Why Nuclear Negotiations with Iran Are Failing
By Jake Wallis Simons

Beginning with a spectacular American misstep.

One of the West’s great foreign policy failures of 2021 was the Iran nuclear negotiations, which remained bitterly unresolved as the clock passed midnight.

Having spoken to a number of diplomatic sources on different sides in recent weeks, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the process has been woefully inept.

Not only has there been a dramatic failure to extract any concessions from Tehran – even a meaningful freeze on progress towards the bomb has remained elusive – but western negotiators have become enveloped themselves in an Asterix-style dust cloud of infighting, competing agendas and tension.

All of this, of course, is a gift to the Iranians, who have entered 2022 in a commanding position.

In truth, the project was all but doomed to begin with. Before he was even elected, Joe Biden telegraphed his desperation to re-enter Obama’s JCPOA deal. ‘The good news is there remains a better way,’ he wrote for CNN. ‘A Biden administration will make it a priority to set Iran policy right.’

The President might not have said in so many words that he would bend over backwards for a deal. But the Iranians are skilled at reading between the lines; and so are the senior members of his own administration.

Diplomatic sources have described Robert Malley, the US Special Representative for Iran, who is leading the negotiations in Vienna, as ‘the most dovish official we’ve ever seen’. In fact, the former head of the International Crisis Group – a think-tank devoted to dispute resolution, the very embodiment of the doctrine of softness – has bent over backwards so far that, as one official put it, he now speaks to Tehran from between his legs.

The talks began with a spectacular American misstep. As soon as the starting-gun was fired, US negotiators amazed international partners by tabling a proposal that was so generous that the Iranians had to rub their eyes to believe it. In the minds of the Americans, this was a take-it-or-leave-it offer, straight out of the box. But it did not come across that way to Tehran.

Once the Iranians had caught their breath and climbed back onto their chairs, they set about demanding further concessions, in the belief that this was only the US opening position. The Americans continued to insist that this was a one-time offer – but crucially failed to back this up by walking away from the table or putting forward punishing consequences. So the Iranians kept on demanding. This resulted in what can only be described by the Hebrew term balagan, as any real sense of pressure and jeopardy dissolved.

Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security advisor, is a more sensible voice in the American camp. But he has been consistently sidelined by Robert Malley, who has been able to craft his own version of the negotiations when reporting to Antony Blinken, the Secretary of State. As a result, the true scale of the debacle is hidden from the White House – and President Biden has been preoccupied with domestic matters anyway.

As the impasse dragged on month after month, and the Iranians continued to strengthen their position by delaying things further while enriching uranium to higher levels, the mood among western diplomats became fractious. Officials could almost hear the Iranians rubbing their hands.

On the British side, things are more coherent. Despite some disagreements, London’s stance is firmer. This has led to the unexpected state of affairs in which Britain is more sympathetic to the Israelis than America. As a result, Jerusalem is expending particular effort in lobbying London to save the US from itself.

British diplomats, however, are bogged down in two negotiations at once: the nuclear talks in Vienna and separate discussions about imprisoned foreign nationals in Tehran.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that 2022 will be Iran’s year. The Ayatollahs have already eased the effects of western sanctions by pivoting economically to China and Russia, and are picking off Gulf states one-by-one. Despite an alliance with Israel, the UAE is now Iran’s second-largest oil customer. Only the Saudis continue to hold entirely firm against Iranian influence.

The Israelis, meanwhile, have been ferociously lobbying the Americans to place a credible military option on the table, without which the negotiations lack teeth. But even if they were successful, there is little guarantee that strikes would work.

Iran’s nuclear installations are buried deep in multiple locations across the country, many of which are in civilian areas. This leaves the West with two options: either an Iraq-style mass ground invasion, or the biggest air campaign since the second world war. Both of these can only be carried out by one country. And given the mood of the public in that country, and the instincts of its political leadership, there’s more chance of a Pride parade in central Tehran this year.

Moreover, Iranian proxy militia have long been embedded throughout the region. In the event of war, they may be activated to strike multiple targets at once. Tehran could even shut down the Strait of Hormuz, which 30 per cent of the world’s gas passes through.

Is there any glimmer of hope? Traditionally, the Americans tend to let their negotiators and envoys run until they fail, then replace them. There is a palpable feeling in diplomatic circles that the clock is ticking for Mr...
By Trying to Restrain Israel, the White House Is Sending the Wrong Message to Iran

By Eli Lake    bloomberg.com    December 30, 2021

On the anniversary of the death of a terrorist mastermind, President Biden can learn an important lesson from his predecessor.

Next week the Iranian regime will commemorate the two-year anniversary of the death of General Qassem Soleimani, who was killed by a U.S. drone strike on Jan. 3, 2020. President Joe Biden should also mark the occasion — by noting that the U.S. is prepared to go beyond economic sanctions in its efforts to deter Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Soleimani — who built Iran’s Quds Force into a kind of NATO for terrorists, connecting militias in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen into a strategic alliance — was Iran’s most important military leader. In response to his killing, Iran launched a barrage of ballistic missiles at the Al Asad airbase in Iraq, causing serious brain injuries for more than 100 U.S. troops. Iranian forces also mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian International Airlines flight.

Soleimani’s assassination is a grievance Iran’s leaders will nurse for the foreseeable future. They see his killing as further justification for Iran’s nuclear and ballistic missile program, as well as its broader policy of bullying weaker Middle Eastern countries. Iran’s leaders see themselves as victims under constant threat.

The reality is different. The assassination of Soleimani was a response to a series of escalations that began after 2018, when former President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. In 2019, Iran launched missiles and drones at Saudi oil fields, attacked ships in the Persian Gulf and stepped up militia attacks against U.S. positions in Iraq. The final straw came at the end of that year, when a coordinated mob nearly overran the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.

After the Soleimani strike, Iran’s militias continued probing attacks on U.S. positions in Iraq, while Iran’s scientists continued to install more advanced centrifuges in its nuclear facilities. But Iran stopped menacing commercial ships, and U.S. embassies did not face more mobs. And while some of this can be explained by the Covid pandemic, Trump’s show of force was also a factor.

Then Biden took office, and Iran’s escalations became more brazen. Even though Biden offered to lift the economic sanctions imposed by Trump if Iran returned to the enrichment limits of the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran is now enriching uranium to 40% purity, very close to the level needed for a weapon. In October, Iranian proxies launched a drone attack on a U.S. base on the Syrian-Iraqi border. In November, an Iranian drone laden with explosives attempted to assassinate Iraq’s prime minister. All the while, Iran has continued to arm its alliance of regional militias with more military technology.

Faced with these escalations, the Biden administration has tried to walk a tightrope on Iran. On the one hand, it has continued to hold out hope for diplomacy even though Iran’s diplomats in Vienna will no longer meet with the U.S. envoy. The U.S. has also relaxed enforcement of some sanctions, leading to an increase in Iranian oil exports, but has not unilaterally lifted them. And early in his administration, Biden ordered a missile strike on Iranian-backed militia bases in response to an attack.

Most troubling, however, is that the U.S. has let it be known that it does not approve of Israeli intelligence operations against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. Some administration officials doubt the efficacy of Israel’s sabotage and assassinations inside Iran, according to the New York Times, fearing that they provide an incentive for Iran to build back its nuclear program better.

This is the wrong message. Not only does it risk alienating America’s most important ally against Iran, as former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. Ron Dermer noted at a web conference this month. It also risks more provocations from Iran: If the regime’s leaders believe they face only economic consequences for their predations, then they will continue to test America’s resolve.

That’s why Biden, like the Iranian regime, should also mark the anniversary of Soleimani’s death. He should make clear that the U.S. is willing to use force against a regime that remains undeterred by sanctions alone.

Improving the Gazan Economy Won’t Mollify Terrorists

By Amos Gilad and Michael Milstein    ynetnews.com    January 2, 2022

For Hamas, the wellbeing of Gaza’s residents is a consideration, not a constraint.

The growing Hamas effort to promote terrorism in the West Bank, the shooting incident along the Gaza Strip border last week, and the rocket launch at Tel Aviv over the weekend, allegedly triggered by lightning, should be a warning for the Israeli policymakers not to be lulled into a false sense of security.

If we were to look at actions and comments made by both Israel and Hamas since the Gaza war in May 2021, known as Operation Guardian of the Walls, we would notice a glaring discrepancy between the apparent intentions of the two sides.

Israel is working on improving the economy in the Hamas-controlled enclave to make life in the Gaza Strip better, since Israeli officials believe it will give incentive to
the local population to stand up against the Jihadist principals, promoted by Hamas and its leader Yahya Sinwar.

Hamas, however, is using the ceasefire reached following the May war to rehabilitate its military power ahead of a future conflict, and endlessly threatens to renew the violence if its demands aren’t met not only when it comes to developments in Gaza, but also in Jerusalem, the West Bank and in Israel’s prisons where many Palestinian inmates are held.

Israeli policymakers are required to change their mindsets and actions when it comes to the Gaza Strip.

First, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of the Western way of thinking that good economics can shortstop radical ideologies.

This model has failed many times over the past decades in the Middle East, including during Operation Guardian of the Walls, in which Hamas for the first time in its history imitated an on Israel attack for religious motives. And the attack began with a blatant violation of the previous ceasefire arrangement, without any tension in the Gaza Strip and with the civilian situation there improving rapidly at the time.

Secondly, there is a need for Israel to put their money where their mouth is and follow its own mottos. During Operation Guardian of the Walls, many Israeli officilas were saying that "what was in the past, won't be in the future".

Israel's promotion of civil gestures toward the Gaza Strip, like giving out work permits to merchants, without demanding Hamas returns the fallen soldiers and civilians, and stops rearming and promoting terror in the West Bank and Jerusalem, may result in a temporary quiet in the area, but it also could become a strategical challenge in the long run.

The current Israeli policy embodies the recognition of Hamas as a legitimate ruler of Gaza, reinforcing its status in the Palestinian system, and minimizing the possibility of a public protest against the organization, as well as the possibility of the Palestinian Authority taking over the Gaza Strip, politically.

Israel faces a dilemma between a bad alternative and a problem that currently has no proper solution. A lenient Israeli response to attacks originating from Gaza will probably entail even more similar attacks, but may also strengthen Israel's deterrence, jeopardize the relations between the organization and the Gazan public, and disrupt its efforts in becoming "the Hezbollah in the southern border".

Most importantly, Israel needs to improve its ability to understand Hamas' logic. It is an organization that is driven by performative actions in order to fulfill its long-term ideological objectives. Hamas occasionally agrees to a ceasefire, because it serves its motives and interests, but a good peaceful life for the Palestinians is surely not one of their objectives.

For Hamas, the wellbeing of Gaza's residents is a consideration, not a constraint, and Israel tends to have a hard time understanding that. Hamas is driven by a different set of values, and at the end of the end its actions are the result of their passion for their dangerous ideology.

The fact that the latest cross-border round of fighting has not escalated into something bigger is not a guarantee that Hamas won't violate the ceasefire agreement with Israel again, according to its own interests.

As a result, the next time Hamas choses to attack Israel by surprise, the hit may be more devastating than before.

**Israeli defence chief meets Palestinian leader in attempt to counter Hamas**

By Mehul Srivastava

Israel's Benny Gantz announces measures aimed at boosting Fatah chief Mahmoud Abbas.

Israel’s defence minister Benny Gantz and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas have agreed a series of measures aimed at helping the Palestinian government counter its Islamist rival Hamas, following rare overnight talks in central Israel.

In his first visit to Israel in at least a decade, Abbas, 86, met Gantz at the defence minister’s home late on Tuesday night. The talks came amid a financial crisis in the Palestinian Authority, which has limited self-rule in urban areas of the occupied West Bank.

“We discussed the implementation of economic and civilian measures, and emphasised the importance of deepening security co-ordination and preventing terror and violence — for the wellbeing of both Israelis and Palestinians,” Gantz wrote on Twitter late on Tuesday night.

Abbas did not release an official statement following the meeting, but Hussein Al-Sheikh, a senior Palestinian official, said the talks included the “importance of creating a political horizon” for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel has been alarmed by the surge in popularity of Islamist militant group Hamas in the West Bank following 11-days of fighting in May, in which hundreds were killed by Israeli strikes in Gaza, Hamas fired rockets that killed 13 in Israel and mass protests against the Israeli assault swept across the West Bank and towns in Israel.

Hamas declared itself victorious as a ceasefire eased some of the restrictions of an Israeli-Egyptian blockade of Gaza, and Hamas-linked politicians subsequently enjoyed a series of victories in municipal elections in the West Bank.

Both the US and Israel prefer the secular Fatah, led by Abbas, as their interlocutor with the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which seeks to establish a Palestinian state.
roughly along the ceasefire lines of the 1967 war, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Hamas seized the Gaza Strip from Fatah in 2007 after being denied a chance to take power even after sweeping election victories the previous year. Since then, it has fought four wars with Israel and jostled with Fatah for more representation in the PLO and other Palestinian legislative bodies.

After the Abbas-Gantz talks, Israel approved a handful of measures that would help Abbas, who is deeply unpopular among Palestinian youth, to keep the support of wealthy Palestinian families and ease the bureaucracy faced by some poorer Palestinians.

Israel will issue 1,100 new permits, including 600 so-called Business Man Cards, which are cherished by the Palestinian elite, to make it easier for them to pass through checkpoints out of the West Bank in their own cars. Dozens more VIP permits will be granted to allies of Abbas.

Meanwhile, 6,000 West Bank residents — some of them refugees, or descendants of refugees, from the 1948 and 1967 wars — will be able to be officially added to a population registry, and about 3,500 in Gaza will receive residency documentation, allowing them to more easily obtain official identity documents for travel or work within Israel.

Israel, which collects import taxes on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, will advance about Shk100m ($32m) to help ease some of the financial pressure on the PA, which has a deficit of more than $1bn, exacerbated by lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Tuesday’s talks faced heavy criticism from Hamas and Israeli rightwingers. Hamas called them “obscene” and an affront “to the Palestinian spirit” in televised remarks. Israeli tanks fired on Hamas positions in Gaza on Wednesday afternoon after reports of an Israeli civilian being injured by shots fired from the Strip.

Rightwing Israeli leaders painted Gantz as weak. Prime minister Naftali Bennett’s “Israeli-Palestinian government” was putting Abbas “back on the agenda”, the Likud party, led by ousted five-time premier Benjamin Netanyahu, said on Twitter. “Dangerous concessions that will jeopardise Israel’s security are only a matter of time.”

Why Russia Won’t Help Get Iran Out of Syria
By Anna Borshchevskaya

Tolerating Israeli airstrikes is as far as it will go.

During the Syrian Civil War, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad relied on assistance from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah to shore up his regime. Today, it is clear they largely won. As Assad reconsolidates control over Syria, many in Israel hope that Syria might extricate itself from Iranian influence. Is this realistic?

Iran’s nuclear and broader regional hegemonic activities remain a priority for both the US and Israel. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz emphasized the need to halt Iranian aggression during his latest meeting with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on December 9. In both Jerusalem and Washington, many hope that Russia might push Assad away from Iran in order to solidify its own interest.

Specifically, Israeli officials believe Russia can help deter Iranian aggression by limiting the forces Tehran deploys in Syria. Most recently, former national security advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat said, “[T]here is a shared view between us and the Russians, beyond what’s publicly exposed…the Russians are striving for regional stability, particularly in Syria. I believe they would agree that Iran is the force challenging that stability.”

This belief originates in Moscow’s Syria intervention in September 2015. Once Russia entered the Syrian theater, Moscow took control of Syrian skies and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) often had to forewarn if not seek Russia’s permission to conduct airstrikes against Iran-backed targets in Syria. Israeli officials interpreted Russia’s willingness to allow such strikes as a sign that Moscow favors Jerusalem’s concerns over Tehran’s interests in Syria.

 Israeli officials may be misunderstanding Moscow’s motivations, however. Moscow accepted Israeli strikes not out of sympathy but rather because Russia has a genuine interest to ensure that no actor in Syria becomes powerful enough to challenge Russia. For Russia, the Israeli strikes were simply useful to keep Iranian ambitions in check.

Israeli leadership has often read too much into this. Moscow’s actions showed repeatedly that Russia had neither the ability nor desire to limit Iranian-backed forces in Syria. First, Neither Putin nor senior Russian officials have given any public indication that they will limit Iranian forces in Syria. In private, Russian analysts close to the Kremlin tend to speak with admiration and respect about Iran and Persian civilization, an attitude they do not extend to Arab states with the exception perhaps of Egypt. Third, Russia’s entire Syria intervention depended on Iran doing the heavy lifting. This is a major component of how Putin kept the Russian intervention limited and inexpensive. Fourth, a Russia-Iran convergence to cooperate to stymie American influence allowed both to put tactical differences aside. Finally, such attitudes misread Russia. When Russian officials demand foreign forces leave Syria, they consider both the Russian and Iranian presence legitimate based on Assad’s invitation.

 Israeli officials have yet to spell out how precisely Russia will limit Iran-backed forces in Syria in a meaningful way. It is one thing to look the other way at Israeli airstrikes despite Moscow’s pro forma condemnation; it is another to commit military forces to
limit them. There is no indication Putin wants to risk a clash with Iran.

The hope that differences between Russia and Iran will emerge with greater clarity as fighting ends is misplaced and reflects wishful thinking more than reality. Putin repeatedly shows that he prefers to compartmentalize and work with all actors, even when they have conflicting interests. This certainly has been the case with Russia’s relationship with Turkey. Iranian tentacles are entrenched too deep in Syria and Assad owes not only Putin but also Tehran his survival. Putin has no mechanism to disentangle Iran from Syria in a way that makes a real difference. Assad is as likely if not more inclined to keep Russian engagement in Syria limited and confined to Kremlin’s narrow interests.

It is understandable that, from the perspective of the Israeli government, it is better to have Russia in Syria than Iran, but the fact of the matter is, Russia and Iran are integral parts of the same strategic set.

Ms. Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia’s policy toward the Middle East.

The escalating international war against Israel.

By Caroline Glick

Israel has no choice but to fight the U.N.’s new permanent inquisition against it, and any business, government or judge that uses its reality-free reports.

At the U.N. General Assembly last month, a large majority of member nations voted to lavishly fund a permanent inquisition against the Jewish state. The member states funded the operation of an “ongoing independent, international commission of inquiry” against Israel.

The commission, run by outspoken haters of Israel with long records of demonizing it and its people, was formed by the U.N. Human Rights Council in a special session in May. Its purpose is to deny and reject Israel’s right to exist, its right to self-defense, its right to enforce its laws and its citizens’ rights to their properties and to their very lives.

The Council’s decision to form its new permanent inquisition constitutes an unprecedented escalation of the political war the United Nations has been waging against Israel for the past 50 years. To grasp the danger, it is necessary to understand how Israel’s foes operate at the United Nations and how their partners in Europe and Israel itself operate.

We begin with the United Nations. In 2005, acting on pressure from the Bush administration, then-U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan disbanded the U.N. Human Rights Commission. The Bush administration’s chief complaint was that the commission was endemically antisemitic.

The U.N. Human Rights Council was founded in 2006, and its members and U.N. staff wasted no time making clear that they intended the new council to be even more antisemitic than its predecessor.

Shortly after the HRC was established, it determined that demonizing Israel would be a permanent agenda item. Item Number 7 is the only permanent agenda item that deals with a specific country. And like the council’s nine other permanent agenda items, Item 7 is discussed at every formal council session. Item 7 enjoins the council to discuss “Human rights violations and implications of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and other occupied Arab territories.”

Having a permanent agenda item dedicated to specifically demonizing Israel, however, wasn’t enough to satisfy the HRC’s obsession with attacking the Jewish state. So since 2006, the council has convened nine special sessions to expand its focus on attacking the Jews. To get a sense of just how overwhelming the council’s focus on Israel is, in the same period, the council has convened just 19 special sessions to deal with every other country on the planet.

The council’s template for demonizing Israel has been fairly consistent through the years. Immediately after each Palestinian terror campaign against Israel comes to an end, the Holocaust-denying, terror-sponsoring PLO chief Mahmoud Abbas has his U.N. representatives ask for a special session to discuss the “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity” Israel supposedly carried out against the Palestinians. No one ever mentions that every single missile launched against Israel by the Hamas terror regime in Gaza constitutes a separate war crime. No one ever mentions Hamas at all.

In short order, the council accedes to the PLO’s request and convenes the special session. On cue, the member nations’ representatives rise, accuse Israel of genocide, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, operating a killing machine, targeting children and any other crime they can think of. Then a majority of the members vote to form a new “commission of inquiry,” led and staffed by “independent” investigators, nearly all of whom believe that Israel has no right to exist and that Jews have too much power.

At the end of its “in-depth investigation,” the commission issues a report which determines that Israel conducted war crimes and crimes against humanity.

This brings us to the second arm of the international political war against Israel: Europe. Every HRC resolution to form a commission of inquiry includes a call to non-governmental organizations and other parties to submit “testimonies” and “reports” that will substantiate the council’s blood libel that Israel committed war crimes and is inherently and incurably evil. NGOs registered in Israel, the P.A. and in Western countries answer the council’s call. And the final reports issued by each of the inquisitions
include hundreds of citations from “testimonies” and reports submitted by these NGOs as proof of Israel’s inherent venality.

These organizations are not independent actors. European governments fund them and direct their operations. If they operated in the United States, nearly every NGO involved in the HRC’s witch hunts against Israel would have to register as a foreign agent of European governments. As Knesset member Amichai Chikli put it, “Europe is waging a war against Israel.”

Last week, Chikli and MK Keti Shitrit were scheduled to hold a conference at the Knesset on European funding of radical NGOs. But in a sign of the depth of Europe’s commitment to its war against Israel, and to its power in Israel, the E.U. embassy in Israel placed massive pressure on the Knesset secretariat and the Knesset Speaker to cancel the conference. In the end, the conference was canceled at the last moment, citing COVID-19 restrictions, even as the Knesset’s parliamentary operations went on unimpeded.

The reports the HRC publishes at the end of each fake commission of inquiry against Israel form the basis for the various boycott efforts against Israel that European bureaucrats carry out. For instance, on the basis of one such report, E.U. member states stopped recognizing Israeli veterinary certificates relating to agricultural exports from Jewish farmers in Samaria.

This brings us to the third arm of the international political war against Israel: Israel’s European-influenced, progressive legal establishment. Last weekend, Haaretz published an interview with former attorney general and recently retired Supreme Court Justice Meni Mazuz. Between the lines, Mazuz explained the legal establishment’s methods for transforming anti-Israel U.N. documents into “law.”

A significant portion of the interview dealt with Mazuz’s campaign from the bench to block military demolitions of homes of terrorists.

As professor Avi Bell from Bar-Ilan University’s Law Faculty explains, “The law explicitly stipulates that it is legal to demolish the homes of terrorists. And there are dozens of Supreme Court decisions that approve demolition orders, based on the law.”

Mazuz told Haaretz that for many years, including during his tenure as attorney general, he had “thought that house demolitions were an immoral step, in contravention of the law whose effectiveness was dubious.”

But when Mazuz served as attorney general, he lacked the authority to end the practice. As he explained, “I couldn’t tell the government that it is prohibited when dozens of Supreme Court decisions say that it is permitted.”

But the minute Mazuz was appointed to the Supreme Court, he began legislating his political views from the bench. To substantiate his position regarding the demolition of terrorists’ homes, Mazuz said that he relied on “the positions of legal scholars” in Israel and abroad, and on the decisions of the U.N. Human Rights Council.

“The demolitions cause us international damage,” Mazuz said. “Do you think that these things stay here? That they don’t come up every year at human rights councils in Geneva and in international forums?”

In other words, Mazuz made clear that along with several of his colleagues on the bench, he used the anti-Israel reports generated by the obsessively anti-Israel HRC to justify his rulings, which denied Israel the right to act in accordance with Israeli law in a manner that the duly elected government, and the duly constituted leadership of the IDF, deemed necessary in their efforts to quell Palestinian terrorism.

As Bell explains, aside from a limited category of U.N. Security Council resolutions, U.N. actions and decisions are all devoid of significance in international law. Decisions by the HRC, like those of all other U.N. bodies, are political documents without any legal weight.

Mazuz and his colleagues in the legal fraternity exploit the public’s ignorance and the impotence of the government and Knesset to transform these political documents into “law” through their judgments and legal opinions.

And this brings us to the HRC’s permanent inquisition, whose operations a large majority of U.N. member nations voted to fund last week at the General Assembly.

As professor Anne Bayefsky explained in a detailed report published last week by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, the commission of inquiry’s mandate is effectively limitless. The commission is empowered to rewrite the entire history of the Arab conflict with Israel and determine that Israel’s birth was an original sin which must be undone. The commission is empowered to carry out an “investigation” on the basis of “testimonies” which E.U.-funded anti-Israel groups will supply, describing fraudulent “war crimes” that will form the basis of indictments of Israeli elected leaders, IDF commanders and line soldiers, and Israeli civilians who reside in Judea, Samaria and unified Jerusalem. The U.N.’s political “courts” in turn will agree to try them for these made-up crimes.

Moreover, as Bayefsky noted, the commission is charged with making “recommendations on measures to be taken by third States to ensure respect for international humanitarian law in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem...[to ensure] that they do not aid or assist in the commission of internationally wrongful acts.”

A similar statement is made in the resolution’s preamble regarding “business enterprises.”

The message in both cases is self-explanatory. The reports the inquisition will publish will serve as the basis for economic boycotts of Israel to be enacted by both government bureaucrats and businesses.
Israel has no choice but to fight this commission and any business, government or judge that uses its reality-free reports. Israel must ensure that the antisemitic propaganda the commission puts out does not turn into “law” through the actions of radical justices and government attorneys.

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

Israel-Jordan-UAE infrastructure deal highlights converging interests

By Tomer Barak

Parliamentary elections in Lebanon that are scheduled for next year will be the first vote since the popular protests were launched in 2019.

Israel, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) for economic projects on November 22, and while it is still unclear when, and how, they will be implemented, the agreements send a bright signal regarding a new era in regional cooperation.

The first agreement includes the construction of a solar power plant and storage facility in Jordan that will produce up to 600 MW per year of green electricity that will be sold to Israel and incorporated into its power grid.

The second agreement deals with the setting up of a desalination plant on the Israeli coastline, with the potable water it generates exported to Jordan at a scope of 200 million cu.m. per year – on top of the existing water deals in place between the two countries, which recently were expanded due to growing Jordanian needs.

Companies from the United Arab Emirates will be involved in building the projects, according to the agreements, which are only at the MOU stage thus far. In the coming year, the final details are scheduled to be finalized, as well concrete feasibility checks prior to implementation. The US special presidential Envoy for climate John Kerry was involved in securing the two agreements.

Three processes came together to create the new agreements: The Abraham Accords, the thawing of Israeli-Jordanian relations in the past six months – which included visits by senior officials – and the growing engagement with the climate crisis along with Jordan’s growing water crisis.

Israel’s Energy Minister Karin Elharrar is seen signing a climate cooperation deal with Jordan in Dubai, on November 22, 2021. (credit: Courtesy)

Israel’s Energy Minister Karin Elharrar is seen signing a climate cooperation deal with Jordan in Dubai, on November 22, 2021. (credit: Courtesy)

For Jordan, the current and past water agreements provide solutions for what is an existential need. Jordan today suffers from a water shortage of 500 million cu.m. per year. The annual per capita water availability in Jordan is under 80 cu.m., much lower than the global water poverty line, which stands at 500 cu.m.

If this was not bad enough, the trend is going from bad to worse by the year. Current reserves, particularly the Disi Reserve on the Saudi border, will thin out in the coming years, and demographic growth coupled with accelerated dehydration linked to climate change will intensify Jordan’s water stress, leaving Jordanian soil parched, its agriculture in a state of collapse and its residents thirsty. The amount of water to be provided under the terms of the MOU will not solve these problems but will certainly help Jordan improve its situation.

Alongside this essential need, the ability to attract foreign investments is a priority for Jordan’s King Abdullah. Environmental initiatives are a lucrative new means to attract funds for investment in the Jordanian economy. To that end, multinational-regional projects are a concept that Western countries and international funds are willing to invest in.

For Israel, the agreement, if implemented, might help to achieve a governmental goal of boosting renewable energy production (the target is 30% by 2030). In addition, there is the obvious strategic benefit that comes from strengthening Jordan’s durability and stability, and the peace between the two countries, which is highly significant for Israel’s security, and for strengthening cooperation with the UAE in the context of the Abraham Accords.

The picture is not totally rosy. The MOUs will face some challenges.

First and foremost, as with previous public agreements with Israel, there has been pushback from the Jordanian public and from parliament, both of which are characterized by strong anti-Israeli sentiments.

From the moment that news of the MOU signings surfaced, demonstrations broke out against the agreements. After Friday prayers following news of the agreements, demonstrators took to the streets of Amman under the leadership of youths affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and some Jordanian tribal leaders. As in previous Israeli-oriented protests, there were voices calling for dissolution of the peace accords, although these were only on the margins of the protest. In line with Jordanian political tradition, accusatory public fingers were pointed at the government and at normalization steps with Israel, but not against King Abdullah himself.

At the same time, the Jordanian Parliament, with whom the government didn’t consult prior to the signing of the MOUs, held a meeting on the subject, in which several MPs attacked government normalization steps with Israel, and even called for a vote of no confidence.

In order to enable the agreement, the Jordanian prime minister was sent in to reduce opposition and usher in the
agreements, and, at the same time, initiated dialogue between the tribes.

A month into the signing, it seems that protests have calmed down, but previous cases demonstrate that it is just a matter of time before the opposition will pick up on an issue as a means to once again attack the government.

Unfortunately, there will be ample opportunities for renewed protests during the coming year, when the sides will need to formulate the details of the agreements, and afterwards, while the project’s infrastructure construction is ongoing. King Abdullah and his government will have to continue to market the agreement as vital, and to employ tools to calm protests. One of those tools will need to be outside support, in the form of American and Emirati assistance, as well as keeping relations with Israel relatively free of crises over regional and Palestinian matters.

There are ample potential challenges to this new cooperation. According to media reports, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, who is already in complex relations with King Abdullah (after alleged Saudi involvement in Jordanian royal family feuds), was angered by the MOUs, which left him “outside of the picture,” including in terms of relations with the US.

The Palestinian Authority was not part of the agreement despite being at the center of the Israeli-Jordanian-Emirati triangle. Technical, financial and environmental issues could also emerge along the way that could complicate implementation of the projects.

In summary, if this process goes ahead successfully, it could pave the path for additional Middle Eastern multilateral agreements in the sectors of energy, infrastructure, climate, health, and other issues. It is of great importance that policy makers around the Middle East and in the US be creative and enterprising, while displaying goodwill and adequate resources to shape and implement needed regional integration and cooperation, which will benefit countries struggling with common challenges ranging from Iran to the climate crisis.

Mr. Barak, IDF (Ret.) Lt.-Col., served in the military for 21 years, including in Intelligence and the Strategic Planning Division.

Lebanon faces dim future as Hezbollah holds the country hostage

By Israel Kasnett

As Lebanon’s citizens deal with a collapsing economy and a paralyzed government, murmurs of dissatisfaction with Hezbollah, Iran’s terror proxy in Beirut, have begun to surface. But experts say it is unrealistic to believe Hezbollah’s iron grip on the country will loosen.

These simmering tensions were expressed even more publicly in a televised speech made by Lebanese President Michel Aoun on Dec. 27, when he called for a “national dialogue” to confront the country’s political and social issues. Aoun warned that Lebanon was “falling apart,” and urged swift action on financial reforms. He also made what could be considered a veiled demand of Hezbollah, seemingly urging the terror group to loosen its grip on Lebanese politics.

“The deliberate, systematic and unjustified disruption that leads to institutions dismantling and the dissolution of the state must stop,” Aoun said.

Lebanon’s Cabinet has not met for three months, and the investigation into the deadly ammonium nitrate explosion at Beirut’s port in August 2020 has stalled out of fear of offending Hezbollah. Together with the Shi’ite Amal party, Hezbollah has blocked the Cabinet meetings over demands for the dismissal of Judge Tarek Bitar, who is investigating the explosion, which killed more than 200 people.

Hezbollah’s absolute control of Lebanon has led to the current catastrophic economic collapse. As a result, approximately 80 percent of Lebanon’s population is now living in poverty, according to a September study published by the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

In yet another blow to the country, the Lebanese pound on Tuesday crossed the symbolic threshold of 30,000 to the dollar on the black market in a new record low, according to websites monitoring the exchange rate.

IDF Col. (ret.) Dr. Jacques Neriah, a special analyst for the Middle East at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, told JNS that Hezbollah and Amal “have done everything possible in order to paralyze the government and impose their rule.”

It was Aoun’s alliance with Hezbollah that allowed him to assume the country’s presidency in 2016, and his Maronite Christian party’s past support for Hezbollah has allowed the group some measure of political freedom. However, this strategic alliance has now become strained, particularly in the run-up to Lebanon’s scheduled May 15 elections.

While some may hope that Aoun’s veiled, yet public, denouncement of Hezbollah can lead to change and possibly even the banishment of the terror group, others are less optimistic.

Eyal Zisser, vice rector of Tel Aviv University and a lecturer in the school’s Middle East History Department, told JNS that such ambitions are unrealistic.

“I am afraid it will not happen,” he said. “Hezbollah is deeply rooted within the Shi’ite society.”

In Zisser’s view, ridding Lebanon of Hezbollah “will have to wait.”

Adding to Lebanon’s woes, the country has found itself at odds with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, after Lebanon’s Information Minister George Kordahi criticized the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen during an interview aired in September.
In reaction, Saudi Arabia expelled Lebanon’s ambassador, banned all imports from the country and forbade its citizens from traveling to Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia also slammed Lebanon’s failure to stop the export of drugs from Hezbollah-controlled ports to the Kingdom and criticized Hezbollah’s hijacking of Lebanon’s government. The Saudis also slammed Hezbollah for providing support and training to the Houthis terrorist militia.

Kordahi has since resigned his position in an attempt to help make amends between Lebanon and the GCC.

Various leaders and officials who have involved themselves in Lebanon’s crisis have all failed to adequately discuss the elephant in the room, that is, Hezbollah.

“Lebanon is not a failed state yet, but it is a failing state, with a government failing its population,” the U.N. special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, said at the end of a 12-day visit to the country in November. The special rapporteur’s comments did not mention Hezbollah.

In December, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visited Lebanon and reaffirmed the world body’s commitment to supporting the country, and urged it to hold parliamentary elections on time.

Guterres called on Lebanon to “achieve reforms” and praised the country’s “generosity” for hosting Syrian refugees. But he failed to mention the country’s treatment of the tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees and their descendants, many of whom live in refugee camps that are scattered across the country.

Similarly, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Lebanon twice in 2020 in an attempt to influence change, but his efforts proved futile. And France’s refusal to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization only fuels the problem. Macron is now working to patch relations between the GCC and Lebanon.

According to Neriah, while Lebanon is marketed as a tourist spot with beautiful beaches, it is actually “the most racist state that exists in the Arab world.”

He pointed to three reasons for this. First, he said, Palestinians have fewer rights than Lebanese citizens. Second, foreign workers are treated as slaves. Third, Lebanon employs Syrians but institutes a strict curfew between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m.

“These are the Nuremberg laws in Lebanon,” he said. “When talking about Lebanon, it is important to be aware of the other side of Lebanon,” which he said is “being held hostage by Hezbollah.” In turn, Hezbollah “receives its instructions from Tehran,” noted Neriah.

Jonathan Spyer, a fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and the Middle East Forum, told JNS that tensions between Aoun and Hezbollah “are not new” and “have been apparent since he became president” in 2016.

“The current financial crisis and the fact that Aoun’s presidency is drawing to a close has exacerbated this dynamic,” he said.

Spyer said he believes this is significant since “it shows that [Iran’s] Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps strategy of implanting ‘two, three, many Hezbollah’ in Arab countries has the inbuilt flaw that it produces social and economic failure. This is most apparent in Lebanon now, and Aoun is clearly trying to offer a counter-trend to this, advocating the repairing of relations with GCC countries.”

However, Spyer also said it is “crucial to note the inbuilt limitations of this. The part of the IRGC ‘Hezbollah strategy’ that works is the hard power piece.”

“Aoun and others can make life complicated for Hezbollah and the Iranian interest,” he said.

That interest includes more control over the eastern Mediterranean and maintaining a massive missile arsenal aimed at Israel.

But like Zisser, Spyer was doubtful of prospects for change. At least for now, and probably in the future, he said Aoun and others “cannot and will not offer a frontal challenge to the core strategic path of Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.”

Israelis scientists train goldfish to steer car around room

Researchers at Ben-Gurion University say fish managed to take specially designed vehicle to targets for rewards, showing that navigation may be independent of environment

It sounds like a fish tale, but scientists at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheba say they have demonstrated a fish’s ability to navigate on land, allowing it to drive a specially designed “Fish Operated Vehicle” around a room.

Six goldfish trained to use the apparatus managed to find their way around the small room and toward a reward, wrote the authors of a study published this month in the journal Behavioural Brain Research.

The fish “were able to operate the vehicle, explore the new environment, and reach the target, regardless of the starting point, all while avoiding dead-ends and correcting location inaccuracies,” said Shachar Givon and Matan Samina, who published the research along with Ohad Ben Shahar and Ronen Segev.

The study adds to a small cohort of literature in which animals are tasked with operating motor vehicles, with experiments performed in the past showing that rats and dogs can tootle around in specially designed cars.

But with the fish experiment, the Beersheba researchers say they have shown that navigation skills can be transferred from a marine environment to a terrestrial
one, not unlike similar studies that tracked animal behaviors in zero- or low-gravity environments.

“The way space is represented in the fish brain and the strategies it uses may be as successful in a terrestrial environment as they are in an aquatic one,” the authors said. “This hints at universality in the way space is represented across environments.”

A goldfish operating a fish operated vehicle. (screen capture: Twitter/Ben-Gurion University of the Negev)

To perform the experiment, the fish were put in a tank attached to a wheeled apparatus, which was attached to a camera tracking the fish’s movement and a computer system designed to respond to the fish’s movement toward the walls of the tank by moving the vehicle in that direction.

Several different experiments were designed, in which the fish were able to move to a target area, and receive a reward of a small bit of food for doing so. Even when starting the vehicle at different points in the room, or moving the target, the fish were eventually able to find their way.

The fish were also not fooled by decoy targets set up around the room, and, as time went on, their performance improved. Many of the fish went from needing 30 minutes to find the target, to finding it in under a minute.

While the scientists say they were the first to study what they term domain transfer methodology in fish, they are not the first to give the water-bound the ability to explore dry land.

In 2014, a team of computer scientists from the Netherlands designed a similar apparatus that allowed a goldfish to drive around a room. In that case, though, the project was designed to demonstrate the possibilities of computer vision, and in the words of its inventors “liberate fish all over the world.”

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**Israeli population reaches 9,449,000 at start of 2022**

**By Abigail Klein Leichman**

**Israel21c.org**

**January 5, 2022**

Approximately 51,000 Israeli residents died in 2021, more than in 2020 (48,788).

Overall, approximately 160,000 people were added to the Israeli population, an increase of 1.7%. Most of the increase (83%) was due to natural growth and the rest (17%) to the international migration balance.

Some 25,000 new immigrants arrived in Israel during 2021 — 30% from Russia and 14.6% from France — as well as approximately 9,000 other migrants including returning citizens. That number increased from 2020, when 20,000 immigrants arrived. The CBS also estimated that 7,500 Israelis are residing abroad for more than a year.

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*If you see something, send something* – editor