

The Palestinian Authority Careens toward Its Next Political Crisis

By Jonathan Schanzer

foreignpolicy.com

April 9, 2021

The electoral odds favor Hamas.

Palestinian legislative elections are scheduled for May 22. Whether or not the vote takes place, finally scheduling elections was nothing short of remarkable. Palestinian politics has been in gridlock, with elections suspended since the terrorist group Hamas won a parliamentary majority in 2006. The stalemate gave way to civil war in 2007, during which Hamas conquered the Gaza Strip and the Palestine Liberation Organization clung to power in the West Bank. Since then, a bitter division between the two Palestinian territories has ensued.

Palestinians deserve to shape their own political destiny, but elections could come at a price. Polls suggest that Hamas could emerge as the strongest party once again. More gridlock, dysfunction, and strife could follow.

The Palestinians have had ample time to address this problem. It has been almost a decade and a half since the last vote. But the political system is dominated in the West Bank by one man, Mahmoud Abbas, and one party, Fatah, whereas in Gaza, it is dominated by one party, Hamas. Having failed to retool their system, the Palestinians are now careening toward another political crisis.

Inexplicably, international stakeholders are watching the sudden return of Palestinian politics from the sidelines.

The saga began in September 2020 in the wake of the Abraham Accords—normalization agreements between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The peace deal was a wake-up call to Palestinians that they were losing traction among Arab states that historically championed their cause. Hamas and Fatah met in Istanbul, Turkey, for a dialogue that few, if any, believed would yield a political breakthrough. After all, the two sides had met and failed to agree many times before. The Egyptians, Saudis, Turks, Russians, and others had all tried brokering agreements and had all failed.

Remarkably, on Sept. 24, 2020, the two sides emerged aligned. “We have agreed to first hold legislative elections, then presidential elections of the Palestinian Authority, and finally the central council of the Palestine Liberation Organization,” said Jibril Rajoub, a senior Fatah official.

Using the past as a guide, the likelihood the two sides would follow through on their agreement was decidedly low. But once again, the Palestinians surprised. On Jan. 15, Abbas announced that Palestinian Authority legislative elections would take place on May 22 and presidential elections on July 31.

Abbas’ announcement was nothing short of remarkable. The aging politician has an iron grip on power after winning a four-year term in 2005 and extending his

term 12 additional years. He ostensibly did so to prevent the rise of Hamas. It was no surprise that Hamas welcomed his announcement. The group called for fair elections for Palestinians to “express their will without restrictions or pressures.”

As election plans took shape, Abbas issued a direct challenge to Israel: He insisted elections could not happen without the Arab residents of East Jerusalem, which Israel considers a part of its capital, taking part. “We are very interested in having elections but not at any price,” Abbas said. The Palestinian Authority followed up with a formal request to Israel.

The issue of Jerusalem appeared to set the stage for a showdown. While the Israelis indicated that “no decision has been taken” on the issue, the Palestinian Authority engaged in an aggressive messaging campaign during which Mutasem Tayem, director-general of the Palestinian Authority’s Jerusalem Unit, said Arab residents with Israeli-issued identification cards must be able to vote “despite all Israeli measures aiming to prevent them from participating.”

Israeli officials say the Netanyahu government decided it would not be drawn into the Palestinian election debate. For one, both sides have found workarounds in the past. More to the point, officials in Jerusalem viewed Abbas as daring Israel to bar polling stations in East Jerusalem. Were that to happen, the Palestinians would cancel elections citing Israeli intransigence. The Israelis, who were gearing up for their own March election, did not like the optics. In particular, Netanyahu did not want the Palestinians or their elections to be an Israeli election issue, not least because he was campaigning for support among Israel’s Arab parties. To Netanyahu’s benefit, the peace process has been a minor issue in all four Israeli election campaigns over the last two years.

Israel thus opted for a policy of silence. Israelis would table their own concerns until after their March 23 elections. As one senior Israeli official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said, “the Palestinians would have to continue waiting for a savior to blame.” The official seemed to suggest the Palestinian leadership did not actually want the vote to take place.

And for good reason. September 2020 opinion polls indicated that Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would beat Abbas 52 percent to 39 percent in a head-to-head contest. If convicted terrorist Marwan Barghouti ran, he was slated to win 55 percent of the vote. In parliamentary elections, Fatah would receive 38 percent of the vote and Hamas 34 percent—a very tight race.

The polling picture in December 2020 didn't improve for Fatah. The parliamentary split between Fatah and Hamas was identical. But Abbas was losing ground to Barghouti and was still projected to lose to Haniyeh. Even worse for Abbas was that 66 percent of respondents demanded the ailing octogenarian's resignation.

The international response was uneasy silence. Rather than addressing the looming challenge of terrorist participation in the Palestinian election, the Biden administration prioritized allocating additional funds to the Palestinian Authority. In March and April, Washington announced plans to provide \$15 million in COVID-19 support, \$10 million in "peace-building" programs, and \$75 million in other indirect assistance. A leaked four-page memo expresses a desire to reestablish ties with the Palestinian Authority (after former U.S. President Donald Trump curtailed them) while only articulating "concern" that Hamas could beat Fatah in the forthcoming elections.

News reports swirled. One Israeli news outlet reported that U.S. President Joe Biden had pushed the Palestinian Authority to proceed with elections "to renew the legitimacy in the Palestinian Authority." The London-based Arabic newspaper Asharq al-Awsat wrote the Biden administration asked Abbas for "clarifications on the partnership with Hamas in the upcoming elections." Indeed, reports suggest the Hamas slate of candidates include current inmates in Israeli jails as well as a terrorist commander.

Opinion polls indicated that Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh would beat Abbas 52 percent to 39 percent in a head-to-head contest.

One Palestinian outlet claimed the United States asked Abbas to postpone or cancel the elections, which Abbas allegedly rejected. However, Israeli and Palestinian officials both candidly say the White House has given a green light. U.S. officials say they will not interfere, and they have little right to make demands after some of the United States' own recent political woes. This is somewhat awkward in light of the fact that Biden, while serving as a U.S. senator, spearheaded the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006, which prohibits U.S. assistance if the Palestinian Authority is "effectively controlled by Hamas."

Jordan and Egypt, both traditional Palestinian allies that oppose the Muslim Brotherhood (of which Hamas is a splinter faction), were also relatively quiet. Qatar-based Al Jazeera noted that "uncertainty about the readiness of the Fatah movement for the elections has raised concern in Egypt and Jordan." The network also reported that Egyptian and Jordanian intelligence chiefs Abbas Kamel and Ahmad Husni met with Abbas in Ramallah, Palestine, and "urged him to unify Fatah on the eve of the elections and to participate in a unified list to reduce the chances of Hamas winning it." Officially, however, both countries issued statements supporting elections, even if they were "still not convinced that the elections will actually take place."

One country that may be eager to see elections is the United Arab Emirates. Mohammed Dahlan, the former Gaza Strip security chief and a rival of Abbas, has lived in exile in the UAE since 2011 and apparently wants to reenter Palestinian politics. He has no plans to run in the legislative elections but is clearly eyeing the presidency. As the Times of Israel noted: "With Abu Dhabi's backing, Dahlan's movement has quietly funded aid projects in the Gaza Strip and in East Jerusalem over the past several years." In fact, Dahlan delivered 60,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines, donated by the UAE to Gaza, amid rumors he would run. Dahlan's polling numbers have not been strong, but he could still have an impact—particularly if his candidacy erodes support for Abbas.

Dahlan is, in many ways, overshadowed by Barghouti, currently serving multiple life sentences in Israel for acts of terrorism committed under his command during the Second Intifada in the early 2000s. Many Palestinians liken him to activist Nelson Mandela, who emerged from a terrorism-related prison sentence to lead a liberated South Africa. Mandela, of course, never directly engaged in violence. Nevertheless, Barghouti continues to put up strong numbers in the polls. His associates are reportedly taking steps that continue to indicate his intention of running for president on a list separate from Fatah.

There has been an eerie quiet from otherwise vociferous U.S. nongovernmental organizations promoting democracy abroad.

Another candidate to emerge is former Fatah Central Committee member Nasser al-Qudwa, who on Twitter declared his intention "of forming an electoral slate within the framework of a broad democratic forum that includes various segments of society, not the Fatah movement alone." For this statement, Abbas expelled him from the Fatah party last month. Undeterred, Qudwa and his supporters founded a new electoral slate—the Palestinian National Democratic Forum—and even invited Barghouti to join it, potentially forming a formidable joint list. Qudwa called for Palestinians to find "a third path" between "armed struggle or negotiations with unending concessions."

The mention of a "third path" is a clear nod to former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who ran under the banner of the "Third Way" in 2006. Fayyad, who currently teaches at Princeton University, announced he also plans to run in the coming elections. He declared his bloc would be comprised of "independent personalities" that would campaign with "transparency and honor."

The field is shaping up, and Palestinians are registering to vote—93 percent of eligible voters so far. Cautiously, long-time observers of Palestinian politics who have had little to write about for many years are starting to weigh in again. The consensus is it may now be too late to cancel legislative elections. But cynicism abounds on whether Abbas will subsequently allow for presidential elections. He has, after all, reigned 12 years beyond what his four-

year term allowed. He is a veritable Middle East strongman.

Now what? Lingered uncertainty, punctuated by the lack of a strong U.S. position, has yielded an eerie quiet from otherwise vociferous U.S. nongovernmental organizations promoting democracy abroad. One advisor to Palestinian reform candidates says the Europeans have filled the void. According to the Associated Press, Palestinian election officials invited the European Union to send monitors in January. But the EU says Israel has not responded to a request made in February for an exploratory delegation.

After their own March 23 elections, the Israelis finally began to voice their concerns. Nadav Argaman, head of Israel's internal security services Shin Bet, visited Maj. Gen. Majed Faraj, the head of the Palestinian Authority's security services in an effort to postpone the election. Argaman also met with Abbas and delivered the same message, only to be rebuffed by the Palestinian president (who told him "you built Hamas"). The Israel Defense Forces' outgoing military liaison to the Palestinians also issued a rare public warning, saying Israel should be prepared to halt all security coordination with the Palestinians if Hamas wins the election.

The senior Israeli official suggested the Palestinians still have one opportunity to "climb down from the tree." They could postpone the election by citing legitimate concerns about COVID-19. Polling stations without proper public health procedures could further strain West Bank hospitals, which were at 115 percent capacity in March, according to the World Health Organization. Gaza infections have been surprisingly manageable, but overall Palestinian vaccination numbers are low. For now, however, these concerns have not been compelling enough

for Abbas to postpone.

The rest of the Middle East is now watching nervously, bracing for yet another power struggle between extremists and a strongman.

With no restrictions on Hamas' participation and as Abbas' polling numbers flatline, the Palestinian Authority looks likely to be heading for a repeat of 2006. That said, a recent change in the Palestinian election law stipulating proportional representation in parliament will make outright control more difficult for one party. But a Palestinian Authority significantly influenced by Hamas is not just possible; it's probable.

Right now, the Biden administration appears content to let elections proceed without preconditions. Israeli concerns, even if more emphatically voiced, will yield little without U.S. backing. The rest of the Middle East is now watching nervously, bracing for yet another power struggle between extremists and a strongman.

But the blame belongs to Abbas. In his 16 years of absolute power, he has barred political challengers and shut down political debate. If Palestinian elections are held, they will occur in a political vacuum. The alternative was a patient process of institution-building along the lines of what Fayyad advocated as prime minister. As he knew well, democracy is a system of governance that cannot be built on voting alone. Rather, it must be built on parties, structures, and the rigorous debate of ideas.

That's not possible this time around. But Abbas could still postpone the elections or work with other parties to restrict terrorist participation. Should he reject both of these paths, a new Palestinian political crisis is slated to begin on May 22.

Mr. Schanzer is the senior vice president for research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

Israel's (Unconfirmed) Strike on Iran Strengthens America's Negotiation Position

By Lahav Harkov

Taking Natanz off the table.

There's a negotiating strategy used in the Knesset during budget debates called "the goat," which the Iranian regime seems to be very familiar with – though they probably have another name for it.

It's been a few years since there was a real budget debate in Israel, so here's a reminder of what "the goat" means: There's a Jewish folktale about a man who complained to the rabbi that his family was too cramped in their tiny one-room shack.

The rabbi told the man to bring his chicken into the house. The man went back to the rabbi and said they feel even more cramped. The rabbi told the man to bring his goat into the house. The man went back to the rabbi and said the house is now so cramped, they cannot live in it for one more day.

The rabbi told the man to put the chicken and goat outside. The man went back to the rabbi and said he now feels like he has plenty of space.

jpost.com

April 12, 2021

The moral of the story is supposed to be to appreciate what you have because it could always be worse.

But in Israeli budget negotiations, "the goat" represents a tactic of adding more and more demands so that when you remove them, you look like you're making concessions to get what you actually wanted in the first place.

That is exactly what Iran seemed to be doing over the weekend.

On Friday, the US and Iran continued indirect negotiations for their return to the Iran deal. Though some of the other parties to the Iran deal expressed optimism that an agreement can be reached, Iran maintained its stance that all post-2015 sanctions be removed before it takes any steps to return to compliance with the deal's nuclear limitations. Soon after, a senior US State Department official said if Iran doesn't budge, then the sides will reach an impasse.

The next day, Iran further breached the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action by launching advanced

uranium enrichment machines at the underground nuclear facility in Natanz.

This seems like it was a gambit by Iran to have a longer list of items that it can scale back from in negotiations, while still ending up closer to a nuclear bomb than the JCPOA originally allowed for it to reach.

Then, less than a day later, there was a mysterious power outage in Natanz that derailed the whole thing.

Though Iran's Atomic Energy Organization confirmed that an "accident" occurred at the facility, there was no official acknowledgment of foul play. Still, some Iranian lawmakers have blamed it on "sabotage" and "infiltration," Iranian journalist Abas Aslani tweeted on Sunday.

There are indications that the disruptions in Natanz were the result of a cyberattack, and – as always – all eyes are on Israel when these things happen. And Iran has yet

to recover from recent "incidents," such as a July 2020 explosion that set back its nuclear program.

Iran, of course, claims its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. But its adversaries in the region and beyond are hard-pressed to believe the ayatollahs' regime in light of its aggression across the Middle East and its calls to wipe Israel off the map. Those are the legitimate defensive aims of a possible attack on the uranium enrichment machines in Natanz.

Israel and others in the region, as well, certainly have been eyeing the talks in Vienna with concern that the US and Iran may truly return to the 2015 nuclear deal, which would lift nuclear limitations on Tehran in 2030, and not make it "longer and stronger" as Washington has promised it would.

Now, when it comes to nuclear negotiations, it looks like someone got Iran's goat.

Israel's Naval Shadow War with Iran Comes Out into the Open

By Ron Ben Yishai

ynetnews.com

April 7, 2021

Stopping the smuggling of arms—and sending a message to Washington.

The talks in Vienna that began Tuesday on the U.S. return to the Iran nuclear agreement are directly connected to the same day attack on an Iranian vessel in the Red Sea that has been attributed to Israel.

Both Tehran and Jerusalem are signaling to Washington that the Middle East must be higher up on U.S. President Joe Biden's list of priorities and that if untreated, the conflict between Israel and Iran could escalate to all-out war.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday confirmed that the vessel had been attacked and "caused minor damage with no casualties." An investigation is underway, it said.

The vessel that was hit, the Saviz, is actually a floating naval base for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in the Red Sea, off the coasts of Yemen and Djibouti - whatever Iran says to the contrary.

Tasnim, the Iranian news agency linked to the Revolutionary Guard, said Tuesday that the Saviz was there to "support Iranian commandos sent on commercial vessel (anti-piracy) escort missions."

Saviz was actually in the area to protect Iranian ships in the Red Sea and to grant fast-moving Revolutionary Guard commando boats the freedom of movement to carry out objectives in line with Tehran's interests.

These boats are kept onboard the Saviz for use by the commando forces who protect Iranian oil tankers and vessels smuggling weapons as they make their way to Syria and Lebanon through the Suez Canal, whilst mindful of Israeli forces in the area.

Pictures of the boats onboard the Saviz appeared in the Israeli media.

The vessel also acts as an intelligence base, monitoring Saudi vessels that are enforcing a maritime embargo on

Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and preventing humanitarian aid from reaching them.

It largely remains off the Yemeni coast, some 1,600 kilometers (994 miles) south of Israel.

The Saviz suffered serious damage in Tuesday's attack, far more than was caused in other attacks on Iranian vessels attributed to Israel as they transported oil and arms to both Syrian and Lebanon.

The damage to the Saviz was below water level, briefly preventing it from moving, but not sinking it.

It is probable that the damage requires the ship to be towed for repairs to a port big enough to accommodate it, most likely in Iran. And weeks if not months will pass before such an operation can take place.

The attack marks an escalation in the ongoing covert war being waged at sea between Israel and Iran.

The aim of the attack was threefold:

1. To retaliate for an Iranian attack on an Israeli-owned cargo ship in the Arabian Sea last month.

2. To show the Iranians that Israel has the upper hand in the waters of the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and that Tehran would be wise to refrain from efforts to attack its navy or Israeli-owned vessels anywhere near their shores, including in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Iran must also end efforts to smuggle oil and arms to Syria and Lebanon.

3. To clarify to the United States that Israel will continue its relentless fight against Iran's subversive actions in the region, whether it is in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, even if the U.S. is attempting to rebuild relations with the Islamic Republic.

Israel has come to understand that Washington is hoping to de-escalate their conflict with Iran at almost any cost so that the administration can focus its attention on the coronavirus pandemic, infrastructure and adversarial relations with China and Russia.

The Iranian nuclear program is a nuisance to the Americans. Biden has committed to preventing a nuclear Iran and his administration is concerned that if Tehran continues to develop its atomic capabilities, Israel might launch a strike against it. This would certainly lead to a war that the U.S. would be dragged into it whether it likes it or not.

To avoid this, the administration is prepared to make significant concessions to the Iranians in order to entice them back to the negotiating table and abiding by the nuclear deal that former president Donald Trump walked away from in 2018.

Diplomats of the EU, China, Russia and Iran at the start of talks on a U.S. return to the 2015 nuclear deal, at the Grand Hotel in Vienna

Diplomats of the EU, China, Russia and Iran at the start of talks on a U.S. return to the 2015 nuclear deal, at the Grand Hotel in Vienna (Photo: AFP)

Officials in Israel are concerned. The country's intelligence agencies observed that the Iranians are not

attempting to produce nuclear weapons at the moment but do want to be a nuclear threshold state. The Vienna talks, which are expected to last a few months, will help them with this goal.

Israel wants to stop the Iranians from fulfilling their plan, but is facing serious obstacles.

The current government has little to no sway over Washington's foreign policy decisions and officials in Jerusalem are watching with concern as America appears ready to be humiliated by Iran as long as it returns to the 2015 agreement.

Even it could affect the Vienna talks, Israel and the U.S. must be on the same page about the next diplomatic steps should Iran keep pushing ahead with its nuclear program. But such discussions have not even begun.

Meanwhile, Iran's economy has rebounded thanks to covert oil sales to China and Russia and its leaders no longer fear the sanctions imposed on the country.

In fact, Iran inches closer every day to becoming a nuclear threshold state.

Unrest in Jordan Should Be a Wake-Up Call to Israel and the U.S.

By Hussein Ibish

bloomberg.com

April 7, 2021

A fragile, but essential kingdom..

A pledge by Prince Hamza to put himself “at the disposal” of King Abdullah II, his half-brother, appears to have resolved the feud within the Jordanian royal family that erupted at the end of last week. But the kingdom's most serious crisis in decades was as a salutary reminder of both the importance and the precariousness of Jordan's stabilizing role in the Middle East.

The events of the weekend remain murky and may never be fully disclosed. The kingdom has banned the publication of “anything related to the investigations,” which suggests the palace is keen to draw a line under the affair.

But the roots of the royal ructions can be traced back to 2004, when the king removed Hamza as crown prince, as a prelude to giving the title to his own son, Hussein. This was not unusual for Jordan — Abdullah's father had made a similar switch in the succession on his death-bed — and Hamzah seemed to accept his demotion with equanimity.

But in recent months, he is reported to grown strident in his criticism of corruption that he linked to his half-brother's reign. Perhaps more alarming for the palace, he is thought to have reached out to powerful tribal leaders, whose support is crucial for the monarchy and has been the bedrock of its power for almost a hundred years.

Still, it came as shock to Jordanians when Hamzah released a video saying he was under house arrest. Several of his associates had been arrested, and government statements suggested there had been an attempted coup, with foreign connivance.

This set off inevitable speculation that Israel or Saudi Arabia had been involved. Israel is frequently blamed for mysterious unrest in Arab countries, especially those that

are deeply enmeshed in the Palestinian issue. Saudi Arabia has also become one of the usual suspects for unexplained developments and one of Hamzah's arrested associates is a Saudi.

But Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf monarchies were quick to issue statements of strong support for Abdullah. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz offered help with what he described as “an internal Jordanian issue.” And the Biden administration reaffirmed American backing for the king, describing him as “a key partner.”

But the coup against Abdullah — if that is indeed what it was — failed, it nonetheless brought royal tensions into the open, breaking with the Hashemite clan's tradition of dealing privately with internal dissent. Plainly, all is not well in the kingdom as it prepares to celebrate its centenary this coming Sunday. The U.S. nonprofit Freedom House recently downgraded Jordan from “partly free” to “not free” in its annual assessment of the state of democracy worldwide. The report cited “harsh new restrictions on freedom of assembly, a crackdown on the teachers union [and] a lack of adequate preparations that harmed the quality of parliamentary elections during the covid-19 pandemic.”

The 100-year-old monarchy faces serious challenges at home and abroad. The Jordanian government's mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic has deepened the longstanding public dissatisfaction over endemic corruption and general economic malaise. By casting himself as a crusader against corruption, Hamzah might have scored powerful points against the status quo represented by his half-brother.

On the foreign-policy front, Jordan has long felt taken for granted by the U.S., Israel and Gulf Arab countries, all

of which rely on the kingdom to play a quiet but essential regional role. The resentment in Amman deepened during the administration of President Donald Trump, when Washington seemed to go along with Israeli plans to annex large swathes of the West Bank. Jordanians regard annexation with existential dread because it could export Palestinian nationalism into the kingdom, given that over half its population is made up of Palestinians displaced by Israel in the 1948 and 1967 wars.

More generally, Jordanians feel they are punished for the relative stability of their country in a restive region, the non-squeaking wheel that doesn't get much grease. The consequences of instability in its neighborhood are often visited upon the kingdom, most obviously in the form of refugees, whether from Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion or from Syria after the rise of the Islamic State and the subsequent civil war.

For the West, Israel and Gulf Arab states, the Jordanian government is an important contributor to political and diplomatic initiatives, whether on the

Palestinians, Iraq or Syria. They also rely on Jordanian intelligence services in the fight against terrorism and extremism.

So the specter of instability in Amman should have set off alarms in capitals across the Middle East, and in Washington. A collapse of order could easily turn much of Jordan into a facsimile of parts of Iraq and Syria just over the border, with militias, ISIS-like terrorist groups, tribal warlords and other forces battling it out in a situation of protracted chaos. The Hamzah affair is a useful reminder of how much all the other parties stand to lose if, like many of its neighbors, Jordan begins to fall apart.

The government's success in reining in Prince Hamzah may in the short run strengthen the king's hand and undermine oppositional activities. The challenge for Jordan's allies is to preserve the stability of the monarchy while pressing the palace for the political, institutional and economic reforms necessary to prevent a repeat of last weekend's events.

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Negotiations with Iran Could Easily Lead to a Worse Deal Than Was Secured in 2015

By Noah Rothman

commentarymagazine.com

April 07, 2021

The pursuit of the elusive Iranian moderates continues.

Iran and the United States are back at the nuclear negotiating table. Talks have so far been described as "constructive," which translates from Diplomatese to English as "fruitless." Seeing as these negotiations are being conducted by European intermediaries who literally shuttle themselves from the hotel where the Iranian delegation is situated to another where the Americans are lodged, it would be a miracle if a breakthrough were reached.

It isn't just the protocols that represent an obstacle to progress, but the gaping chasm between the parties' negotiating positions that is unlikely to be bridged. The United States maintains that Iran must take some concrete steps toward complying with the original accords before it budges. Presumably, that would entail reductions in Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium or the mothballing of its enrichment capacity. Iranian negotiators insist that they need to see each and every Trump-era sanction on the Islamic Republic lifted before they reciprocate. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister and lead negotiator Abbas Araghchi told Iranian PressTV that he would not accept a "step-by-step plan." For Tehran, it's all or nothing.

To their credit, American negotiators still nominally adhered to Joe Biden's campaign-trail pledge to seek a better, more comprehensive deal than 2015's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). That implicit admission that the original Iran nuclear deal was insufficient is welcome, but the administration is handicapping itself if it's looking for a better deal.

"I think what we can essentially rule out are the maximalist demands that the United States do everything first and only, in turn, would Iran then act," State

Department Spokesman Ned Price told reporters. "I don't think anyone is under the impression that that would be a viable proposal." Good. Maximalist demands should be ruled out. But no one said anything about minimalist demands.

The United States will have an easier time making the first overture by easing any one of the suite of sanctions currently targeting vital sectors of the Iranian economy, the Iranian regime, or the designated terrorist actors under Tehran's control. What's more, the United States appears to have imposed on itself a short window to secure something resembling a deal, making it the party most likely to blink first.

"The talks are taking place ahead of an Iranian presidential election in June, in which incumbent Hassan Rouhani cannot run again," Politico Europe reported. "A more hardline leader would make progress on the diplomatic front more difficult." Raising the specter of Iranian hardliners, who are forever waiting in the wings to sabotage progress, is an eerie echo of the kind of moral blackmail Barack Obama deployed so often against the JCPOA's critics. And while Special Envoy Robert Malley told reporters that the U.S. would "negotiate with whoever is in power in Iran" and the Iranian political calendar cannot "dictate our pace," nor could the U.S. afford to "ignore the reality of an election."

Malley's ambiguity is not reflected in the pro-deal press, which is eager to see negotiations produce some sort of framework ahead of Iranian elections. "Improved relations with the west might boost turnout among an Iranian public worn down by sanctions and a resurgent Covid outbreak," the Guardian reported, "so could help reformists who had supported the deal only to have their

political ground undercut by Trump's actions." This, too, is a familiar refrain.

The JCPOA was said in 2015 to have greatly empowered the reform wing of the Iranian theocracy, which Rouhani helmed. But what did we witness in the immediate aftermath of the Iran deal's implementation? Iran-sponsored sectarian attacks in Iraq; the material and political support for a genocidal regime in Syria; weapons funneled to Houthis in Yemen; political instability in Lebanon and Bahrain sponsored by Tehran; and a vicious crackdown on political demonstrators inside Iran. All of this occurred before Donald Trump effectively abrogated the JCPOA in May 2018, after which Iranian provocations only became more reckless and provocative.

The idea that a nuclear accord with the West empowers Iran's moderates presumes the existence of

Iranian moderates—a presupposition that has time and again proven flawed.

But that seems to be the belief to which the Biden administration and its negotiators adhere. If so, they could convince themselves that they're better served chasing an accord, any accord, at the possible expense of its terms. And the results of such a flawed approach are predictable. For all their talk of a better deal, we will likely end up with something even worse.

Update: The United States blinked first. As a gesture aimed at breaking the logjam, Reuters reports that the Biden administration is prepared to lift sanctions on Iran that are "inconsistent with the 2015 pact." We will see if Iran reciprocates.

Mr. Rothman is the Associate Editor of Commentary and the author of Unjust: Social Justice and the Unmaking of America.

No Longer the Sole Province of Israel and the U.S., Drones Are Revolutionizing Aerial Warfare

By Francis Fukuyama

americanpurpose.com

April 5, 2021

Starting in the Middle East.

Back in the early 2010s when I first started playing with drones, I speculated in the FT that if I could own a drone, anyone could, and that this would have big implications for global politics. At that time, drone technology was largely controlled by the U.S. and Israel, but I noted that it was inevitable that it would spread widely and change the nature of interstate conflict. The specific use I imagined was for targeted assassinations, and Henry Sokolski recently speculated in these pages that they could be used against critical infrastructure like nuclear power plants. Neither of these threats has emerged big time as of yet, but the global landscape has already been changed by military drones.

The main actor in this development is Turkey under its autocratic president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The country has developed its own domestic drones and has used them to devastating effect in several recent military conflicts: Libya, Syria, in the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and in the fight against the PKK inside its own borders. In the process, it has elevated itself to being a major regional power broker with more ability to shape outcomes than Russia, China, or the United States.

Turkish drones like the Anka-S were developed by the Turkish aerospace industries firm TUSAS, while the Bayraktar TB2 was developed by the defense industry firm Baykar Makina, led by MIT-educated drone designer Selçuk Bayraktar, who was to later marry Erdogan's daughter. The impetus to create a domestically-produced

drone was driven by the U.S. military embargo in 1975, and Washington's reluctance to sell the country its advanced Predator and Reaper drones. Turkey bought Heron drones from Israel, but found that relationship problematic as well. Drones are, however, not that hard to manufacture, and the most recent Turkish ones are quite impressive. The TB2 can stay aloft for 24 hours, and can perform both reconnaissance and attack missions.

The effectiveness of these weapons was first demonstrated beyond Turkey's borders in Syria in March 2020, where in retaliation for a Russian-backed Syrian attack that killed 36 Turkish soldiers, Ankara launched a devastating attack on Syrian armored forces that were moving into Idlib province along the Turkish border. Video footage showed them destroying one Syrian armored vehicle after another, including more than 100 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and air defense systems.

The Syrian offensive was brought to a complete halt, and Idlib province secured as a haven for refugees. Then in May, Turkish drones were used to attack an air base in Libya used by UAE-backed Libyan National Army of General Khalifa Haftar, which ended the LNA's offensive against Tripoli. Finally, during the Nagorno-Karabakh war in September, Turkish drones intervening for Azerbaijan against Armenia destroyed an estimated 200 tanks, 90 other armored vehicles, and 182 artillery pieces, forcing the latter to withdraw from the territory. This has become a point of nationalist pride in Turkey, as this pro-Azeri video suggests.



It seems to me that Turkey's use of drones is going to change the nature of land power in ways that will undermine existing force structures, in the way that the Dreadnaught obsoleted earlier classes of battleships, or the aircraft carrier made battleships themselves obsolete at the beginning of World War II. Combined arms land forces of the sort that defeated Iraq twice in the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars are built around tanks, whose primacy was due to the fact that for many years, only a tank could destroy another tank. One of the little-known facts about the 1967 Middle East War was that only a couple of Egyptian tanks were killed from the air in Israel's massive opening air strike, because it was too difficult to hit so small a target with an airplane. In the intervening years, precision-guided munitions began to proliferate, making the targeting of tanks much easier, but they still required expensive platforms like the A-10 close-support attack aircraft, which in turn necessitated expensive air defenses to operate against a sophisticated opponent.

Drones have now changed this picture substantially because they are relatively cheap, hard to defeat, and don't risk the lives of human pilots. Militaries around the world are scrambling now to figure out how to defend themselves against drones, and it is not clear who will win the arms race between drones and drone counter-measures. But it is possible that the world saw its last massive tank battle during the 2003 Iraq War.

Drones have done much to promote Turkey's rise as a regional power in the year 2020. The country has now decisively shaped the outcomes of three conflicts, and

promises to do more of the same. The Middle East, which looked like it was being polarized along Sunni-Shia lines led by the two primary antagonists Saudi Arabia and Iran, is in fact more genuinely multipolar. Turkey has not aligned itself permanently with anyone. It has opposed its fellow Sunni powers, the Gulf States, in Libya; simultaneously sided with Russia by buying the latter's S-400 air defense system while attacking Russian forces in Syria; and has refused to align its aims with Washington despite its continuing membership in NATO. Yet it has also sold TB2 drones to Ukraine, which might help unfreeze that conflict.

This has had some good consequences. Turkey's intervention in Syria defeated what would have been a genocidal act against the refugees who had sought shelter in Idlib province. Had Assad succeeded in retaking the province, he would have provoked another massive refugee crisis with big implications for Europe. It's not clear the world would be better off had Gen. Haftar occupied Tripoli. On the other hand, Turkey's intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh created a massive refugee crisis for Armenians. The multi-sided nature of Middle Eastern conflicts makes them harder to solve, and is one reason why the Syrian civil war is still raging after nearly a decade.

Many American critics of U.S. drone policy are still living in a world where the U.S. and Israel were the main users of this technology. But that world has already disappeared and is quickly giving way to one in which drones become central battlefield weapons. What that will look like in ten years' time is anyone's guess.

Conflict over the Blue Nile Dam Could Destabilize the Middle East

By Alberto M. Fernandez

memri.org

April 6, 2021

Egypt and Ethiopia have a dam problem.

About two months from now, it will start raining in the highlands of Ethiopia. This is the longer rainy season in that country and will be the time that the second partial filling of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) takes place. If the GERD project and the first partial filling of the dam last summer raised tensions with downstream states Sudan and Egypt, this year the filling comes along two additional recent events that heighten them further: a brutal internal conflict inside Ethiopia in Tigray, and border tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia in the Fashaga region. The GERD should, in normal rainy years, bring benefits to all three countries in terms of regularizing waterflow, but in years of drought, Egypt would be at the mercy of a foreign power 2,000 miles away.[1]

The complete filling of the GERD's lake will take several years and there is no reason why this year should



be decisive, but there is no doubt that the distrust and tension are rising. In addition to the conflict inside Ethiopia, both Sudan and Egypt are themselves facing a variety of internal challenges.[2] Seven other countries

make up the ten riparian states of the Nile Basin,[3] and with Nile Basin countries tied to other regional states in the Middle East, Africa, and global powers elsewhere, the rising tensions about the GERD cast a long shadow.

As the African Union seeks to broker an agreement, Sudan and Egypt have called for expanding mediation to the UN, EU, and United States in addition to the AU. Ethiopia has not yet accepted while Egyptian President Al-Sisi recently made a stark warning that "Egypt's water is off limits." Both Egypt and Ethiopia have alternated between sounding conciliatory and bellicose, while Sudan – caught in the middle – leans toward Egypt now. Sudan and Egypt recently concluded joint wargames involving both aircraft

and special forces.[4] The GERD is located only a tempting 28 miles from the Sudanese border.

Sensing, correctly, that an already volatile situation is deteriorating, the Biden Administration sent U.S. Senator Chris Coons (D-Connecticut) to Ethiopia in March 2021 and hinted at selecting veteran career diplomat Jeffrey Feltman as Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa. While these pieces are put in place and feverish efforts toward a mutually acceptable negotiating mechanism are contrived, what should be priority diplomatic steps in this multifaceted conflict?

Get The Guardrails Back Up – While AU diplomacy has been a constant and several countries, including the United States, have not been absent in their efforts, the military dimension of a possible conflict is closer to the surface than ever before. Parts of the Sudan-Ethiopian border now host not only regular Sudanese and Ethiopian armed forces, but irregular forces and ill-disciplined tribal militias. Sudan's former Janjaweed, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), face Amhara militias known for their brutality against local people.[5] With the chance of inadvertent, escalating clashes and public saber-rattling so prominent, a first step must be to ensure that a dangerous, volatile situation does not deteriorate even further into open military conflict before the rains come.

Getting Sudan Right – The rising regional conflict places Sudan's fragile transition toward democracy and national peace at great risk. Sudan's transitional government has inked peace agreements with almost of the country's rebel groups, bringing the possibility of real peace to long-suffering areas like the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile region closer than ever. Sudan has just taken in 70,000 Ethiopian refugees in the past few months.[6] The civilian government has also begun taking much needed political and economic steps to address the grim heritage of the three decades of the Bashir regime. But there is fierce ongoing competition not only between civilian and military parts of the government but also within military factions. The international community, led by the United States, must not lose focus in supporting Sudan's reform and political transformation. It would be a great tragedy that Sudan's transition would be lost in a rising conflict about Nile water driven particularly by the country's authoritarian Northern and Southeastern neighbors.

An Off-Ramp For Abiy Ahmed? – How the mighty have fallen! The 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is now credibly accused of riding the crest of Amhara nationalism in committing savage ethnic cleansing against Tigrayan rivals. Ethiopia

called in (or allowed) Eritrea, the North Korea-like former enemy now ally of Ahmed to join in the carnage in Tigray.[7] A best-case scenario for the international community would seek to provide an off-ramp for the Ethiopian leader away from further deterioration in the internal political and security situation inside Ethiopia while seeking to decouple Ahmed from Eritrean dictator Isaias Afwerki; this is a very tall order. Ahmed described Ethiopia's military as "fighting on eight fronts" against its enemies, a description which seems to bode very poorly for the country's near-term stability and its international relations. And such instability in turn makes a GERD dividend even more of an urgent imperative for a messianic Ahmed to deliver some sort of tangible progress or hint at prosperity for his people,[8] further enraging an Egypt fearful of drought and a Sudan threatened by flooding.

Warning/Engaging The Neighbors – While Eritrea has played a key role in stoking instability inside Ethiopia in recent months, it is not the only regional wildcard that can make the situation worse. Sudan is assaulted by remnants of the Bashir regime broadcasting daily anti-government Islamist propaganda in Arabic from Istanbul (the Erdoğan government was very supportive of the brutal Bashir regime in its last years).[9] Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea all have a long decades-old history of arming rebel and insurgent groups against the other. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Israel can all play a role in making the situation better or worse and need to be in constant dialogue with international mediators to ensure they play, at least, a non-negative role.

Avoid Alienating Egypt – One of the problems with GERD negotiations in recent years was the Ethiopian concern that the Trump Administration favored Egypt. That will certainly not be a problem with a Biden Administration.[10] The danger now is that Egypt could be so alienated by the new administration that it could feel it has nothing to lose by a sharp military response to Ethiopia if provoked. The irony is that the United States, given human rights concerns about the Ahmed government, cannot swing too far toward the now bloodstained embrace of Ethiopia's leader and away from Egypt even if Biden wanted. The U.S. needs a working relationship with both Ahmed and President Trump's "favorite dictator" President Al-Sisi to keep the overall situation from deteriorating further, let alone in attempting forge some sort of face-saving solution.

Mr. Fernandez is Vice President of MEMRI.

Israel's Protracted Political Crisis Harms National Security

By Efraim Inbar

jiss.org.il

April 13, 2021

The power of the IDF, the potency of Israeli deterrence, the health of Israeli society, and the stability of Israel's newest peace agreements with Arab counties – all are impacted negatively by continuing electoral indecision.

The results of Israel's March 2021 election (its fourth election within two years!) again failed to yield a clear result. There is a reasonable possibility of a fifth election this fall. Of course, the lingering political crisis has

domestic repercussions. It also is impairing Israeli national security and eroding the country's international standing.

The political system in Israel is failing to ensure the stability required for smooth functioning of the Israeli defense establishment. The most notable example of this is the absence of clear medium- and long-term budgetary decision-making.

When he took office, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi sought to implement a multi-year military plan for the years 2020-2024, dubbed "Momentum." Due to the political instability and the coronavirus crisis, the plan did not receive orderly approval of the political echelon and is not backed by multi-year budgetary authorization. Although the IDF is executing the plan as best possible with the resources currently allocated to it, there is considerable uncertainty about its full implementation.

Furthermore, decision-making process on key security issues unquestionably has been harmed. The political echelon is preoccupied with managing political crises and election campaigns. The time left for Israeli politicians to think seriously about security challenges is limited. Although professional echelons of the defense establishment continue to work and make recommendations, they cannot take major decisions without the involvement of the senior political level.

The ongoing political crisis also undermines Israeli deterrence. Over recent years, Israel has been perceived around the world as a high-tech power and an economically and militarily strong country. To this can now be added Israel's prowess in swiftly vaccinating its population against Covid-19. All this has strengthened Israel's deterrence, only to be damaged by Israel's inability to elect a stable government to deal effectively with security challenges.

The continuing political crisis also propagates a perception of Israel as a divided country that could crumble under pressure. While this is not an accurate reflection of the state of Israeli society, this perception is preferred by the political elites in Teheran who long for the day that Israel will collapse due to internal divisions. In fact, this view of Israel is common among those who want to still believe that the Jewish State is a temporary phenomenon. This view encourages the country's enemies to continue their struggle against Israel's existence.

The main issue in the election campaigns of the last two years has been Binyamin Netanyahu's suitability to serve as Prime Minister. Serious disagreements about policy regarding the economy, the coronavirus pandemic, Iran, and the Palestinian issue conspicuously have been absent; indicating a broad Israeli consensus on these issues. Nevertheless, the election campaigns have exacerbated social and political differences which erode Israeli social

cohesion. The prolongation of political-electoral crisis deepens weaknesses in Israeli society and invites foreign aggression.

The complicated political situation also raises difficulties in Israel's foreign relations, particularly with countries of the region with which Israel recently has reached peace agreements. These countries are unaccustomed to weaknesses of the democratic system and are unfamiliar with the vagaries of Israel's political system. Instead, Arab countries have preferred to see Israel as a stable and strong country with which long-term enterprises can be comfortably concluded. But Israel's lingering political crises cast a shadow over this assumption and create discomfort among Israel's new partners. The gap between Netanyahu's international image as a strong, extremely successful leader and his inability to win a series of election campaigns raises doubts regarding the credibility of Israel's leader and its political system.

The political stalemate also invites the interference of foreign elements in Israeli politics. In past, American governments have been tempted to meddle in Israeli election campaigns. The Palestinian Authority also has not refrained from trying to manipulate the Arab public in Israel. Prolongation of the electoral crisis creates additional opportunities for outside intervention in Israeli politics.

The most recent election result potentially has given the Islamist Israeli Arab party Raam (a somewhat moderate Israeli version of the Moslem Brotherhood) a key role in formation of the next government. Raam may be the deciding factor in determining who will serve as Prime Minister.

This may be an opportunity to enhance the integration of Israeli Arabs into Israel's political system. It is also can be an opportunity to counter slanderous accusations that Israeli democracy is flawed because it excludes Israeli Arab citizens.

However, that matter is complex because those Arab countries with which Israel has diplomatic relations regard the Islamic identity of Raam in an extremely negative light. Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco are fiercely opposed to the religious extremism inspired by the Moslem Brotherhood, and are engaged with struggles against the Brotherhood in their own countries. If at the end of the day an Israeli government is formed the support of Raam, Israel will have some explaining to do.

Israel's political leaders must come to their senses and form a stable and sane government. Continuation of the existing situation breeds national insecurity.

Professor Efraim Inbar is President of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS).