

**With eyes set on Washington, Sisi seeks role of peacemaker**

By Khaled Abu Toameh

jpost.com

September 13, 2021

**Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is seeking to rid himself of the image of a dictator.**

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's meeting on Monday with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett sits between Cairo's effort to resume its pivotal roles in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general and the Gaza Strip in particular.

The meeting is also seen by Palestinian and Egyptian political analysts as part of Sisi's effort to curry favor with the administration of US President Joe Biden.

Sisi is trying to both depict himself as a peacemaker and rid himself of the image of a dictator.

The meeting with Bennett enables him to show the world that no progress can be achieved toward security, stability and peace in the Middle East without Egypt.

Over the past few months, Cairo has stepped up its efforts to end the crisis in the Gaza Strip, especially after May's war between Israel and Hamas.

The 11-day war ended with an Egyptian-brokered truce agreement, which Sisi is hoping to maintain and turn into a long-term ceasefire.

The Egyptian president has pledged \$500 million toward the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. He has also dispatched Egyptian engineers, construction experts and workers to the Hamas-ruled coastal enclave to help remove the rubble of buildings that were destroyed during the fighting.

Sisi's sudden interest in the Gaza Strip is attributed to his desire to maintain a certain degree of control over Hamas, an offshoot of his archrival, the Muslim Brotherhood.

The last thing Sisi wants is for Hamas to join forces with the Muslim Brotherhood, whose leaders have not forgiven him for removing former president Mohamed Morsi from power in 2013.

Sisi is hoping a long-term and comprehensive truce between Israel and Hamas would pave the way for Egyptian companies to participate in the reconstruction effort of the Gaza Strip, a move that would definitely benefit the Egyptian economy.

In addition to being a peacemaker, Sisi wants to become the builder of the Gaza Strip, a move that would bolster his standing among Palestinians and many other Arabs and Muslims.

He is also hoping that increased Egyptian presence in the Gaza Strip and improved relations with Hamas would help Egypt fight the Islamist terrorists in Sinai.



Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on September 13, 2021.  
(photo credit: KGBH GIDEON-GPO)

Egyptian security officials have accused Hamas of collaborating with the jihadists who are waging a massive terrorist campaign against Egyptian security forces in the Sinai. In recent months, however, relations between Cairo and Hamas have significantly improved.

Sisi has reached the conclusion that the Palestinian Authority, headed by President Mahmoud Abbas, will not return to the Gaza Strip in the foreseeable future.

This conclusion is based on several meetings and discussions between the two leaders, as well as other Egyptian officials, including Kamel Abbas, director of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate.

With the PA out of the picture, Sisi knows the key to reaching any deal regarding the

Gaza Strip lies in Israeli hands.

The Egyptians know Abbas has no leverage with Hamas and that he is extremely anxious to return to the coastal enclave. They also know Abbas cannot play any role in a prisoner-exchange agreement between Hamas and Israel.

Sisi sees the last ceasefire he helped broker between them as a significant achievement that restores Cairo's role as a major player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

His next mission is a prisoner swap and a long-term truce between Israel and Hamas.

Sisi knows if he succeeds with these two tasks, the international community, specifically the Biden administration, would no longer be able to ignore his role as one of the most influential leaders in the region and the Arab world.

Once he secures a deal on the Gaza Strip and brings Hamas under his control, Sisi has said he wants to assist in reviving the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Again, the move aims to show the Biden administration that the path to the negotiating table passes through Cairo and not any other Arab capital or even Washington.

In this regard, Sisi is coordinating his efforts closely with Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah, who has also signaled his desire to see the Israelis and Palestinians return to the negotiating table.

The Jordanian monarch wants the negotiations to result in a two-state solution so that talk about turning Jordan into the future homeland of the Palestinians would be buried for good.

In addition to presenting himself as a peacemaker in

the Middle East conflict, Sisi also is working to improve his abysmal human-rights record.

On the eve of the meeting with Bennett, the Egyptian president praised the role of civil-society organizations as “key and important in enhancing and protecting human rights at the political, economic and social levels.”

The announcement aims to send a message to the Biden administration and the rest of the international community that Sisi is not only working hard to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians, but is also seeking to spread awareness of human rights and the need to protect personal freedoms, freedom of expression and the right to form civil-society organizations in Egypt.

## As Israelis Await the Third Lebanon War, the West Has Already Bought into Their Enemies' Propaganda

By Matti Friedman

**Border towns have seen a half-century of violence, and expect more.**

The rule for watching the Israel-Lebanon frontier is that although nothing seems to be going on, something always is. Nothing seemed to be going on, for example, on one of the afternoons I recently spent along the electrified fence trying to sense the course of events this fraught summer, gazing out at a green blanket of shrubbery stretching toward a cluster of Lebanese homes nearby. All was still in the late summer heat.

A bush rustled just across the fence and a gray sunhat appeared, followed by a bearded face and then a purposeful body belonging to a young man in a black Adidas soccer jersey—Hezbollah, but armed only with a camera. Anyone who's ever spent time in an ambush or on guard duty knows how thrilling it is to have something to do after hours of boredom, and there was a spring in the man's step as he strode in our direction. He raised his telephoto lens at a spot about 50 yards from where I watched with an Israeli officer and two soldiers. The guerrillas don't operate alone, but the photographer's comrades, presumably equipped with more than cameras, remained in the bushes, unseen.

The Hezbollah lookouts in the windows of the placid town nearby, Ayta ash-Shab, and scattered throughout the underbrush had probably seen the Israeli Jeep climbing the approach road to the border emplacement and knew its multiple antennas meant it belonged to a commander. They were waiting. The officer wasn't surprised to see the photographer, who snapped a few dozen shots of us. We took a few cell-phone shots of him. Hezbollah watches the army watching Hezbollah watching the army. “This sector is like a game of chess,” the officer said.

The Lebanon frontier is rarely the first worry for

tabletmag.com

September 09, 2021

Israelis or for international onlookers. There's usually something that seems more urgent. But wise observers never take their eyes off this border for long. Looking west along the ridge from the point where I encountered the Hezbollah photographer, for example, it's possible to see the spot near a bend in the road where, as usual, nothing appeared to be going on until one day in 2019 the army

uncovered a Hezbollah attack tunnel 80 yards underground, with stairs rising to an exit located 250 yards inside Israeli territory. A sign in the tunnel read “To Jerusalem.” The guerrillas had been digging it for years. The army destroyed it, along with five others that were revealed at different points along the fence. Awareness of the border then receded, as it does, but anyone paying attention knows Hezbollah is hard at work and working hard to conceal it. Glimpses become possible here and there. Last year, what seemed to be a civilian home in the town of Ain Qana exploded when a Hezbollah weapons store detonated. And a few months ago, in an attempt to bring attention to what's being built beneath the civilian landscape of Lebanon, the army released photos of what it identified as another weapons

cache. This one, in the village of Ebba, was concealed in a civilian building next to a school.

What's different this summer is that some of the important changes on the Lebanese side have become easier to see. Lebanon has long been a husk of a country, a loose arrangement among competing sects and factions, but now an economic crisis threatens to push the remains of the state toward genuine collapse. The young Israelis in the lookout posts can see it with the naked eye. Take Outpost Nurit, for example, one of the border emplacements I visited with the officer. (Nurit means “buttercup,” an odd name for a military position, but the



army has always given bucolic names to its bases around here. I spent part of my own military service in the late 1990s inside Lebanon at a place called Pumpkin.) The outpost's soldiers used to look every night at the lights of nearby Aytā ash-Shab. But now the village is mostly dark because electricity is scarce. The price of fuel nearly doubled just last month, and a few days before my encounter with the photographer, two Lebanese civilians were killed in a shootout at a gas station. A few days later, more than two dozen died when a fuel truck blew up in circumstances that remain unclear. Bakeries are struggling to keep the ovens going, supermarkets are throwing out meat because they lack power to run freezers, and half of the country's people, about 3 million of them, are below the poverty line and sinking.

The trickle of desperate civilians trying to get across the border into Israel—some Sudanese migrants and other foreigners, but Lebanese citizens as well—has increased. They're usually spotted by the young women soldiers in rooms full of screens who keep track of the border cameras and sensors, then intercepted by patrols of the brigade of military engineers currently responsible for the fence in this sector. I met a few of the brigade's sunburned 20-year-olds lounging by their Humvee at the gate of a base just west of Buttercup, Outpost Livneh ("birch"), under towering concrete barriers erected to block sight lines and bullets from Lebanon, which is just a few yards away.

Driving the zigzag road up the border ridge from Western Galilee takes you out of Israel and into a high-elevation world that feels like somewhere else—a kind of in-between country that almost seems more Lebanese than Israeli. Down in the lowlands are beaches and restaurants where you can forget Lebanon and Hezbollah, but not up here. Israeli civilians live as close to the fence as the soldiers, but unlike soldiers, they never rotate out. At places like Kibbutz Adamit, the people who raise chickens and apples have lived through a half century of violence going across the border in both directions. There were the years of infiltrations by Palestinian terrorists in the '70s and '80s, such as the attack on a civilian bus at Avivim that killed 12 civilians, including 9 kids, or the one at the kindergarten at Kibbutz Misgav Am, or the school in Ma'a lot. There were dozens.

Then came Israel's first major incursion against the Palestinian fighters in Lebanon in 1978, as the Lebanese tore themselves apart in a 15-year civil war; then the big, botched Israeli invasion of '82, the First Lebanon War; then the 18 years of small-scale combat in Israel's "security zone" in south Lebanon, which saw the eclipse of the Palestinian groups and the rise of the Shi'a army Hezbollah and its backers from Iran. That period, which the Israeli government finally recognized officially as a war just this year, ended in 2000 with a disorderly overnight withdrawal and the abandonment of Israel's local Lebanese allies, followed by a Hezbollah takeover the same day. Viewed from the summer of 2021, it was an event reminiscent in

nature, though of course not in scale, of the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan. The withdrawal in 2000 was followed by small attacks and infiltrations—three soldiers killed on patrol, a shepherd murdered in Western Galilee as he tended his flock, two army technicians shot off an antenna at Outpost Buttercup—and then, in the summer of 2006, by the Second Lebanon War.

Just beneath Outpost Birch, a few steps from the electrified fence, I stopped the car at the spot on the road where a Hezbollah team had crossed the border that summer of 2006 and surprised a routine patrol of army reservists, spiriting two bodies into Lebanon to serve as bargaining chips. An Israeli tank rushed into position by Outpost Buttercup, which Hezbollah anticipated, having kept a close eye on army maneuvers: An IED destroyed the tank and killed everyone inside.

Over the following month northern Israel was hit by thousands of rockets, and parts of Lebanon were ravaged by the Israeli Air Force. I covered that war, living in my parents' reinforced "safe room" just south of the border in Nahariya, which became a ghost town as residents fled south. Since then, everyone here has been waiting for the "next war," which is considered a foregone conclusion and is universally described in advance as much worse than the last one. Hezbollah's rocket arsenal is bigger and deadlier than it was 15 summers ago, and in the Next War, it won't be only northern Israel that's in range. Hezbollah's patrons in Iran are more emboldened now than they were in 2006, while our patrons, the Americans, are confused and ailing. We're strong and heavy, and Hezbollah has the element of surprise. There isn't likely to be a buildup. The Next War will start like the last one, all at once, when nothing seems to be happening.

Dan Kohn has lived at Kibbutz Adamit for 50 years. In the last war, when most people in the border zone evacuated to the south, he and the other residents stayed put. They're so close to the fence that the Hezbollah munitions sailed right over their heads. Nothing hit the kibbutz until the last day of the war, when a Katyusha rocket destroyed a Daewoo Super Racer belonging to Kohn's son, who'd parked it a few minutes before. Like most Israelis, Kohn has considerable regard for Hezbollah. "When they come over the fence, it won't be with just two or three people, like the Palestinian groups in the old days," he said. It'll be a few dozen. The army has been warning that the Next War could involve an attempt by Hezbollah to capture an entire Israeli community and hold it, even just for a few hours or a day. This kibbutz would be one obvious target. It wouldn't be that hard. It's true that the army destroyed those six tunnels under the border. "But I sometimes wonder if they found the seventh," Kohn said.

The residents of Adamit have regular meetings with army officers, who've assured them that in the case of a Hezbollah incursion, soldiers will reach them in minutes. "I don't believe a word they say," Kohn told me, but he didn't seem too worried. Lebanon, with its bewitching

landscape and tendency to deliver unpleasant surprises, is just part of his life. He took me for a drive along the fence, past the neighboring Bedouin village of Aramsheh, whose Israeli residents have relatives on the Lebanese side. We saw the blue metal barrels painted with the letters “UN” that mark the international border. A white UN helicopter passed overhead, part of the toothless international force that is meant to keep the peace along the border but can do nothing about Hezbollah. This afternoon the pilot would report, no doubt, that nothing was going on.

As I drove to meet Kohn at Adamit on Aug. 4, the radio reported a three-rocket attack launched from Lebanon, attributed to a Palestinian faction. No one was hurt. Israel responded with airstrikes that didn't hurt anyone either, and then Hezbollah fired a barrage of 19 rockets over the border, the first time it had claimed responsibility for such an attack since the 2006 war. It was a uniquely public step. In a sign of growing stress inside Lebanon, the Hezbollah team that fired the rockets was detained and roughed up by furious Druze villagers who understood that their lives were at risk if the Israelis fired back. One of the Druze filmed it and put the video online. That was unique too.

The events demonstrate the immense gap between the concerns of Israelis and the preoccupations of Western observers. Israel now has Iranian proxies and allies on its borders with Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza and is regularly rocketed from territories it ceded in south Lebanon in 2000 and in Gaza in 2005. Since the 2006 war with Hezbollah, and through several rounds of fighting with Hamas, the propaganda of these groups has found purchase in Western societies and capitals. Hezbollah, like Hamas and like the Iranians who support them both, have an acute grasp of the addled intellectual moment in the United States and of the ideological confusion of what remains of the Western press.

They understand that the rocket launch from the civilian backyard in Gaza or Lebanon won't be filmed; the innocent people killed in the Israeli counterstrike will be captured by a dozen film crews, then tweeted by supermodels and a few members of Congress as #IsraeliGenocide. A Hezbollah weapons warehouse located next to a school elicits a shrug; its destruction by an Israeli jet will be the subject of an “investigation” by Human Rights Watch and a photo essay in *The New York Times* in which a single empty school desk stands, undamaged and picturesque, in the rubble. The script is already written. Javad Zarif, until recently the Iranian foreign minister, has learned to condemn Israel not as an affront to the regime's brand of fundamentalist Islam, but to “human rights, humanitarian law, and international law,” and growing numbers of Westerners think this makes sense. All of this was put to effective use by Israel's enemies in the last war in Gaza in May—and all of it will come into play with greater force in the Next Lebanon War, whenever it happens.

Spending time on the border with Yitzhak Huri, a

lieutenant colonel who's the second-in-command of the army brigade in this sector, I asked if he thought Lebanon's disintegration and the desperation of its citizens made war more or less likely. Does the crisis lead the Lebanese to pull back to avoid further mayhem, or go for broke? “When a person has nothing to lose, you can't know what he's capable of,” Huri said. “The same goes for countries.”

I put the same question to the Lebanon watcher David Daoud, who was born to a Jewish family in Beirut and lives in Washington, D.C., where he works with the Atlantic Council and the advocacy group United Against a Nuclear Iran. Hezbollah has never wanted Lebanon to be a prosperous state “like Israel or Singapore,” Daoud said, because that would limit its autonomy. But at the same time, he said, the organization's interests aren't served by another civil war or the kind of state collapse that would be hastened by a war with Israel at this moment. The group is more likely, Daoud thinks, to try to use the current crisis to make itself even more central to the lives of its followers by doing what it has always done: providing services that should be provided by the state but aren't. Hezbollah is already distributing bread and fuel, and if it plays its cards right, it will emerge stronger. “The crisis hasn't weakened Hezbollah, but it has constrained them to such an extent that they must act responsibly on the border,” Daoud said.

That's why, for example, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah quickly announced that his group's recent 19-rocket barrage was purposely aimed at open fields, not at Israeli civilians or even soldiers. He's trying to project strength to his followers, insisting he's unafraid of war, while calibrating his actions to avoid an explosion he won't be able to handle. But it's a hazardous game. Both sides may not want a war, but that doesn't mean there won't be one. Things could easily slip out of control no matter how closely each side watches the other.

What do Israelis see when we look into Lebanon? A place with beautiful forests and beaches, where different groups of people share a strip of Levantine coast, one that could have been as successful as Israel or more so—the “Switzerland of the East,” as people said in the '50s and '60s. Some of us see a country that has been an arena for misguided Israeli policies or the backdrop for a potent chapter of our own young lives as soldiers. Many see a continuous threat.

But there's another story we might see across the fence this summer, as we struggle to emerge from an unprecedented period of political dysfunction of our own, with four elections in two years and no national budget, with political leaders who've tried to convince us to see each other as enemies, and with internal divisions that feel less bridgeable than ever before. Lebanon is a country that allowed itself to be hollowed out. Its different sects failed to create a national story about citizenship that superseded other loyalties, and the state was paralyzed until the fragile edifice corroded, until the forces of progress faded or

emigrated and were replaced by religious and tribal powers not just indifferent to modernity but openly contemptuous of it. It's a story of state collapse, which is one of the themes of this region in our times. The forces of disintegration are weaker in Israel than they are in

Lebanon, but they're present and will win if we let them. The neighbor across the fence isn't just a problem or a threat. Lebanon is a possible future.

*Mr. Friedman's most recent book is "Spies of No Country: Secret Lives at the Birth of Israel."*

## **Not management material: Iranians worry that their new government is inept**

**By The Economist**

**economist.com**

**September 11, 2021**

**One minister is wanted for bombing Jews; another wants to kidnap Western soldiers.**

It was fitting that Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's new president, spent the first working day of his government visiting a cemetery, since he had helped orchestrate the mass execution of political prisoners in the 1980s. The setting also fitted the country's glum mood. Since Mr Raisi's victory in a rigged election on June 18th, cases of covid-19 in Iran have spiked. The daily death toll is among the highest in the world.

Most Iranians blame the country's (unelected) clerical regime. In January the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, banned the import of Western vaccines because America is "untrustworthy". He later backtracked, but the roll-out has been too slow to help stem the Delta variant.

It now falls to Mr Raisi (pictured) to deal with the health crisis, as well as a sinking economy. His relatively moderate predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, struggled in the face of hardline opposition. Some think the election of Mr Raisi, a protégé of the supreme leader, will at least make the government more coherent.

The new cabinet is certainly more hardline than Mr Rouhani's. It includes no women, but plenty of men under sanctions by Western countries, including the president himself. Seven of the 19 seats went to people associated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (irgc), Iran's strongest military force, including four former commanders. Five cabinet members come from Astan-e Quds-e Razavi, the largest bonyad, or clerical conglomerate, which Mr Raisi used to run. Six more are from the judiciary, another conservative bastion formerly headed by Mr Raisi.

Mr Khamenei will have more of a hold over this administration. Not only did he choose Mr Raisi, he probably steered him towards Muhammad Mokhber, the new senior vice-president and manager of one of Mr Khamenei's largest economic holdings. Mr Mokhber is one of many cabinet officials to have worked under the supreme leader. Mohammad Esmaili headed a supervisory body of Iran's state broadcaster controlled by Mr

Khamenei. Now he is the culture minister, lashing out at the "the deviation and secularism" of Iran's cinema, theatre and music.

But the new cabinet is not as coherent as it might appear. It includes free-marketeers and socialists, populists, realists and ideologues. With Mr Khamenei ailing, Mr Raisi may be trying to woo a broad range of those who would determine the future supreme leader. Iranians, though, fear that the ministers will battle over the spoils of power, awarding themselves and their allies the best jobs and perks. They have already grabbed scarce Pfizer and AstraZeneca jabs, say critics, leaving a home-grown (and unproven) vaccine for the masses.

GDP per person has dropped by about 15% since 2018. The government seems to have no convincing answers. "They hint at having a plan, but there's no substance to it," says Sanam Vakil of Chatham House, a think-tank in London. "The conservatives are not unified on economic issues, so you get a mix of populism and neoliberalism." Mr Raisi and his ministers have promised to produce 1m affordable homes a year. How they will pay for them is unclear. Earlier this year the new vice-president for economic affairs, Mohsen Rezaei, suggested a novel way to boost Iran's hard-currency reserves: by seizing Western soldiers and demanding ransoms.

The best way to help the economy would be to revive the deal signed in 2015 by Iran and six world powers. It required Iran to curb its nuclear programme in return for the lifting of international sanctions. Donald Trump pulled America out of the deal in 2018 and cut Iran off from the world economy. But President Joe Biden wants to renew it. Mr Raisi, for his part, says he supports the resumption of indirect talks between America and Iran.

In any new negotiations, though, Mr Raisi is likely to rely on his foreign minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, who is close to Hizbullah, a Lebanese party-cum-militia, and to the irgc, both deemed terrorist groups by America. Mr Raisi's new interior minister, Ahmad Vahidi, is wanted by Interpol for his alleged role in bombing a Jewish cultural centre in Buenos Aires in 1994. These appointments hardly signal a desire to re-engage with the world"

## **As Israel gets hotter and drier, it must prevent fires, not just fight them**

**By Haviv Rettig Gur**

**timesofisrael.com**

**September 12, 2021**

**After the 2010 Carmel tragedy, Israel rebuilt its fire service bottom-up. But as last month's Jerusalem Hills fire showed, firefighting can't make up for a failed prevention policy.**

The first report of the fire came at 3:03 p.m. on

August 15 in a phone call from a resident of Beit Meir, a small village nestled in the sprawling pine forests that carpet the hills west of Jerusalem.

Visit [suburbanorthodox.org](http://suburbanorthodox.org) for the current issue.

There was smoke in the forest to the east, the report said.

Fire stations in nearby Mevasseret Zion and Beit Shemesh responded first. According to the Fire and Rescue Services, the first firefighter reached the blaze 20 minutes later, at 3:23.

It was a fast deployment given the tiny, winding forest roads that the bulky fire trucks had to take. But in that dry, windy August afternoon, it was far too late.

By the time the firefighters were on the scene, the blaze had had perhaps 35 minutes to burn — 35 minutes during which the flames, swept upward by the wind, no longer traveled along the ground. Israeli firefighters call it “treetop kindling,” the dangerous moment when flames in dry pine forests begin to spread faster along windswept treetops than in the brush below.

Pine trees are clever plants. Their pinecones are built to hop long distances in the crackling heat of a forest fire, allowing a pine-forest fire to leap the treeless fire barriers cut through the forest.

The sprawling forests of the Jerusalem Hills, said one fire official, were a “ticking time bomb,” especially in an era of global warming and in a country that faces the dual dangers of negligent campers and ideological arsonists.

It would take three days and the tireless efforts of 204 firefighting crews, 20 planes, IDF rescue teams and help from Palestinian firefighters to fully extinguish the blaze.

#### **The disaster that might have been**

The fire ended better than anyone, including fire officials, had expected. No one was killed. The final tally found 13,000 dunams (3,200 acres) burned, far less than the 20,000 dunams the fire department initially feared.

But it could have gone much worse, officials said. It nearly did.

Israel’s national Fire and Rescue Services were stretched to the limit. Pictures of exhausted firefighters asleep on a roadside after 36 hours of uninterrupted work were shared widely on social media. Cabinet ministers were phoning their counterparts in Cyprus, Greece and other countries looking for help as the fight dragged on.

Several towns and villages – Ksalon, Shoshon, Ramat Razi, Givat Ye’arim, Ein Rafa, Shoeva, Beit Meir and others – were partly or wholly evacuated. Several saw homes and businesses go up in flames. Cops from Jerusalem were sent to roam the empty streets of towns endangered by the blaze to look for forgotten residents or lost pets as the flames neared. And as the fire pushed through the Sataf forest on Jerusalem’s southwestern edge, firetrucks were pulled from the fight and deployed in a perimeter around the massive Hadassah Hospital Ein Kerem, which lay squarely in the fire’s path and which, officials concluded, was nigh impossible to evacuate.

But perhaps the best example of the disaster that might have been is the story of the Eitanim psychiatric hospital nestled in the woods outside Givat Ye’arim. Eitanim was evacuated in time and escaped any serious damage from the encroaching flames, but only by a lucky

accident. Eitanim’s story encapsulates the story of fires in Israel: a government that has failed for decades to invest attention and expertise in the growing problem of forest and brush fires, and in doing so placed countless towns and villages all over the country in danger.

#### **Rebuilt from the ground up**

Israel’s firefighters performed admirably last month. And well they should have. The country’s firefighting force has been rebuilt from the bottom up over the past 10 years, in the wake of the tragedy of the 2010 Mount Carmel forest fire.

Israel experiences a massive wildfire every few years, with especially large ones in 1989, 1995, 2010, 2016, 2019 and last month. Climate models show they’re getting more frequent and more fast-spreading, in part due to rising temperatures and a longer summer dry season. But no fire was more traumatic than the one that ignited on Mount Carmel in December 2010 and ultimately claimed the lives of 44 people, the worst civilian disaster in Israel’s history up to that point (eclipsed since then by last April’s deadly crush during the Mount Meron pilgrimage).

Among the dead were thirty-seven Prisons Service officers whose bus was overtaken by the flames as they attempted to evacuate a prison in the fire’s path. Haifa police chief Ahuva Tomer, the first female head of a major urban police department, was also killed trying to help coordinate the rescue.

The deaths brought new attention to an already widely recognized and longstanding problem: Israel’s fire services were a hodgepodge of 20 disconnected, poorly equipped and haphazardly trained regional fire departments that weren’t up to the challenge of a major fire.

After the 1989 and 1995 fires, the government went through a kind of ritual. It formed a commission of inquiry that produced a report detailing the dire shortages in the fire service’s manpower, equipment and training. It then ignored it.

It was only in May 2008, after years of delays and when it was clear the fires were a growing problem, that the cabinet managed to pass a decision approving a major reform of the fire services. Key to the reform was the unification of the scattered regional departments ostensibly overseen by the Interior Ministry into a single cohesive national force under the Public Security Ministry, which would be integrated closely with the national police.

The decision passed, but, maddeningly for those pushing for the reform, nothing happened. It took the 44 deaths on Mount Carmel two years later to get things into gear. A month after that fire, in January 2011, the cabinet issued another order that effectively mandated the actual implementation of the previous one. The order set a deadline at the end of 2012 for implementation. In August 2012, the Knesset passed the National Firefighting and Rescue Authority Law, officially establishing the national fire service mandated in the previous year’s cabinet decision. The new service formally began operations in February 2013.

The first challenge of the new force was the integration of the regional departments into a single hierarchy. It was no easy task. The gaps between the departments in basic firefighting doctrine, training and equipment were significant. As a June 2012 State Comptroller's report noted, different departments even used different radio terminology while battling the Carmel fire, making it difficult for them to notify fellow firefighters where the fire was moving.

But unifying and standardizing the departments wasn't enough. According to a Technion-Israel Institute of Technology study of the fire service commissioned in 2012 by the Public Security Ministry, Israel's firefighting services were woefully underfunded and understaffed.

The new service embarked in 2013 on a massive years-long expansion in manpower and capabilities. At its founding in 2013, the fire service inherited the 2,433 employees of the regional departments, including firefighters and logistical personnel. By 2019, that figure had grown to 3,690. Some 350 new firetrucks were added to the force between 2011 and 2020, an investment of hundreds of millions of shekels that expanded on and in many cases replaced the aging fleet of trucks with new vehicles, including off-road and other specialty trucks. Forty-nine of those new trucks, dubbed Alon (Oak) by the fire service, were specifically outfitted for battling forest fires.

Officials say the new force's unified hierarchy, modeled on the national police, has dramatically improved response times and made all the difference in recent years in preventing a recurrence of the Carmel disaster. In October 2020, a major blaze broke out near the northern city of Nof Hagalil. Dozens of crews from neighboring towns and districts were deployed almost immediately by a single national control center in a way no fire chief a decade earlier could have dreamed of doing. And in the Jerusalem Hills last month, the fire service proved it could do the same on a scale many times larger. Over 200 crews and thousands of firefighters and support personnel were in the hills battling the blaze within hours of the call from Beit Meir, all closely coordinated and carefully tracked in real time.

Over a dozen specially outfitted firefighting planes were also deployed to battle the Jerusalem blaze. They are the service's Elad air squadron, named for Elad Riban, one of the firefighters who perished in the Carmel fire. The squadron was another key lesson from the Carmel experience, when Israel had to call on other countries' airborne firefighting forces to help contain the blaze.

According to fire service numbers, the squadron's planes were deployed to 200 separate fires in 2020 alone, logging 1,900 flight hours and dropping 1.5 million liters of fire retardant. On especially hot and dry days, the squadron carries out patrol flights over areas prone to brushfires, hoping to catch fires while they're still small.

In 2020, the reliance on air power grew to include a drone unit that has deployed to large fires to help forces

on the ground track the spreading flames. Lacking funds for its own helicopter force, the fire service has teamed up with the Israel Police to outfit police helicopters with enormous buckets able to drop 680 liters of water at a time on a fire.

The expansion of the force has also included new investments in professionalizing its training arm. Last year, the service established the National Fire and Safety College and a special R&D unit. Plans are underway to develop automated early detection systems based on drones and other technologies.

#### **All told, it's an impressive new service.**

Yet the takeaway from last month's fire, at least for the firefighters themselves, wasn't their improved capabilities. Even with their new training and equipment, the firefighters said, disaster was only barely averted.

'Everyone knows what needs to happen'

Building fires in Israel are relatively rare and rarely deadly. Wood is an expensive resource, so buildings are constructed from stone, cement and glass. But forest fires are common, and large ones can be costly.

The Carmel fire came in early December after an unusually long dry season that year. The combination of widespread vegetation and extended dry seasons is a characteristic feature of Israel's climate. Israel is also a small and relatively crowded country, its national parks and cultivated forests not large enough to allow for more than a few short kilometers between towns and villages. To a firefighter, that all amounts to the worst possible combination: hundreds of residential areas large and small strewn across a landscape carpeted with kindling.

Government reports produced after previous major fires all made the same basic point: It's not enough to expand the fire service. The dense forests must be thinned out, firebreaks must be cut through the trees and undergrowth, especially around towns and along roads, and forests must be diversified beyond the traditional fast-growing, fast-burning Aleppo pines.

"Everyone knows what needs to happen," a frustrated Yehoshua Shkedy, chief scientist of Israel's Nature and Parks Authority, told The Times of Israel last week. "But only after 2010, because so many were killed, did anyone start implementing."

The problem boils down to management. Israeli forests are not managed by any single agency or supervising body. Some forests are owned and cultivated by KKL-JNF, others by the Nature and Parks Authority, and still others by local municipalities. Budgets for prevention measures are concentrated in the KKL and NPA forests, while municipalities often lack the funds and expertise to do their part. Alas, wildfires are unaware of these demarcations as they leap from tree to tree, and poorer conditions in one part of a forest can help a fire overwhelm containment measures taken by a more responsible steward in another.

A 2017 government report – it's a recurring refrain, the plethora of unread and unimplemented government

reports on the issue – recommended establishing a single supervisory body to oversee a coordinated nationwide effort to implement prevention measures in all Israel's forests, irrespective of who owns or manages them.

As NPA's Shkedy explained, that scattershot prevention policy could have turned the Eitanim hospital into a tragedy larger than the Carmel fire, had it not been for the foresight of the hospital's director, Dr. Gadi Lubin. Lubin was concerned about the trees' proximity to his hospital's perimeter wall, so he recently approached NPA and KKL officials at his own initiative to ask them to clear a firebreak around the complex.

Pine-forest fires will eventually leap across such barriers, but not as quickly as tree-to-tree travel. Last month, as the fire drew closer to Eitanim, that open area held off the flames for hours, giving rescuers time to evacuate the premises. Firefighters were even able to douse the flames before they could leap the barrier, sparing the facility any property damage.

It's a cautionary tale Shkedy tells anyone who will listen. Eitanim was likely saved from catastrophe not only by the firefighters, but by the initiative of the psychiatrist who runs the facility. When fire safety must depend on an unusually attentive psychiatrist to prevent disaster, Shkedy argues, that's a failure of policy.

Similar stories were told throughout the Jerusalem Hills last month. One fire service official who spoke with The Times of Israel recalled visiting Givat Ye'arim, "where a woman took us to see her burned-out home. We stood at the window and saw how the trees were planted right up to her home. People want to feel that they live in the woods, but that's exactly how the fire reached the house."

Firefighters are the first to note that by the time they're called in, the battle is already partly lost. The lives and property of residents, countless animals and vast areas of shrubland and forest are by then already succumbing to the flames.

### Prevention

The past two years have seen a great deal of staff work done on a comprehensive nationwide wildfire prevention plan, with a clear division of responsibility, firebreak maintenance regulations and so on. Plans were drawn up in a cross-agency effort led by the National Security Council and a price tag for implementation was calculated: roughly NIS 40 million per year for five years, or NIS 200 million all told. A small annual budget would then be required for upkeep.

It's pennies on the dollar, officials say. Fire service figures say fires, even with the efforts of the fire service, still cause some NIS 3 billion in damages each year. It's a figure that makes the new, more expensive national fire service a good investment. Prevention is cheaper still.

There's nothing new in this insight. The US has been focused on prevention for the better part of five decades, with public information campaigns involving cartoon bears, improvements in building codes, fire education and drills in schools and large buildings throughout the

country, and sternly enforced requirements for fire safety measures in all public places, including accessible street hydrants and extinguishers.

Those decades-long efforts worked beautifully. According to National Fire Protection Association figures, over the 38 years from 1977 to 2015, US civilian fire deaths fell by more than half, from some 7,400 per year to 3,300 – even as the American population grew by 100 million more people. The decline wasn't caused by better firefighting; the average death toll of a deadly fire remained relatively steady across those decades. There were simply fewer fires. The number of reports of building fires declined 54% over the period. In 1977, there were 15 fire reports for every 1,000 Americans; in 2015, there were four. Prevention efforts have been so successful that fires are now responsible for only a small percentage of calls to US fire departments — roughly 4% in 2015. Medical rescue or "mutual aid" requests are now the largest category at a combined 68%.

Those kinds of figures, replicated throughout the West, in urban settings and in the wild – the number of reported wildfires has also declined – drive home the point: Prevention is much, much cheaper than firefighting. It's also more effective.

### Glimmers of change

Disaster was averted in the Jerusalem Hills by a combination of Israeli firefighters' impressive new capabilities and a heavy dose of dumb luck. At Eitanim, at Givat Ye'arim and elsewhere, things could have turned out much worse. Though the latest fire claimed no human lives, it reminded Israeli leaders of the danger and set some long-stalled wheels in motion.

On August 16, the second day of the fire, Public Security Minister Omer Bar-Lev raised the issue of the first NIS 40 million to jumpstart implementation of the nationwide firebreak plan with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

"The firebreak issue was held up until today because of a lack of budgets and the low priority assigned to the issue," his office said bluntly in a statement, acknowledging the failure of past governments as Jerusalem's western horizon pumped thick clouds of smoke over the capital.

In early September, the cabinet formally approved a broader NIS 65 million plan to rehabilitate the ravaged area that included, alongside the cleanup of the remains of toxic asbestos warehouse roofing and funding for tracking populations of protected species like fallow deer and gazelles that saw many of their members die in the flames, funding for a comprehensive fire prevention plan for the Jerusalem Hills region.

In a statement about the new funding, the Environmental Protection Ministry noted last week that the future is expected to bring "rising temperatures, declining rainfall, and an increase in the rate and intensity of extreme events such as heatwaves and fires."

A serious and comprehensive prevention policy is no mere cost-saving measure. It's increasingly a question of

life and death.

## Some Arab Olympians Embrace Israeli Competition

By David May and Michael Levinson

algemeiner.com

September 9, 2021

**Hamid Sajjadi, Iran's recently appointed minister of sports, warned Iranian athletes in August not to compete against counterparts** from the "child-killing and occupying regime of Israel." With the 2022 Winter Olympic games commencing just five months from now, sporting authorities must condemn and punish this discrimination.

At this year's Olympic games, the world watched Fethi Nourine from Algeria and Mohamed Abdalrasool from Sudan forfeit their judo matches rather than risk sharing the Olympic stage with an Israeli opponent. Supported by the Palestinian Olympic Committee, Nourine and Abdalrasool demonstrated that old hatreds die hard. Meanwhile, Olympians from presumably hostile countries welcomed their Israeli peers, embodying the Olympic values of sportsmanship and mutual understanding.

The International Judo Federation (IJF) promptly suspended Nourine and his coach, and launched an investigation into the incident. In a press release, the IJF said, "Judo sport is based on a strong moral code, including respect and friendship, to foster solidarity and we will not tolerate any discrimination, as it goes against the core values and principles of our sport." Defiant, Nourine told the Algerian press, "My position is consistent on the Palestinian issue, and I reject normalisation, and if it cost me that absence from the Olympic Games, God will compensate."

For years, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has called upon athletes in the Arab world to boycott Israeli sports. Jibril Rajoub, the chairman of the Palestinian Olympic Committee and the Palestinian Football Association, has weaponized these sporting events to condemn what he calls the "crime of normalization." In 2014, Rajoub declared, "Any activity of normalization in sports with the Zionist enemy is a crime against humanity." Following Nourine's withdrawal, Rajoub posted a photo on Facebook of the two together, and commended Nourine's "courageous stance refusing normalization."

Rajoub is effectively encouraging athletes to break Olympic rules, and destroy their careers in a campaign to exclude and alienate Israeli athletes. "The practice of sport is a human right," states the Olympic Charter. "Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind."

Rajoub even has a personal history of promoting violence against Israel.

In 2013, he stated that if given the opportunity, he would use nuclear weapons against the Jewish state. In 2018, FIFA fined and subsequently banned Rajoub for using threats of violence to convince Argentina to cancel its match with Israel. FIFA's chief of investigations added that Rajoub "glorified terrorism," and compared Israelis to

"Satan and Nazis." Rajoub, under the direction of the PA, has used the Palestinian Olympic Committee as a political arm.

The IJF has taken commendable action to root out hatred at its own competitions. Earlier this year, the IJF suspended Iran for four years due to its refusal to let its athletes compete against Israelis. However, in 2021, the Court of Arbitration for Sport ruled that the IJF had no "legal basis" for serving Iran an unlimited suspension over its boycott of Israeli athletes. The Court did find, though, that the Iranian delegation committed "serious violations" and referred the case back to the IJF for disciplinary action.

At the same time, another positive trend is emerging: Athletes from countries historically hostile to Israel have shunned the discriminatory boycott. Saeid Mollaei fled the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2019 after Iranian agents coerced him to throw a match to avoid facing an Israeli — whom Mollaei has since befriended. After winning a silver medal in Tokyo, Mollaei said, "Thank you to Israel for the good energy. This medal is dedicated also to Israel." Mollaei even used the Hebrew word *todah* — thank you — in his speech.

Moreover, Saudi Arabian judoka Tahani Alqahtani faced Israeli Raz Hershko in women's Olympic judo, and even shook hands after the match — despite the tremendous backlash she received in the days prior to the competition. The IJF commended the move, stating, "Saudi Arabia proves that, through sport, we can go beyond differences and make sport a force to unite the world."

Vahid Sarlak, an Iranian Judoka whose own delegation forced him to purposefully withdraw from a match in 2005 to avoid facing an Israeli athlete, has since openly befriended Israeli athletes. "I am next to Israeli athletes," Sarlak said in a video message in August with Israel's national judo coach, Shani Hershko. "I have a great message to you. They really love Iranians. Sports is sports, not about politics."

Sports provide a platform to exhibit the best in humanity, and, sometimes, the worst. The Olympics are supposed to unite athletes from across the world in the fraternity of competition and fair play. Instead, the Palestinian Authority, Iran, and some athletes used this year's games to discriminate against Israelis. As preparations are well underway for the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, the International Olympic Committee, and all sporting bodies, should show zero tolerance for sports discrimination.

**Mr. May** is a senior research analyst at the *Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD)*, where **Mr. Levinson** is an intern.

## UK Muslim doctor delights in helping separate Jewish Israeli conjoined twins

By Nathan Jeffay

timesofisrael.com

September 31, 2021

**Kashmir-born Dr. Noor Ul Owase Jeelani, a world authority on conjoined twins, says he worked for months with Israeli team: ‘All children are the same, whatever color or religion.’**

A Muslim doctor from London has spoken of his pride and joy at helping separate Jewish Israeli conjoined twins just over a week ago, saying it illustrates that “from a doctor’s point of view, we’re all one.”

Staff at Soroka University Medical Center in Beersheba successfully completed the operation on the twins conjoined at the head, and said that the babies are now likely to grow up to live normal lives.

The medical team managed this despite never having performed such a surgery, which involved complex on-the-spot decisions regarding which blood vessel to give to which twin, and assessing in real-time the impact that immediate decisions were having on the functioning of the brains.

Now, the man who brought the experience to the table has told his story to The Times of Israel — and said it should serve as a reminder that medicine transcends all divisions.

Dr. Noor Ul Owase Jeelani, a pediatric neurosurgeon at London’s Great Ormond Street Hospital, has performed four other separation surgeries on twins who were conjoined at the head with fused skulls, intertwined brains, and shared blood vessels. He and his colleague, Professor David Dunaway, are seen as the world’s experts on such cases.

Jeelani directs a nonprofit, Gemini Untwined, to plan and perform such operations. When doctors at Soroka needed to prepare for the operation, they reached out to him. He agreed, for the first time, to operate outside the UK.

He said that the fact that a Kashmir-born Muslim doctor scrubbed up alongside an Israeli team to help a

Jewish family was a reminder of the universal nature of medicine.

“It was a fantastic family that we helped,” he stated. “As as I’ve said all my life, all children are the same, whatever color or religion,” he said. “The distinctions are man-made. A child is a child. From a doctor’s point of view, we’re all one.”

He found the family’s delight at the success of the operation deeply moving.

“There was this very special moment when the parents were just over the moon,” he stated. “I have never in my life seen a person smile, cry, be happy, and be relieved at the same time. The mother simply couldn’t believe it, we had to pull up a chair to help her to calm down.”

Jeelani’s involvement with conjoined twins started in 2017, when a neurosurgeon from Peshawar, Pakistan, asked him to operate on identical conjoined twins, Safa and Marwa, born three months earlier to a woman from rural northern Pakistan.

He raised the money from a Pakistani oil trader called Murtaza Lakhani and, with Dunaway, successfully performed the operation, after hundreds of hours of preparation. He went on to establish Gemini Untwined, and perform more

surgeries.

He worked for months on the Israeli surgery.

“We’ve been involved right from the start, talking to the team in Israel and planning it with them over a period of six months,” he said.

Jeelani added: “This latest surgery fulfills a key objective of our charity, namely, to empower local teams abroad to undertake this complex work, successfully utilizing our experience, knowledge, and skills gained over the past 15 years with our previous four sets of twins.”



Dr Noor ul Owase Jeelani. (courtesy, Noor ul Owase Jeelani)



Conjoined twins, newly separated at Soroka University Medical Center in Beersheba, look at each other for the first time, on September 5, 2021. (courtesy of Soroka University Medical Center in Beersheba)

Current issue also available at [suburbanorthodox.org](http://suburbanorthodox.org).  
If you see something, send something” –editor