

**Israel's new coalition shouldn't write off American Jewry**

By Jonathan S. Tobin

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**Most Israelis don't care about the talk of moves that upset the non-Orthodox. But even if many U.S. Jews are failing Israel, abandoning the largest Diaspora community is self-defeating.**

It may be that some of the statements emanating from certain partners in Benjamin Netanyahu's new government are more a function of posturing than genuine policy priorities. But even if those expressing them are serious, it's unlikely that Netanyahu will let them have their way.

Still, the talk coming from the Religious Zionist Party's Itamar Ben-Gvir and members of the ultra-Orthodox parties about changing the Law of Return or reversing a court ruling that recognized Reform Movement conversions shouldn't be dismissed as mere noise surrounding the coalition negotiations.

The debate is important for three reasons.

One is that as much as the secular majority in Israel despises the Chief Rabbinate whose Orthodox bureaucracy governs life-cycle events like marriage, issues that are primarily of interest to non-Orthodox Jews leave them cold. That's because Israelis tend to view what they consider to be a "Diaspora version" of Judaism as having little to do with their lives.

On top of that, even many Israelis who have no sympathy for the demands of the religious parties believe that the bulk of U.S. Jewry has effectively turned its back on Israel. That conviction has led them to think that the Jewish state should have no compunction about offending the sensibilities of their American cousins.

Last, much of the criticism about American Jews' lack of understanding about the Jewish state's security dilemmas, and their high-handed attempts to substitute their ignorance for Israeli common sense, is justified. But the cost of effectively writing off the approximately 90% of American Jewry that is not Orthodox, and sabotaging the efforts of those trying to preserve the U.S.-Israel alliance, is much higher than Israelis think.

The latter brings us to proposals being mooted by Ben-Gvir and others, despite the probability of their being inconsequential in terms of actual impact.

Overturing the Supreme Court ruling that Reform converts should be eligible for the right to make aliyah under the right of return would affect very few people. The overwhelming majority of Americans who immigrate to Israel are modern Orthodox, not Reform converts. But such a move would nevertheless be taken as a slight to the Reform community.

Then there's the stated desire to eliminate the so-called "grandfather clause" the Law of Return, which allows anyone with a Jewish grandparent to obtain Israeli citizenship. The legislation was enacted this way in response to the impact of Nazi persecution. The clause

was based on the assumption that anyone with a Jewish grandparent would have been marked for death during the Holocaust.

Many people in Russia and Ukraine fit this description. As the war between those two countries continues, it's natural for many of them to look to Israel as a haven for escape. Changing the law would block their entry, other than as short-term tourists.

This is a good thing from the point of view of those Israelis unhappy about the fact that a considerable number of immigrants from the former Soviet Union—perhaps in the hundreds of thousands—are not Jewish according to religious law. Not only that; many of them are not only secular, but continue to observe Christmas, among other traditions from their home of origin.

Many of the Orthodox regard this phenomenon as potentially undermining the foundations of the state. But, since the Chief Rabbinate rejects practical compromises on less stringent conversions of the people in this group—many of whom serve in the Israel Defense Forces and identify as Jewish—the problem persists. In other words, rather than work for a solution, the Orthodox simply want to shut off the flow of such people into the country.

Meddling with the Law of Return would also have consequences in the United States. Astronomical rates of intermarriage—at least 75% among non-Orthodox Jews—have created a similar population of Americans who are currently eligible for aliyah, but would be prevented from doing so in the future if the Orthodox demands are met by Netanyahu and the coalition.

Of course, mass aliyah from the United States of highly assimilated people with only tenuous ancestral ties to their Jewish forebears is a fantasy. Or, rather, it is a nightmare scenario about U.S. antisemitism that, despite a surge in hatred against Jews, is not even a remote possibility.

Here again, however, though the impact would be minor—since few Americans in the above category intend on immigrating to Israel—the symbolism of branding Reform and Conservative Judaism as illegitimate is major.

The reaction of a significant cross-section of Israelis to this controversy is often a shrug of the shoulders. Their attitude is that if Reform and Conservative Jews want to have a say in Israeli affairs, they should make aliyah en masse and vote in the kind of numbers that would make it too difficult for the secular and Orthodox establishments to flout their concerns. The same applies to the battles over the right to egalitarian worship at Jerusalem's Western Wall.

On top of it all is the fact that liberal American Jews pontificate about the conflict with the Palestinians as if the last 30 years of history—during which Israel repeatedly

tried to implement a “land for peace” formula—never happened. Large majorities of them support unfair pressure to “save Israel from itself,” by forcing it to make suicidal concessions to the Palestinians, and back the appeasement of Iran, which poses an existential threat to the Jewish state.

This has led many Israelis to ask why—if the only U.S. Jews who can be counted on to prioritize Israel’s security when they vote are Orthodox or political conservatives—should they care about measures that only offend the liberal denominations?

Nevertheless, as much as the battle for the hearts and minds of non-Orthodox Jewry can seem lost at times, conceding the notion that up to 90 percent of North American Jews can be just written off would do enormous damage to the battle to defend Zionism.

It’s true that evangelical Christians provide most of the pro-Israel muscle in American politics nowadays. But relying entirely on them, or on the minority of American Jews who are Orthodox, ignores a vast reserve of people who are, or who might be, persuaded to back Zionism.

It wasn’t that long ago that Conservative and Reform Jewry were bastions of pro-Israel sentiment. That has changed in recent decades, with evidence mounting that even many rabbis are adopting fashionable liberal stands

### Is there a reason to fear ben Gvir?

By Binyamin Rose

**The US pressure campaign about Ben Gvir evokes historical echoes.**

Both Israel and the United States will have to learn to live with Itamar Ben Gvir, who stands poised to assume control of the new Ministry of National Security once the Netanyahu government is sworn in.

The US pressure campaign against Netanyahu to keep Ben Gvir out of the cabinet failed. It came from all corners — Democratic senators, Biden administration officials, and Conservative and Reform Jewish groups.

It was an exercise in futility to begin with. Netanyahu could not avoid giving cabinet posts to Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich — the leaders of the second-largest party in his ruling coalition. Shas and UTJ received their fair share, too, for sticking with Netanyahu through thick and thin.

The level and tone of the outside interference were inept and inappropriate, coming from the same people who applauded the diversity of the previous government for including Arab and far-left parties. But it’s not unprecedented, and the new government and its supporters in Israel and the diaspora must prepare for the second wave, and for how the government will react to a cacophony of criticism.

Let’s turn the clock back some 25 years, when a much younger and more combative Netanyahu first became Israel’s prime minister.

At the time, IDF general Ariel Sharon was the bête

according to which Israel is an illegal occupier and human-rights abuser.

That 90 students at the Reform and Conservative rabbinical seminaries signed an outrageous letter taking sides against Israel in the spring of 2021, when the Jewish state was under assault from thousands of rockets and missiles launched by terrorists in Gaza, was a seminal moment.

Against this travesty, a movement of rabbis dedicated to reviving support for Israel has arisen. The Zionist Rabbinic Coalition faces an uphill fight against long odds. But it is clearly in Israel’s interest for the organization to succeed in pushing back against these toxic trends that are rooted in antisemitism and woke ideology.

Letting the religious parties win on the conversion and Law of Return issues would effectively ensure that its efforts will have been in vain. That’s why it’s likely that Netanyahu, who understands Americans much better than most Israelis, is not likely to concede.

He is aware that writing off the vast majority of world Jewry would be a catastrophe, as well as a blow to Israel’s efforts to maintain its standing in the United States and to mobilize support from those Americans who are interested in helping the Jewish State.

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noire of both the international community and the Israeli left for his role in Israel’s ill-fated invasion of Lebanon in the 1980s. President Clinton pressured Netanyahu not to appoint Sharon as defense minister, even though he was Bibi’s most seasoned military hand. Netanyahu bent to the pressure and put Sharon in charge of a new Ministry of Infrastructure, which no longer exists.

If Bibi bent, Sharon broke.

Two years later, Sharon accompanied Netanyahu to the Wye Plantation talks, at which Clinton coerced Israel to cede parts of Hebron to the Palestinian Authority. I remember thinking at the time that as long as Sharon was riding shotgun with Bibi, Hebron was safe.

I was wrong. Not only did Sharon not stand in the way, but he even upped the ante seven years later when he presided over the destruction of Jewish communities in Gaza and the northern Shomron near Jenin, expelling 19,000 Jews from their homes and thriving farms.

Israel suffers from these monumental mistakes to this day. Gaza has turned into a fortress run by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, while Jenin is the most bellicose hotbed of Palestinian Authority terror.

There is no telling how much the international pressure campaign affected Sharon’s 180-degree turn — from telling Jewish settlers to grab every available hilltop while they still had a chance, to instead giving strategic



territory from our biblical heartland away to our sworn enemies.

How much of his U-turn was driven by his desire to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the international community?

The conventional wisdom is that Ben Gvir and Smotrich are much tougher — they're religious Zionists, unlike Sharon, who was secular, and they have the courage of their convictions.

They said the same thing about Naftali Bennett. I'm not trying to draw comparisons between people, but politics, like history, tends to repeat itself. Remember, the view from here isn't the view from there. No one is immune from that thinking. And no one likes to be bashed in the media every day. Ben Gvir has already received death threats that necessitate extra protection for him and his family.

#### Reality Check

Netanyahu's plan to carve up existing ministries and create the new Ministry of National Security was devised to keep Ben Gvir's power in check.

On paper, Ben Gvir will have supervisory powers over 18 Border Patrol units responsible for maintaining order in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. But the IDF will still make the operational decisions, as they always do, in consultation with the Security Cabinet, Defense Ministry, and intelligence chiefs.

The Border Patrol is hoping Ben Gvir will secure larger budgets so it can expand its scope and effectiveness, but Ben Gvir will find himself in the crosshairs whenever the IDF brass orders an evacuation of an "illegal" Jewish outpost that's causing international consternation. And imagine the outcry if Ben Gvir decides it's time to start

enforcing the law against illegal Arab settlements in Judea and Samaria.

Ben Gvir may have the title, but he doesn't hold all the cards. Expect clashes in which he will joust with everyone and anyone, including his voters.

The same applies to Smotrich. He's a more seasoned politician, and he has prior cabinet experience, in the Transportation Ministry, where he won public acclaim.

But Smotrich was never a serious candidate for the Defense Ministry, and the Biden administration misspent political capital lobbying against him. The Likud has a gentleman named Yoav Galant who is number four on the party list, a former IDF major general who fought in Lebanon and Gaza and led the Navy's southern command. There's no way Smotrich was beating him out for the job.

Smotrich will likely become finance minister, but no matter who gets the job, his or her first task will be to cancel or pare down a wave of planned price hikes on gasoline, electricity, and property taxes scheduled to take effect on or before January 1.

As this new government settles in, neither the greatest fears of the international community nor the highest hopes of Israelis who elected it are likely to be borne out.

But the political labels have already been flung about, and some of them have stuck. Ben Gvir and Smotrich are far-right, or even ultranationalists, whatever exactly that means. Shas and UTJ will also have to fend off attempts at delegitimization as dark, antiquated forces when it comes to matters of religion and state.

The chorus of critics might have been defeated at the polls, but they haven't stopped rehearsing their lines, and they will get louder with each passing day.

We need to steel ourselves.

## The End of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, and the Rise of the Arab-Israeli Coalition

By Dan Schueffan

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### The New Middle East is here, and it's not what Shimon Peres expected.

Despite what most Western readers have long been conditioned to assume, the Middle East and Arab-Israeli relations are a source of good news these days. The region is still violent and unstable; the conflict between the Jewish state and its radical enemies, Palestinians and others, is far from over; the threat of the Iranian revolutionary regime may be greater than ever. However, a new strategic alignment that has lately been emerging promises a better chance than ever before in modern history for regional states to isolate and stand up to the radicals who continue to threaten the existing order. The old structure of the Arab-Israel conflict that defined the Middle East for generations—during and shortly after the Cold War—is now being replaced by a strengthening Arab-Israeli coalition against Iran and its radical Arab proxies.

Since the 1930s, Arab radicals—the likes of the Mufti of Jerusalem Haj Amin al-Husseini, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Moammar Gadhafi, Saddam Hussein, Hafez al-Assad, and

Yasser Arafat—managed to intimidate other Arab regimes and mobilize them, often against their own national interests, in a fruitless and destructive struggle for the "liberation" of Palestine from the Jews. Cooperation with Israel was condemned as treachery, and evasion of confrontation with her was considered cowardice. This imposed pan-Arab solidarity stifled regional development and repeatedly drew the region into wide-scale wars which occasionally pushed the Soviet and American superpowers to the brink of nuclear confrontation.

For Israel, pan-Arab solidarity could have presented a clear existential threat. A small, vulnerable and isolated state could hardly survive in the long run against a radical and aggressive Arab leadership that can mobilize the enormous resources of the entire Middle East—oil, gas, money, markets, international clout, control of essential waterways and impact on Muslim communities the world over.

The erosion, restriction, and ultimately the abolition of aggressive regional solidarity targeting the Jewish state was

the supreme objective of Israel's regional strategy since its inception. While the goals of regional peace and cooperation sound much more noble and appealing, every clear-sighted realist knew that this romantic dream is unattainable in this historically violent and unstable region. Besides, breaking up attempts at regional solidarity was an indispensable precondition to any progress toward peace or its lesser cousins: Arab states would consider accepting Israel only following a painful recognition of the failure of the attempt to erase it at an acceptable cost.

Israel's grand strategy of breaking up aggressive Arab solidarity scored a crucial success in its 1947-49 War of Independence. A preemptive alliance with King Abdallah I of Transjordan broke up the joint Arab invasion on the day the Jewish state was established, thereby partitioning Mandatory Palestine between Israel and the Hashemite kingdom. Without this alliance, Israel may not have survived the coordinated Arab assault in the early part of the war, it would not have withstood the pressure to internationalize its capital city in Jerusalem, and it could not have concentrated all its forces in the south to confront the Egyptian expeditionary army. The resounding Egyptian defeat that followed forced that pivotal Arab state to betray all other Arab invaders in February 1949, by signing a separate agreement with Israel, practically enabling her to dictate the terms of the armistice and the strategic outcome of that formative war.

Only five years after having successfully shattered Arab solidarity in the late 1940's, Israel faced her most formidable challenge when a messianic Arab leader unprecedentedly captured the imagination of Arabs "From the [Atlantic] Ocean, to the [Arabian] Gulf." Gamal Abdel Nasser's movement was not essentially about the struggle against Israel. It was about uniting the Arabs under Egyptian leadership to restore their historic glory, to retrieve their trodden dignity and to catapult their international bargaining position.

Yet the mobilizing commitment to "liberate" Palestine could not have been left out of Nasser's wish list, even though Nasser himself had consistently insisted since the early 1960s that the Arabs were ill prepared to deal Israel a decisive blow and repeatedly warned that a premature war could end up in disaster, as it had in 1948. Ironically, his own political instruments—the radical rhetoric and the political mechanisms of all-Arab solidarity—were turned against him and enabled his even more radical rivals in the Arab arena to manipulate him into initiating the 1967 war.

Traumatized by the all-Arab mobilization against it in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Israel placed at the top of its regional security strategy the objective of undermining and finally shattering aggressive Arab solidarity against the Jewish state by forcefully removing its Egyptian keystone. Israel, as well as its Arab neighbors, were well aware that the eviction of Egypt from this pivotal position meant not only the collapse of the all-Arab struggle against Israel. It also inevitably meant terminating the Arab hopes for a major role in world affairs that fueled Nasser's messianic

movement. This was a zero-sum game: Israel could not be safe without it; Egypt and Arab radicals could not abide by it.

The ultimate expression of Israel's strategic victory in this crucial round was Egypt's 1979 separate peace agreement with Israel. The essence of Israel's success was Egyptian acquiescence with whatever consequences Israel chose to inflict on other Arabs who continued to challenge it violently. Thus, Israel could get away, for instance, with the occupation of an Arab capital city (Beirut, 1982), the destruction of nuclear projects (Iraq, 1981; Syria 2007) and with wide-scale repression of Palestinian violence (2002-04, in response to the Second Intifada). The 1979 separate peace with Egypt was "the end of the beginning" of the "all-Arab-Israeli conflict." When the Soviet Union collapsed a decade later, the chances of a major coordinated assault against Israel declined even further.

The next major step that changed the core of Arab-Israeli relations and the regional balance of power was not the failed "peace process" with the Palestinians or the 1994 peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. It came more than three decades after the regional turning point in 1979, following the "Arab Spring" and Arab awareness of the far-reaching significance of its failure.

The exhilarating hopes for a speedy restoration of Arab greatness that Nasser inspired in the 1950s and 1960s were shattered with the 1967 defeat and obliterated by the turn of the century. The much more modest hope that prevailed in the region and among Middle Eastern scholars was that Arab societies might extract themselves from their lingering predicament by rising against their autocratic and corrupt leaders and replace their failing realities with more pluralistic modern political and social structures. The Arab upheaval in the second decade clearly proved that the failure to meet the challenges of the 21st century was deeply rooted in these Arab societies, far beyond the tyranny and deficiencies of their leadership. Never before in their modern history were Arab regimes and their politically aware elites more cognizant of their weakness and less hopeful about an effective response to their predicament in the foreseeable future.

The profound change in the strategic landscape of the Middle East in the recent decade started with this recognition, but it materialized only when it was accompanied by three more realizations among important regional players. A somewhat exaggerated and oversimplified definition may be helpful in order to characterize its four pillars: the magnitude of the Iranian regional threat, the inability of Arab states to stand up to that threat by themselves, the questionable steadfastness of American support, and the proven capacity and dependability of Israel.

Unlike most European and American political leaders, officials, and observers, Arabs fully realize the magnitude of the Iranian determination to hegemonize the Middle East at their expense and the effectiveness of Iranian brutality and sophistication in the pursuit of that objective.

Watching the impact of the Iranian takeovers in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and its subversion in their own countries, they know they are in desperate need of external assistance to survive.

In this time of supreme Arab anxiety and distress, the Obama administration demonstrated a frightening combination of surrealistic misreading of basic regional realities and sweeping strategic incompetence. Some of the most important regional allies of the United States perceived Obama's policies as an attempt to replace their own historic alliance with the U.S. by an American strategic deal with the Iranian Revolution. These suspicions, which culminated with the JCPOA, were only partially alleviated during the one-term Trump administration; they resurfaced with renewed vigor when Biden was elected. This deep mutual mistrust was manifested when even a conciliatory presidential visit in July 2022 failed to convince Saudi Arabia to help Biden to bring down the price of oil.

With the need for external support against the Iranian threat at a desperate peak, and trust in the American guarantor at its lowest ebb, the most vulnerable Arab states turned to the only power that fully appreciates the magnitude of that threat and is capable and determined to provide a forceful response. Israel is not only cognizant of the catastrophic consequences of Iranian regional hegemony but has also been engaged for more than half a decade in a wide-scale preventive war in Syria and western Iraq to thwart the Iranian takeover where it threatens Israel most acutely.

Israel is, of course, infinitely less powerful than the U.S. But to the beleaguered Arabs it is, at this stage, also immeasurably more trustworthy as an ally against their worst and most immediate enemy, which poses an ongoing existential threat.

Using an outdated vocabulary of Middle Eastern affairs, recent relations between Israel and most Arab states are often discussed in terms of peace and normalization. What is happening recently is far more significant than the willingness to live together and overshadow old grievances and animosities. It is about strategic interdependence with a senior Israeli partner. The historic all-Arab coalition against Israel has been replaced by a de facto Arab-Israeli coalition against the radical forces that threaten them both. Iran is the immediate and outstanding among those radicals, but Erdogan's Turkey in

the eastern Mediterranean, Syria—and, in a different way, its allies in the Muslim Brotherhood—are not very far behind.

For Israel, the result of these new alignments is a transformational change in its regional standing, as well as a major upgrade of its position on the global stage. In the Middle East, Israel can, for the first time, act as a full-fledged regional power. In recent decades, Israel established its position as a formidable military, economic, and technological power, but it could not openly and freely maneuver politically or partake in regional strategic alliances. Its position is dramatically enhanced when Arab parties compete over its attention and cooperation.

On the international scene, global powers and other states no longer have to weigh the advantages of cooperation with Israel against its prohibitive costs in “the Arab World.” While a large part of Arab public opinion remains hostile to Israel, European and other states can pay lip service by criticizing Israel in international forums and through symbolic diplomatic protests while deepening bilateral cooperation, with no real cost vis-à-vis Arab regimes.

By far the most significant effect of this transformation is on the American strategic calculus of its relations with Israel. Washington no longer needs to choose between support of Israel on the one hand, and Arab oil, gas, money, markets, and alliance with the United States, on the other. Most of America's allies in the region need a strong Israel for their strategic welfare or even survival, and they share with Israel a disappointment in the degree of trustworthy support that Washington offers to its regional allies. The U.S. is already engaged in coordinating an American-sponsored regional air defense system against Iran that reflects this new and revolutionary reality. Crucially important Arab states want more of that, not less.

In some important ways, then, the “New Middle East” has arrived. Not, of course, in the surreal Shimon Peres vision of regional democracy, peace, and prosperity, but in terms of a balance of power and hard strategic realities that can guardrail a somewhat less unstable and dangerous region, where the radicals are isolated and the others cooperate to keep them at bay.

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## Inside the Drug Trade That Funds Iran's Levantine Empire

By Paul Wood

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### Captagon and the Middle East.

Abu Hassan puts down his Kalashnikov and reaches into a pocket on his bodywarmer to hand me a small white pill. ‘Here,’ he says in Arabic, ‘a gift. This’ll keep you awake for 48 hours.’ He grins and adds in English: ‘Good sex!’ The pill is Captagon, an amphetamine known as ‘the poor man’s coke’. It can make the user feel invincible and was

taken by fighters on all sides in Syria's civil war; Isis were said to be big fans of ‘Captain Courage’. It has now spread across the Middle East. You might find Captagon fuelling a party in Riyadh or keeping a Baghdad taxi driver awake through a double shift. It is, of course, illegal. And horribly addictive. It is said to be by far Syria's biggest export, providing more than 90 per cent of the country's foreign

currency. The Assad regime may be the world's biggest narco state.

Captagon is said to be Syria's biggest export, providing more than 90 per cent of the country's foreign currency

Abu Hassan was introduced to me as the boss of a Lebanese Captagon gang. We met through a relative of his – the only reason Abu Hassan is talking to me. He's not the biggest Captagon producer in Lebanon, he says, but not the smallest either. He isn't what you'd imagine a Lebanese drug lord might look like – no bling, no flash car. He is small and scruffy, in his fifties, with grey stubble and a weathered, chestnut-coloured face; he drives an ancient Mercedes. More in keeping with expectations, there are four or five bodyguards. One, wearing combat webbing stuffed with ammunition and grenades, sits with us while we talk. The mountains that are the border with Syria loom in the distance. Abu Hassan explains how the Assad regime makes money from him.

It starts with a call from a middleman in Syria, placing an order for a dealer in Iraq, Jordan or Saudi Arabia. Then they hurry to get the ingredients, what he calls 'Chinese salts' and benzene. These are legal chemicals shipped through the port of Beirut and they cost little. His men mix them up in a vat and stamp out the pills with a machine. Before it was banned, Captagon was a drug for narcolepsy and attention deficit disorder. The body breaks it down to amphetamine and another stimulant found in small amounts in tea. A lot of what is sold as Captagon in the Middle East is simply amphetamine. Abu Hassan doesn't know the chemical formula for what he makes. But he says with pride that every batch gets some extra kick from five kilos of methamphetamine, or crystal meth (a drug that makes addicts' teeth and hair fall out). They put eight kilos in the batch for the pill he gave me, 'so it's good stuff'.

The smallest order he ever got through the Syrian middleman was for three boxes, the biggest for 300. He holds his hands apart to show something the size of a large shoebox and says that each one would hold about 10,000 pills. He sells the pills for \$1-2 each but then has to 'pay for the road' through Syria. It costs \$2 a pill to move a shipment across the border, then another \$2 to move a little way up the road to the city of Homs, and so on through all the regime's checkpoints. The pills could pass through 'a dozen hands' on their way to the dealers and their customers across the Middle East, the price going up at each stage. In Riyadh, each pill fetches \$24, or more. A box sold for \$20,000 ends up being worth a quarter of a million.

Much of this money goes, he says, to the Syrian mukhabarat, or secret police; 'the intelligence'; and the army's 4th Division, led by President Assad's brother, Maher. There is also a big businessman who controls a number of checkpoints because he is used by the regime to oversee aid convoys. 'Everyone takes their cut.' Even the smallest shipment means half a million dollars for the people who run the Syrian regime; a hundred boxes will

put \$10 million into their hands. 'And let's say a hundred guys like me are moving product through Syria. That's the whole state budget, right there.'

It works the same way in Lebanon. He says he has to pay off the local police, the mukhabarat, the intelligence services, and Hezbollah, the Shiite militia that is controlled by Iran and which has fought for the Syrian regime. We are meeting in Hezbollah territory, in the Beqaa valley. The towns along the highway through the Beqaa are dotted with Hezbollah flags, a fist clutching a Kalashnikov on a yellow background. Posters of clerics and martyrs from the fight in Syria are tacked to lampposts. The organisation's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, calls the claim that they smuggle drugs 'fake news'. This would be against Islam, he says: they wouldn't even sell drugs to their enemies. Abu Hassan smiles at this. He knows that Hezbollah doesn't need to be in the Captagon business to profit from it.

The Assad regime's involvement in Captagon is much, much bigger than just extorting smugglers such as Abu Hassan. Like him, the US government identifies Maher al-Assad as the 'kingpin' – but behind manufacturing as well as smuggling. I was told about a meeting in Washington DC where an official laid out the intelligence. There were Captagon factories everywhere: two in the province of Homs and one in Hama, in the heart of the country, and several in Tartous and Latakia along the coast. A paper factory in the northern city of Aleppo had also been converted to Captagon production. That last claim isn't a surprise. Two years ago, Italian police in the port of Salerno seized three container ships from Syria. They found almost 15 tons of Captagon hidden in large paper cylinders. The street value was more than a billion dollars, making it the largest amphetamine bust in history.

Charles Lister, of the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, says there is no doubt Captagon is being produced 'at industrial scale' in Syria. The figures are astonishing. Last year, \$5.5-6 billion worth of Syrian Captagon was seized abroad. The total value of Syria's legal exports is \$800 million. But Lister says the Captagon trade is at least five times what was seized, if not ten to 20 times bigger, given how easy it is to smuggle across borders in the Middle East. His most conservative estimate, then, is of exports worth \$25-30 billion dollars. By comparison, the total value of drugs exported to the US by the Mexican cartels is thought to be \$5-7.5 billion a year. Lister says: 'There is only one revenue stream that matters to the regime right now. And that is drugs.'

There are no scruples about the human cost. This is a regime that murdered tens of thousands of its own people to stay in power. These crimes have put Syria under suffocating international sanctions, which, as one observer put it to me, punish ordinary people for failing to overthrow their government. Some argue, therefore, for more targeted action. But people like Maher al-Assad are already under sanction and – the real problem – the more the Syrian regime is isolated, the more it will have to rely on its illegal source of income, Captagon.

Others argue to bring Syria back into the international community, bribing the regime to go straight. But that would let the Assads and their allies escape justice. And this is easy money for the regime. The drugs are cheap to make and the market keeps growing, especially now that it is moving into Europe. As Lister says, from their point of view, it would be ‘crazy’ to get out of the Captagon business.

He wants to ‘encourage the region itself to come together to combat this’. Saudi Arabia has shown what this might look like. The Saudis banned imports of all Lebanese fruit and vegetables after eight million Captagon pills were found in a shipment of hollowed-out pomegranates. This has unfairly hit all Lebanese farmers, but is having an effect. Abu Hassan tells me he has had to shut down his pill press because of the risk of government raids. He and his bodyguards keep eyeing the road

## Attempts to Reform the Israeli Judiciary Aren’t a Threat to Democracy

By Ruthie Blum

### The override clause.

Israel’s outgoing interim prime minister, Yair Lapid, opened his Yesh Atid Party meeting on Monday by addressing the infamous “override clause.”

“It will crush the court; it will crush Israeli democracy,” he said, referring to one of the main issues dividing Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition-in-formation and the rival “anybody but Bibi” camp that lost the Nov. 1 Knesset election.

Soon-to-be-former Defense Minister Benny Gantz echoed the sentiment on social media. “Those who promote passage of the override clause with a majority of 61 are acting in the name of corruption, not governance,” he tweeted, also on Monday. “Netanyahu wants to carry out a [car]-ramming attack on Israeli democracy and harm national security.”

Exiting Transportation Minister and Labor Party chair Merav Michaeli posted about her faction’s “first conference to save democracy and the justice system,” held to “unite the forces of good...to fight the dangerous override clause that is liable to critically harm the legal system and...the rights of all of us.”

The list of doomsayers about the proposed amendment—aimed at enabling the Knesset to “override” Supreme Court reversals of laws it enacts—goes on. Some detractors have been highlighting the slim majority of MKs (61 out of Israel’s 120-member parliament) that promoters suggest should be sufficient to dismiss judges’ unwanted interference.

Others, who don’t even bother pretending that the size of the majority in question is at the root of their objections, simply decry the very notion of stripping the judiciary of any of its powers.

This isn’t to say that all supporters of the override clause are comfortable with every detail of its incarnation. Take best-selling author and neo-conservative pundit Gadi Taub, for example. In a letter to colleagues over the

nervously as we speak. ‘We pay for protection but that doesn’t mean we can sleep comfortably.’

Abu Hassan tells me the story of his life: joining a Palestinian militia to fight the Israelis, then the Shiite Amal militia to fight in the civil war, then moving into hashish farming, now Captagon. Five years ago, his nephew was among a group of Lebanese soldiers kidnapped and killed by Isis in the nearby Sunni town of Aarsal. So Abu Hassan kidnapped the nephew of the man he held responsible. He made the young man lie on the grave of his dead relative and shot him. Then he called the man in Aarsal and said: ‘Come get the body of your dog.’ War breeds men like Abu Hassan. The Syrian war has made many more of them – the Captagon trade will not be easy to stamp out.

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jns.org

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weekend, the senior lecturer at the Federmann School of Public Policy and Governance at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem responded to a petition against the clause launched by a fellow academic—Dr. Yael Shomer of Tel Aviv University—in tandem with a separate one signed by 130 jurists and counting.

Shomer’s formulation boiled down to what has become a convenient catchphrase—the “tyranny of the majority”—bandied about by all override opponents, among them those lacking even minimal familiarity with the subject.

Taub wrote in an email, “Since the text [of the petition] expresses a professional opinion, but touches on politics, it is inappropriate for it to paint a partial picture...or ignore fundamental parameters that we certainly wouldn’t allow ourselves to disregard in the classroom.

“The text is meant to have an influence beyond the realm of academia, and thus contains elements that it needs to clarify for non-professionals [who] put their faith in [our research]. It is our duty, thus, to provide a complete picture. It should be taken for granted, as well, that we mustn’t frivolously join in declarations, some of which border on actual irresponsibility,” he said.

Taub’s expansion on this, which included a thoughtful examination of the flaws of the petition, was countered by Hebrew University political scientist Gayil Talshir.

“The key question surrounding the override clause,” she replied, “is what majority [should be] required for the Knesset—not the government, which in any case is enormously powerful—to overrule a High Court of Justice ruling that an ordinary law is unconstitutional (i.e. violates civil or minority rights, or goes against Israel’s being Jewish and democratic).”

Taub’s 19-point answer warrants study by every member of the newly instated 25th Knesset. The following is my translation, for foreign consumption:

There is no dispute that in Israel there is no structural separation between the legislative and executive branches. This is not unique to Israel; it characterizes the parliamentary system everywhere. Does this mean that separation of powers only prevails in a presidential system? Certainly not. It means that the separation of powers is not hermetic in the parliamentary system, and thus the nature of its checks and balances is also different. But the remedy cannot be the authorization of a court with no defined limit to its power to have the final decision-making authority in all matters, when its members are not appointed by elected officials, but rather, in practice, by their peers.

No other Western democracy's court has such powers and such control over the appointment of its judges.

In fourth place in the Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index is New Zealand, where the court has no authority to annul laws.

Britain, a prominent example of a parliamentary system, is similar to Israel in another sense; it, too, has no written constitution. But this doesn't mean a court with unlimited power is needed there. On the contrary, in the U.K., as in New Zealand, the court has no power to overturn laws.

A coalition system does not mean, as is often said, that the government is all-powerful. On the contrary, such a government is dependent for legislation on the coalition, even on parts of the coalition; at times, when it numbers only 61 [lawmakers], a single MK can thwart it. In a parliamentary system, there is justification for this subordination, as the Knesset represents the entire public. But the fragmentation of the [multi-party] Knesset pushed us, due to an extreme electoral system, into a hard-to-manage situation (as evidenced by the recent rounds of elections). The weakness of the Knesset, due to this fragmentation, poses a particularly serious problem to governance.

The Israeli experience illustrates how this situation enabled the power of the court to grow, with individual parties having come along [over the years] and vetoing reforms...What makes the Israeli situation unique is the question of whether this is the result of the weakness of the government vis-à-vis the Knesset and/or that of the Knesset vis-à-vis the Supreme Court. We have often heard from lawyers that it was the weakness of the elected branches that created a vacuum into which the court entered.

Talshir writes that in Israel the court has returned few laws to the Knesset for review...and invalidated [only some of] them. The English court returns laws to the parliament for review, along with a recommendation that is not binding on the MPs.

We are repeatedly asked what will happen if the Knesset decides to cancel elections. But our Knesset is restrained to an extraordinary degree, and the body that appropriated the power to cancel elections is precisely the court. If it decides to do so, who will restrain it? After all,

the Knesset could, at any moment, cancel the 'Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty,' even by a majority of two [lawmakers] against one, and thus cut the foundation out from under the authority that the court took for itself, under the influence of [former Supreme Court President] Aharon Barak, in a single day. But it doesn't. The court, on the other hand...[has] stated that "in rare situations" and under "extreme circumstances," it is possible to exercise judicial review over the Knesset members elected by the public to form a coalition. In short, the court has taken upon itself the power to cancel election results "in rare situations."

Our method of selecting judges, which reproduces the political DNA of the justices far beyond the reach of public will, is unreasonable, and even less so where such extreme activism is concerned.

Talshir writes that the court returned "only" 22 laws for the Knesset's consideration. First, it didn't return them for review; it invalidated them. Secondly, [22 laws] is quite a lot. Thirdly, this is just the tip of the iceberg. In other cases, it neutered the laws without actually invalidating them...[I]n others, it gave interim injunctions that canceled government decisions or threatened to invalidate them. ...In a host of other cases, the State Attorney's Office [legal counsel to the executive branch] declared a law "not High Court adjudicable," thus killing it before it was even born.

We are told that the court protects the minority from the majority...But most of the time, it uses unlimited power to decide on contentious issues that should be matters for the parliamentary give-and-take that leads to compromise.

The claim that the court defends the rights of the individual is not convincing either...Israel violates the individual rights of its citizens wholesale, taking away their freedom and property too easily and without due process, [through] confiscation and arrests, which the court shamefully does not restrain. It recently also allowed the use of torture in criminal proceedings. Here was a case in which the legislature protected human rights, and the police and state prosecutor, with the approval of the court, trampled on them.

The court's blithe use of the concept of human rights leads to utter absurdities. The Deposit Law...[to temporarily withhold a percentage of wages from asylum-seekers until they leave the country] was deemed a violation of human rights, while [taxpayer-funded] public broadcasting was touted as a civil "right."

The definition of democracy is, indeed, the "sovereignty of the citizens." This should be stressed in the face of the misleading discourse adopted by jurists following [Justice] Barak, who reduced the expression of this sovereignty—elections—to the rank of "procedure." Talshir goes at least one step in this direction when she writes that "anchoring the protection of civil and minority rights against majority rule (in addition to a constitution that guarantees the rule of law and elections that guarantee

the rule of the majority that can be changed) is a condition for democracy.” But elections are not “extra.” They are essential to democracy even in the narrow, logical sense....[They] are a necessary condition for the existence of democracy, because there is no democracy without them.

Talshir is correct that liberal democracy is meaningless without the protection of human and minority rights, but this isn't to say that the “essence” of democracy is human or minority rights, since it is a system of governance that must determine how to protect these rights. That is through the sovereignty of the citizenry, without which the other rights are meaningless. (We've already seen what enlightened tyranny looks like, from the 18th century onward.)

Talshir writes that “elections that seemingly exclusively reflect the ‘will of the people’ do not make a country democratic—see Syria and Russia, etc.” This is a very puzzling claim. In those countries, there are no free elections, and they do not reflect the will of the people.

The idea that the will of the people is a fascist monster, and thus needs to have an unchallengeable authority placed over it, is misleading and, in any case, undemocratic. If the people do not want democracy, there will be no democracy. No court will be able to impose democracy—or liberalism (i.e. human rights), without the

### **On the Holiday of Sigd, Ethiopian Jews Remember Generations Past, and Yearn for Future Redemption** By Shula Mola [jewishbookcouncil.org](http://jewishbookcouncil.org) **November 15, 2022**

#### **A celebration of the Jewish connection with Jerusalem.**

I have a powerful memory of my last Sigd in Ethiopia in November 1983. Sigd is a holiday of the Ethiopian Jewish community which takes place fifty days after Yom Kippur each year. Sigd celebrates our connection to Jerusalem; the entire village would go up the nearby mountain men, women, and children dressed in our best festive clothes for a day of fasting and prayer. The Kessoch, our religious leaders, read verses from the Torah and prayed for a return to Zion. I remember the strong feeling that surrounded us all, that soon the dream would come true for us to reach Jerusalem. By that year, some of the villages of the Beta Israel had already left to go to Eretz Yisrael, including some of my uncles. During that Sigd in 1983, I watched from the side-lines as the adults prayed, and I spent my time quietly conversing with my cousins. We talked about how we would no longer have to go up this mountain, because we would soon reach Jerusalem and would pray in the holy Temple.

I remember many other things from that Sigd. For example, I can still see a woman sitting to the side and scattering grains of wheat on the ground while lamenting in a whisper and crying. At that time I did not really understand what she was doing. Today I know that it was part of the observance of Sigd. On this day we also prayed for the release of the souls of the dead, sprinkling grains of wheat or teff flour for birds to eat so they would fly our

sovereignty of the people—from above. Those who recommend the latter side with Plato's view of “substantive democracy.”

Concentration of power in the hands of the court does not constitute insurance against the danger of the trampling of human rights. In Germany, the Supreme Court sided with Hitler [through] the Enabling Act [that] abolished the parliament...In the Dred Scott ruling, the U.S. Supreme Court supported slavery, while the elections that brought Abraham Lincoln to power led to its abolition in a bloody war.

I myself, am not happy with a 61-majority override clause, which I think will lead to a battle between branches of government. In its stead, relations between them should be anchored in basic laws, the most urgent of which would define the limits of the court's power and changing the method of electing judges. On this basis, it would also be possible to discuss the court's authority to invalidate laws, for example, with a special majority. I fear, however, that the outcry against the override clause is not aimed at protecting minority or individual rights, but rather at preserving the [current situation] that is unparalleled in the democratic world for a very simple reason: that it is distinctly anti-democratic.

*Ruthie Blum is an Israel-based journalist and author of “To Hell in a Handbasket: Carter, Obama, and the ‘Arab Spring.’”*

prayers to heaven. The holiday of Sigd is not only a gathering of the living, but also a day to remember and be reunited with those that have passed.

The community held within its heart the dream of going to Jerusalem through the celebration of the Sigd holiday every year. Our generation was able to realize the dream of many generations and return to Zion. The return to Zion was possible thanks to the power of the dream.

The poet Danny Adamsu, in the song “Memory, How Much Power Has the Spirit,” described the journey from Ethiopia to Eretz Yisrael:

No right, no left. Straight. Just north. Walking and walking, marching brotherhood.

Districts, villages, and families.

There are no days, only nights

Eat a little, strong spirit

The same spirit that sustained our community for many generations in Ethiopia also sustained us in the difficult journey that the community endured. I was a twelve-year-old girl when I made the journey described in Adamsu's poem.

We are walking, the water is gone, and the food is gone.

Desert, the earth is hot, determined to arrive.

There is power, which comes from the Spirit.

These lines from Adamsu give me chills. These lines bring back the memory of that journey — I remember the ground burning my feet. But I ignored it; I didn't pay

attention. Mainly I remember the expectation, and the talks between us children, that soon we will arrive in Jerusalem. I remember the strength in the spirit. In recent years many in the community, including me personally, have been looking for that spirit that Adamsu describes. We try to follow the spirit for power. To trace the spirit that has sustained our community for 2500 years.

The holiday of Sigd became a national holiday in Israel in 2008 through the joint effort of the poet Dan-ny Adamsu, during his time as the CEO of the Association of Ethiopian Jews, and Avi Masfen, another man who held the spirit and hope of returning to Jerusalem. At that time I served as the chairperson of the organization but I was not convinced that it was really important to gain recognition for our Beta Israel celebrations from the wider Israeli society. Today, almost fifteen years later, I realize how lucky we are as a community to have such a meaningful holiday for us and other Jewish communities to recognize. I am more and more convinced that our chance to feel at home in Israel can only be realized if we find ways to express our culture and traditions as part of the larger spirit and culture around us.

According to Rab-bi Dr. Sharon Shalom, Sigd is an ancient holiday that was forgotten by the other Jewish communities and preserved by the Beta Israel community. I think the universal spiritual and social meanings of the holiday can only be real positive additions to society as a whole. The heart of Sigd is in the renewal of the covenants between a person and God, a person and the community, and a person and society. We give to charity and help the people and villages who need it. And in the second part of the day, we lift our spirits through singing, dancing, and communal meals. This holiday has the power to strengthen the connections between people and affirm our community's identity. Today I am engaged day and night in searching for this spirit of our community. I am documenting the history of our community for the strength of our children and future generations.

Since the mid-1980s every year, on the twenty-ninth day of the month of Cheshvan, people have gathered on the Promenade in the Armon Hanatziv neighborhood in Jerusalem, with a breathtaking view of the Temple Mount in the Old City.

*Ms. Mola is an Israeli civil and human rights activist and educator*

## How the Mayor of New York Helped Brooklyn's Jews to Observe the Sabbath

By Yehudit Garmaise

boropark24.com

November 28, 2022

Aided by a one-dollar lease.

A new eruv surrounds all of Boro Park, and most of Brooklyn, thanks to the work of the Brooklyn Eruv Board and Vaad, and the oversight of Rabbi Yaakov Zeide and 10 additional rabbis: notably HaRav Asher Eckstein and HaRav Gavriel Tzinner, shlita, the dayan of Vishnitz and the author of Boi Toshiv.

"We built an eruv around most of Brooklyn that has been functional since Yom Kippur," Rabbi Eli Uminer, a board member of the Brooklyn Eruv, told BoroPark 24.

While many smaller kosher eruvin have long served many Jewish communities in Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Eruv, which has extended the boundaries of most of the eruvin, covers many areas that were not previously included in any eruvin, and can serve as a backup when other eruvin go down.

Jews who want to walk to other communities for simchas on Shabbos should first carefully check the eruv's boundaries on the map on [brooklyneruv.com](http://brooklyneruv.com) to remain 100% clear on where they can legally carry, Rabbi Uminer pointed out.

The new eruv, for instance, does not encircle Williamsburg, which has an eruv of its own.

Jews who wish to can walk from the Brooklyn eruv into the Williamsburg eruv.

The Brooklyn Eruv's board said that it undertook the project, "in order to enhance the oneg Shabbos for all: those with babies at home can go for walks, to visit Bubbie

and Zeidie, go to the park, and walk to simchas in other neighborhoods.

"Additionally, the eruv will cover those who carry inadvertently."

While the first part of completing an eruv is building and repairing the eruv's tzuras hapesoachim, or "doors" and "virtual walls," the second part is that the city's mayor or police commissioner must rent the eruv to the Jewish community, Rabbi Uminer explained.

"Additionally, we had to ensure the zikui hapas, which is the matzah for the eruv chatzeiros," Rabbi Uminer added.

While in the past, the city had given the Jewish community a verbal agreement, today at City Hall, Mayor Eric Adams completed the project by signing a 99-year lease for \$1," to allow carrying in the boundaries of the eruv in accordance with Jewish law," the mayor's signed proclamation said.

"It was very nice that the mayor took the time to host us and to make the eruv for us," said Rabbi Uminer, who was at City Hall today along with other Brooklyn Eruv Vaad members Rabbi Tuvia Greisman, Rabbi Shmuel Poltman, and Rabbi Yossel Greenwald.

The many rabbis who support the eruv said that a vaad of mashgichim will check the eruv weekly, and that they will "ensure that the Brooklyn Eruv will be maintained in the best possible way."