

**On DC trip, Bennett's approach to Iran – and governing – took amorphous shape**

By Lazar Berman

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**Premier points at wisdom of his multi-faceted effort against Tehran and spirit of unity in his coalition, but he'll have to show more boldness going forward if he intends to lead.**

Naftali Bennett's first visit to Washington as prime minister was a fairly low-stakes affair.

He came at a time when US government and media attention were focused elsewhere, on the unfolding disaster in Afghanistan and the latest COVID-19 wave. Moreover, his goals in his first meeting with US President Joe Biden were modest: establish a personal connection, present a strategy to stop Iranian nuclear and regional ambitions, advance a visa waiver program and secure a replenishment of Iron Dome missiles.

In this subdued context, Bennett revealed the contours of both how he intends to deal with Iran and how he will lead his unwieldy coalition in general — in each case a low-key approach that hopes to be effective without rocking the boat too much.

Some might say his policy is an example of prudent, cautious statesmanship; others that he's given up on his principles in order to secure two years as prime minister with no particular goals in mind other than remaining in power.

Death by a thousand cuts

The major international challenge facing Bennett is the Iranian nuclear program.

After expectations that the Biden administration's eagerness to secure a return to the 2015 deal — known formally as the JCPOA — would lead to easy negotiations with the Islamic Republic, that accord is becoming ever more elusive. Iran's moderate then-president Hassan Rouhani introduced a number of demands to the Vienna talks that he knew the US could not accept, and his hardline successor Ebrahim Raisi will likely take an even more aggressive approach.

While Bennett's predecessor Benjamin Netanyahu was willing to irreparably damage ties with Barack Obama's White House and possibly with the Democratic Party in his fight against the emerging JCPOA, Bennett reportedly pledged to Biden that despite opposing an American return to the deal, he will not wage a public campaign against it.

Instead, Bennett is opting for a broad approach that looks to counter Iran beyond its nuclear program. He



(From left) Benny Gantz, Yair Lapid, Naftali Bennett, Gideon Sa'ar and Merav Michaeli sit together after their new coalition wins Knesset approval, June 13, 2021. (Haim Zach/GPO)

intends to push back on its proxies, on its maritime attacks, on its economy and on the stability of its regime.

The idea, said his advisers last week in Washington, is to push on a number of weak spots simultaneously, in the hope that enough pressure will cause the Islamic Republic to collapse.

Bennett returns to two historical analogies to explain his strategy. He argues that the Middle East is in a Cold War scenario, with Israel playing the role of the US and Iran — a rotting regime hated by most of the population — akin to the Soviet Union. Enough pressure on multiple fronts, Bennett argues, will cause the system to eventually collapse.

The other analogy he uses is the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II. In order to stop the German U-boat attacks devastating Allied shipping, the US, UK, and Canada developed a range of tactics and technologies to ultimately take control of the North Atlantic. The “little bit of everything” approach that dispersed the Nazi wolfpacks, he says, can also halt Tehran's nuclear program and possibly even bring the Islamic Republic to its knees.

This approach can be seen as patient and appropriately cautious. While maintaining the goodwill of Israel's most important ally, Israel will work to covertly present Iran with a range of challenges, forcing it to defend itself everywhere all the time until the whole edifice collapses.

On the other hand, it is hard to describe Bennett's proposed approach to Iran as much of a strategy. Like many of Israel's responses to threats, it is a series of impressive tactical efforts without a clear logic uniting them into a properly conceived campaign. Airstrikes and sabotage can certainly be helpful, but on their own they are not going to cause Iran to withdraw its support for armed proxies or compel the supreme leader to suspend his nuclear research program.

The new spirit of unity

“I come here from Jerusalem, our eternal capital,” said Bennett after his one-on-one conversation over coffee with Biden last Friday, “and I bring with me a new spirit, a spirit of goodwill, a spirit of hope, a spirit of decency and honesty, a spirit of unity and bipartisanship of folks who, as you suggested, harbor very different political opinions, even opposing.

“Yet we all share the deep passion to work together to build a better future for Israel,” he told the president in

their joint press appearance. “And that’s what Israel is about. We’re out to be good, to do good.”

US President Joe Biden meets with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, on August 27, 2021. (Nicholas Kamm / AFP)

Bennett and his staff repeated this message throughout the visit — that he has been able to bring together Israeli politicians with very different worldviews around professional, non-ideological discussions to find solutions to the country’s pressing problems like COVID-19, climate change, and the state budget.

Supporters would argue that Bennett’s uniting approach to governing is a welcome and timely change from the partisan bickering Israelis have grown used to in their politics. What’s more, a pandemic like COVID-19 is beyond politics and ideology, and cooperation is required to cope with a disease that has killed 7,000 Israelis.

The flaw in this approach, as nice as it may sound, is that it is incoherent. There is no politics without ideology, just as there is no ideal solution to any challenge.

Take the coronavirus pandemic. Goals need to be defined and weighed against each other: protecting lives, protecting the economy, protecting civil rights, protecting education. Without ideology, there is no way to prioritize and no way to make the difficult choices necessary to craft a policy around a set of goals.

More broadly, there is no objective definition of the “better future” for Israel Bennett described to Biden. Every shekel invested in new capabilities to counter the potentially existential threat from Iran is a shekel not invested in the potentially existential threat from climate change. A larger welfare budget means a smaller education budget, and money sent to strengthen Jewish identity in the Diaspora is not spent on combating violent crime in Arab cities.

On policy issues, a leader is expected to wisely balance the competing needs and interests of various constituencies, and come to a coherent policy that reflects the values, desires, priorities, religious sensibilities and rights of most of the public.

The coalition can hold fast and “muddle through,” in the words of a senior Israeli official, for only so long. At some point, Bennett will have to point at real goals based on an underlying worldview, and he may well be forced to do so in the face of a challenge that threatens to rip the government apart.

Avoiding dramatic moves might seem like the right approach for the anti-Netanyahu coalition governing the country. But real threats and problems will arise, and playing small ball for two years is no way to solve them.

The “new spirit” of cooperation is nice, but Bennett will have to start expressing his government’s principles and goals if he wants to be a leader worthy of the name.

## **Mideast terror groups energized by Taliban victory, but not rushing into battle**

**By Yaakov Lappin**

**jns.org**

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**Prof. Eyal Zisser of Tel Aviv University tells JNS that Hezbollah and Hamas are building on events in Afghanistan for morale but are realistic enough to avoid initiating war with Israel at this time.**

The shockwaves from the Taliban’s lightning-quick takeover of Afghanistan are continuing to reverberate throughout the Middle East, and Islamist forces are feeling energized by the U.S. withdrawal.

But according to Prof. Eyal Zisser, a lecturer in the Middle East History Department at Tel Aviv University, that boost in morale isn’t translating into rash attacks and warfare.

“I think that while the extremist forces are seeking to build on the American withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s victory for morale purposes, they are realistic enough to understand that this is not Afghanistan, that the reality here is difference, and therefore, Hezbollah and Hamas are congratulating the Taliban but they are careful not to go after it and launch a conflict with Israel,” Zisser told JNS.

After the 2006 Second Lebanon War, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah boasted of victory for propaganda purposes, but in actuality he remained in his bunker and has been very careful not to provoke Israel for most of the time since the war, said Zisser.

The developments in Afghanistan create a new

opening for further strengthening the alliance between Israel and pragmatic Sunni states, who are equally threatened by radical Islamist elements, whether Shi’ite — the Iranian axis — or radical Sunni Islamists, ranging from ISIS to the Muslim Brotherhood.

“The fear of an American abandonment of the area after Afghanistan has of course grown stronger, and I think this is sufficient to strengthen cooperation between the Gulf States and Israel,” said Zisser. “But there is also a need to continuously strengthen their sense that Israel can indeed assist them.”

Zisser argued that the U.S. is not about to leave the Gulf region, noting it retains significant forces in that area. “This is not Iraq or Afghanistan — the Americans are wanted in this area [the Gulf], so I assume that talk of abandoning the area is premature. The question is whether the Iranians will decide to challenge the U.S., and if so, will the U.S. respond militarily as the Trump administration did, or will [President Joe] Biden simply desire to avoid a conflict at all costs? Time will tell,” he added.

An additional Israeli perspective on events unfolding in Afghanistan could be found in a recent paper published by the Institute for Policy and Strategy Team at IDC Herzliya, which stated that “the swift, chaotic and humiliating evacuation of American forces and assets from

Afghanistan is a transformational event whose long-term impact it is too early to assess.”

At the same time, the paper argued, “past experience shows that victories of extremist forces across the Middle East generally carry with them radicalization processes and amplify terror threats.”

In the shorter term, the team wrote, Israel can draw a number of key conclusions from the developments. First among them is the “resounding expression of the failure of the ‘nation-building’ project and inculcation of a democratic system embarked on by the United States some two decades ago.”

Against this backdrop, the Israeli perspective — which prefers stability over externally “implanting” democracy and a liberal set of values on countries of the region — was revalidated, said the paper.

“Thus, Israel must continue to support the moderate and monarchic Sunni regimes in the Middle East, particularly in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Even if these regimes are not democratic, they still curb religious forces of the political Islam, fight against what remains of ISIS, and like Israel, are disturbed by the growing shadow of Iranian influence and Shiite terrorism,” it stated.

Such positions are likely a reflection of how the Israeli defense establishment is viewing events in Afghanistan.

“Israel needs to deepen its cooperation with moderate regimes in the diplomatic, military and intelligence realms, and take action in every way possible to strengthen them,” said the paper. “It appears that events in Afghanistan have created opportunities for Israel to step up military ties with the Arab states.”

## By Working with Egypt to Send Natural Gas to Lebanon, the U.S. Helps Iran

By Tony Badran

alarabiya.net

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### Boosting Syria and Hizballah at the same time.

The US ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea, confirmed recently that the Biden administration is facilitating the export of Egyptian natural gas and Jordanian surplus electricity to Hezbollah-controlled Lebanon via Syria. Shea’s remarks came after Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah’s announcement that Iran was sending Lebanon shipments of fuel.

Even though the effort to wheel Egyptian gas had been reported last month, the coincidence in timing has led to a flurry of speculative commentary in Lebanon about the supposed meaning of the American initiative.

Always eager to see their affairs as the center of global intrigue, Lebanese commentators quickly weaved grandiose theories, tying the US plan to geopolitical threads that are as convoluted as they are fictional. Instead, the announcement is another misstep in Biden-era US policy that will benefit Iran’s Lebanese interests and its local arm, Hezbollah.

At the heart of the Lebanese speculative analysis is the conceit that the US is competing with Iran over Lebanon. By bringing gas and electricity from Arab countries through Syria, the argument goes, the US is countering Hezbollah, and preventing Lebanon from falling entirely into Iran’s orbit. Leaving aside the fact that Lebanon has been an Iranian satrapy for well over a decade – what does falling “entirely” even mean in this context? – this reading is off on all counts. It is confused both about the Biden administration’s regional posture as well as about the conduit for its latest initiative, namely Syria.

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For the American plan to work, the Biden team would require the cooperation of the Assad regime and would therefore need to waive sanctions on Damascus. In other words, the administration would throw a lifeline to Iran’s other vassal, whom Tehran continues to prop up with

assistance, ranging from funding to fuel shipments, and the support of a host of militias, led by Hezbollah.

Hezbollah maintains control of a stretch of territory in western Syria along the border with Lebanon. Ongoing Israeli strikes in this region, from Homs to Qusayr down to the area west of Damascus, is a testament to the group’s, and the Revolutionary Guard’s, entrenchment, and to the concentration of their military infrastructure in this area.

The area in question is also home to the transit point for the Egyptian natural gas, which Lebanon would receive through the Arab Gas Pipeline. The pipeline runs from Egypt to Jordan and Syria. From Homs, it would connect to the Deir Ammar plant in northern Lebanon.

After years of war, however, the Syrian section of the pipeline likely requires repairs. Shea might have alluded to this already, with her comments that there will be “some logistical things that need to happen too.” That is to say, this initiative will require investment in Syria, which is under US sanctions.

Speaking to Al Arabiya, Shea said she recognized that sanctions imposed on the Assad regime under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019 posed an obstacle to the plan. Nevertheless, she expressed the administration’s determination to work around this hurdle: “There is a will to make this happen.”

The administration is looking to fund its plan through the World Bank. Washington’s discussions with the World Bank also covered financing the cost of repairs to the electric transmission lines and maintenance of the gas pipelines, the office of the Lebanese president said following an August 19 phone call between President Michel Aoun and Shea.

In other words, the Biden administration is looking to secure investment to rehabilitate infrastructure in Syria. This is on top of the transit fees Assad will demand and, presumably, collect.

Underscoring the falsehood of the conceit of competition with Iran, or of an alleged Hezbollah concern over wheeling energy through Syria, Nasrallah has welcomed the US plan. After all, Washington's initiative is a positive development for both Hezbollah and its Syrian ally – Assad will receive sanctions waivers and potential investment, while Hezbollah maintains its position on both sides of the border.

Hezbollah's support for the deal is further seen in the Lebanese delegation that will discuss the deal with the Syrians. Reportedly, it will be led by Hezbollah's trusted troubleshooter and emissary, General Abbas Ibrahim, head of the General Security Directorate.

Most importantly, Nasrallah could not have missed the US ambassador's response to his announcement on Iranian fuel shipments. Far from voicing opposition, never mind a threat to enforce sanctions, Shea seemingly offered only acquiescence: "I don't think anyone is going to fall on their sword if someone's able to get fuel into hospitals that need it." The only objection Shea mustered was a feeble jab at Hezbollah's reliability, questioning whether the terrorist group would distribute the Iranian fuel to all of Lebanon: "I ask you, can you count on Hezbollah to do that?"

Shea's implicit acquiescence is in line with the posture of the administration she represents. As it set out to appease the Iranian regime in an effort to revive Barack Obama's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Team Biden has waived sanctions on Iran's oil trade to allow the regime to access frozen funds from sales to Japan and South Korea. In addition, the administration pointedly has not enforced sanctions on Iran's oil trade with China.

It's unclear whether the Iranian fuel shipments to Lebanon will unload directly there or will head to Syria and be brought in overland. The latter option poses some problems to the Lebanese theory regarding the alleged antagonism between Nasrallah's announcement – the "Iranian plan" – and the wheeling of Egyptian gas through Syria – the "American-Arab plan" – which supposedly would cause friction between Tehran and Damascus.

A tweet by Lebanese Druze chieftain Walid Jumblatt captured how worthless these flights of fancy are. "Egyptian gas through Syria and Iranian fuel by sea, or via Iran – pardon me, Syria – or Russia, I don't know." Jumblatt's quip shows how silly it is to build wild theories on a false and utterly meaningless distinction between Iran and its client, the Assad regime.

Either way, by seemingly acquiescing to the Iranian shipment and by actively looking to waive sanctions on Assad, the Biden administration's posture is a win for Iran. Much like the Lebanese commentators, Team Biden will likely defend its initiative by arguing that it would serve the greater good of helping Lebanon or, better still, of countering Hezbollah.

This episode perfectly encapsulates the core problem with the very concept of a US "Lebanon policy." Under the pretense of attempting to "save" Lebanon, US policy sets itself on a path which inexorably leads to shoring up the Iranian-dominated order led by Hezbollah. By definition, Washington's "Lebanon policy," whose proponents often will market it as an arena of competition with Iran, is, structurally, a pro-Iran policy.

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## Why Saudi Arabia Turned against Hamas

By Nadav Shragai

[israelhayom.com](http://israelhayom.com)

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**Once a hotbed of terror financing, the kingdom is now sending dozens of terrorists to jail.**

Not too many years ago, the idea of a Saudi court sending dozens of Hamas members who had been operating out of the kingdom to prison would have seemed almost inconceivable. But this week, what once appeared a near-impossibility came to pass. Saudi Arabia, which used to be an economic paradise for members of al-Qaida and Hamas, sentenced 64 Hamas operatives convicted of money laundering and smuggling money to Hamas' armed wing in the Gaza Strip to prison.

Only two decades ago, the Saudis still had strong ties to terrorism, with 60% of Hamas' budget at the start of the millennium coming from Saudi sources. Millions of shekels were handed over to families of suicide bombers as "compensation" or "stipends." In the files of the Shin Bet security agency, one can still find remarks by high-ranking Saudi officials from the time of the Second Intifada, praising the suicide bombings. Sheikh Saleh bin Abdul-Aziz, for example, Saudi Arabia's minister for Islamic affairs, who said that armed jihad by the Palestinians was

permissible just before a suicide bombing in Rishon Lezion; or Saudi Ambassador to Britain Ghazi Katzive, who published a poem praising the bombers.

Even a decade ago, the Saudis were still ambivalent about terrorism. In December 2010 Wikileaks published a memo from then-US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in which she claimed that the Saudis, a major US ally, was a key source of funding for terrorists and that terrorist groups were raising "millions of dollars a year" from Saudi sources, often during the Haj pilgrimage. Clinton noted that Saudi officials comprised the main source of funding for Sunni terrorist organizations worldwide.

That memo didn't exactly shock anyone, mostly because years earlier, US-Saudi ties had already been dogged by rumors about the Saudi links to the 9/11 attacks (which were planned by al-Qaida in Afghanistan). Fifteen of the 19 hijackers in the attacks were, as we now know, Saudi citizens.

But now, possibly because of its problematic past, and also because Iran has now become the main backer of global terrorism, the Saudis are trying to do things

differently. The 64 Hamas operatives based in Saudi Arabia were sentenced to anywhere from eight months to 22 years behind bars. Their money laundering-smuggling operation made use of Turkish money changing companies. The convicted operatives include high-ranking Hamas official Dr. Mohammed Al-Khudari, 80, who headed the Hamas delegation to Saudi Arabia for 30 years and who has now been sent to prison for 15 years.

The Saudis didn't bother responding to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh's publicly expressed hopes for clemency. Hamas' attempts to send Mohammad Dahlan to work on the Saudis also met with a cold shoulder.

Despite the change in the Saudis' behavior when it comes to terrorism in general and Hamas in particular, their dark past continues to pursue them. The Biden administration, unlike that of former President Trump, is not eager to forgive them. Three years after the Saudis declared Hamas a terrorist organization, Biden this week threw cold water on the Saudis' open attempts to win his trust.

The Saudis continue to deny involvement in the 9/11 terrorist attacks

Biden recently announced that he "welcomed the Department of Justice's filing ... which commits to conducting a fresh review of documents where the government has previously asserted privileges." The publication of the classified section is supposed to provide at least a partial answer to whether and to what degrees the Saudis were involved in the attacks. The White House took this step in response to pressure from the families of the 9/11 victims.

The Al-Thumairy riddle

Biden's announcement this week came as a shock to the Saudis, just like their conviction shocked Hamas. Formally, they have long been calling for the publication of the classified 9/11 documents, while vociferously denying any involvement in the attack on the Twin Towers, but there is no doubt that they would prefer not to open this Pandora's box.

The documents, which might soon be made available, comprise 28 pages of a secret addendum to the Congressional report of 2002. Among other things, they address the role that Fahad al-Thumairy, a functionary at the Saudi Consulate in Los Angeles and an imam at a San Diego mosque that two of the 9/11 hijackers visited, did or did not play in the attacks. Two years after the report was written, two American researchers who were members of the government committee investigating 9/11 documented a conversation between the hijackers and al-Thumairy. The latter denied any connection to the two or their friends, despite transcriptions of phone conversations that were shown to him and supposedly contradicted his answers. According to a report in the New York Times, the researchers had the impression he was lying. In 2003, al-Thumairy's US visa was cancelled, and when he tried to return to Los Angeles, he was deported to Saudi Arabia.

Until the secret documents are made public, the Saudis aren't sitting idly by. They are trying to placate the Biden administration, after the president made it clear from the start that he would not be going easy on the Saudis when it came to terrorism and human rights. One way they can do this is through Israel: Trump losing the presidency delayed or froze the process of Israel-Saudi relations being acknowledged, but Israeli and Saudi officials continue to hold meetings on a regular basis on economic and defense issues. Only recently, the Saudis ran a report in Asharq Alawsat, a newspaper owned by a member of the Saudi royal family, a notable report about Foreign Minister Yair Lapid's visit to the United Arab Emirates at the end of June that included a picture of Lapid with the Israeli flag behind him. They continue to allow Israeli flights to use Saudi airspace en route to the UAE and points east, allow Israelis and Saudis to do business, and a few weeks ago even allowed judoka Tahani al-Qahtani to compete against Israel's Raz Hershko at the Tokyo Olympics.

This week's Saudi court ruling that sent the dozens of Hamas operatives to prison was also intended as a signal to the Biden administration that although the Trump era is over, relations with Israel were something to aim for. Immediately after Biden was elected, his spokespeople stressed that the US would be happy to broker formal relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but that it would have to be done based on "American values." The Saudi step can be seen as taking those values into consideration.

Apart from that, the ruling against the Hamas operatives in Saudi Arabia was more fruit borne by the revolution that the Trump and Netanyahu policies created in the Middle East. Last week it was Lapid's visit to Morocco, and this week it was Saudi Arabia's ruling about Hamas.

Saudi is at least as worried as about Iran as Israel is, and possibly more. The attack on Saudi oil production facilities by Iran or its Houthi satellites in September 2019 made it clear to the Saudis whose side they should be on. Iran's ongoing support for the Houthis, who are fighting against Saudi Arabia in Yemen, has only bolstered this inclination.

Honored by President Raisi

Hamas, which the Saudis tossed out on its ear this week, has long since become an open ally of Iran. The organization recently forced Saudi Arabia into a corner when its representative in Yemen, Moaz Abu Shamala met with Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a member of the Houthis' Supreme Political Council, who are allies of Iran and enemies of Saudi Arabia. Abu Shamala gave his Houthi hosts a shield of honor from Hamas in thanks for the Houthis' support for the Palestinian issue – effectively spitting in the Saudis' face.

This week, as if to complete the picture, senior Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzouk congratulated the Taliban for its victory in Afghanistan. Hamas even published picture of a meeting between its leadership and that of the Taliban

that took place after Operation Guardian of the Walls in May.

From Israel's perspective, Saudi Arabia has in the past few years been moving from an enemy state and supporter of terrorism to an entity that is a loyal member of the axis against Iran and its satellites.

Recently, Saudi researcher and journalist Khaled al-Sulaiman defined the Saudis' priorities as "Liberating Palestine from Iran before liberating it from Israel." Things like these are not published without approval from the Saudi royal family, and they reflect the winds of change in Saudi Arabia.

And Iran? It has indeed taken control of Hamas. This past May, at the end of the campaign Hamas waged against Israel, Haniyeh thanked the Iranian regime for the money and weapons the latter had supplied to the Gaza Strip. Last week, he visited Tehran and declared that his organization would stand alongside Iran against any threat from Israel or America, as part of the "axis of resistance."

Haniyeh spoke just after a Hezbollah rocket attack on the Galilee and an attack on the Israeli-owned cargo ship Mercer Street off the coast of Oman. High-ranking Hamas officials have visited Iran along with senior members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, under Ziad al-Nahala.

Haniyeh and al-Nahala took part in the swearing-in ceremony of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, and were honored with seats in the front row of Iran's parliament.

Hamas setting itself up as an open ally of Iran, Saudi Arabia's biggest enemy, hovers in the background of the kingdom's unprecedented ruling against its operatives. Nevertheless, the golden era of US-Saudi relations that characterized the Trump presidency is not expected to return any time soon. The Biden administration is willing to maintain the ties, but under certain restrictions, such as Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman remaining a persona non grata in Washington due to his alleged involvement in the murder of Saudi journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Embassy in Istanbul.

It also seems as if a semi-official meeting between Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and bin Salman, like one the latter held with Netanyahu, is not a practical option right now. The Palestinian issue remains the main stumbling block to official, open relations between the Israelis and the Saudis. If under Trump it might possibly have been overcome, under Biden, the US is insisting on framing the entire issue as an obstacle.

## **While Israelis and Palestinians fight, climate change threatens the land**

**By Gershon Gorenberg**

**washingtonpost.com**

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**With Hizballah's guns trained on the Lebanese people, efforts to promote democracy and reform will hit a wall.**

A century ago, Egyptian explorer Ahmed Hassanein found pictures of animals carved in rock in the depth of the Libyan desert. "There are lions, giraffes, ostriches, and all kinds of gazelles," he recorded. It was evidence that the surrounding area had once been verdant savanna. A prehistoric shift in climate, from natural causes, had made the land unlivable for beasts and humans.

I thought about that desolate place recently as I looked at the pale splotch of the sun behind clouds of smoke from a forest fire west of Jerusalem. I imagined explorers coming here in 500 years from temperate Greenland or Antarctica, looking at the desolate hills of the once-fertile land. In place of carvings of giraffes, they may find inscriptions in Hebrew and Arabic, commemorating victims of the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians, which ended when the land itself died.

The climate is shifting, this time because of human negligence.

In December 2010, when a huge forest fire raged through the Carmel range above Haifa, it seemed like a unique disaster. Then, in November 2016, came major blazes both in the Haifa area and the hills near Jerusalem. A wave of fires in 2019 was followed by another in 2020, and then by this month's firestorm outside Jerusalem. What was unique has become annual.

As usual, allegations of arson followed the latest blaze.

Police and firefighters reportedly asked the Shin Bet security service to join the investigation, given suspicion of "nationalist motives" — meaning Palestinian terror. Palestinians, meanwhile, pointed to photos of the denuded hillsides. The fires, they said, revealed agricultural terraces of pre-1948 Palestinian villages, which had been hidden by Israeli forestation. Both reactions neatly fit the disaster into the familiar frame of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

I don't make light of that conflict, or of the complicated history of 1948. But attention is a limited resource, and both Israelis and Palestinians should be devoting much of our attention to whether any of us will be able to live here in 2048.

As Tel Aviv University climate expert Amir Givati told me, temperatures in the entire Mediterranean region are rising even faster than the global average. In Israel, he says, the increase in recent decades is 2 degrees Celsius.

The change isn't equally spread through the wet Mediterranean winter and the rainless summer, says climatologist Hadas Saaroni, also of Tel Aviv University. "The summer is heating up more than the winter," she said. And the wet season is getting shorter, Saaroni and colleagues found in recent research. Though total annual rainfall isn't shrinking, it's falling on fewer days — meaning more floods, less water soaking into soil and more parched months between the last rain of spring and the first storm of fall or winter.

Fall, at the end of dry seasons that lasted too long, has been particularly dangerous in recent years. But this year's

megafire — or possibly the first such fire this year — came in August, indicating that already in summer, conditions are worse than in the past. The longer dry season, says Givati, combines with unusual heat to dry plants totally, “from the leaves down to the roots,” so that they are more flammable and burn quicker. “There have always been fires,” he says, “but what’s happening now are firestorms. The spread is so quick that it is difficult to control.”

The fires are the most blatant symptom of change here — easier to visualize than the vanishing of cool breezes on August nights, or steadily worse heatwaves. But year by year, the land is less livable.

In this harsh glare, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict is beyond tragic. Why should Israel insist that it cannot give up settlements, or Palestinians insist on the individual right of return of refugees to homes in pre-1967 Israel, when both peoples may end up as climate refugees knocking uselessly on the gates of Canada and Finland? We should be desperate to reach a political compromise so that our diplomats can jointly travel from capital to capital, demanding action on greenhouse emissions.

To make that case, though, we need to do more here.

“There’s no doubt that we need to increase the use of solar energy drastically,” says climatologist Saaroni. Yet, as of 2020, Israel was producing just 7 percent of its electricity from renewable sources, and the cabinet recently gutted key goals from a plan to cut emissions.

In the occupied West Bank, Israeli peace activist and former renewable energy executive Gershon Baskin spent years “fighting the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli authorities to get Palestine to become 50 percent” dependent on renewable energy during daylight hours, he told me. Israeli unwillingness to give up control over land and grid lines and “Palestinian governmental dysfunctionality” foiled the plan, he says. “We’ve shed so much blood over how much we love this land,” Baskin says, “and yet we treat it so badly.”

That cannot last. Let me combine cynicism and optimism: Israelis and Palestinians now face a shared, existential threat. Perhaps that will finally force us to make peace and work together.

*Mr. Gorenberg is an Israeli historian and journalist, and author of “War of Shadows: Codebreakers, Spies, and the Secret Struggle to Drive the Nazis from the Middle East.”*

## Investor divisions over Israel risk conflict for companies

By **Attracta Mooney, Laurence Fletcher and Judith Evans**

**The fierce backlash from US state funds over Ben & Jerry’s boycott underscores diverging demands from shareholders.**

Ben & Jerry’s decision to pull out of occupied Palestinian territories spurred one Israeli cabinet minister to upload a TikTok video of herself binning its ice cream in protest. Now, a series of US pension funds are looking at dumping the entire company.

The backlash highlights the divisions among US and European shareholders over Israel and Palestine. While US states are calling for companies to continue operating in occupied Palestinian territories, big European investors have been divesting over human rights concerns.

“It is almost an impossible choice for companies. Which side of the Atlantic do you want to upset?” said Tara Van Ho, a lecturer at the school of law and human rights at Essex University, adding that companies would have to consider whether they could better bear the financial impact of upsetting US or European shareholders.

### Legal threat

Thirty-five US states have passed laws to combat the more than decade-old Boycott, Divestment, Sanction movement, which lobbies for companies to stop operating in occupied territories.

Florida’s state pension fund, which has about £124m

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invested in Unilever, this month added the group to its blacklist of companies that boycott Israel. If Ben & Jerry’s, which Unilever bought in 2000, does not cease its boycott within 90 days of being listed, the fund will not be allowed to invest in the company.

The anti-BDS legislation has already been used to exact commitments from companies including Airbnb. The holiday rentals group came under pressure from pension funds including in Illinois and Florida after saying it would remove listings for homes in Jewish settlements in the West Bank in 2018, but later pledged that it would not boycott Israel.

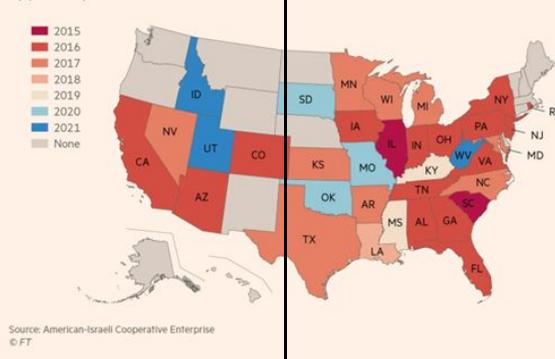
G4S, the security company, was also forced to reassure US state pension funds that its decision to sell its Israel business in 2016 was made on “strategy and commercial grounds”, rather than because of pressure from the BDS movement.

BDS targets include banks that are accused of financing the settlements, security and telecoms companies whose technology could be used for surveillance, and companies involved in construction and demolition in the occupied areas.

But in 2015, SodaStream’s celebrity brand ambassador, actor Scarlett Johansson, was engulfed in a controversy over its factory in an illegal West Bank settlement. The Israeli home drinks machine maker closed the site soon after, though denied it was linked to the campaign.

US states with anti-BDS laws

By year laws passed



Source: American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise © FT

Some European investors have been calling for companies to restrict their operations in Israeli settlements, regarded as illegal by the United Nations and the EU, over concerns about human rights violations. The focus on human rights comes as demand for sustainable investing has boomed.

Last month, KLP, Norway's largest pension fund with \$95bn in assets, said it had dumped 16 companies over an "unacceptable risk contribution to human rights abuses" in Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Kiran Aziz, senior analyst for responsible investments at Unilever shareholder KLP, said responsible investors need to "take into account the inherent risk of operating in occupied territories and conflict zones".

"KLP made this decision publicly and we expect other investors to follow suit in Europe, the US and elsewhere as responsible investment is rapidly increasing," she said.

#### Investor pullback

Norway's giant oil fund, a major institutional investor, recently excluded two Israeli companies while New Zealand's Super Fund divested from five Israeli banks.

Other investors have quietly reduced holdings in companies with links to the occupied territories. Last year, the BDS movement said Dutch pension fund ABP divested from two Israeli banks partly over human rights concerns. ABP said it had sold out because "our portfolio managers found other investment opportunities more interesting".

In May, pro-Palestinian groups hailed a victory as the Methodist Church in the UK dumped construction equipment manufacturer Caterpillar, which has come under scrutiny over the use of its bulldozers in occupied territories. The religious group said the decision was down to Caterpillar's poor environmental, social and governance rating.

Still companies and investors are coming under regulatory pressure in Europe to consider human rights, including business in disputed territories such as the West Bank or Crimea, said Van Ho. France and Germany require companies to consider the human rights impacts of

their own or their suppliers' operations, while the EU has committed to introducing similar legislation.

Richard Goldberg, who helped spearhead anti-BDS state law in 2015 as deputy chief of staff for legislative affairs in Illinois, said that while there are "credible arguments" for considering ESG in investment decisions, there is a "malicious agenda" when it comes to Israel.

"It makes no sense to make a corporate decision to boycott Israel. It is morally wrong, politically wrong and economically wrong for your shareholders," he said.

Unilever has sought to distance itself from Ben & Jerry's decision and affirm its commitment to Israel, including through a call with Israel's prime minister and letters to Jewish groups.

Bernstein analyst Bruno Monteyne said the issue was testing the limits of ESG investing. "It's important from a share price point of view, but also there is an ESG question in there — is it the first time we are going to have to think about how far ESG can go?"

Despite the pushback from US pension funds and fierce opposition from the Israeli government, other groups have backed Ben & Jerry's. Aziz at KLP, a Unilever shareholder, said: "If Unilever wants to maintain its position as a responsible business leader, it may want to consider more robust support of its subsidiary's decision."

Noam Perry at the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker group that offers a tool highlighting alleged human rights violations in investments, called on other companies to follow Ben & Jerry's example. "We see these shameful attempts by state legislators to punish companies that stand for universal human rights," he said.

Van Ho said the "swing of international legal regulations" means more companies will have to consider pulling out of illegal settlements or risk penalties. "If I were advising businesses on what to do, it would be to follow Ben & Jerry's lead."

Others insist, however, that businesses withdrawing is not the solution.

Goldberg said: "Does denying Jews and Arabs ice cream because of where they live help bring peace?"

## The future of American power : On America's declining influence in the Arab world

By Marwan Muasher

economist.com

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**In Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, America intervenes, fails, hastily departs—and leaves chaos that others must fix or live with.**

The end of America's "unipolar moment" was bound to come sooner or later. As its time as the sole superpower concludes, its influence in the Middle East is inevitably waning. But the process is being hastened by rapid change in what have long been the three pillars of American policy in the region: stability, Israel and oil.

Begin with stability. The Pax Americana hasnot worked. America has tired of enforcing it, and Arab countries are tired of having it imposed on them to their detriment. More than two decades of failed Israel-

Palestinian peacemaking, a disastrous war in Iraq and America's preference for a nuclear deal with Iran over the interests of Arab states have left the United States and its Arab partners further apart than ever.

The invasion of Iraq was an especially grievous blunder. The American public was promised a short and cost-free war, financed by Gulf countries, that would take supposed weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of a tyrant and, in the words of President George W. Bush, "build a lasting democracy that is peaceful and prosperous, and an example for the broader Middle East". These fanciful promises, based on faulty intelligence and overconfident bluster, met with a cold reality. They cost

America trillions of taxpayers' dollars and thousands of slain soldiers. The ripple effects of the failures in Iraq (and Afghanistan) left Americans even more sceptical of military adventurism overseas, and of global engagement in general.

To most Arabs, the invasion of Iraq was serious interference in their affairs—a violation of their sovereignty, if not their dignity. They regarded Saddam Hussein not as the brutal dictator that he was, but as someone who wanted to restore pride to the Arab world; an objective cut loose by an American war designed, in their view, never to let an Arab country assume any considerable power.

The sweeping protests of the Arab Spring in 2011 proved to all, America included, that the objective of maintaining regional stability by the time-tested strategy of supporting oppressive autocrats friendly to the West (unlike Saddam) had ceased being viable. More limited interventions in Libya and Syria, seeking to work mostly through local proxies, also proved hopeless in creating order.

Faced with these many failures, the United States threw up its hands. As then-President Barack Obama put it in an interview with the Atlantic in 2016, “We averted large-scale civilian casualties, we prevented what almost surely would have been a prolonged and bloody civil conflict. And despite all that, Libya is a mess.” His successors—both Donald Trump and Joe Biden—have been animated by similar desires to get out.

Their main disagreement is on how to handle Iran. Mr Trump abandoned Mr Obama's nuclear deal of 2015, and favoured a policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran; Mr Biden is seeking to revive the deal. Many Gulf countries feel that, in order to reach an agreement, America is ignoring Iran's continued interference in the security and stability of the region.

No American president, it seems, is prepared to entertain an alternative policy: a complex effort to support a serious process of reform in the Arab world. Worse, in the past 20 years America has been prone to a policy of “unfinished business”. It starts interventions, fails to achieve its objectives, hastily departs—and leaves a mess behind for the people of the Middle East to try to fix, or live with. The withdrawal from Afghanistan is a case in point. The Afghans, including those who sided with the United States, are left to live under the Taliban.

Unfinished business is true not only of interventions, but also of the “peace process” between Israel and the Palestinians. America's oversight of the negotiations has failed to end Israel's occupation. Worse, it has given Israel the cover to entrench the occupation and establish a form of apartheid—two separate and unequal legal systems for Israelis and Palestinians. Mr Trump's “deal of the century”—whereby he moved the American embassy to Jerusalem, in effect blessing Israel's annexation of the city,

and set out a peace plan that denied Palestinians their dream of independence—was further proof to the Arab public that the United States not only neglects their interests, but works directly to undermine them.

And yet America's alliance with Israel, the second of the three pillars, is changing rapidly. By embracing Mr Trump, the long-serving former Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, accelerated the polarisation of Americans' views of Israel. What was once an issue of easy bipartisan agreement has become a contentious front in America's culture wars. Mr Trump's ham-fisted peace plan was intended to appeal to his evangelical supporters, some of whom believe that giving the land God promised to the Israelites will hasten the end of the world. On the left, meanwhile, Israel's enduring occupation has caused a new generation of Americans to question the iron-clad commitment to Israel. The centre is shifting, too. A poll in 2018 for the University of Maryland found that if a two-state solution were to prove impossible, 64% of Americans would choose full equality for Palestinians over Israel's continued existence as a Jewish state.

This American re-alignment is spurred by a third factor: growing energy independence. The United States' net energy imports peaked in 2005 at about 30% of total consumption. But thanks to the development of fracking, which increased gas- and oil-extraction capacity, America became a net energy exporter in 2019. It still imports some crude oil, but the share from the OPEC cartel (dominated by Arab countries) has fallen from 85% to 14%. America has all but freed itself from the need to secure and protect supplies from Middle Eastern producers. Granted, many of its allies are still dependent on them, even in a world that is turning away from fossil fuels, but whatever leverage oil-producing Arab countries could once exert on America is weakening.

Blunders, failures and changing energy-market conditions, coupled with disillusionment with America's policies by Arab people and governments alike, have meant that other countries are starting to fill the vacuum. Russia, Turkey and Iran have stepped in, particularly in Syria, but also elsewhere. The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and, implicitly, Saudi Arabia have forged closer ties with Israel to counterbalance Iran. China has decided to flex its power through economic means, pouring significant funds into the region for all willing to accept, no questions asked.

America's declining influence does not make the road to stability and prosperity any easier. Though it may not have had much success in the Middle East, it is even less likely that those now vying for greater influence will do better, or even try to help at all.

The changes wrought by the oil markets, the Arab Spring and the widespread use of social media mean that Arab states' old tools for keeping social peace—hard security, subsidies and public-sector jobs—are weakening. They seek to survive by leaning on ugly, repressive tactics.

That hardly engenders warm feelings among potential supporters or partners in the West. Russia, China and Turkey all have authoritarian tendencies, and can scarcely be expected to seek to open Arab systems politically, socially or economically.

And yet achieving stability in the Arab world requires precisely that. Rulers need new tools: inclusion, equal citizenship and merit-based economic systems that promise social peace and a better quality of life. Such change cannot come from re-alignment with China, relying on Russia or an alliance with Israel. It can only be achieved

through a serious and gradual homegrown reform process. With the withdrawal of America from the Middle East, that task must henceforth fall more than ever on Arab countries themselves. Arab rulers need to understand that reform is essential for their survival, and Arab populations need to employ peaceful means to stand up for their rights more assertively.

*Mr. Muasher is the author of “The Arab Center: The Promise of Moderation” and “The Second Arab Awakening and the Battle for Pluralism”*

## It’s Time to Restore the Gaza Security Perimeter

By Alan Baker

**The death of an Israeli border policeman should be a wake-up call.**

The unbelievable ease with which an armed Hamas terrorist was able to brazenly approach Israel’s concrete defensive barrier that separates Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, insert the barrel of his handgun into the narrow slit in the concrete and just blindly shoot, at close range, a border policeman, raises many serious questions.

By the same token, one may also ask how and why a regular phenomenon has been allowed to develop over the last few years by which large groups of violent, wildly incited Hamas demonstrators and armed terrorists, hysterically intent on infiltrating into Israel with the aim of harming Israeli soldiers and citizens, are able to so easily approach and storm Israel’s security barrier.

One of the central security elements of the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement (commonly termed “Oslo II”) was the creation of what was called the “Delimiting Line” along the entire northern and western edges of the Gaza Strip, separating the Strip from Israel’s sovereign territory.

Part of this central security element was the establishment of a “Security Perimeter” adjacent to that line, within the Gaza Strip, hundreds of meters wide. In that Security Perimeter, the PLO and Israel agreed that the Palestinian police would exercise “security responsibility for preventing infiltrations across the Delimiting Line or the introduction into the Security Perimeter of any arms, ammunition or related equipment.”

Following Israel’s 2005 unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip and Hamas’s violent expulsion of the Palestinian Authority and forced takeover of the Strip in 2007, those essential components of the security arrangements relating to the Gaza Strip appear to have been replaced by a glaring security vacuum along the perimeter line with Israel. Add to this the tense security reality between Israel and Hamas that has existed over the years, with clashes, riots, violent mass demonstrations and, to cap it all, eruptions of fighting in operations Cast Lead

jpost.com

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(2008), Protective Edge (2014) and Guardian of the Walls (2021).

The irony of this situation is that Hamas has utilized and abused and continues to utilize and abuse this very same security perimeter for precisely the opposite purpose to that for which it was established. They have turned it into a zone for organized disorder and violence, a zone in which they sponsor, encourage, and organize periodic mass, violent demonstrations, as a staging area for attempted infiltrations, and as a means to periodically pressurize Israel, to attract international attention, and to bribe Egypt, the UN, Qatar and others to provide money and other forms of material and financial support.

Clearly, such a glaring vacuum in the security situation along the edge of the Gaza Strip, if allowed to continue, and if not filled by Israel with appropriate, alternative, and effective military and intelligence mechanisms, including whatever electronic and other measures are necessary to counter mass demonstrations and violence, is nothing more than an open invitation, a carte blanche, for further abuse by Hamas.

The question arises whether it would not be overly naïve to suggest to those international entities mediating between Israel and Hamas (Egypt, UN and Qatar, among others) that under any arrangement between the parties, Hamas be required to commit to reviving the security perimeter in the same format as the appears in the interim agreement, and to deploy its own police forces in order to prevent attempted infiltration and violent incidents.

Alternatively, another option could be the deployment in this security zone of a foreign police presence such as the multinational force and observers (MFO), which is already present in the area, or even an Egyptian or Qatari police presence. Such presence would likely restrain Hamas from exploiting the separation line area for pressure or for the purpose of heating up the area.

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***If you see something, send something” –editor***