

The new predators: Why drones are becoming Iran's weapons of choice

By The Economist Newspaper

economist.com

November 10, 2021

The attempt to kill Iraq's prime minister highlights how Iran's unmanned aerial vehicles are changing the military balance in the Middle East.

Using drones to assassinate people has long been the preserve of the most advanced armed forces, such as America's and Israel's. But the attempt on November 7th to kill Iraq's prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, was a dramatic demonstration of how such "precision strike" capabilities are spreading to less advanced countries and even shadowy militias.

Several of Mr Kadhimi's bodyguards were hurt when at least one drone hit his home in the protected "Green Zone" of Baghdad (more drones may have been shot down). The prime minister survived and, apparently nursing a wounded wrist, soon appeared on television to denounce the "cowardly" attack.

The hit was so rudimentary—apparently involving quadcopters of the sort that can be bought by hobbyists and rigged with small bombs—that it could have been staged by any one of Iraq's many armed groups. "If you can deliver pizza with a drone, you can drop a grenade," says James Lewis of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a think-tank in Washington.

Yet suspicion immediately fell on Iran and its proxies, for two reasons. The first is that Fatah, the political arm of Shia militias aligned with Iran, is furious at losing most of its seats in Iraq's election last month. Loyalists have staged unruly protests and on Friday attempted to burst into the Green Zone. The following day, at the funeral of a protester killed by security forces, militia leaders vowed revenge against Mr Kadhimi. "The blood of martyrs will hold you accountable," one said. That night the drone attack took place.

The second reason is that Iran has become the most assiduous provider of drone and other military technology to its proxies and friends, not only in Iraq but also in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. Drones are fast becoming Iran's favoured weapon of asymmetric warfare, unnerving its enemies and threatening to change the balance of power in the region. These are not the sophisticated machines operated by America, such as the Predator and the Reaper. Nor are they akin to the Israeli and Turkish combat drones that allowed Azerbaijan to defeat Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh last year.

Instead, they are often "craptastic" knock-off versions, made with commercially available components, explains Aaron Stein of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. But Iran is also making improvements, not

least by reverse-engineering captured drones, such as America's stealthy RQ-170.

Lacking a modern air force—Iran's jets date to the time of the Shah before his overthrow in 1979—the clerical regime has invested heavily in ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones. Like unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from advanced countries, Iranian ones are used for both surveillance and strikes (not least against ships). Unlike them, Iranian UAVs do not usually carry precision-guided munitions. Instead the drone itself is the guided bomb, flying into the target and detonating like a robotic kamikaze. Iran dispenses with the satellite links that allow Western forces to control drones from the other side of the world. Instead its UAVs are typically operated through line-of-sight radio controls, or can guide themselves with GPS devices of the sort used for retail sat-nav machines.

Iran achieves great range by distributing UAVs (or the techniques to make them) to its allies across the Middle East, thereby threatening targets from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. The drones are often delivered in kits and assembled locally with minimal help from Iran, notes Mr Stein. "These drones allow Iran to orchestrate attacks while maintaining deniability and ambiguity," says an Israeli military official.

The simplicity belies the threat that the drones pose. Last month an American outpost in Tanf in Syria was hit by five GPS-guided drones. Nobody was hurt—the Americans apparently had warning and got out of harm's way—but American officials later blamed Iran and the Biden administration imposed sanctions on people and firms associated with the drone programme.

"We no longer have air superiority in the theatre," laments a senior American military source, "Americans got used to owning the skies." What is more, drones are exposing the vulnerability of vital installations across the region. In 2019 several drones struck Saudi Arabia's oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, interrupting about half of the country's oil output for a time. The Houthi militia in Yemen, which is allied to Iran and has been fighting against a Saudi-led coalition since 2015, claimed responsibility. But Western military sources believe the drones were dispatched from Iraq, or perhaps even from Iran.

Israel, for its part, has been grappling with drones since 2004, when an Iranian-made drone flew over the country without being intercepted. Hizbullah, a Shia militia, later broadcast footage of the event. Since then Israel has intercepted about a dozen drones—including one that appeared to be heading for Israel's nuclear reactor

in Dimona in 2012. It also destroyed, via air strikes, Iranian drones and their control systems on the ground in Syria in 2018.

As the country that pioneered the use of disposable and suicide drones to destroy Arab air defences in the 1970s and 1980s, Israel is among those working hardest to defend against them. It has resorted to everything from F-16 fighters to the Iron Dome anti-rocket system, but is looking for a better response. Drones can be hard to detect because they are often small, fly low and slowly, and might not broadcast any signals. They “get lost in the clutter”, notes an official at Israel Aerospace Industries, a

state-owned firm that has developed anti-drone systems. “Hard kills” (ie, shooting down the drones) can cause damage on the ground, particularly in built-up areas; jamming radio and GPS signals disrupt civilian life; and lasers-based systems are still in development. “Drone defence is an expensive business as countries have a large number of facilities to protect,” says the official. He points to the spread of 5G mobile-phone networks that might give future attackers the option of controlling drones remotely, akin to having satellite links. “It’s a crazy arms race because the technological possibilities for drone use continue to increase.

Conflict in the Horn of Africa Should Worry Israel

By Eyal Zisser

israelhayom.com

November 14, 2021

The Ethiopian civil war, and a possible war between two of Jerusalem’s African allies.

There has been growing belief and concern over the past year that a military conflagration could engulf the Horn of Africa, including Eritrea and Sudan. In Egypt, the army has already begun making preparations, and Cairo has even warned that if Ethiopia follows through with its plans to open the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (the al-Nahda Dam), which would cut off the Nile River's water flow to Sudan and then Egypt downstream – it will have no choice but to respond with force and defend its water resources, which it considers an existential matter.

Ultimately, war has already erupted in Ethiopia. It isn't a head-on collision between Cairo and Addis Ababa, rather a domestic fight between the Ethiopian government and the Tigrayan ethnic minority in the country's north. Similar to the Alawites who currently hold power in Syria, although the Tigrayans comprise just 6% of Ethiopia's population of 100 million, they ruled Ethiopia until 2018, when the current government, led by Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy, seized power and disenfranchised them.

Ethiopia is not an artificial country whose borders were drawn up by clerks in London or Paris irrespective of the realities on the ground. Therefore, one cannot blame the West, as is often customary these days, for their current predicament. Their calamity is the doing of the country's leaders, who failed to create a national identity unifying the various ethnic groups. Ethiopia is fractured between the Oromo people, who represent about one-quarter of the population and live in the country's center and south; the Amharas, who comprise some 20% of the population; and finally the Tigrayans. These groups are mired in constant strife that occasionally turns violent. At least one war has already been decided – after Ethiopia

recognized Eritrea's independence and withdrew its forces from its territory. Abiy received a Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for that initiative. Other tensions and conflicts, however, have remained unresolved.

It's possible the government in Addis Ababa will survive, but it's clear that the country once seen as the "economic miracle" of Africa is descending into chaos, the price for which its people are now being forced to pay. After all, even in good times, there was an inexplicable gap between the country's rich center and other regions, where people were dying of starvation without water to feed their herds and cultivate their crops.

Despite the geographical distance, Israel is finding itself involved in the war in Ethiopia. First, due to the Falash Mura community, who have ties to Judaism and want to immigrate to Israel. The realities of civil war, as we have seen play out in other parts of the world, motivate many people to suddenly rediscover the Jewish roots – putting Israel in a complicated position. Second, because of Ethiopia's strategic location along the Red Sea: on one side of the sea Iran is establishing a menacing military presence in Yemen; on the other, meanwhile, Israel has managed to forge alliances with Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, and recently Sudan as well. All of this is now in jeopardy due to civil wars and internal conflicts afflicting these countries. Finally, it's worth bearing in mind that although the rising flames between Cairo and Addis Ababa threatened to consume Israel, both countries asked the Jewish state for help and support.

Restoring peace and stability to Ethiopia is a supreme interest for the country's own people, its neighbors in Africa, and for far-flung Israel.

Prof. Zisser is a lecturer in the Middle East History Department at Tel Aviv University.

Iran Is Extending Its Influence in Africa

By Danny Citrinowicz and Jason M. Brodsky

19fortyfive.com

November 5, 2021

And selling drones to Ethiopia.

For those who follow Iran's activity in Africa, the information coming from Addis Ababa regarding the possible use of Iranian drones amid Ethiopia's new

military campaign against the Tigray is not surprising. According to some reports in October, as many as 50 cargo flights bearing arms have landed in Ethiopia from the United Arab Emirates and Iran over a period of two

months. The US Treasury Department confirmed recently that Iran's Quds Force has been proliferating such drones for use in Ethiopia.

Historically, Iran's bid for influence on the African continent since the 1979 Islamic Revolution has been an uphill struggle as Tehran had no significant historical footprint in Africa due to the predominance of Sunni and Sufi forms of Islam among African Muslims. Nevertheless, Iran has created an infrastructure of mosques, cultural centers, charitable networks, and educational institutions which have served to spread its revolutionary ethos to Africa.

Africa has been designated as one of the main targets for Tehran as it looks to expand its influence beyond the Middle East. The presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13) was a turning point in Iran's engagement on the continent, as Tehran deepened its ties with African countries, particularly sub-Saharan ones. But African countries, due to pressure from the West, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, demonstrated a strong disinclination to expand their strategic ties with Iran. This illustrates the gap between Africa's real potential for Iran and what Tehran envisions.

Ebrahim Raisi's ascendance as president indicates that the Iranian establishment is seeking to refresh the Africa playbook it adopted under the Ahmadinejad administration. Unlike President Hassan Rouhani whose administration sought to use the Iran nuclear deal as the centerpiece of efforts to deepen ties with the West, Raisi, along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), are likely to focus more time on exporting the Islamic Revolution in Africa. Moreover, Iran's new Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian used to serve as the deputy foreign minister for Arab and African Affairs, and he is, as his president, eager to promote these relations.

On top of that dynamic, the Iranian system may look to Africa as a place to achieve its strategic goals—particularly the implementation of a resistance economy to neutralize sanctions—and signal to the international and particularly domestic audiences that it has alternatives. This is connected to Tehran's own pivot to Asia, as the regime will try to minimize any Iranian dependence on the West.

As in the Ethiopian case, Iran is expected to increase its arms sales to Africa, especially after the expiration of the arms embargo under UN Security Council Resolution 2231. It will use such practices as a platform to expand its influence on the continent. Ethiopia is probably not the only country that is an export market for the Iranian military industry—Iranian arms have been spotted in Somalia as well. Iran is also likely to increase the number of high-ranking officials visiting Africa and will try to promote economic projects to further bypass sanctions imposed by the United States. It is also possible that both Tehran and Beijing will work together to minimize US influence in Africa.

Iran's pivot to Africa is not just economic in nature.

Tehran sees the continent as a launchpad for targeting US and Israeli interests. Increased Iranian operations in Africa started after the death of former IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. In January 2020, the head of US Africa Command told Congress that intelligence reports indicated Iran was planning attacks on Americans in Africa to avenge Soleimani's demise. This threat burst into the public spotlight in September 2020, with news that Iran was weighing a plot to assassinate the then US ambassador to South Africa Lana Marks. Indeed, as of April 2021, US Africa Command warned that "Iran is increasingly active on the continent."

Earlier this year came news that Ethiopia's intelligence agency had thwarted an Iranian terrorist cell casing the embassy of the United Arab Emirates there, having "activated a sleeper cell in Addis Ababa last fall with orders to gather intelligence also on the embassies of the United States and Israel," according to *The New York Times*. Another cohort was seeking to target the Emirati embassy in Sudan. *The Economist* last year also reported, citing a western intelligence source, that police in Niger arrested an operative who admitted working for the IRGC's Quds Force Unit 400, having been recruited during a pilgrimage to Iran, where he also received arms training. He built networks in the Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Eritrea, Gambia, Sudan, and South Sudan, and coupled this activity with attempts to "seek mining licenses in the CAR and Niger to help offset the impact of American sanctions on Iran and to fund covert operations," according to *The Economist*. Tehran may seek to employ this modus operandi—of arms exports and sanctions neutralization coupled with terror—more aggressively in the coming years.

Thus, the Iranian leadership, especially with the elevation of Ebrahim Raisi as president, will seek to increase its footprint in Africa—through economic and military partnerships, and with plots to attack US interests. This is part of the new policy being implemented by the Raisi administration, especially as the Iranian system seeks to pivot to non-western countries. In the eyes of Tehran, this approach is an important tool in the Iranian toolkit aiming to counter western dominance using an African strategic depth.

Iran will probably duplicate the way it works in the Middle East in Africa. Meaning, it will work with local forces and use them as proxies or partners to promote Iranian interests, like the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) or the Polisario in Western Sahara. There is also a possibility that Iran will try to prevent other countries in Africa from improving their relations with Israel, by arming and funding insurgent movements.

It will be imperative for the United States to work closely with its partners in Africa to block any Iranian attempt to fulfill its interests and severely punish those countries cooperating with Tehran. Expanding the Abraham Accords to include more countries in Africa—aside from Morocco and Sudan—like Niger will be

important in this regard. By doing so, the Biden administration and Israel can work together to thwart Iranian influence on the continent.

Should the U.S. Want the Taliban to Succeed?

By Yaroslav Trofimov

wsj.com

November 12, 2021

Keeping Afghanistan from becoming a humanitarian crisis and an exporter of terrorism may require making uncomfortable choices.

In January 2008, Taliban suicide bombers and gunmen stormed Kabul's luxury Serena Hotel. Six people were killed, including a Norwegian reporter and an American citizen. The Federal Bureau of Investigation offered a \$10 million bounty for the Taliban's deputy leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who it believes orchestrated the attack.

In September 2021, two weeks after the last American troops left Afghanistan, Mr. Haqqani's brother Anas—a former inmate of the notorious Bagram detention facility—came to the Serena Hotel for a chat with a handful of Western reporters. We were his friends, he told us with an amiable smile, and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan desired good relations with all nations, including the U.S. Sirajuddin was now the country's interior minister and had just met top United Nations officials to assure them they could safely travel anywhere.

America's longest war—a conflict that killed 2,465 American troops and many times more Afghan civilians and combatants—has ended. The Taliban have won, their Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has been fully restored and, unlike in the 1990s, it is now in control of all 34 of the country's provinces.

For the U.S. and its allies, who fought for 20 years to prevent just this outcome, Afghanistan's new reality creates a fundamental policy dilemma: Do the Western democracies want the new Taliban regime to fail or succeed?

Even after the August military withdrawal and the closure of Western embassies in Kabul, these nations retain significant influence over Afghanistan's future direction. Their actions—and inaction—are bound to have far-reaching implications, including for their own security.

While no country has formally recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, all major powers—including the U.S.—continue to have diplomatic contacts with Taliban representatives. Those talks are gaining new urgency as Afghanistan, crippled by American sanctions and asset freezes, hurtles toward a humanitarian catastrophe this winter.

The calculations are complex. Moves to bolster the Taliban, even if they stop well short of diplomatic recognition, risk inspiring other radical Islamist movements in the Middle East and elsewhere. That is especially so because some key leaders of the new regime in Kabul, which has harshly restricted women's rights, marginalized ethnic minorities and cracked down on

Mr. Citrinowicz is a senior research fellow at the Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy in Israel. Mr. Brodsky is policy director at United Against Nuclear Iran.

dissent, have longstanding ties to al Qaeda and are designated as global terrorists by the U.S.

Undermining the new Kabul administration through economic and diplomatic isolation, however, could spark a refugee crisis in Europe comparable with the 2015 exodus from Syria—and empower the Taliban's only significant armed rival, the far more extreme Islamic State, which wants to establish a world-wide caliphate through jihadist conquest. Islamic State has already intensified attacks against the Taliban and members of the Shi'ite minority in recent weeks.

“Ultimately the Taliban government cannot be stable without an inclusive political settlement, but for now the choice is either the Taliban or a breakdown, with ISIS emerging,” said Barnett Rubin, a senior fellow at New York University's Center on International Cooperation who served as a senior State Department adviser on Afghanistan. “There is no other alternative.”

Anti-Taliban Afghan politicians who hope for Western support, and who are backed by some Republican lawmakers in the U.S., say that any steps to accommodate the Taliban are dangerously misguided. “Taliban and ISIS are two sides of the same coin,” said Ahmad Wali Massoud, a brother of late anti-Taliban commander Ahmad Shah Massoud and a leader of the so-called National Resistance Front that sought to confront the Taliban after the Aug. 15 fall of Kabul. That resistance, centered in the Panjshir valley, was largely crushed in September.

“Trying to legitimize the Taliban is a stupid and naive policy. Do they want to show the world that the Taliban are a better terrorist and ISIS is a bad terrorist?” wondered Mr. Massoud, a former Afghan ambassador to London. “Terrorists are terrorists. They kill.”

Preventing terrorist movements like al Qaeda from using Afghanistan once again to threaten the U.S. and allies was the Taliban's key commitment under last year's Doha agreements with the Trump administration, which paved the way for American military withdrawal. Taliban leaders say they won't waver from that obligation even now that all foreign forces are gone.

“We have made a promise, and we will stick to it,” the Taliban's chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in an interview in Kabul this month. “The weakening of the Afghan government is not beneficial to anyone, neither to the Afghans nor to the Americans. The countries that were involved in the war here, which led to the country's destruction, now have an additional responsibility to rebuild the ruins together with us. We extend our hand of friendship to them.”

A senior Biden administration official said that while it is clear that there is no love lost between the Taliban and Islamic State, the U.S. doesn't have full clarity at present about the exact nature of the Taliban's "complicated" relationship with al Qaeda. One encouraging sign, the official added, is that "we are not yet seeing what a lot of people worried might happen, a rapid influx of foreign fighters into Afghanistan."

Embarrassment about the Taliban's sudden military triumph in August, and subsequent political recriminations, are complicating the Afghanistan policy debate in Washington and other Western capitals. "There is so much history here, with the wounds, the humiliation, with our own mistakes, with our total failure to stabilize that country," a senior European official said. "You cannot expect the West to act totally coldhearted and rational without taking the recent 20 years into account."

The political polarization in the U.S., where President Biden's handling of the Afghanistan withdrawal has galvanized Republican opposition, makes it particularly difficult for Washington to decide how to engage with Afghanistan going forward, added NYU's Mr. Rubin. "They don't have the capacity to overthrow the Taliban," he said. "And it is politically impossible for them to help the Taliban succeed."

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking. Washington's decision in August to freeze more than \$9 billion in Afghan central-bank assets, coupled with American sanctions that cut off the country from the global financial system, has already caused an economic meltdown. Doctors, teachers and other government employees haven't been paid for months. Even though the U.S. has exempted humanitarian assistance from the sanctions regime, banks worldwide remain afraid of running afoul of complex U.S. regulations, and most have preferred to cut off all dealings with Afghanistan. As a result, even the United Nations and its agencies have trouble getting money into Afghanistan to pay their own local staff, U.N. officials say.

With the worst drought in decades adding to Afghanistan's woes, large parts of the country risk mass starvation in coming months, the U.N. has warned. Already, more than half the country's population—a record 22.8 million people—face acute food insecurity, according to the U.N.'s World Food Program.

"I am terrified for this country, of where it could possibly go if we can't resuscitate the economy," said Mary-Ellen McGroarty, Afghanistan representative and country director for the WFP. "Desperate people make desperate decisions. How much more stress can people take?"

At a WFP food distribution center in Karte Seh, which used to be one of the most prosperous parts of Kabul, former members of the middle class lined up recently to receive rations of wheat flour, pulses and vegetable oil—for many of them, now the only source of food. "Everyone is upset and miserable here. This is the only

way we can survive," said Enjila, a 30-year-old employee of Azizi Bank who hasn't been paid for months—and who is the sole provider for her husband, paralyzed after a stroke five years ago, and their six children.

Standing in a separate men's line nearby, tailor Syed Mohammad Aga, 54, said he is asking for food aid for the first time because his business of making women's dresses has dwindled under Taliban rule. "Women are afraid to come to the shop. The situation is really bad," he said. "Since the beginning of the Emirate, I have not worked a single day," added Mohammad Ismail, a 46-year-old construction worker in the same line.

Some senior Taliban commanders say they aren't particularly alarmed by this misery. "Yes, there will be poverty, but it is worth it. The control of our home is finally in our own hands," said Hajji Qari Osman Ibrahim, head of the Taliban's central region military commission, which oversees Kabul and neighboring provinces. "We're not bothered that the foreigners are not helping us. We are happy that we can finally decide by ourselves, even if it means having to live just on water and bread."

A senior Biden administration official said that, while Washington is helping contribute to humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan, "the likelihood of staving off a more severe crisis is not particularly high."

Financial sanctions, asset freezes and the withholding of international recognition from the Taliban's new regime in Kabul all aim to pressure the group to become more moderate, to respect women's rights and to establish a more inclusive administration, he said. Those issues, as well as counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and the departure of Afghans who assisted the U.S. and its allies, are the focus of continuing diplomatic contacts between Western nations and the Taliban in Qatar.

"There are things that we have the ability to do that they want. We haven't rushed into doing a lot of those things," the senior Biden administration official said. "If they want to get things from us, they are going to have to demonstrate that they are not going to govern the way they did in the 1990s, and the jury is still out."

Since taking power in August, Afghanistan's new rulers have indeed imposed an authoritarian system, dismantling the democratic institutions of the fallen Afghan republic and dismissing calls for elections. Despite past promises of creating an inclusive government, the new administration in Kabul is made up almost exclusively of ethnic Pashtun Taliban clerics. Protests, particularly by women's activists, have been dispersed by force and outlawed. Some Afghan journalists who attempted to cover the demonstrations were briefly detained and severely beaten.

The Taliban haven't reopened government-run secondary schools for girls in most provinces, although they promise to do so in the future. Nor have they allowed women to return to work in most government offices,

though they pledge to do so once what they consider appropriate gender-segregation arrangements are in place.

Yet, despite all these new curbs on civil liberties, the Taliban so far haven't enforced the kind of draconian, obscurantist rules that earned them international condemnation during their previous time in power. Arguably, many—if not most—governments in the region have comparable or worse human-rights records.

When the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996, they started off by torturing to death, mutilating and then publicly hanging former President Mohammad Najibullah. By contrast, after taking Kabul this past Aug. 15, Taliban leaders proclaimed an amnesty for members of the former government and security services and visited former President Hamid Karzai in his home to provide security guarantees.

While hundreds of former military and intelligence officers have been assassinated across the country since August, many of these killings appear to be private vendettas—sometimes carried out by Islamic State—rather than government policy. So far, there is no evidence that Afghanistan is experiencing the kind of blanket arrests and reprisals that followed the Communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975—or the mass killings that American-backed Afghan warlords perpetrated after defeating the Taliban in 2001. Civil servants of the former government have been asked to return to their jobs.

Though the Taliban complain that the Western-promoted exodus of educated elites undermines prospects for an economic recovery, they also continue allowing Afghans who used to work for the U.S. and allies to trickle out of the country, mostly on flights to Qatar.

Unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban haven't imposed mandatory beards, formally banned music or prohibited women from leaving home. Private TV stations continue broadcasting, and access to the internet and social media, including via mobile broadband, remains uncensored. Primary schools for girls operate across the country. The once fearsome religious police for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, whose members used to enforce strict Taliban rules with beatings and arrests, possesses only advisory powers—at least for now.

At Kabul's Dasht-e-Barchi hospital, which was attacked by Islamic State gunmen last year because most of the patients are members of the Shiite Hazara minority, the new Taliban overseer, Hussain Gul, pointed out that all of the 23 women doctors and other medical staff are working as usual. "The international community should help us. The requirements that they wanted us to meet are all being met now," he said. "None of the female workers here have been fired—it shows inclusivity. I'm the only new person

here."

Because of the funding crunch, the 100-bed hospital lacks most medication except basic painkillers, and its maternity ward doesn't have an anesthesiologist or operating theater anymore. Pregnant women are turned away, in hopes that another hospital could offer adequate treatment, if any complications are likely, said gynecologist Manija Ramzi. The Taliban, so far, haven't interfered with her work, she said. Yet, she added: "In the previous time, when the Taliban were in Kabul for five years, we've all had bad experiences—which is why we are still so afraid of them."

Despite their desire for international recognition and aid, the Taliban say that they won't compromise on the movement's core principles to accommodate the U.S. "The international community cannot change the policy of the Islamic Emirate by putting pressure on it," said Akef Muhajir, the spokesman of the new Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, which has taken over the former Afghan republic's ministry of women's affairs. "They couldn't do it in 20 years of bombardments, when they were hitting our schools, mosques, wedding parties and funerals. They won't succeed now, either."

In the nearly three months since Kabul's fall, the diplomatic contacts of the U.S. and other Western nations with the Taliban, under way in Doha, Qatar, haven't generated much progress. "The two sides are sticking to their own respective positions. We haven't seen any flexibility, and therefore we continue to see the deterioration of the situation on the ground," said Mansoor Ahmad Khan, the Pakistani ambassador in Kabul. Pakistan, along with China, Russia, Iran and Turkey, is one of the few major nations that have kept their embassies open after the Taliban takeover.

The Taliban, however, aren't a monolithic movement, and the West is missing an opportunity to encourage the more moderate parts of the movement, said Faiz Zaland, a professor at Kabul University who has chosen to remain in the city and work with the country's new rulers. Now that the Taliban have reopened all girls' schools in northern Afghan provinces like Balkh, Kunduz and Jowzjan, Western nations should respond by paying teachers' salaries in those parts of the country, he said.

"Why are you not setting an example? If the Taliban cooperate, we cooperate, so at least the Taliban can learn," he said. "Within the Taliban leadership, there are very extreme people. The revenge by the U.S. and the EU is providing more weight to them, is supporting these extremists because they can now say that these foreigners, these infidels, these non-Muslims can never be friends."

An Orthodox minister and his hypocritical ultra-Orthodox critics

By David Horovitz

timesofisrael.com

November 11, 2021

Matan Kahana's reforms would bring ultra-Orthodox men into the workforce earlier, remake kashrut,

bolster conversion – all according to halacha. Haredi leaders should be delighted.

Ultra-Orthodox leaders, emphatically including politicians, should be rushing to embrace Israel's new minister for religious services.

A Shabbat-observant, kashrut-keeping, thoroughly Orthodox Jew, Matan Kahana's core mission, as he set out in an interview published Tuesday in *The Times of Israel*, is to bolster Israel's Jewish identity, which he argues has been diluted over the decades.

Kahana speaks with forlorn longing for the early years of the state, for example, when shops and places of entertainment were closed on Shabbat; while he stresses that it is none of his business what Israelis do inside their homes on their day of rest, he argues that the Sabbath in the Jewish state should have a palpably different character, in tune with the only Judaism he considers authentic: halachic Judaism.

Specifically as regards the interests of the ultra-Orthodox community, his appointment portends a stream of beneficial reforms. Most importantly, he and his government are moving to lower the age at which ultra-Orthodox males who have avoided IDF service in order to study Torah full-time can enter the workforce, initially to 21. As things stand, that number is 24, and 24-year-old ultra-Orthodox men tend to be married with children, which means it is hard for them to then get the kind of education that enables them to secure reasonably paid and fulfilling work, condemning many of them to lives of relative poverty.

Kahana and the government acknowledge that this reform may not be fair to non-ultra-Orthodox Israelis, who carry the burden of military service. But they argue credibly that it is wise — that, in time, ultra-Orthodox men entering the workforce at a younger age, and appreciating the benefits, will encourage their younger siblings and their sons to consider both military service and studying a core curriculum, en route to a better life workwise and economically.

The process Kahana has in mind eschews coercion; it also relies on creating IDF frameworks in which ultra-Orthodox recruits can serve without compromising their lifestyle.

Kahana's other reforms include the privatization of kashrut supervision, which he argues will benefit ultra-Orthodox kashrut authorities, since food manufacturers will seek out the most stringent supervision in order to ensure that their products are deemed kosher enough for all.

He also wants to encourage a more welcoming approach to would-be converts to Judaism who are sincere about wanting to join the Jewish people — helping the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who are Jewish enough to live here under the terms of the Law of Return but who are not halachically Jewish, his key point being that this new encouragement must not come at the expense of stringent observance of the halacha.

He is no advocate of Reform and Conservative

Judaism, seeing no significantly enhanced role in Israel for the non-Orthodox streams, but neither is he adversarial — encouraging both aliyah and the thriving of Diaspora Jewry, and backing the revival of the so-called Western Wall compromise

A veritable Orthodox revolutionary, Kahana has a great more on his agenda, which is why we ran our interview with him at such length.

He is no advocate of Reform and Conservative Judaism, seeing no significantly enhanced role in Israel for the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism. But neither is he adversarial, encouraging both aliyah and the thriving of Diaspora Jewry, and backing the revival of the so-called Western Wall compromise, which would formalize the pluralistic prayer pavilion at the Wall and provide an official role in its oversight to leaders of non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.

Rather, he avowedly regards Orthodox Judaism as the rightly dominant approach to the faith in the public sphere of the Jewish state. Again, nothing but good news for the ultra-Orthodox community.

And yet, far from being embraced, Matan Kahana is routinely denounced by ultra-Orthodox politicians, who have found themselves atypically consigned to the opposition benches after so many years expertly utilizing their balance-of-power status between the right-wing and left-wing blocs to determine the nature of Jewish life in the Israeli public sphere.

The members of United Torah Judaism and Shas have spent the past months, as the new coalition took shape and then took office, attempting to depict Kahana, along with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and their wildly diverse coalition government, as constituting a grave threat to Jewish life in Israel, by which they mean their vision of Orthodox Jewish life.

In fact, the revolution Kahana is seeking to advance faithfully reflects the interests of authentic Orthodox Judaism. Notably, it upholds centuries of Orthodox rabbinical wisdom highlighting the imperative for adherents of the faith to provide financially for their families — that is, to work for a living — and to find time alongside that work for Torah study, with the best and the brightest, but only the best and the brightest, subsidized by the rest of the community to be able to study full-time.

Ultra-Orthodox leaders know all about these rabbinical teachings. The problem is that if their community indeed enters the workforce more fully, it will not need ultra-Orthodox politicians, and the rabbinical leaders behind them, to leverage particular financial and social benefits from the government on their behalf; theirs will no longer be a widely impoverished constituency.

It will also be a community more effectively finding its place in the wider mosaic of Israeli society. The ultra-Orthodox rabbis will lose some of their grip, and the ultra-Orthodox politicians, no longer leveraging for their captive electorate, will be redundant.

No wonder they are doing everything they can to denounce Kahana, Bennett et al as Reform Jews who, in the words of some ultra-Orthodox MKs, should take off their kippot. Kahana, like it or not, is anything but a Reform Jew. He is, rather, reclaiming Orthodoxy, in the

political arena, from the self-interested hypocrites who, at the expense of their devout community, have for decades skewed some of its traditions, rights and responsibilities in the Jewish state.

Why the King of Jordan Met with Israel's Most Influential Arab Politician

By Ron Ben-Yishai

timesofisrael.com

November 11, 2021

It strengthens his position at home, and vis-à-vis the U.S.

Jordan's King Abdullah II showed his political proficiency when he met with Ra'am leader Mansour Abbas, a member of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's ruling coalition.

The meeting last month was revealed by the Royal Palace in Amman earlier in the week.

The king had more than one good reason to invite Abbas to Jordan for a personal meeting, chief among them is a show of support for Israel's new government after Bennett signed off on it.

Abdullah backs the Bennett government not only because it does not include Benjamin Netanyahu, but because for the first time in Israel's short history, an Arab Islamist party is a legitimate part of it and is able to impact its policies.

Abbas's visit to Amman could also work to strengthen U.S. support of Jordan while the kingdom is in desperate need of economic assistance from Washington and from Jerusalem.

The monarch has also bolstered his position as the custodian of Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites by showing his support for Ra'am — a moderate Islamist force.

But there may be an internal Jordanian political motivation to the public meeting with Abbas. The palace has been facing mounting pressure over Jordan's economic crisis.

Last month's report that the king had squirreled away \$100 million in tax havens while his subjects are struggling to make ends meet has caused him a great embarrassment.

Neighboring Saudi Arabia has turned away from the king and was believed to be behind the alleged coup attempt by Abdullah's half-brother Prince Hamzah, last April.

Abdullah's main opposition comes from Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and a photo opportunity with Islamist Abbas could help defuse some of that tension.

Jordan's Bedouin tribes, devout Muslims themselves, are the main supporters of the palace but they too have much criticism of the king. The Ra'am party represents many Bedouin tribes in Israel who have family ties to tribes in Jordan and by honoring Abbas, Abdullah could hope to appease some of his critics.

This also sends out a message to Jordan's Palestinian majority, indicating that the king has not forsaken the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem or the nationalist aspirations of the Palestinian people.

Learning the Lessons of the Abraham Accords

By Robert Nicholson

wng.org

November 10, 2021

Take religion seriously.

What can a growing peace movement between Arabs and Israel teach us about productive engagement with the Islamic world? For the United States, a country reeling from its failure in Afghanistan but still called to deal with dozens of countries that represent the world's second-largest religious community, it's an important question.

The so-called "Abraham Accords," a set of loosely connected peace deals signed by Israel and five Muslim-majority countries at the end of 2020, took the world by storm, normalizing the Jewish state's relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, and Kosovo in quick succession. For a region that hadn't seen peace in a century, the announcement was an unexpected ray of light. But it hit the foreign policy establishment hard, disproving the old theory that Arab-Israeli peace was impossible without a final deal with the Palestinians. Indeed, the new approach had been successful precisely because it had broken the old rules. It offers a bold new model of diplomacy that is less conventional but more

realistic than what the United States has been trying these last 20 years.

Its first lesson is obvious: Take interests seriously. Last year's breakthrough came not because of interreligious dialogue or cross-cultural understanding. It came because of secret military and intelligence cooperation between Arabs and Israelis against the looming threat of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The goodwill came later, and that shouldn't be surprising. Peace never starts with goodwill—it produces goodwill. It starts with mutual concerns about national security, because nations can't think about peace when they feel threatened. The instinct to survive has historically been the best argument for peaceful coexistence and cooperation, and it's the duty of wise statesmen and women to harness that instinct to reduce net hostilities over time.

The second lesson is also clear: Show some respect. The United States spent two decades trying to recreate Afghanistan and Iraq in its own liberal democratic image, just as imperial Britain planted monarchies and France secular republics. The Abraham Accords take a more

modest approach, honoring the parties as they are and affirming their distinctive traditions without trying to change them. Instead of a shared creed, they preach mutual respect, recognizing a shared heritage in Abraham without demanding uniformity among his children. We often think about peace as love, but respect is the better metaphor.

The third lesson: Don't avoid religion. Even secular people in the Islamic world tend to be more religious than their Western counterparts, unapologetic in their particularism, and ready to defend faith and fatherland on pain of death. Yet the Ivy League-trained peacemaker presents himself to the region as a disinterested observer, a neutral friend of Muslims and Jews who brings no beliefs or agenda of his own. In a region where everyone belongs to some tradition, this posture looks suspicious. The expectation isn't to hide one's faith, but to profess it openly while affirming the role that religion plays in political life.

The fourth, and related, lesson: Own your biases. Donald Trump was an unlikely catalyst for peace between Jews and Arabs, but it was his extreme candor that made the whole thing possible. Unlike previous presidents, Trump didn't try to present himself as an "honest broker." He admitted what Muslims already knew: that Americans are strong supporters of Israel who feel an ardent love for Zion. Trump's awkward confession was expected to start a

world war, but it only made his call for U.S.-Arab friendship more credible. Peacemaking doesn't preclude bias; it just asks the parties to keep it in check.

The final lesson: Take what you can get. Critics complain that the Abraham Accords fail to secure full peace with the Palestinians or address the human rights violations of the parties. But in a region devastated by war, every handshake brings the temperature down one more degree, rolling back the climate of hatred and making room for a deal with the Palestinians. Of course, we should be vigilant when dealing with flawed regimes to ensure that we're never used to sanction evil, but every government is flawed, including our own. Total moral satisfaction is impossible in relations between states, and yet it is states that make war and thus to states that we must look for peace. No treaty is lasting or complete, but no treaty at all is often far worse.

The problem in Afghanistan was that we hoped for too much, believing that our power could change hearts and minds given the right intentions. The Abraham Accords offer a humbler approach better suited to the texture of the region, less complete than we would like but nevertheless responsible for increased stability and hope for millions of people. We would be wise to study its lessons—and learn from them.

Mr. Nicholson is president & exec. director of The Philos Project.

Why Palestinians Are Fleeing the Gaza Strip

By Khaled Abu Toameh

gatesstoneinstitute.org

November 15, 2021

Fallout from Hamas's misery economy.

A tragedy that recently hit the Gaza Strip has again exposed the extent of the suffering of Palestinians under the rule of the Iranian-backed group, Hamas.

The tragedy also serves as a reminder of the double standards of the international community in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, especially the obsession with Israel and the tendency to ignore any wrongdoing on the Palestinian side.

According to reports from the Gaza Strip, at least three Palestinians who fled the Hamas-controlled coastal enclave went missing, apparently after their boat capsized off the shores of Greece and Turkey. The three were among dozens of Palestinians seeking a better life away from the repression and corruption of Hamas.

One of the victims was identified as 25-year-old Anas Abu Rajileh; another was Nasrallah al-Farra.

The incident attracted extensive attention among Palestinians because of an audio recording by one of the Palestinian emigrants on the boat. In the recording -- a voice message he sent his mother in the Gaza Strip -- the young man is telling his mother that one of his friends has drowned. He asks her to notify the friend's family. "Mother," the man is heard saying, "we are drowning and the fish are eating us."

Many young people from the Gaza Strip who are able

to save or secure enough money have in recent years been fleeing to other countries through Turkey and Greece. They reportedly pay thousands of dollars in bribes to Hamas officials, Egyptian border guards and smugglers to help them leave the Gaza Strip to start a new life in Europe and other countries.

A public opinion poll conducted by Al-Aqsa University in the Gaza Strip last year showed that 51% of young people living in Gaza would willingly migrate if they were given the opportunity to do so.

More than 80% explained that the main reason they want to leave the Gaza Strip is economic factors.

Notably, the poll found that 73% of respondents believe that if Hamas and its rivals in the ruling Fatah faction, headed by Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, stopped warring with each other, the young Palestinians would not consider emigration.

Hamas and Fatah have been at war with each other since 2007. Then, Hamas staged a violent coup against the PA, threw PA officials to their deaths from the top floors of high buildings, and seized control of the Gaza Strip.

It is not clear how many Palestinians have fled the Gaza Strip in recent years. Some reports estimate that more than 40,000 Palestinians managed to leave between 2014 and 2020. Other reports put the figure at more than 70,000.

Palestinians in the poll expressed concern that many of the emigrants include university graduates and professionals, especially medical doctors who prefer to work and live in European countries, and not under Hamas.

"The drowning incidents of young men during the emigration trips make the families of the immigrants anxious," the pan-Arab Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper reported. "At the same time, the drowning shows the extent of the tragedy experienced by the residents of the Gaza Strip, which pushes the best of its sons to emigrate."

The latest incident sparked a wave of protests by many Palestinians, who took to various social media platforms to express shock and disbelief over the tragedy and denounce Hamas leaders for their failure to improve the living conditions of their people.

Referring to the lavish lifestyle led by most Hamas officials in the Gaza Strip and abroad, many Palestinians complained that while the fish are eating the poor emigrants, Hamas leaders continue to enjoy the best fish and seafood on offer in Qatar and the Gaza Strip.

Upon learning about the tragedy, other Palestinians launched a hashtag on Twitter, titled "We Want to Live," in which they too held Hamas responsible for the high rate of unemployment and poverty in the Gaza Strip.

Some social media users also blamed Abbas's Fatah faction for their continued misery, because of its ongoing rivalry with Hamas.

"The [Hamas] government is doing nothing to change the human lives there," wrote Palestinian journalist Walid Mahmoud. "Add to that that the media is not talking about this, and I believe they won't talk about this." Mahmoud, who is from the Gaza Strip, explained that the hashtag "We Want to Live" reflects the extent to which the population of Gaza has been outraged by "the stupidity of the ruling [Hamas] administration."

Referring to the corruption and apathy of Hamas leaders towards the suffering of their people, some Palestinians revealed that the sons of Hamas leaders were giving each other tickets to the Egyptian seaside resort of Sharm a-Sheikh as gifts.

A Palestinian man from the Gaza Strip, who did not reveal his name, posted a video in which he launched a scathing attack on the Hamas leaders, accusing them of destroying the future of young people.

"If our leaders do not care about us, this is a disaster... The people are dying; they are starving. The people's

lives have been destroyed. The young men are dying, and the fish are eating them. The [Hamas] leaders and their sons are not better than me and my children."

Apparently, the two million Palestinians living under the rule of Hamas have reached the conclusion that it is Hamas, and not Israel, that is responsible for their misery.

Judging from the reactions of Palestinians to the latest tragedy involving the would-be-emigrants, it is obvious that many Palestinians understand what most anti-Israel activists fail to grasp -- that Hamas prioritizes manufacturing and smuggling weapons over providing jobs to the unemployed and assisting those living in poverty.

Hamas could have turned the Gaza Strip into the Singapore of the Middle East. Instead, Hamas chose to turn the Gaza Strip into a center for jihad (holy war) against Israel.

Ghanem Nusseibeh, a Palestinian Muslim belonging to the oldest Arab family in Jerusalem, commented:

"During the past 15 years, Hamas has taken Gaza from bad to worse. Gazans are a people under a brutal Islamist regime who are held hostage to stagnant policies that only serve the interests of Hamas and their global Islamist allies. If the international community could help liberate Gaza from such forces, they could help Gazans create a Dubai on the Med or a new Singapore."

If the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are indeed so desperate, it would behoove them to overthrow Hamas and end its iron-fisted rule over the Gaza Strip.

Yet, Hamas continues to crush dissent and intimidate its critics. In addition, Hamas continues to enjoy popularity among many Palestinians not only in the Gaza Strip, but even in the West Bank. The reason Hamas is so popular is that many Palestinians support its call for the elimination of Israel.

It would be more helpful if the Palestinians fleeing the Gaza Strip remained home and devoted their energies to removing Hamas from power, even if that removal came at a heavy price. This is the one and only way to solve the problems of Gaza.

Blaming Israel for everything wrong in the Gaza Strip may fool many in the US, Canada, Europe and the UK. But the Palestinians fleeing Gaza and their families who remain behind know the truth -- that it is Hamas that has brought them to the abyss, including the sea in which they are now drowning.