

Would Israel Be Better Off Without U.S. Military Aid?

By Michael Oren

tabletmag.com

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Partnership might be preferable to largesse.

Notwithstanding the continued support for Israel among most Democratic legislators, and despite the efforts of both countries' leaders to play down its seriousness, the recent blocking of \$1 billion of U.S. military aid to Israel is a turning point. For the first time in memory, Congress failed to approve a large-scale defense package for the Jewish state. And though progressive senators such as Vermont's Patrick Leahy have challenged the sale of offensive weaponry to Israel, this is the first time Congress has withheld aid from a purely defensive system. By harmlessly shooting down Hamas rockets that would otherwise have to be silenced by massive air and ground action, Iron Dome saves thousands of Israeli and Palestinian lives.

Those lives, apparently, are less important to Congress' anti-Israel progressives than denying assistance to Israel. The success of the "squad"—House Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib—in preventing their own party from backing Iron Dome is unprecedented and a harbinger of more brazen efforts come. Although the funds are widely expected to be approved at a later date (the leader of the House Appropriations Committee introduced legislation with Iron Dome funding the day after progressive Democrats had it removed from a government spending bill), for Israelis, the event must serve as an overdue wakeup call to begin rethinking the nature of American aid, one of the mainstays of our alliance with the United States.

Though now taken for granted, American defense aid for Israel began belatedly and grew in fits and starts. Throughout its first two decades, while assisting Israel economically, the United States refused to sell Israel any arms, much less aid it militarily. A breakthrough occurred during the Kennedy administration, which sold Hawk anti-aircraft missiles to Israel, followed by President Lyndon Johnson, who allowed it to purchase Patton tanks and Skyhawk aircraft. Even then, Israel fought the 1967 Six-Day War with French weaponry—AMX tanks and Dassault Mystère fighters, plus some American army surplus—but in the process proved its worth as a potent Cold War ally. The result was an inchoate U.S.-Israel strategic alliance that burgeoned during Israel's War of Attrition (1967-1970) with Soviet-backed Egypt and then in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. In Operation Nickel Grass, the United States replenished Israel's battlefield losses with some 55,000 tons of military equipment.

The material was paid for, not donated. Outright military aid to Israel would only be offered in 1979, after the Camp David Accords with Egypt, when President Carter earmarked roughly \$3 billion for Israel. The grant,

though, was spread out over several years and used to reimburse Israel for the airbases it evacuated in Sinai. Not until the mid-1980s, in the Reagan years, did Israel receive an average of \$1.8 billion per year, increased by the Clinton administration to \$2.4 billion. In large measure, the money offset the phasing-out of American economic grants to Israel as well as the massive sale of American arms to Arab countries. Still, the amount grew to just over \$3 billion in 2008 with the start of President George W. Bush's 10-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. In addition to the MOU annuity, Israel also sought "plus ups"—congressional grants for missile defense and other one-time expenditures, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars. In time, this would make Israel the largest single recipient of American military aid since World War II, a total of more than \$150 billion.

But that number is also misleading. The aid comes in the form of foreign military funding (FMF) designed to facilitate the foreign military sales (FMS) of American military equipment. This means that nearly three-quarters of the aid is spent in the United States, as a subsidy for the domestic arms industry, creating tens of thousands of jobs. Thanks to that money, the Israel Defense Forces have become the world's most American-equipped army, with the largest fleets of F-16 and F-35 jets outside of the United States. For companies such as General Dynamics and Lockheed-Martin, there can be no better advertisement for their fighters than their use by Israel's famed air force. And while Israel's critics in the United States often claim that it receives the greatest amount of American aid, in fact Germany, Japan, and South Korea get many times more. Their allotments, though, are not characterized as aid but as items in the U.S. defense budget.

Though generous, U.S. aid to Israel is hardly free. Under its terms, Israel cannot buy whatever it wants from the United States. Requests to buy Tomahawk missiles and strategic bombers have been routinely denied. Israel can buy the F-35 but cannot have access to its operating system. Israel cannot, moreover, sell what it wants to whomever it desires, most expressly to China. President Clinton vetoed Israel's sale, worth \$1 billion, of Phalcon reconnaissance planes to China, and President Bush nixed a \$700 million deal of Harpy missiles.

Yet the value of U.S. defense aid to Israel could never be calculated merely in monetary terms. To Israel's enemies, it sent an unequivocal message of superpower support. That message proved crucial during the Cold War and, later, in Israel's conflicts with terrorist groups. It gave concrete expression to Congress' 2008 commitment to ensure Israel's qualitative military edge (QME),

guaranteeing its “ability to counter and defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors.” The message of American backing remained vital as Israel began to confront a new type of danger—not of tanks and planes but of boycotts and sanctions, of those who denied Israel not only the right to defend itself but also the right to exist.

For years, the arrangement proved so comfortable for both Americans and Israelis that few rose to challenge it. By 2015, though, the situation began to change. The Iran nuclear deal, negotiated behind Israel’s back and regarded by Israeli leaders as strategically threatening, greatly diluted the message of American support for Israel’s security. So, too, did America’s retreat from the Middle East, which began with President Barack Obama and accelerated under President Donald Trump. The progressive wing of the Democratic Party, meanwhile, expanding in size and influence, demanded a more pro-Palestinian American policy, and a much tougher stand on Israel. Asked during the 2020 presidential race whether they would use American aid as leverage to pry diplomatic concessions from Israel, Democratic candidates Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, Beto O’Rourke, and Pete Buttigieg all replied “yes.” Asked by Israeli journalist Zvika Klein why young American Jews protest against Israel rather than Iran or Syria, Peter Beinart explained, “As Americans, we don’t provide \$3 billion in military aid to Iran or Syria ... without us, Israel couldn’t do everything it does.”

In fact, Israel today receives \$3.8 billion annually, according to the MOU signed by Obama and then-Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2016. But even with that increase, the aid no longer influences Israeli decision-making to the extent it once did. Back in 1985, American aid represented nearly one-half of Israel’s defense budget. Today, it accounts for only 19%. Moreover, under the Bush MOU, Israel was able to keep 26.3% of the aid—off-shore procurement (OSP)—to develop military capabilities specific to its needs. But the Obama MOU phases out the OSP, further reducing its importance to Israel’s security.

Why should Israel, still a vulnerable country in the world’s toughest region, allow itself to be seen as open to progressive arm-twisting?

Behind closed doors, Israelis are questioning why a country as militarily and economically robust as theirs should continue to appear dependent on any foreign power. Why, they wonder, should Israel bear the opportunity costs of many billions of dollars by not selling its defense technologies to certain countries? And why should Israel, still a vulnerable country in the world’s toughest region, allow itself to be seen as open to progressive arm-twisting? Isn’t it time—with the Obama MOU set to expire in 2027—to begin asking whether Israel can continue to depend on U.S. military aid, whether its downsides outweigh its benefits, and whether or not more secure and mutually advantageous alternatives exist?

The answers to these questions may well lie in moving from the current donor-to-recipient model to a collaborative relationship based on both countries’ interests and strengths. Such an arrangement would provide for investment in joint research in artificial intelligence, directed energy (lasers), and cyber—all fields in which Israel excels. Such cooperation would bring immediate benefits to American and Israeli security and strengthen their abilities to counter common threats. “The U.S. and like-minded allies must lead in the development of emerging critical technologies,” I was told by Enia Krivine, senior director of the Israel Program and the National Security Network at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. “The U.S. must invest in Israel and other techno democracies who share our values to secure the future.”

And nothing, it might be added, would be a better response to those legislators who are willing to cause harm to the Palestinians—and perhaps even to America—in order to attack Israel. Nothing could more effectively stimulate economic growth while contributing to Middle East security, and nothing could be more befitting for two sovereign, democratic states. In this way, perhaps, the blocking of aid for Iron Dome would not only be a wakeup call but also an opportunity for Israel and the United States to place their relationship on a more equitable and durable foundation.

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When Bennett takes Netanyahu's stage at the United Nations

By Jacob Kornbluh

forward.com

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This will be Bennett's best opportunity to introduce himself to the international community and tell his fellow world leaders who he is, and not only who he is not.

No one remembers that Michael Jordan was succeeded by Pete Myers and Brent Barry, and LeBron James was replaced by Jamario Moon, Omri Casspi and Cedi Osman.

Those shoes were impossible to fill.

Naftali Bennett stepped right into the Prime Minister’s Office with no on-the-job training or even a proper meeting with his predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, which has had its pluses and minuses.

When it comes to international diplomacy, being Netanyahu’s successor has mostly helped Bennett, because the world leaders he met – starting with Jordanian King Abdullah – were so glad that Netanyahu was finally gone. The headline on the bottom of the screen when Bennett

met with US President Joe Biden was “President meets with Israeli leader who is not Netanyahu.”

But when Bennett delivers the annual speech to the United Nations General Assembly on Monday, he will come with a disadvantage, because that was Netanyahu’s greatest stage to showcase his talent. That was where Netanyahu was at his best in making Israel’s case to the world.

It was where Netanyahu effectively used his props of maps of Tehran and Beirut, a bomb with a red line and the architectural plans for Auschwitz. Bennett’s advisers stressed that he would not be bringing any props.

They failed to acknowledge, however, that the props were never the headline but the means of attracting the world’s attention to the headline. Last year, Netanyahu used the speech to reveal Hezbollah’s secret arms depot in Beirut near the site of the port explosion that killed 200 people. In 2018, he told the international community about a secret atomic warehouse in Tehran. He told the world four years ago that he would make peace with Arab countries, and no one believed him, but they listened.

CNN and Fox broadcasted Netanyahu’s speeches live, because they knew there would be drama and headlines. At a conference where the top headline so far has come from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson mocking Kermit the Frog, it will be hard for Bennett to capture the world’s attention if his only gimmick is not being Netanyahu.

Despite those challenging circumstances, this will be Bennett’s best opportunity to introduce himself to the international community and tell his fellow world leaders who he is, and not only who he is not. He will get ample time to explain what he believes in and what he is trying to accomplish in his time as prime minister.

Then again, perhaps like other world leaders, his target audience will not be the international community but his own voters at home. That would be legitimate, but if so, he is also at a disadvantage with that goal.

Netanyahu always found a way to speak during prime time on a weeknight. Bennett will be speaking at 4 p.m. local time, two hours before a holiday begins and two days before the public receives a newspaper.

Very few Israelis will be watching, and Netanyahu’s associates said emphatically that he will not be among them. That won’t stop Netanyahu from reacting, of course, and putting Bennett down.

Netanyahu tried to insult Bennett following his meeting with Biden, but he ended up harming only himself when a clip of him mocking the president and wrongly accusing him of falling asleep during his meeting with Bennett went viral.

Had he swallowed his pride and offered Bennett his assistance with the speech, it could have helped Netanyahu regain the statesmanship voters want to see. Instead, Netanyahu only offered Bennett his pity and tweeted that he should study his past UN speeches and learn from them.

“Even the great Michael Jordan, when he passed the torch to Kobe Bryant, did it with respect, because he saw him as his student,” a former Netanyahu aide said. “The situation here is different. Bennett has followed in Bibi’s footsteps and learned from him, but Bibi is not one to embrace his students. In his mind, among the many assets he brought was his international standing and ability to speak to the US public and international community, and the UN speech was his annual opportunity to do that.

“We will feel the drop-off, not having our best speaker, having someone m

Peace with the Palestinians? Entirely possible!

By Shoshana Lavan

blogs.timesofisrael.com

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When 15 peace organizations unite to bring hundreds of Arabs and Jews to eat, enjoy music, listen to speeches, and dialogue together, of course, I have hope.

Before I moved to Israel, I had an argument with a friend. He told me he does not believe one person can make a difference. He insisted it is always groups of people, organizations, political parties. I listed: Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, all to no avail. He would not listen. One person, he said, cannot change the world.

A few weeks ago, I was chatting with a friend here on our kibbutz. He’s given up on the idea of peace in Israel. “We’ve already been trying for over 70 years,” he said and walked away. Seventy years? I thought. Is 70 years a long time to try for peace? When Germany and England were at each other’s throats in two world wars, would they have expected to be working together 70 years later, peacefully and happily? How many other countries can we think about who have been enemies for what feels like forever,

only to find themselves at peace centuries later? Friends, even.

Another friend here, whose political views are totally polar opposite from mine, tells me not to be naïve. “Why do you think you can make a difference?” he asks.

I feel sad for these friends. But I also feel lucky. Five years ago I was, I thought, trapped in an abusive relationship, with a tiny baby, and I did not know whether we would get out alive. I remember my mum saying, “You will get out of this. It will not last forever.”

Often we believe, because we are human and cynical and blind to the possibilities of hope and change, bad things will last forever. But history shows us, time and time again, this is not so.

And because I have been in hell, and managed to get out of it, I truly know what is possible in this world. The evil that is possible. And the goodness too.

Something I have never truly understood about Israel and Palestine is why so many peace organizations have individually been trying to fight against those who are

unified in their belief Israel and Palestine will never work together, the Jews and Arabs will never be at peace. I always knew if these organizations were to work together, they would be much stronger.

On Friday, September 24, 2021, in Kibbutz Hannaton, this is exactly what happened. Representatives from 15 leading Israeli-Palestinian peace organizations came together for a peace event. Hundreds of people, Arabs and Jews, were there, eating together, enjoying music together, listening to speeches together, and taking part in dialogue circles together.

It was also wonderful to hear from the two senior representatives of the Palestinian Authority, who travelled from Ramallah to tell us in no uncertain terms, “We want peace. We are a partner for peace. We the Palestinians want to live in our own country in peace and co-operation with the State of Israel.” Even the children were exploring what peace means to them and decorating a peace castle. It was a phenomenal beginning to what will be many more events, and a change in the way we talk about peace here.

There WILL be peace between Israel and Palestine. There will be peace between Jews and Arabs. This enmity we have now will not last forever. How can it, when so many people are working for peace, and spreading the word of peace, and showing how peace is the only way of the future?

My sister told me some weeks ago, “It’s all very well what you guys are doing for peace in the North. But people in Jerusalem will not listen. Your message and your actions will not reach all of Israel.”

I beg to differ. The only way we can bring about peace is by showing the rest of the country the beautiful events which can and will happen when we are unified here as a

human race, not separated by culture and history. And I have a very simple question to put to all those who do not want peace. Do you truly want your children, and your grandchildren, and generations of children to fight and die in wars of our making? Which are our responsibility to stop?

On Friday, I watched as Jamila from Kfar Manda and her assistant Aisha worked tirelessly for hours to make pitot with toppings for hundreds of people, for free. Arabs and Jews alike relished it. They sat together and talked, bonding over the delicious tasting food, breathing in the atmosphere of peace and friendship. Those two women did not stop working, and it was only at the end of the whole event, once everything had been cleared away, that I saw them having anything to eat themselves. Those women believe in peace and will do all they can to make it happen. They were the first stall by the entrance of the event, and for me they will always be a symbol of it.

We will never give up; we will never rest; we will work tirelessly and endlessly until the very end, when peace WILL come.

There is no question of it coming — the only question is when. And I would like to see it happen in my lifetime so that the little boy I saved from an abusive home will never have to face violence and terror again.

I believe one person can change the world. And when that one person unifies with another one person, and another one person, and so on, the possibilities are limitless.

Ms. Lavan, who recently made Aliyah, teaches high school English Literature and Language as well as English as a foreign language. She is also an aspiring peace activists.

Israel’s ‘blame my predecessor’ Iran strategy revealed

By Caroline Glick

jns.org

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The Lapid-Gantz-Bennett government has decided to raise the white flag of surrender.

Two weeks ago, Foreign Policy magazine published an interview with Defense Minister Benny Gantz. In it, Gantz said that Israel has dropped its opposition to the Biden administration’s plan to return to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran. With Gantz’s statement, the full expanse of the Lapid-Gantz-Bennett government’s strategy for contending with Iran’s nuclear program has come into view. And it is deeply alarming.

Over the past several weeks and months, the discourse about Iran’s nuclear program has been dominated by the question of how far Iran is from “nuclear breakout.” Nuclear breakout is the point at which a state has the independent capacity to build a nuclear weapon at will, within a relatively short time. Such states are referred to as “nuclear threshold states.”

Soon after he took office in January, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Iran was three to four

months away from nuclear breakout. Now, eight months on, the Biden administration says Iran is as close as a month away from nuclear breakout.

These alarming claims are nothing new. In February 2020, for instance, the United States assessed that Iran was up to four months away from nuclear breakout. In 2015, on the eve of the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, (i.e., the nuclear deal with Iran), the United States and its partners said that without the deal, Iran was three months from nuclear deal.

With the deal, the Obama administration and its partners said that it would take Iran a year to reach nuclear breakout. Outside experts disagreed. Former senior United Nations nuclear inspector Olli Heinonen said that in the best-case scenario, Iran’s breakout time under the deal was seven months.

For his part, then-President Barack Obama said that at the end of the JCPOA’s lifespan in 2025, Iran’s breakout time would be reduced to zero. That is, Obama admitted

that the deal itself enabled Iran to become a threshold nuclear state.

The contradictions and disputes about when Iran would be able to build atomic bombs at will don't mean the assessments are worthless. They are important guideposts for policymakers. The disparities between where Iran's nuclear capabilities stood at the time the assessments were made and where it supposedly stands today don't mean that the assessments were necessarily wrong. Instead they indicate that something has been happening over the past decade or so that has slowed down Iran's nuclear progress and blocked it from reaching nuclear breakout, despite its efforts and apparent progress towards the nuclear finish line.

What was that something?

In a word, that something was Israel. For the past decade, Israel implemented a multi-dimensional strategy whose goal was to harm Iran's nuclear, military, diplomatic and economic capabilities.

On the nuclear level, both in cooperation with the United States and on its own, Israel worked to undermine Iran's nuclear advances. Iran's nuclear scientists were assassinated. Through cyberattacks, Israel was reportedly repeatedly damaging Iran's centrifuges and other components of its nuclear program. Frequent sabotage operations allegedly carried out by Israeli officers and agents on the ground in Iran have caused massive, and in some cases, sustained damage to Iran's nuclear installations.

Israel's non-nuclear focused military operations against Iran were directed toward diminishing Iran's military forces and capabilities in Syria. Israel reached an unprecedented agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin that enabled Israeli forces to freely operate against Iranian military targets and weapons shipments to Hezbollah in Syria. Outside Syria, Israel conducted a naval campaign against Iran's naval assets in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman and beyond.

Diplomatically, Israel's unflinching opposition to the 2015 nuclear deal and more generally to every diplomatic effort that strengthened Iran, enabled it to build alliances with Arab states threatened by Iran in the Persian Gulf and North Africa. These alliances in turn formed the basis of the Abraham Accords. Israel's alliances with Iran's other enemies served as a force multiplier for Israel and its Arab partners in their joint and separate operations against Iran and its proxies in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, the Gaza Strip, Sinai and Africa. Israel's unrelenting diplomatic offensive against the JCPOA rendered the nuclear deal controversial. Rather than feeling free to pat themselves on the back, supporters of nuclear appeasement of the ayatollahs were forced onto the defensive.

At home, the same Iran that was just months or weeks from nuclear breakout was also just months or weeks away from an internal revolution that with the support of Iran's neighbors could have brought down the regime of the ayatollahs.

Gantz's statement to Foreign Policy that Israel's new government has dropped its predecessor's opposition to the administration's plan to return to the JCPOA means that Israel is no longer pursuing the economic component of its previous strategy. After all, the first consequence of a U.S. return to the JCPOA will be the abrogation of all U.S. economic sanctions on Iran. Unencumbered by sanctions, Iran will quickly reach a level of economic prosperity which, at a minimum, will stabilize the internal political situation in Iran in a manner that secures the regime's survival.

Gantz's announcement that Israel is walking away from the economic component of the previous government's Iran strategy followed earlier moves by the government that rolled back the strategy's other components. Just days after the Lapid-Gantz-Bennett government came into office, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid put an official end to Israel's direct actions against Iran's nuclear installations with his announcement that the new government would not surprise the Biden administration through independent and uncoordinated actions against Iran's nuclear program.

Since taking office, the Biden administration has made clear repeatedly that its only policy towards Iran is appeasement. Consequently, there is no way the administration will either work with Israel to sabotage Iran's nuclear installations, or approve any Israeli plan to sabotage Iran's nuclear installations on its own. So by giving the administration veto power over Israel's actions on that front, Lapid—followed by Gantz and Naftali Bennett—effectively ended Israel's own operations. It comes as no surprise then that there have been no reports of damage to Iran's nuclear installations in recent months.

Russia took an axe to Israel's military operations against Syria when it announced that Putin had cancelled his agreement not to interfere with Israel's operations against Iranian targets in Syria. But Syria isn't the only battlefield the government has abandoned.

In late July, Iran attacked an Israeli-managed cargo ship docked off the Omani coast. Two crew members were killed. Aside from a bit of huffing and puffing, Israel failed to retaliate. Likewise, Israel failed to retaliate when Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, launched a missile strike against northern Israel. And earlier this month, Israel did nothing to block Iran from supplying fuel to Hezbollah in Lebanon, despite the fact that the Iranian operation constituted a major breach of U.S. sanctions on Iran.

Israel's diplomatic campaign against Iran had two audiences: the Arab regimes threatened by Iran, and the western powers—including the Democrat Party—that embraced nuclear appeasement. The Arabs responded to Israel's staunch diplomacy by embracing the Jewish state as an ally.

As for the western powers, by rejecting nuclear appeasement, Israel rejected the legitimacy that the western
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powers were providing to Iran's nuclear weapons program through the JCPOA.

The JCPOA didn't merely preserve Iran's nuclear capabilities and enable it to expand them while producing a missile arsenal capable of launching nuclear warheads. The 2015 nuclear deal also gave international legitimacy to an illicit nuclear program advanced in material breach of Iran's signature on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

On a practical level, Gantz's announcement that Israel no longer opposes the Biden administration's plan to restore the United States to the JCPOA means that Israel has dropped its objection to the West's decision to legalize Iran's nuclear weapons program.

So what is the Lapid-Gantz-Bennett government's strategy on Iran?

By cancelling all four components of Israel's longstanding, successful strategy for containing and

undermining Iran, the government has made clear that its strategy for dealing with Iran's nuclear program is to raise the white flag of surrender.

Rather than present a new strategy for preventing Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold, the government has focused its efforts on selling its strategy of lying down and doing nothing. The government justifies its decision to let the clock run down by casting the blame for its failure to act on the person who conceived and implemented the Israeli strategy that blocked Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold until now. Although everyone knows who it is they are scapegoating, Bennett has opted to refer to him only as "my predecessor."

Ms. Glick is an award-winning columnist and author of "The Israeli Solution: A One-State Plan for Peace in the Middle East."

How the U.S. and France Are Propping Up Hizballah's Rule in Lebanon

By Tony Badran

fdd.org

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The new government puts the country more firmly in Iran's clutches.

After a year of political bickering among Lebanon's sectarian chieftains, Hezbollah determined that the time had come for a new government to arise. By now, it should be clear to all observers that the terror group runs the Lebanese political order. And through this government, Hezbollah will now lead Lebanon's engagement with the outside world. Hezbollah's decisions on the make-up of the new government have telegraphed the basic contours of the group's plan.

It was a direct intervention by Hezbollah's emissary, the head of the directorate of general security, Abbas Ibrahim, that precipitated the formation of the government. Hezbollah's prodding ended a year-long spat between, on the one hand, two Sunni prime minister designates, Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati, and, on the other, Maronite president Michel Aoun and his son-in-law Gebran Bassil. The prolonged paralysis only highlighted both sides' insignificance, in contrast to Hezbollah's position as ultimate arbiter.

Hezbollah not only controls the new government, as it did for Lebanon's predecessor governments, but it and its immediate allies also hold two-thirds of the governing portfolios. The ministries Hezbollah decided to hold, either directly or through its Shiite ally Amal, are telling.

Even though Hariri and Mikati ended up squabbling with Aoun and Bassil over ministries for over a year, Hezbollah had secured the key positions it wanted in the government from the outset. A year ago, as Lebanese and outside actors entertained themselves with talk of an "independent" and "technocratic" government, Hezbollah laid down its terms, which included keeping the Ministry of Finance in the hands of a Shiite picked in concert with the group's closest ally, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri. Berri named Youssef Khalil, former director of financial operations at the Central Bank of Lebanon. The Maronite

president and the Sunni prime minister designee quickly consented.

External actors, such as France, also went along. Famously, French President Emmanuel Macron had launched an initiative last year to push for a new Lebanese government. But Macron always viewed Hezbollah as his primary interlocutor in Lebanon. After the explosion at the Beirut port in August 2020, Macron visited Lebanon and met with Hezbollah officials. According to the French press, Macron offered to partner with Hezbollah in Lebanon: "I want to work with you to change Lebanon," he reportedly told a Hezbollah member of parliament in Beirut. In addition to talking with Hezbollah, Macron also personally reached out to the group's Iranian patrons.

Macron has apparently resolved that, because Hezbollah and, behind it, Iran are the dominant players in Lebanon, partnership with them is a prerequisite for advancing French interests—both geopolitical and commercial. In addition to its existing investment in offshore gas exploration in Lebanon, France has also been eyeing other ventures. In September 2020, during his visit to Beirut, Macron was accompanied by Rodolphe Saade, chairman and chief executive officer of the French container shipping giant CMA CGM Group. CMA CGM, a subsidiary of which has operated the Syrian port of Latakia's containers terminal since 2009, is vying to rebuild the Beirut port.

Against this backdrop, Hezbollah's choice of ministries in the new government is revealing. After holding the Ministry of Public Health in two successive governments, Hezbollah opted to let go of that portfolio for the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, which oversees the port. What's more, the new minister, Ali Hamie, also holds French citizenship. In fact, certain Lebanese media circles have gone so far as to suggest that Hamie's nomination represents a point of intersection between France and Hezbollah.

French policy in the Levant is hardly at odds with U.S. policy. In fact, in July, in a highly unusual move, the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon and her French counterpart jointly visited Saudi Arabia to urge the kingdom to reinvest in the Hezbollah-dominated order in Beirut. Similarly, the U.S. secretary of state and his French counterpart have tried to press the Saudis on the matter.

The U.S. posture is overdetermined both by its policy of realignment with Iran and by its Lebanon policy. The U.S. conceit in Lebanon is to prevent “state collapse” through investment in “strengthening state institutions,” which Washington maintains will “counter Hezbollah’s narrative.” Exactly what this gibberish means is anyone’s guess. What is clear, however, is that a policy of propping

up a Hezbollah-run “state” is, by definition, a pro-Iran policy.

France’s emerging partnership with Hezbollah belies the American pretense of distinguishing between Hezbollah and a distinct “Lebanese state.” In its statement welcoming the announcement of the new government, the State Department, never once mentioned Hezbollah, despite the group’s overt and decisive position in that government. The Biden administration nevertheless pledged to support the new government. In other words, everyone now recognizes that engagement with the “Lebanese government” means working with Hezbollah.

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Congressional Progressives’ Push for Greater Israeli Civilian Casualties

By David Horovitz

timesofisrael.com

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If they were to succeed, the result would be increased Palestinian deaths as well.

Were it not for the astonishing Iron Dome missile defense system, the Gaza-ruling Hamas terror group would have been able to reduce Israel’s residential areas to rubble in recent years, rendering much of the country unliveable. It would also have condemned Israel to international isolation: A single rocket from Gaza that evaded Iron Dome and fell near Ben Gurion Airport in 2014 prompted most foreign airlines to suspend their flights to Israel.

In this past May’s 11-day conflict alone, an estimated 1,500 rockets fired from Gaza were heading directly into Israeli civilian neighborhoods. In excess of 1,400 of them were knocked out of the sky by Iron Dome interceptors. In the little more than a decade since the system was first rushed into service, it has stopped thousands of the terror groups’ indiscriminate rocket launches from killing and maiming Israelis, with an intercept rate somewhere between 85 and 90 percent.

While simultaneously protesting to a gullible world the Israeli security blockade on Gaza that prevents a more rapid development of its capacity to wreak destruction in Israel, Hamas works feverishly to outwit Iron Dome — altering the range of its rockets, modifying their warheads, attempting to overwhelm the system with multiple launches, and, most recently, by utilizing drones to carry its warheads across the border.

Acutely conscious of the lives at stake, Iron Dome’s developers continually upgrade it, racing desperately to stay one step ahead of the terrorists.

The United States has been a core, consistent partner in the development and funding of Iron Dome. This is an immensely expensive enterprise: Each of the dozen or so Iron Dome batteries reportedly deployed by Israel costs upwards of \$50 million, and each interceptor rocket costs \$20,000-\$100,000. The Gaza rockets they stop, by thousands.

on almost everything, a small group of “progressive” Democratic legislators held their party hostage and secured the removal of a clause providing \$1 billion in supplementary funding for Iron Dome from a critical US government-funding bill.

In the Barack Obama era, a president heavily criticized by many in Israel for his positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on the Iranian nuclear threat, helped ensure that funding for Iron Dome was approved with alacrity, even when Capitol Hill was at its most dysfunctional.

Hosting Prime Minister Naftali Bennett at the White House only last month, President Joe Biden took pains to stress, “I fully, fully, fully support replenishing Israel’s Iron Dome system.”

That Democratic members of Congress today would even wish to prevent, never mind succeed in preventing, the smooth approval of funding for Iron Dome dismally underlines the immorality taking hold in small but now self-evidently potent areas of that party when it comes to Israel.

For seeking to deny funds to Israel for Iron Dome is indeed immoral. This is a military system whose sole purpose and capability is defensive. It keeps people alive despite terrorists’ best attempts to kill them. It is the vital first line of defense against the war crime of indiscriminate rocket fire directed at civilians.

Far from protecting Palestinian civilians, hobbling Iron Dome would likely have the opposite effect

Those US legislators doing their utmost to deprive Israel of its protection are attempting to abandon Israelis to that deadly fire. They are opposing Israeli civilians’ right to a shield against murderous terrorism.

Iron Dome’s principal deployment, moreover, has been facing a territory, Gaza, in which Israel has no military or civilian presence — having withdrawn to international acclaim in 2005 — an enclave that is ruled by a globally reviled terrorist organization.

It would also be crucial in any war against Lebanon's Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed terror army with far greater rocket and missile capabilities than Hamas and the shared goal of destroying Israel.

Without the protection afforded by Iron Dome, it is worth stressing, the Israeli military would likely be forced to resort to greater use of firepower when the homefront comes under rocket attack, in order to limit the duration of conflict and minimize Israeli civilian deaths — likely leading to greater civilian casualties in the terrorists' home territory.

But, on Tuesday, with their political power magnified by contrast, range in cost from hundreds of dollars to the low the gulf between US Democrats and Republicans

The complicated politics of hating Israel

By Jonathan S. Tobin

AOC's tears and subsequent apology for not opposing the Iron Dome illustrated the frustrations of the left and the fears of other Democrats about being bulldozed by radicals.

Thursday, Sept. 23 was a banner day for pro-Israel Democrats. But in the aftermath of the party leadership's swift move to undo what had seemed like a stunning triumph on the part of their leftist wing, the question to be asked is not why Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) wept on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. Rather, it is whether the Democratic establishment will have many more such victories over the increasingly loud voices being raised against the Jewish state by their activist base.

The surprise vote came only two days after the House leadership bowed to the demands made by the ringleader of the leftist "Squad" to remove the provision to pay for the missile-defense system from a stopgap budget bill needed to fund the government. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had included the Iron Dome in that massive piece of legislation as a ploy to embarrass Republicans. But she failed to account for the fact that a significant minority of her own party would vote against it because it included a provision that supported Israel. Faced with the certainty that enough left-wingers would defect to sink the legislation, she backed down.

While it was assumed that the funding would be approved later in the session, it was nonetheless an embarrassment for pro-Israel Democrats and a personal humiliation for both Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer. The octogenarian pair know that as long as they stay in their posts, the one thing they can't afford is to be portrayed as weak with respect to the business of running the House.

The Democratic leadership has tolerated "The Squad," whose numbers have grown from the original quartet since the 2020 election because they understand how popular AOC and her radical comrades like Reps. Ilhan Omar (D-Minn.) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) are with the party

In other words, far from protecting Palestinian civilians, hobbling Iron Dome would probably have the opposite effect.

For some legislators, obsessed by a loathing for a small state in a toxic region, absolutely no avenue is off-limits

Leading Democrats are assuring Israel and Israel's supporters in the US that the capitulation to the progressive legislators is a short-term setback that will be swiftly reversed. Anything else would be unthinkable.

But the very readiness, the cynical scheming to target Iron Dome, of all things, is despicable and unforgivable. It shows that, for some legislators, obsessed by a loathing for a small state in a toxic region, absolutely no avenue is off-limits when it comes to harming Israel and rendering its people vulnerable to their would-be killers.

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base, as well as with its pop-culture cheering section on the late-night comedy shows. While they've never hesitated to label Republican outliers as beyond the pale, they've been careful to avoid being similarly frank about Omar and Tlaib's predilection for anti-Semitism and allowed the former to escape censure for some of her more egregious hatemongering.

Famously, Pelosi allowed herself to be photographed with Omar and AOC for the cover of Rolling Stone magazine. That confirmed their status as party rock stars shortly after Omar accused Jews of buying Congress to support Israel with her "It's all about the Benjamins" comment. But getting pushed around over budget maneuvering, which is the essence of running the House of Representatives, is quite another thing. Allowing the radicals to win on Iron Dome would be the end of any hope that the elderly odd couple running the House could maintain even the semblance of party discipline on any issue.

So rather than wait to push through Iron Dome funding, Hoyer decided not to let the anti-Israel faction have any time to enjoy their victory. He rushed legislation to the floor and made it clear to his members that they opposed this measure at their peril.

The result was exactly what Pelosi and Hoyer intended. Even many of those who are open foes of Israel got the message and, contrary to the indications that led to the budget debacle earlier in the week, most of them flipped and voted for the Iron Dome funding with even AOC and Rep. Hank Johnson (D-Ga.), another vicious Jew-hater who has referred to Israelis as "cockroaches," voting "present."

The final result in which the measure passed by a margin of 420-9, with only eight leftist Democrats and one Republican (Rep. Thomas Massie of Kentucky, a libertarian who votes "no" on all foreign aid and just about any other measure funding government activities) opposed, was a personal triumph for Hoyer and Pelosi.

During the course of the debate on the House floor, there was even a rare moment of verbal courage on the part of one Democrat regarding some of his colleagues. After Tlaib called Israel “a violent apartheid system,” Rep. Ted Deutsch (D-Fla.) called her out, rightly asserting that she was not telling the truth about an American ally. Even more to the point, he correctly noted that those like Tlaib, who think that one Jewish state on the planet was one too many, were engaging in “anti-Semitism.”

That’s exactly what we’ve needed to hear from Pelosi or from President Joe Biden, who egregiously praised Tlaib earlier this year as a “fighter” and promised to keep her Palestinian relatives safe from the Israelis rather than denounce her, as he should have, as a purveyor of Jew-hatred and lies about the Jewish state.

Deutsch’s speech didn’t get as much attention as the pictures of AOC weeping on the House floor. Taking pleasure in another’s pain isn’t nice. AOC, however, is a vicious political bully, as well as a hypocrite who flaunts her undeserved celebrity (the champion of socialism who also makes appearances at gatherings of the mega-wealthy, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute Gala while proclaiming her intention to “tax the rich”) in the most unseemly manner. The sight of her crying over getting outmaneuvered brings to mind Oscar Wilde’s wisecrack about the demise of one of Charles Dickens’ most pitiable characters: “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing.”

But any schadenfreude over her discomfort notwithstanding, AOC’s vulnerability to pressure was curious. Some initially saw her switch in voting from “no” to “present” as an indication that she was worried about losing liberal Jewish voters in a future primary challenge to Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer or in holding her seat after redistricting. But that theory was exploded a day later when she issued a public apology for not voting against Iron Dome, reassuring progressives and the rest of the party base that she shared their antipathy for the Jewish state and its right to self-defense. Not

unreasonably, she thinks being labeled as insufficiently anti-Israel is a greater threat to her political future in the Democratic Party than being seen as a moderate on the issue.

Yet it was telling that The New York Times, which has increasingly welcomed anti-Zionist voices on their opinion pages as well as allowing them to color their news coverage, sympathized with AOC. In the first version of the article about her decision, it said that she and other liberals were subjected to intolerable pressure from the “still powerful pro-Israel voices in their party, such as influential lobbyists and rabbis.” That line was subsequently deleted from the article without noting the change in violation of the Times’ own policies. But the casual slur, as well as the claim in the article that Hoyer was acting at the behest of the Israeli government, shows how willing the flagship of liberal journalism is to promote anti-Semitic narratives.

For now, the aged leaders of the Democrats are still in charge, and that has to be frustrating for AOC and the Times. Yet the problem is not just the ability of radicals to gain so much attention and applause even when they fail but what happens after Pelosi, Hoyer and Schumer (not to mention Biden) are gone from the scene.

It’s by no means clear who will replace them as Democratic leaders. Indeed, one likely pro-Israel successor to Pelosi, former Rep. Joe Crowley (D-N.Y.), was ousted by AOC in 2018. One would like to think that relative moderates and supporters of Israel like Deutsch are the future of the Democratic Party. But until he is invited on nighttime comedy shows to repeat his denunciation of the hate exhibited by “The Squad”—something that is about as likely as an invitation to former President Donald Trump—we’re entitled to wonder whether Thursday’s victory for pro-Israel Democrats is not so much an indication of their continued strength as a last hurrah for a faction that may be on its way out.

Mr. Tobin is editor in chief of JNS—Jewish News Syndicate.

At Risk of Arrest, Prominent Iraqis Call for Peace with Israel

By Lazar Berman

timesofisrael.com

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“We can live under the repression of terrorism or we can die with courage.”

It is both necessary and inevitable that Iraq recognize Israel and join the Abraham Accords, Sahar Karim al-Ta’i, a senior official in Iraq’s Ministry of Culture, has told The Times of Israel in an interview.

Ta’i publicly expressed her views on Friday at a conference in Iraqi Kurdistan, in front of hundreds of Iraqi activists and tribal leaders who publicly backed peace with Israel. During her speech, she discussed the expulsion of the country’s Jews, the vast majority of whom fled Iraq for Israel amid rising persecution following the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948.

“They looked to Iraq, and are still looking to her,

waiting for the eyes of their proverbial mother to show affection for her lost children,” she said. “They are still waiting for the moment when Israel is recognized by Iraq as their country and that of their brethren who share the country with them.”

Over 300 Iraqi tribal leaders and activists congregated in Erbil on Friday to call for normalization with Israel. The conference, organized by the New York-based Center for Peace Communications, caused a media firestorm in Iraq, with the country’s president attacking the gathering as “illegal.”

“Erbil must prevent these Zionist terrorist meetings. If not, the government must arrest all the participants,” said

prominent Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in response to Friday's conference.

Ta'i, a Baghdad native who is currently senior research director at the Culture Ministry, was recently a prominent contender for a ministerial position. How did a veteran Iraqi official come to publicly back peace with Israel, a country with which Iraq is still officially at war?

It started with her parents, Ta'i told The Times of Israel just ahead of Friday's conference. "I was raised in a family that instilled in us the principle of freedom of expression and freedom of conscience, that we should say what we feel and what we believe," she said.

Though she lost her father as a child, she remembers him talking about his close friend, a successful Jewish businessman named Sassoon, who was forced to flee Iraq.

The friend offered Ta'i's father his property instead of letting the government confiscate it. But her father refused to take what his friend had worked hard to acquire.

"I don't believe this is the end of our friendship," her father told his friend, according to Ta'i.

Ta'i grew up in an Iraq dominated by notorious dictator Saddam Hussein, who turned the country into one of the world's most unfree states. But Ta'i, who often listened to foreign radio broadcasts, found out about the Holocaust from a French Middle East radio service — at a time when the Nazi genocide was a taboo subject in Iraq.

"I'll never forget the time I first heard about the crime of the Holocaust, it brought me to tears," she said.

Studying philosophy in college, she was particularly influenced by Jewish-American philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, who wrote the landmark work, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions."

She and her late brother, a victim of terrorism, also developed a deep love for classical Iraqi Jewish vocalists.

Now that the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have agreed to normalize relations with Israel, Ta'i decided the time had come for Iraq as well.



Dr. Sahar al-Ta'i, an Iraqi advocate of normalizing ties with Israel, speaks at a peace conference in Erbil, Kurdistan, on Friday, September 24, 2021. (Screenshot)

"To pluck a ripe fruit, first you have to plant a seed, you have to water it, you have to wait for it to grow, then the flowers bloom, and then you know the fruit is coming," she said. "The tree is big, and the flowers are already blooming, and soon we will pick the fruit of our labor."

She also pointed to the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for her public advocacy. "Coronavirus created an opportunity," she said. "All of us are preoccupied with the same issues. Finally something happened that forced people to stop thinking about war, and start thinking about saving lives."

Ta'i insisted that she was not afraid of any consequences

for her personal safety.

"It is precisely because of these elements — terrorism, violence — that [it is] necessary to take a decisive step," she stressed. "My family was not altogether relaxed about it, they worried about me, there are dangers to expressing these kinds of ideas, yet nonetheless this is my conviction and this is my decision."

"We can live under the repression of terrorism or we can die with courage," she said.

Ta'i believes that her advocacy, and that of her colleagues in the Erbil conference, will ultimately influence Iraqi policy.

"Certainly if a leadership figure should see a civilian, a woman in a country like Iraq, communicating this message with this boldness in front of the world, then surely those who are stronger, living within fortified walls, should be even more bold," she said.

"Particularly today when there is the model of the UAE taking this type of very bold decision, then why should they not embrace this model that is now available?"

And if Iraq's leaders do not act, Ta'i is ready to keep the pressure on.

"We will bring it out through public activism, things like the statements you are about to see, and more things of that nature, until that result is achieved," she said..

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If you see something, send something" –editor