar pattern to those of Iranian-Israeli ones. Up until just over a decade-and-a-half ago, and the ascendance of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), Israel and Turkey saw each other as having much in common—two non-Arab countries in an otherwise almost exclusively Arab region, sharing a western looking perspective with regard to the future development of both countries—with Ankara a far less problematic member of NATO than it is today, and with a then-firm ambition to accede to the E.U.

Indeed, so close and robust were the bilateral contacts between Ankara and Jerusalem, that The New York Times wrote in an August 1999 piece: “Over the last few years, Israel and Turkey have built a strategic partnership that has altered the face of Middle East politics. Trade and tourism are booming in both directions. Israeli pilots practice maneuvers in Turkish airspace, and Israeli technicians are modernizing Turkish combat jets. There are plans for Israel to share its high-tech skills with Turkey, and for Turkey to send some of its plentiful fresh water to [pre-desalination era] Israel.”

Relations began to deteriorate with the rise of the AKP and its increasingly firm grip on power in Turkey, but particularly following the 2008-9 Israel Defense Forces' Operation Cast Lead in Gaza—and were further exacerbated by the 2010 Mavi Marmara incident.

Although Turkey's relations with Israel have not reached the same level of enmity as those of Iran, they are a far cry from those that prevailed in the 1990s—with Erdoğan even comparing Israel to Nazi Germany and the events in Gaza to the Holocaust, in an address to the U.N. General Assembly.

Israel's preoccupation with peace & the Middle-East's “special lunacy”

In many ways, Israel is obsessed with the idea of peace. This preoccupation is not difficult to understand. After all, the Jewish state has been under constant threat ever since its inception just over seven decades ago—and

the Jewish collective in the Holy Land, for considerably longer.

However, as understandable as this desire is, it cannot blind the country to the real mechanism of international relations and the potentially fickle—or at least, ephemeral—nature of the relationships between nations.

This was aptly expressed by Henry Kissinger in his well known book *White House Years*. In it he wrote: “Israel insisted on a ‘binding peace.’ Only a country that had never known peace could have attached so much importance to that phrase. For what is a binding peace among sovereign nations when one of the attributes of sovereignty is the right to change one's mind?”

He went on to elaborate: “For three centuries France and Germany had fought wars in almost every generation; each one was ended by a formal “binding” peace treaty that did nothing to prevent the next war. Nor did “open frontiers” in 1914 prevent the outbreak of a world war that shook Europe to its foundations.”

Referring to the special lunacy that pervades the Middle East, he noted: “Most wars in history have been fought between countries that started out at peace; it was the special lunacy of the Middle East that its wars broke out between countries that were technically already at war.”

The imperative of interest

The impermanence of international alliances were succinctly articulated by Lord Palmerston, then-British Foreign Secretary, in a March 1848 address to the House of Commons: “...it is a narrow policy to suppose that this country or that is to be marked out as the eternal ally or perpetual enemy of England. We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are perpetual and eternal and those interests it is our duty to follow.”

This notion of interest as the dominant determinant of nations' behavior was, arguably, first articulated by Athenian historian and general, Thucydides' (460 BCE – 400 BCE), in his treatise *The History Of The Peloponnesian War* (Ch V), in which he stipulated that, “identity of interests is the surest of bonds whether between states or individuals.”

Centuries later, essentially the same idea was articulated by British statesman, Lord Salisbury (1830-1903), who stated that, “the only bond of union that endures' among nations 'is the absence of all clashing interests.’”

It was the renowned scholar Hans Morgenthau, who in his *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, set out a modern formulation of the notion of interest as the defining determinant of nations' behavior.

Novelty no virtue

In it, he pointed out that basic patterns of international behavior have remained immutable over time—and the passage of time will not change them: “Human nature, in which the laws of politics have their roots, has not changed since the classical philosophies of China, India, and Greece endeavored to discover these

laws. Hence, novelty is not necessarily a virtue in political theory, nor is old age a defect.”

He added, “[T]he fact that a theory of politics was developed hundreds or even thousands of years ago...does not create a presumption that it must be outmoded and obsolete...To dismiss such a theory because it had its flowering in centuries past is to present not a rational argument but a modernistic prejudice...”

Warning of the consequences of allowing wishful thinking to cloud judgement, he cautioned: “In order to improve society it is first necessary to understand the laws by which society lives. The operation of these laws being impervious to our preferences, men will challenge them only at the risk of failure.”

Sobering precedent

For those who subscribe to the “people-to-people”

doctrine, perhaps a sobering example is the chilling case of the 1929 Hebron massacre, in which the Jewish residents of the town were viciously attacked and brutally murdered by Arabs, who had long been their friendly neighbors but at the call of their leaders, mercilessly turned on them.

Accordingly, Israeli policy-makers would do well to heed the dour words of Tzipi Schissel, curator of the Hebron History museum: “...it’s impossible to understand the reality we face today, without knowing the history of Hebron.”

Which is precisely why—despite positive developments—Israel needs to “keep its powder dry.”

Mr. Sherman is the founder and executive director of the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies.

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Hamas Lost the Last Round of Fighting with Israel—but That Only Makes the Next Round More Likely

By Alex Fishman

ynetnews.com

September 2, 2020

Meanwhile, the coronavirus makes the situation all the more volatile.

This can be attributed to the current leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, who's steadily losing his grip on the Palestinian enclave his group took over in 2007.

If it were within his power, Sinwar would have gladly erased the last escalation from the collective Palestinian consciousness.

Not only did he fail to achieve any economical, national or military achievement to present to the people of the Strip, the situation in Gaza actually deteriorated.

During the three weeks Israel closed the land and ocean passageways into the Strip, the number of unemployed there jumped by no less than 10%, as thousands lost their jobs and their livelihoods.

Neither Sinwar nor his people can bury these numbers with mere words. This last round of violence against Israel was a colossal failure for him and his people.

In October, Sinwar is set to run for the Hamas presidency, in an election season that begins in November and ends in March.

Sinwar is stumbling to the starting line while Gaza is under full lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic and while the Strip is suffering from the worst economic crisis it has known since the Hamas leader came into power.

During the latest escalation - which involved continued incendiary balloon attacks on Israeli territories adjacent the enclave - Sinwar tried to force Israel to the negotiating table in an effort to improve the life in the Strip by October.

On that count he succeeded; Israel indeed negotiated with Hamas through Egypt, Qatar, and the UN.

During negotiations, Sinwar demanded conditions that were supposed to supply the residents of the Strip with a new lifeline. Only, he did not settle for the usual demand for new electricity infrastructure in order to supply Gazans with additional power.

Sinwar demanded the electricity Israel supplies to the enclave be greatly increased; the import of goods Israel categorized as contraband; more Palestinian workers granted entry into Israel; and finally, he demanded an open checkbook from Qatar instead of a monthly stipend.

On Monday, Sinwar announced a restoration of calm along the Gaza border without receiving anything significant from Israel. This calm is set to expire within two months - the time period Hamas gave to Israel before it embarks on its next escalation.

Qatar, for its part, paid what was promised - handing over \$30 million with no guarantees of future payments.

If it was up to the Qatari emissary, this would have been the last grant Gaza ever sees from Doha.

It seems that following Qatar's initial reluctance to transfer the grant, Sinwar and al-Emadi held a meeting in which the Hamas leader hurled accusations against Qatar, which he claimed was trying to weaken him in order to strengthen Khaled Mashal, his political adversary in the upcoming elections.

In the end, not only did Sinwar found himself back at square one, the IDF used the balloon attacks as an excuse to strike no less than 104 Hamas-affiliated targets within the enclave, thus delivering a blow to the organization's infrastructure in the Strip.

Israel's Fire and Rescue Service and the military were both prepared to deal with the blazes started by the balloon attacks.

The IDF also used the opportunity to test a laser-based defense system whose objective is to shoot down drones and balloon clusters. The results appeared to have been satisfactory, as the IDF's Planning Directorate is now contemplating whether to further develop the system.

Hamas is also seeing the finishing touches to Israel's underground barrier, a countermeasure that aims to torpedo any further attempts to tunnel into the country.

About a week ago, Gaza was hit by its own wave of

coronavirus, a new development that may have pushed Sinwar to end the current round of aggression.

Given that the Strip has a sum total of 120 ventilators, it is safe to say Gaza is on the precipice of disaster.

The Strip is under complete lockdown at the moment, no movement is permitted from district to district, and

schools and beaches are closed.

All exits from the Strip have been closed, except for the goods transferred from Israel into the Strip on Tuesday that were thoroughly disinfected by the Palestinians upon their entrance into the enclave.

The Iranian President's Record of Suppression

By Isaac Schorr

nationalreview.com

Even with plainly documented torture and mass arrests, the myth of Rouhani the moderate persists.

Upon being elected president of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2013, Hassan Rouhani was heralded by Western leaders and the media as a harbinger of a new era. White House press secretary Jay Carney said that his election “represented a call by the Iranian people for change.” The Washington Post called Rouhani a “moderate cleric” whose ascension delivered “an unmistakable rebuke” to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The New York Times described Rouhani as “mild-mannered” and took his advocacy of “greater personal freedoms” at face value.

Others saw Rouhani's less ostentatiously hostile presentation for what it was: a smokescreen. Though he was far less bombastic and prone to saber-rattling than his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his track record should have made it obvious that Rouhani was not going to turn Iran into a less troublesome actor in the region or a bastion of human rights. He was the same man who had chaired the Supreme National Security Council — the body responsible for setting Iranian nuclear policy and believed to be responsible for the planning of terrorist attacks from Buenos Aires to Saudi Arabia — from 1989 until 2005. To Rouhani, “Israel is the great Zionist Satan” that “can never feel that it is in a safe place,” and “the beautiful cry of ‘Death to America’ unites” his country. In a 2004 speech, Rouhani boasted that nuclear negotiations he was holding with Britain, France, and Germany bought time that allowed engineers to install “equipment in parts of the [nuclear conversion] facility in Isfahan.” “By creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work there,” he explained.

Seeing through the Rouhani administration's “charm offensive” in November 2013, Senator Marco Rubio wrote to advocate harsher sanctions, noting that, his “moderate” label aside, Rouhani was the president of “a government that is a notorious abuser of its people and the leading global sponsor of terrorism.” Rubio has been vindicated not only by Iran's flagrant violations of the nuclear deal it agreed to in 2015 but also by its continued support of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthi rebels in Yemen, and the destabilizing activity of the Quds Force — the terrorist arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, previously led by General Qasem Soleimani — throughout the region.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Rouhani has failed to live up to his reputation as a reformer at home as

September 6, 2020

well as abroad. During his original campaign in 2013, Rouhani ran on a platform of freeing political prisoners and curbing the power of the morality police. A horrifying new Amnesty International report on the Iranian government's response to widespread protests in November 2019 shows that this was empty campaign rhetoric.

The report, appropriately titled “Trampling Humanity,” was put together after Amnesty conducted interviews with 76 individuals, 60 of whom were subjected to “arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and other ill treatment.” During and in the aftermath of the protests, thousands of Iranians were arrested by security forces — in the vast majority of cases, for merely showing up to the protests. In Behbahan, a small city of fewer than 125,000 people, over 1,000 were arrested. Children as young as ten years old were taken into custody. Moreover, the “heightened security atmosphere” was used as a “pretext . . . to arbitrarily arrest and detain members of ethnic minority groups” such as “Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, and Kurds, even when they had not taken part in the protests.” Iranian authorities have not released exact figures on how many were arrested, nor the fate of those who were. Instead, officials have tendentiously claimed that “some have been referred to courts” while “a considerable number have been released.” Punishments doled out to those tried for their roles in the protests included being forced to wash corpses in morgues, “researching the topic of the Islamic hijab and writing by hand a 90-page paper on it,” and being forcibly conscripted into the paramilitary Basij force.

Many of those arrested disappeared for weeks and even months. Family members who inquired as to their status were often “subjected to harassment [and] intimidation.” Some who vanished were taken to jail, others to unofficial secret detention facilities, where even the minimal protections afforded to prisoners in regular facilities are ignored and various forms of torture could be carried out more easily.

Torture was used not only to force the “confessions” of individuals' unlawful behavior, “but also about their alleged associations with opposition groups outside Iran.” Among the methods used by authorities to elicit such confessions were beatings, prolonged stays in solitary confinement, stress positions and suspension, electric shocks, mock executions, and sexual violence and humiliation, including “forced nakedness, invasive body

searches intended to humiliate the victims, sustained sexual verbal abuse, pepper spraying the genital area, and administering electric shocks to the testicles.” Allegations have also been made that interrogators raped some detainees, but it is very difficult to get interviewees to talk about such experiences because of the “psychological, social, legal, and institutional barriers to reporting rape and serious concerns around reprisal.”

Trials held were rife with injustices, as defendants were frequently denied legal counsel, a fair and public hearing, an independent and impartial tribunal, or the right to a meaningful appeal. They were also tried before both criminal courts and Revolutionary Courts, the latter of which charged them with vague infractions such as “spreading propaganda against the system” and “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security.”

The story of Amirhossein Moradi paints a full, ugly picture of the Iranian regime’s response to protests under Rouhani. Moradi was arrested in November and was held in solitary confinement with only intermittent interrogation and torture interrupting it. He eventually “confessed” to

being involved in the protests “after his interrogators promised to provide him with medical treatment for the injuries he sustained under torture, which they later denied him.” Since then, Moradi and two other young men have been sentenced to death for arson, and their fate has been rubber-stamped by Iran’s Supreme Court. Only one more review process is left, and a decision is forthcoming.

Jay Carney was right that Hassan Rouhani’s election in 2013 reflected the will of the Iranian people for détente with the West and an expansion of their own rights and freedoms. But the Obama administration, the Post, and the Times were wrong to believe that Rouhani was well suited to achieve those aims. Supreme Leader Khamenei effectively decides who is even able to run for office by way of a Guardian Council run by hardline clerics. If Rouhani were truly an “unmistakable rebuke” to Khamenei, he would never have become president. If Rouhani was determined to act in the best interest of his people, reading Amnesty International’s report would not have been so heartbreaking.

Mr. Schorr is an ISI Fellow at National Review.

Palestinian Leaders Have Prevented Peace to Maintain the Flow of Aid Money

By Hani al-Dahiri

saudigazette.com.sa

September 6, 2020

A crippling blow without firing a single bullet.

It is regrettable to see the plight of Palestinian brothers whose politicians have traded their cause for more than 60 years. These politicians saw to that the issue remained alive and did not reach any settlement. They sabotaged negotiations and rejected all peace initiatives, whether those presented by the Israeli side or those by other international parties.

The Palestinian politicians did this at the expense of their cause and their people so as to gain from the situation, which has remained as is till date. The intransigent attitude that they pursued for decades was the only guarantee for their survival with donations pouring in and aid funds boosting their treasuries and accounts in the European banks from all sides, especially from the countries of the Arab and Islamic worlds.

Today, things have changed, and the peoples who used to sympathize with the Palestinian cause are fully aware of this game by people with vested interests. The Palestinian issue means the death of the issue in the minds of millions of people, because it is the inevitable result of six decades of lying, trickery and collection of money in the name of a crisis whose owners do not want it to be resolved.

A few days ago, the courageous Emirati step to normalize relations with Israel came and that delivered an explicit message to the Palestinian political leaders: “The time has come to confront between yourselves and those who are deceived by you... the time for playing and jumping the ropes as well as trafficking with the concerns of the Palestinian people is over.”

As for serving the interest of the Arab people in Gaza and the West Bank, it requires the intervention of rational

Arabs to negotiate with the Israeli side and work to establish comprehensive peace in the region away from gangs who eye only political gain.

It is evident that it has become certain that other Arab countries will catch up with the United Arab Emirates, and this means that the last berry leaves will fall from the private parts of the thieves of the cause who have gone beyond history, and the curses of the Palestinians, who have traded in their pain since 1948, will follow them forever.

There is an eternal saying attributed to the 16th US President Abraham Lincoln, and I find it completely applicable to most of the Palestinian leaders who manipulated their people and their cause. Lincoln said: “You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.”

The truth is that there is nothing in the entire Palestinian issue that enables it to continue and remain dependent on the current situation, because it is an issue that has reached old age and after old age the only thing remaining is death. And hence, either it is to be resolved today or it would die as the Andalusian issue died as wise men realize that there is no difference between the two issues at all.

As a human being, as a Muslim and as an Arab, I am saddened by the situation of the Palestinian man who was traded in by his political leaders. I wish him well, and hope that he would wake up from his coma and adopt what is good that serves his interest and his future.

However, his case in the property dispute with his opponents is not sacred to me, especially since the normalization of relations of some Arab countries with

Israel will allow me and other Muslims to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque and pray therein, which is the only thing that concerns us in this case.

As for other matters, the people of Palestine are more deserving of it, because in terms of logic, it is a first-degree “real estate dispute” and no one should be ashamed of acknowledging this fact.

Israel’s Virus Czar Was Making Headway. Then He Tangled With a Key Netanyahu Ally.

By David M. Halbfinger and Isabel Kershner

nytimes.com

September 8, 2020

As he moved to slow the pandemic, Dr. Ronni Gamzu kept butting heads with ultra-Orthodox leaders. Then Israel’s top virus fighter was suddenly undercut.

For a fleeting three days, it looked as if Israel had successfully rebooted its faulty fight against the coronavirus.

Then politics intervened.

In late July, a veteran Tel Aviv hospital administrator, Dr. Ronni Gamzu, was anointed the country’s virus czar and swept in with self-assurance. Acknowledging previous government mistakes, he enlisted the military to take responsibility for contact tracing and pleaded with Israelis to take the threat seriously and wear their masks.

He also vowed to restore the public’s trust, demanding accountability from municipal officials while replacing the central government’s ceaselessly zigzagging dictates with simple instructions that anyone, it seemed, should be able to understand and embrace.

Last Thursday, Dr. Gamzu won cabinet approval for a traffic light-themed plan to impose strict lockdowns on “red” cities with the worst outbreaks, while easing restrictions in “green” ones where the virus was finding fewer victims. The goal was to avoid, or at least delay, another economically strangling nationwide lockdown.

By Sunday, however, Dr. Gamzu was looking more like a victim himself.

Ultra-Orthodox leaders who felt that their community was being stigmatized revolted against the traffic light plan. This time, however, they did not bother to attack Dr. Gamzu, instead directing their ire at his most important backer, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

And Mr. Netanyahu, under fierce public pressure from one of his most vital constituencies, caved in on the targeted lockdown plan.

Forget about the harshest new restrictions in red cities, he announced Sunday night. Instead, he and Dr. Gamzu grasped at a watered-down nighttime curfew, something that Arab mayors had proposed to curtail big weddings but that even Dr. Gamzu later conceded would have little effect in ultra-Orthodox communities.

Mr. Netanyahu and Dr. Gamzu took turns at a microphone on Monday to project unity. Mr. Netanyahu insisted that he had not knuckled under but merely done what the professionals had recommended. Dr. Gamzu insisted that even if his professional recommendations had been blocked, he was determined to soldier on.

But the upshot for Israel is a bleak prospect: The pandemic has mushroomed, with Israel’s number of new cases near the worst in the world on a per-capita basis. Yet

the odds of stopping its march seem slim as the Jewish High Holy Days approach.

Ordinarily, the New Year, Yom Kippur and Sukkot are a festive and unifying time. Instead, there are fears that by Sept. 18, when the holidays begin, Israel will be either overrun by the pandemic or under a full lockdown. And the deeply polarized country appears to be warring with itself along religious, cultural and political lines that may sound familiar to many Americans.

Secular Israeli Jews accuse the ultra-Orthodox and Arab citizens of spreading the virus in their overcrowded areas. The ultra-Orthodox point to the relative normalcy of life in Tel Aviv and complain that they are being singled out.

Joined by their right-wing allies, they ask why, if crowds are so dangerous, liberal-leaning protesters are allowed to gather by the thousands to demand Mr. Netanyahu’s ouster.

And a growing chorus of frustrated Israelis across the political spectrum accuse Mr. Netanyahu of working harder at holding onto power than on bringing infection rates down. Indeed, in dumping Dr. Gamzu’s lockdown plan, critics said Mr. Netanyahu had subverted his virus czar’s authority to mollify his ultra-Orthodox coalition partners.

“It shows that fighting the pandemic is not his first priority,” said Orit Galili-Zucker, a onetime Netanyahu strategist.

In effect, she said, the other crises that have weakened Mr. Netanyahu’s standing — his ongoing trial on corruption charges, and the anti-corruption demonstrations denouncing him — are inhibiting his willingness to let the professionals dictate how to combat the pandemic.

“The political story of Israel is affecting its fight against the virus,” Ms. Galili-Zucker said. “It’s very sad.”

Dr. Gamzu became Mr. Netanyahu’s virus czar after pioneering a program to protect the elderly from the virus at Ichilov Hospital in Tel Aviv. He addressed the Israeli public energetically and emotionally in frequent television appearances and Facebook videos, asserting that he would now make the decisions.

Others had refused the job because its powers were undefined. But Dr. Gamzu, exuding confidence, tried to turn that to his advantage.

“I have a natural authority,” he said on Aug. 31, at the start of an interview that took three days to complete because of repeated urgent interruptions. “I was director-general of the Ministry of Health, I know all the politicians, I know all the ministers. I know all the cabinet.

I know all the political issues. But I'm not a politician. I'm a professional," he added.

"I would say that I have 100 percent authority," Dr. Gamzu declared.

He laid out a three-pronged strategy: restoring public confidence; building the infrastructure needed — faster and more widespread testing and many more epidemiological investigators — to break the chain of contagion; and empowering local authorities.

His signature initiative was the traffic light plan. It would give mayors the tools they needed to respond quickly to new outbreaks, but also give them the inducement they would need — easing restrictions — to win public cooperation.

If it worked, he said, it could help delay another nationwide lockdown until the army's contact tracers are ready for an expected resurgence of the virus in the fall.

The problem politically was that nearly all the red cities turned out to be either predominantly Arab or ultra-Orthodox. And every action affecting the ultra-Orthodox sector elicited fierce pushback.

After a public outcry over the planned arrival of 12,000 or more yeshiva students from abroad, Dr. Gamzu said, he whittled the number down to 4,000.

Dr. Gamzu also wrote to the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, and warned of potentially dire health consequences if tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox were allowed to make an annual pilgrimage to Uman, the burial site of a revered 18th-century rabbi.

Ukraine closed its borders, and Dr. Gamzu was accused of exceeding his pay grade — and of fanning anti-Semitism, no less — by politicians including the coalition whip for Mr. Netanyahu's own Likud party.

Then Dr. Gamzu offended a leading rabbi, Chaim Kanievsky, over what he later said was a misunderstanding about the testing of yeshiva students, for which he profusely apologized.

The lockdown plan was "the last straw," said Israel Cohen, a political commentator at an ultra-Orthodox radio station.

"All these things together brought the situation almost to the breaking point between Netanyahu and the ultra-Orthodox public," he said. "People who usually expressed

support for Bibi were saying on social media: 'Hey, what's this? They're putting us in a ghetto.'"

Dr. Gamzu's authority seemed to erode in plain view last week.

It took until just before midnight on Aug. 31 for him to get the government to close schools in red cities the next morning, the first day of school. But the mayor of Beitar Illit, an ultra-Orthodox West Bank settlement, allowed his city's schools to reopen anyway. On Wednesday, Dr. Gamzu drove there to personally enforce the closure.

But it was Sunday's reversal by Mr. Netanyahu that prompted a chorus of calls by Dr. Gamzu's supporters for him to resign in protest, and left some Israelis despairing over what they called a leadership vacuum.

"I don't know how anyone can be considered in charge of the situation when they have no power at all," said Gadi Wolfsfeld, a political scientist at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. "Every decision is either whittled down or ignored. You can't expect the public to listen to the government when the government looks like it doesn't know what the hell they're doing."

Dr. Gamzu gamely tried to bounce back on Monday.

With a nationwide lockdown looking increasingly inevitable, he stressed the advantages of starting one over the holidays: It would do less damage to the economy, which slows down then anyway, and would prevent large family meals and other opportunities for the virus to spread.

He insisted that he still had Mr. Netanyahu's support for his broader strategy. And he said he was no quitter, and accepted that Mr. Netanyahu was operating under political constraints.

"I can understand complexity," Dr. Gamzu said. "I'm not the type of person who says, well, if I'm not getting 100 percent consent to everything I bring to the table, then it's all or none."

If ultra-Orthodox leaders are savoring a victory over Dr. Gamzu and his lockdowns, there is still the matter of the virus, coursing its way through their communities with little to stop it.

"Who did we defeat?" asked Mr. Cohen, the radio commentator. "In the end, we all have to look after ourselves."

Aliyah to Israel on the rise, despite COVID-19 and bureaucracy bottlenecks

By Israel Kasnett

jns.org

September 9, 2020

"We are doing the best we can to help process everyone," said Yael Katsman, vice president of public relations and communications at Nefesh B'Nefesh.

Israel is seeing a spike in aliyah (immigration to Israel) this year, with a higher number of people interested in moving to the Jewish state compared to previous years. But with COVID-19 wreaking havoc across the world, it has become more difficult to get through the process and

once in the Jewish state, whole families are required to sequester in a hotel for two weeks. Welcome to aliyah in 2020!

According to Yael Katsman, vice president of public relations and communications at Nefesh B'Nefesh, a nonprofit organization that promotes and facilitates aliyah to Israel, "aliyah is continuing, and we are seeing a massive spike in interest in the number of applications."

Katsman noted that compared to previous years, this August there was a more than 200 percent increase in applications. The top three states from which people seek to make aliyah are New York, California and New Jersey.

“We’ve had almost 1,000 people coming in this summer,” she told JNS.

“Israel’s gates are open to olim [new immigrants]. It’s just a question of getting the paperwork in order,” she added.

And herein lies the problem.

The global coronavirus pandemic has wreaked havoc on bureaucratic systems since offices are shut and workers are staying home. This means that the process to make aliyah, which requires no shortage of paperwork, signatures and stamps, has essentially slowed to a crawl.

Coupled with that 200 percent increase in applications, and potential immigrants are looking at a major system backup.

To make matters worse, Israel requires an apostille—a form of authentication issued to documents for use in countries that participate in the Hague Convention of 1961—for documents such as birth certificates, personal status documentation, adoption papers and criminal background checks.

While there are companies that provide services helping individuals with getting documents authenticated with apostilles, a large part of the problem is that they must be issued by a federal office in America—offices not working to full capacity.

“It’s a process,” said Katsman. “There is various documentation that you need, which is part of the standard process of making aliyah. The processing is taking somewhat longer because of the pandemic.”

“We are doing the best we can to help process everyone,” she said.

Helping new immigrants acclimate to home and school

Knesset member Michal Cotler-Wunsh of the Blue and White Party told JNS that with regard to apostilles,

“the specific holdup comes from an important effort on Israel’s part to ensure those that are making aliyah are not known offenders in their countries of origin who are attempting to move to Israel.”

“The problem is also primarily affecting individuals making aliyah from the U.S., where the apostille must come from Washington, and due to COVID-19, this office is functioning on extremely limited capacity, leading to the delays in the aliyah process,” she said.

But she understands that some solution must still be found if the coronavirus isn’t going anywhere anytime soon and people need a way to expedite the process.

“Given the imperative to protect all its citizens, Israel cannot simply ease the apostille restriction; however, we are looking into creative solutions to ameliorate the backlog in the system due to COVID-19,” said Cotler-Wunsh. “These include looking at bilateral efforts between the U.S. and Israeli governments to streamline the apostille process, or allowing individuals to move to Israel on visas and finish the aliyah process while already in the country.”

Once the aliyah process is complete, olim must isolate for two weeks after landing in Israel. What was once a day of immense joy and emotion has become a dreaded period that lacks the celebratory atmosphere that usually greets new arrivals.

But Cotler-Wunsh, a member of the Knesset Immigration and Integration Committee, said she has made efforts in this area as well in order to help olim acclimate to their new reality.

Indeed, on Sept. 1, the first day of school, she visited those being released from their two-week quarantine in hotels to welcome them and to speak to the new students joining classrooms around Israel for the first time.

“The Jewish Agency, the IDF’s Home Front Command unit, and the hotel staff are playing such an important role in supporting olim during this unique and challenging” time, she said, adding that “it was important that I speak to each of them about the support they need and my responsibility as a voice for olim in the Knesset.”

**Current issue also available at suburbanorthodox.org.
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