

President Biden Has an Opportunity to Change Course on Iran

By Jonathan Schachter

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Netanyahu's warnings about the nuclear deal have proved prescient.

Since Israel's Nov. 1 election — the fifth in under four years — it has been hard to miss the online and on-air angst about Benjamin Netanyahu's illiberal coalition partners, his controversial domestic agenda, and Israel's relations with the United States. Yet, for all the discussion about alt lifestyle rights, legal reform in Israel and the 40-year chemistry between Netanyahu and President Biden, the leading issue on Netanyahu's agenda is Iran's nuclear program. More than anything else, Washington's next moves toward Tehran are what will set the tone for relations with Jerusalem.

In the seven years since the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal, or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Netanyahu's warnings have proved prescient. With the agreement's implementation, Iran became more, not less, aggressive across the Middle East. The nuclear infrastructure the JCPOA guaranteed Iran enabled the regime to move closer to nuclear weapons at a time of its choosing. Rather than preventing proliferation, the JCPOA sparked a regional nuclear arms race, as Iran's neighbors now seek the same weapons-relevant nuclear capabilities the agreement allows Iran.

At the same time, the United States and Europe have responded to increasingly grave violations of Iran's nuclear obligations — some of which are separate from the JCPOA — with toothless expressions of concern and intensifying efforts to appease the regime.

Starting in late summer, the conventional wisdom suggested that nuclear negotiations with Iran were suspended until after the midterm elections. But the regime continues to increasingly and irreversibly violate the JCPOA's terms, while it stonewalls three international investigations into undeclared nuclear materials and activities. A women-led uprising rages in Iran's streets, despite the regime henchmen's brutal efforts to put it

down. Iran is now giving Russia the same drones and missiles that Tehran has given to Hezbollah, the Houthis, and others to menace America's allies in the Middle East. Providing the Iranian regime with hundreds of billions of dollars in sanctions relief and legitimizing the expansion of a uranium enrichment program that has no peaceful justification makes less sense than ever.

The week before Christmas, a video appeared of President Biden saying that the JCPOA is dead, though he would not make an announcement declaring it so ("Long story," he said). This is a promising development, mostly because the JCPOA was never a solution to the Iranian nuclear problem. Additionally, if Biden were to continue pursuing a futile return to the JCPOA, Israel's government and neighbors would conclude that they must fight Iran and do so alone. Netanyahu has always argued that the nuclear deal made war more likely. It should be clear to U.S. policymakers that a nuclear-armed Iran is an outcome Israel cannot accept and will fight to prevent. Yet, until now, the administration's approach has been pointing directly toward such a conflagration.

The new year opens with a new Israeli government and a historic opportunity for Biden. If his remarks reflect a change in course, if he is prepared to pressure rather than placate Iran and to develop a "Plan B" to genuinely prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons, he will make both a nuclear arms race and a war to prevent it less likely. Standing against Iran with Israel and America's other Middle Eastern partners will demonstrate U.S. leadership, stymie Russian and Chinese efforts to supplant the U.S. in the region, and improve the prospects for peace between Israel and its neighbors.

The question is, will the president change direction in 2023 to the only practical path offering a chance for peace? If he does, he undoubtedly will find in Netanyahu a willing, capable and creative partner.

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Saudi Arabia Isn't What It Used to Be

By John Hannah

foreignpolicy.com

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The U.S. should be encouraging, not ignoring, reforms.

Go to Riyadh. That's the top recommendation I've been giving U.S. officials after my November 2022 trip to Saudi Arabia with a delegation sponsored by the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, where I work.

Why? Because amid the dysfunction of the U.S.-Saudi relationship, the domestic transformation currently underway in the country is one of the most important but underappreciated developments of the past decade, with profound implications for the Middle East and beyond. Most Americans at every level—in the Biden

administration, the U.S. Congress, the media, and certainly the public—are strikingly unaware of the vast scope and scale of Saudi reforms and the tremendous stake the United States has in the country's success.

The Saudi economy is being overhauled and diversified away from its singular dependence on oil. Billions of dollars are being spent to create new industries and the jobs that go with them nearly from scratch, including tourism, transportation, and renewable energy. Millions of Saudi women are being empowered and granted newfound rights to drive, work, and travel; while women are by no means fully equal citizens yet, this

development is literally changing the face of Saudi society. Culture—once almost totally absent from public spaces because it was considered blasphemous to Islam—is being nurtured and embraced. Cinemas, art shows, rock concerts, raves, theme parks, and even opera festivals are popping up across the country.

Radical Wahhabism—the austere, misogynistic, intolerant, and anti-Western religious doctrine that controlled the kingdom for decades—is steadily being replaced by efforts to inculcate and propagate a more tolerant and moderate version of Islam. School textbooks are being scrubbed of their most hate-filled content—from sanctioning the second-class status of women to demonizing Jews and Shiites to endorsing capital punishment for homosexuality. The state-backed export of jihad ideology has ended in favor of a message urging Muslims around the world to respect the norms and laws of the countries where they live.

Yet most Americans are oblivious to these changes. The reason is obvious enough. Saudi reform efforts—collectively known as Vision 2030—are the brainchild of the country's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. And for most Americans, Mohammed bin Salman is synonymous with a list of shocking, high-profile acts of political repression, human rights abuses, and downright brutality. Exhibit A, of course, is the grisly 2018 dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, a U.S.-based columnist for the Washington Post, by a Saudi hit team that was assessed by the U.S. intelligence community, based on strong circumstantial evidence, to be operating with Mohammed bin Salman's approval. In the wake of the murder, most everything else concerning Saudi Arabia has been considered secondary by most U.S. politicians and pundits.

The future of Saudi Arabia is hugely important to the United States.

The reaction in the United States is perhaps understandable. But it's also deeply unfortunate—especially for leaders in the Biden administration and Congress who bear responsibility for national security. By all means, press Mohammed bin Salman and the Saudis on the need to limit the worst excesses of a political system that, after all, remains an absolute monarchy, especially when it comes to the all-too-frequent mistreatment of dual U.S.-Saudi nationals. Don't back away from the role that human rights and democratic values have long played in U.S. foreign policy. Just don't let it blind you to the unprecedented and historic process of economic, social, cultural, and religious liberalization that is transforming one of the world's most important midsized powers. It's a transformation that promises to benefit not just tens of millions of Saudis (especially the more than 60 percent of the population under age 35) but also Middle East security and U.S. national interests more broadly.

The future of Saudi Arabia is hugely important to the United States. It's a member of the G-20. It's the world's

largest exporter of oil, which—as Russia's war in Ukraine has reminded us—is still the international economy's most precious commodity. As the birthplace of Islam and home to its two holiest mosques, it carries great weight with many of the world's 50 majority-Muslim countries. Going on 80 years, it's been the United States' most important strategic partner in the Persian Gulf—albeit oftentimes a problematic one, as highlighted by events like the 1973 Arab oil boycott and the kingdom's historical role in financing extremism. The Saudis have provided critical support to counter common adversaries, including the Soviet Union, Iran, al Qaeda, and the Islamic State. If Saudi Arabia's recent flirtations with Israel lead to normalized relations, then it could transform the geopolitics of the Middle East and significantly bolster regional efforts to contain and constrain Iranian aggression.

It's certainly true that Mohammed bin Salman has done nothing to mitigate his country's long history of autocratic rule. On the contrary, as evidenced by the Khashoggi murder, he's escalated efforts to snuff out all signs of political dissent, however mild and unthreatening—often in dark and disturbing ways. Women may now be behind the steering wheel, but the brave female activists who originally championed the cause find themselves imprisoned and reportedly tortured. A 72-year-old U.S. citizen who wrote some mildly critical tweets of Saudi policy from his home in Florida was recently arrested and sentenced to 16 years in prison while he was visiting family in Riyadh. The list goes on.

But outside the political realm, it's also true that the crown prince is expanding the space for individual Saudis to exercise a degree of personal freedom unprecedented in their history. Less than a decade ago, my main impressions on visiting the kingdom were of a sullen, bleak, and xenophobic populace of unproductive subjects, living off unearned government largesse, foreign labor, and a steady diet of religious intolerance. Fast forward several years, and there's a palpable sense in Riyadh of dynamism, energy, and future possibility. The private sector is expanding; young people—especially women—are entering the workplace in record numbers, starting businesses, and being held accountable for their performance. The country is opening itself to the rest of the world in terms of tourists, commerce, and cultural influence in ways never before seen.

I spent a major chunk of nearly 15 years in government railing against Saudi Arabia's sinister and duplicitous role, both financially and ideologically, in creating the ecosystem of anti-Western jihadism that spawned al Qaeda and the Islamic State. If you had walked into my White House office after 9/11 and asked me what was the single most important thing the Saudis could do to advance U.S. national security, I would have said without hesitation that they should stop the export of their hate-filled and tyrannical religious doctrine to Muslim

communities around the world. That religious doctrine and the vast sums Saudi institutions and wealthy individuals spent to promote it were helping to get thousands of Americans and other people killed.

Over the past five years, Mohammed bin Salman has done exactly that. He's incarcerated radical clerics preaching violence. Extremist madrassas, both at home and abroad, have been defunded. Any Saudi support to foreign mosques and organizations must now be approved by host governments. It's a transformative development that even one of the kingdom's harshest U.S. critics, Sen. Chris Murphy, recently acknowledged. But most U.S. officials appear incapable of recognizing this shift, much less its tremendously beneficial impact on U.S. national interests. That's particularly unfortunate given that the Saudi crackdown on extremism has also been accompanied by one of the world's most ambitious programs of domestic reform as well as an historic new willingness to support the normalization of relations with Israel. Add it all up, and it makes the growing chorus of voices that appear single-mindedly focused on shunning, punishing, and (however inadvertently) driving the Saudis into the arms of Washington's most dangerous great-power adversaries not just shortsighted but harmful.

During my two most recent visits to Saudi Arabia, I've had some version of the following conversation with at least 20 young women professionals. I raised the Khashoggi murder. They admitted it was terrible and cast a pall of shame on their country. They said it should never have happened and must never happen again. But then they warned, politely, that if U.S. politicians persisted in defining their country of 36 million people by its single worst day—ignoring the historic opportunities now available to them to live lives of purpose, accomplishment, and fulfillment that their mothers and grandmothers could

never have dreamed of—then the United States is going to have a real problem with millions of Saudi women going forward. If a group of young Saudi women entrepreneurs, scientists, and researchers who represent the best hope for the future of Saudi Arabia and the U.S.-Saudi relationship can grasp the virtue of balancing the bad against the good, so should those responsible for U.S. national security.

The reform of Saudi Arabia may be the most important and hopeful transformation of any Muslim society since former Turkish President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk built a modern, secular, pro-Western country on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Historians 100 years from now may well look back on Mohammed bin Salman's sweeping campaign of reform and liberalization as one of the most significant geopolitical inflection points of the early 21st century. For all of Saudi Arabia's faults and shortcomings, the United States has every interest in engaging, influencing, and shaping that process of historic change rather than shunning and abandoning it to be shaped by those much less friendly to U.S. interests.

U.S. President Joe Biden is fond of reminding his critics that they shouldn't compare him to the Almighty but rather to the alternative. It's good advice that he should insist on applying to Saudi Arabia as well. There, we already know where the alternative ultimately ends: in the smoking ruins of 9/11. With some luck and sustained U.S. engagement, what's emerging in Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia today holds out hope for something that could be infinitely better.

But don't take my word for it. Go to Riyadh, and see for yourself.

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Arab Attitudes to Israel Remain Constant, Despite Israeli Political Upheavals

By David Pollock

washingtoninstitute.org

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Normalization is becoming normal.

Two rare, reliable new public opinion polls commissioned by The Washington Institute of citizens in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in late November 2022—when it was clear that Binyamin Netanyahu would once again become Israel's prime minister—show that popular acceptance of allowing contacts with Israelis is holding steady at just over 40% in both states. These results are all the more surprising, as around 90% of those two publics also say that Netanyahu's election would have negative regional effects.

In fact, that level of Saudi and Emirati popular acceptance for contacts with Israelis has remained stable since a comparable survey in November 2020, soon after the Abraham Accords were announced. A positive view of contacts roughly doubled compared to findings from another survey conducted shortly before the Accords were made public. Subsequently, tensions on the Temple

Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif and the May 2021 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza had no apparent effect on this higher level of public support according to polls taken just a few weeks later.

It now appears that Netanyahu's return to power, highly unpopular as that is among these Gulf Arab publics, does not alter this pattern. In addition, findings from a parallel survey conducted in Bahrain in July 2022 are remarkably similar, with 37% of Bahrainis also voicing acceptance of allowing Israeli contacts. Even in Qatar, which has not joined the Abraham Accords, the most recent available data (November 2021) reveal an almost identical level of popular acceptance of Israeli contacts among its citizens.

The logical conclusion is that this aspect of normalization with Israel has itself become relatively "normalized" among most Gulf Arab publics—even as a slim majority in each country remains privately at least

“somewhat” opposed to it. The figures are similar and steady over the past three years, regardless of formal inclusion or exclusion from the Abraham Accords, political changes in Israel, or tensions on the ground in the Palestinian arena.

More than Half of the Palestinian Public Has Also Been Open to Some Israeli Contacts

Also noteworthy in this connection is that among the Palestinians themselves, the most recent available hard survey data (June 2022) show an even higher proportion—at least 60% of each subgroup—approving certain contacts with Israelis. In this case, a West Bank/Gaza/East Jerusalem poll conducted by a local independent Palestinian pollster asked about encouraging “direct personal contacts and dialogue with Israelis, in order to help the Israeli peace camp advocate a just solution.” At the time, a surprising 48% of East Jerusalem Palestinians also expressed a positive view of the Abraham Accords themselves, though only around half as many Gazans or West Bankers agreed with that assessment.

Views on Contact with Israelis Differ from Views on Full Diplomatic Normalization

This distinction in the Arab popular consciousness between contacts with Israelis and formal peace agreements with Israel is a significant characteristic of public opinion in the Gulf as well. In Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for instance, the most recent survey shows that only around 20% of each public says the Abraham Accords will have “a positive effect on the region.” When those Accords were first announced, by contrast, an initial burst of optimism yielded corresponding figures of around 40% positive views among both those publics.

Majority of Lebanese Endorse Maritime Deal with Israel—But Not Personal Contacts

A different distinction emerges, surprisingly, in Lebanon, where the November 2022 survey series asked both about contacts with Israelis and about Lebanon’s own new maritime boundary accord with the neighboring Jewish state. The overwhelming majority of Lebanese—whether Shia, Sunnis, Christians, or Druze—say they reject contacts with Israelis, which are outlawed and indeed prosecuted by their government. Yet the majority overall (61%) also voiced a favorable view of the maritime deal with Israel. That proportion of support for the deal is much higher than in any of the other three Arab countries polled in this November 2022 wave.

Just Ten Percent in Egypt or Jordan Approve Israeli Contacts, Despite Decades of Formal Peace

In these latest polls, Egypt also stands out strongly from its Gulf Arab cousins in terms of popular rejection of

contacts with Israelis. Even after 45 years of official peace with Israel, a mere 10% of Egyptians today say that “people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so.” That percentage has barely budged since the question was first posed in July 2020, whatever the state of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process or any other discernible variable.

This attitude is most likely both cause and consequence of Egyptian government policy during most of those long decades. That policy can best be described as follows: secret security cooperation with Israel—alongside ferociously negative, state-guided media coverage and commentary on almost everything Israeli, plus intense harassment of most Egyptians, except for a few government-approved economic managers, who engage personally with any Israelis.

In this respect, Jordan follows closely in Egypt’s footsteps. Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, and the two countries have worked closely together ever since on border security and even on certain issues related to the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif, and lately also on energy and water projects. Nevertheless, the percentage of Jordanian citizens in every recent survey who say they accept contacts with Israelis also hovers consistently at the strikingly low level of approximately 10%. Jordanian officials sometimes privately acknowledge that this dichotomy presents a problem, although there is little evidence that they intend to correct it.

Methodological Note

This analysis is based on face-to-face surveys conducted among representative samples of around 1,000 citizens in each country, selected according to standard geographical probability procedures. In the 2022 West Bank/Gaza/East Jerusalem poll, the sample size was 1,315 Palestinian adults (age 18+) residing in the three territories. The surveys were conducted by highly experienced, technically qualified, and entirely apolitical regional commercial survey research companies. Strict quality controls, health safety protocols, and assurances of confidentiality are provided throughout the fieldwork.

The author has personally organized and supervised the conduct of these surveys, without ever in any way interfering in the sampling, interviewing, or other aspects of the research. The statistical margin of error for samples of this size and nature is approximately 3 percentage points. Additional details, including full questionnaires, results, demographic distributions, and other pertinent information, are readily available on our interactive polling data platform.

Marathon Man

By Yaakov Schwartz/written by Gavriel Meir Hamodia Prime/hamodia.com January 25, 2023

New IDF chief of staff Herzl Halevi took the baton last week from Aviv Kochavi and faces challenges that include soaring Palestinian violence and Iran.

Herzl Halevi won’t be getting the traditional 100-day grace period in his new job as IDF Chief of Staff. In fact, he won’t get a moment’s grace.

Halevi, who was chosen for the job by former Defense Minister Benny Gantz in the recent government headed by Yair Lapid (over the objection of then-opposition leader Binyamin Netanyahu), will be scrutinized by politicians from both the left and right, as he deals with situations that present operational and ethical challenges.

While new IDF chiefs understandably want to bring their vision to the post, the fluid security situation doesn't allow for a restart. Halevi is a marathon runner who's been handed the baton by his predecessor, Aviv Kochavi, and continues the race from where it left off last week.

The big challenges awaiting him are Iran (see sidebar) and Yehudah and Shomron. If it were up to Halevi, he'd prefer to devote his time to Iran, the main front, but the escalation in the Palestinian arena over the past 10 months requires immediate attention.

For one thing, the need to assign so many extra soldiers to operational duty in Yehudah and Shomron to combat terrorism has cut back on the training exercises that the IDF conducts in preparation for a multifront war.

For another, increasing operational duties in Yehudah and Shomron deepen the political divide within Israel over the "occupation," and draws U.S. criticism (at the inevitable clashes resulting in Palestinian casualties).

From the IDF's perspective, the stick — i.e., the nightly raids and other means of suppressing terrorism and fending off a third intifada — should be tempered with the carrot, mainly in the form of economic incentives to keep the peace, or at least the quiet.

In 2015, at the outbreak of a terror wave that saw stabbings and car-rammings, then-IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot convinced the prime minister at the time (and now), Binyamin Netanyahu, not to respond with closures and blockades of PA-controlled territories, but to keep open economic and trade channels as tools to restrain the Palestinian public.

The defense establishment is convinced that this policy was effective in 2015 and should be applied now, as well. From its point of view, the equation is simple: It's better to be smart than right. If Israel wants to be able to focus on Iran, as the No. 1 threat, it must put an end to violent escalation in Yehudah and Shomron.

The recent announcement by U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan that, for the time being, the Iranian nuclear agreement is not on the table, is consistent with Israel's position. The previous Bennett-Lapid government

Iranian D-Day closer than ever [Sidebar]

Will Herzl Halevi be given the order to bomb Iranian nuclear installations during his tenure as IDF Chief of Staff?

Anyone listening to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's remarks during the official handover ceremony last week, when Halevi received command of the IDF, heard a very clear message.

"The aggression of the regime in Iran destabilizes the region and threatens to destroy us and hurt other countries

liked to brag that its behind-the-scenes efforts led the administration to pull back on renewing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The truth is quite different.

The United States changed its position on renewing the nuclear deal due to the closer ties between Russia and Iran, in the context of the Ukraine war, and the suppression of human rights in Iran. It had nothing to do with Israeli diplomatic moves, behind the scenes or otherwise.

Nonetheless, the security establishment sees the administration's new stance, even if only temporary, as significant, in that it narrows the scope of dispute between the United States and Israel. It also opens the door to the possibility of increased U.S. economic pressure on Iran, and for a credible military operation to be put on the table in the event that Iran continues its systematic march toward a nuclear bomb.

Outgoing IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi said last week that the Israeli and American security establishments are on the same page when it comes to their perceptions of the threats from Iran, and the possibility that a military option will be needed if Iran breaks out toward a bomb.

A working visit by Halevi to Washington last month, even before he assumed command of the IDF, signals the importance the American security establishment attributes to cooperation with Israel.

Still, the distance from that to American readiness to engage militarily with Iran is great.

U.S.-Israel cooperation on Iran doesn't solve the core problem: In the absence of a nuclear agreement, Iran will continue to advance in small but steady steps that shorten the time needed to break out toward a bomb, if it should decide to acquire one.

At the same time, there are those in the Israeli defense establishment who speak of this being an opportune time to step up military pressure on Iran via physical strikes, targeted assassinations of senior officials in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and attacks on intelligence centers operating in Syria to help Iran establish bases there.

This would constitute price-tag deterrence against repeated efforts by Iran to harm Israeli citizens abroad.

Herzl Halevi's job will be preparing the IDF to carry out these intermediary measures and, ultimately, for possible measures that could, b'ezras Hashem, take Iran off Israel's national-security agenda, once and for all.

that are looking up to us," Netanyahu stressed, adding that Israel "won't wait until the sword is on our neck." °

"We won't be drawn into any unnecessary wars. Maintaining human lives is the primary value for us, but there are situations in which we will need to show sacrifice to maintain our existence."

Similar sentiments were expressed by National Security Council Chief Tzachi Hanegbi, a former longtime

minister and former chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

“If we are abandoned, Prime Minister Netanyahu will attack Iran’s nuclear facilities,” he told Hamodia.

“The central mission of the prime minister, and his primary obligation, is to ensure that Iran does not obtain nuclear weapons. The alternative to an attack is accepting a reality in which a radical regime has nuclear weapons. No Israeli leader can accept that.

“In my view, if the U.S.-Iran negotiations don’t reach a satisfactory conclusion, and the United States doesn’t take action, Prime Minister Netanyahu will act. Otherwise, Israel faces an existential threat.” Hanegbi added that his assessment is based on 30 years of knowing Netanyahu and working closely with him.

Petty disputes bog down US-Israel ties

By Binyamin Rose

Hebrew was once written in both directions. How did it fix its direction, and what does that show.

Liberal-minded Americans overwrought with a portrayal of Israel’s new government as far-right, ultranationalist, with a splash of fascism, can breathe easier.

This latest incarnation of the Netanyahu government, even with Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich holding senior cabinet positions, was at its deferential best during last week’s visit from Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s national security advisor.

At the government’s urging, a Jerusalem planning board delayed consideration of expansion plans for a Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. The Defense Ministry dutifully dismantled a new outpost in Judea named in memory of Rabbi Chaim Druckman, a spiritual leader of the national-religious community. And when a bipartisan US Senate delegation led by Senator Jacky Rosen (D-NV) met several top Knesset members and steered clear of Smotrich and Ben Gvir, no one uttered a peep.

To add insult to injury, just as Sullivan was conveying the Biden administration’s profound fears over Netanyahu’s plans to reform the judiciary, Israel’s High Court bared its teeth, applying their form of cancel culture to Aryeh Deri.

We don’t pretend to know everything said behind closed doors. We don’t know if Netanyahu merely listened politely, or if he diplomatically told Sullivan that Biden ought to be more concerned about the directional tilt of his own Supreme Court than Israel’s, but the Netanyahu government conveys weakness when it bows to an American agenda that runs counter to Israel’s long-term national interests.

Netanyahu has set a goal of avoiding antagonizing the Biden administration, and he made this clear to his coalition partners before they signed on.

Bibi also remembers 2010, when Biden was vice president and landed in Israel only to hear that the Ministry of Housing had just approved 1,600 new homes

Maj. Gen. (res.) Tamir Heyman, a former head of Military Intelligence, says that contrary to public opinion, Iran is not feeling isolated by the West’s sanctions. “Iran has economic backup from Russia and China,” he says.

According to Heyman, the United States will not go to war over an Iranian nuclear bomb. “Anyone who reads the most recent National Security Strategy report understands that the Americans have no intention of using military force to bring down the Iranian regime. They wrote this openly, it’s no secret.

“The United States is not heading toward starting a new war in the Middle East,” concludes Heyman, executive director at the prestigious Institute for National Security Studies.

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in the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood of north (not east) Jerusalem. Biden reacted strongly, condemning a decision that he perceived as a political slap in the face.

Rolling Political Dice

Netanyahu’s middle name is caution. On that basis, his strategy is fathomable, but it’s not riskless. And once again, his government missed an opportunity to express reasonable positions and goals in both a forceful and persuasive manner.

The delay in the housing project to appease Sullivan is only temporary. It involves the expansion of Nof Tziyon, a neighborhood in southeast Jerusalem established more than 20 years ago and built on private land purchased legally by supermarket mogul Rami Levy.

Nof Tziyon borders the Arab village of Jebel Mukaber, which is also within Jerusalem’s municipal borders. Like Ramat Shlomo, it is one of the dozens of Jewish neighborhoods that border on and coexist with Arab communities. There is no way Sullivan would visit there, because, like every other member of the international community, he has an allergy to anything Israeli over the Green Line, even if it serves as a living example of two different peoples living together in relative peace.

Netanyahu, who finally came out on top after five elections in three and a half years, is a political animal who hopes that Americans will elect a Republican president in 2024 who would view the Israeli right as comrades, not adversaries.

That’s a gamble.

Biden is getting shredded now over his classified documents scandal, but this could be ancient history by next year. Even if Biden is swept away by it, the Democrats have a wider roster of potential presidential candidates than they did in 2020, when party leaders saw Biden as the only mainstream Democrat capable of denying Donald Trump a second term.

There are also no assurances that a Republican administration will be that much more favorable to Israel, at least on Netanyahu’s terms. Recent polls show support

for Israel dropping precipitously among young evangelical Republicans. A 2021 survey commissioned by the University of North Carolina showed support from evangelicals under 30 dropping precipitously from 75% in 2018 to 34% in 2021. A Pew Survey in March 2022 revealed that evangelicals ages 18–29 held a more favorable view of the Palestinians (61%) than Israelis (56%).

Even Trump, considered by many to be the most pro-Israel president ever, warned Bibi — and publicly — to take it slow on settlements. His deal of the century would have confined Israel to just 30 percent of Judea and Samaria, with the rest held in escrow for a future Palestinian state.

Bold Is Better

Patience is not always a virtue.

While the Biden administration seems resigned to the demise of the Iran nuclear deal and the two-state solution, it needs quiet on the Middle Eastern front to pivot to other global trouble spots — mainly China, North Korea, and now, Europe.

Saudi Arabia is one place where both the US and Israel can do business and win some peace.

Just two months ago, JINSA, the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, led a delegation to meet with Saudi leaders in Riyadh. JINSA Senior Fellow John Hannah reported that the Saudis told them they would

shake hands with Israel “next month” if the US would meet three conditions: to come to the aid of Saudi Arabia if it were attacked; to give assurances of a reliable supply of US weapons to the Saudis so they could defend themselves; and to allow the Saudis, who possess seven percent of the world’s uranium deposits, to continue exploiting that natural resource for peaceful purposes. Hannah said the Saudis offered to establish a joint Saudi-US company like the oil company Aramco in the 1930s so that US personnel would always be on hand to monitor and inspect the premises.

When Hannah asked if progress on the Palestinian issue a prerequisite for Israeli-Saudi normalization was, he said the answer was an unequivocal “no,” which he said was “followed by a vivid description of a Palestinian leadership incapable of making peace with Israel for fear of being killed by its people.”

Jake Sullivan’s visit was just a warm-up for the upcoming visit of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, which itself is preparatory for a Netanyahu-Biden meeting in Washington.

The US and Israel relationship will stand on much firmer ground, even with Netanyahu and Biden on opposite ends of the political spectrum, if they act boldly and grab what’s attainable instead of peering backward at the unachievable.

The Ukraine war starts to undermine Israeli security

By Jonathan S. Tobin

jns.org

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The U.S. decision to strip arms stockpiles stored in the Jewish state to resupply Kiev’s forces in its deadlocked fight with Moscow is a gamechanger. Why is no one protesting?

For the last 11 months, Israel has sought to signal its opposition to Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine while avoiding being dragged into a war that compromises its own security and interests. Threading that needle has been a difficult task, but it was an issue on which both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his main political foe—Yesh Atid Party leader Yair Lapid—have been in agreement.

Nevertheless, Israel is now being made to pay a steep price for the war. The news, broken last week by The New York Times, that the U.S. is emptying the strategic reserve of arms and ammunition it has stored in Israel for Middle East emergencies, as well as for the Jewish state to draw on in the event of its being attacked, marks a turning point.

Should a conflict with either Hamas in Gaza or Hezbollah in Lebanon break out at the behest of Iran, or, in a nightmare strategic scenario, with both simultaneously, consequences for the Israel Defense Forces could be serious.

Israel has sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including a temporary field hospital on the Polish border when the

fighting in that region was at its height. It also has taken in refugees and provided intelligence to the Ukrainians.

But with Russia occupying part of neighboring Syria and granting Israel overflight rights to strike Iranian and other terrorist targets, the Jewish state needs to avoid a conflict with Moscow. Similarly, with Russia’s remaining Jewish population essentially being hostages held by President Vladimir Putin, Israel has every reason to remain neutral.

This hasn’t prevented Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy from subjecting Israel to a ferocious campaign of pressure aimed at forcing it to ally itself with Kyiv.

It began with a virtual speech to the Knesset last spring, when Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, engaged in what amounted to Holocaust denial. During his address, he falsely claimed that Ukrainians had stood in solidarity with Jews during the genocide, when, in fact, they were the most enthusiastic of Nazi collaborators.

He has stopped at nothing to leverage sympathy for his country’s plight in order to persuade the Israelis to join the war. Curiously, his attempts have not been accompanied by a willingness to back Israel against the campaign of delegitimization against it in international forums. To the contrary, Ukraine’s anti-Israel votes at the United Nations have coincided with its harsh accusations that Jerusalem isn’t doing enough to defeat Russia.

If that wasn't bad enough, Zelenskyy then attempted to blackmail Netanyahu into giving him some of his country's vital air-defense systems, in exchange for Ukraine switching its vote on an antisemitic U.N. resolution targeting Israel.

Nothing the Ukrainian president actually does outside of his war leadership is given much coverage in the mainstream corporate press. His suppression of political rivals and opposition press outlets—not to mention churches that he has labeled as traitorous for having ties to religious authorities inside Russia—are all ignored. Belief in the myth that he's the second coming of Winston Churchill and the pristine leader of a Jeffersonian democracy remains widespread.

Sympathy for Ukraine's suffering people and admiration for its armed forces' performance in the face of the Russian invasion are nearly universal. So is support for the country's right to self-determination.

The United States gave Ukraine more than \$100 billion in aid to continue the war—a staggering sum that's likely to increase in 2023. At the same time, both the U.S. and Western Europe are doubling down on their backing by providing heavy weapons like tanks.

These moves come at a time when it's clear that the Russian invasion has been stymied, and the fighting has become a bloody stalemate that's starting to resemble trench warfare in World War One. Neither side can win the decisive victory it wants.

Still, President Joe Biden and other allies are backing Zelenskyy's maximalist war policy. His goal is the eviction of Russian forces from what remains of the territory it overran last winter, most of which has been retaken by Ukraine, as well as the parts of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea that have been in Moscow's hands since 2014.

No serious person believes such a total Ukrainian victory is possible. By the same token, Putin's incompetent military—which many in the foreign-policy establishment still foolishly speak of as if it were the powerful Red Army that defeated Hitler and threatened Western Europe during the Cold War—has no prospect of achieving its original aim of conquering all of Ukraine.

While there is much talk about not wanting to grant Putin any legitimacy or a moral victory, those who think sinking more arms and money into this war will lead to his fall are engaging in wishful thinking.

Autistic Soldiers Find Their Place in the IDF

By Joshua Zitser

Not a disability, but an asset.

Each day, Sgt. I. scours the internet to find elusive intelligence that could help Israel fight its enemies.

He is a web specialist for an elite unit of the Israel Defense Forces, focused on open-source research that informs high-level decision-making and can even reach the prime minister's desk.

He is also autistic.

Sgt. I., like some 150 others, isn't in the IDF by

The sensible response to this crisis should be to push for an end to a war that is causing so much suffering and death. But Washington is so besotted with Zelenskyy that it is prepared to risk a confrontation that could lead to a catastrophic World War Three nuclear scenario.

What's more, Biden is stripping the American military of its supplies of arms and ammunition in order to feed the Ukrainian military's insatiable demands. That has already left U.S. military forces in a dangerously low state of readiness.

Supporters of unlimited aid to Ukraine say they are sending a message that the West will not tolerate aggression. But the astonishing decision to treat the territorial integrity of Ukraine as the Number One U.S. security priority has had an unintended consequence. It has created a situation in which the West would be unable to come to the aid of Taiwan, should it be invaded by China, the nation that is, contrary to the overblown fears about Russia, by far the most potent threat to American security and global influence.

That's the context for the decision to empty out the American strategic reserves of arms and ammunition located in Israel. Sacrificing the ability to respond rapidly to a threat to American allies and interests in the Middle East is a steep price to pay to help Ukraine sustain an endless and unwinnable war.

It's also one more sign that the Biden administration, like that of former President Barack Obama and in contrast to that of Donald Trump, has downgraded its support for Israel and moderate Arab states in favor of a new strategy that sees them as a burden rather than vital allies.

This move, which makes Israel less secure and may embolden Iran and its terrorist auxiliaries, ought to have generated a firestorm of criticism. But Jerusalem is rightly afraid of pushing back too hard against the pro-Ukraine consensus.

It nevertheless should stick to its refusal to be drawn into a conflict that has unknowable consequences for its security. Biden's helping to escalate a war that he should be trying to end won't lead to a Ukrainian victory. What it will do, like his unsuccessful efforts to appease Iran, is make the Middle East an even more dangerous place for Israel and other U.S. allies.

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chance. He signed up to serve through Ro'im Rachok, a first-of-its-kind program that places autistic people in the military to utilize their valuable skills.

Speaking to Insider from inside HaKirya, the sprawling headquarters of the IDF, he said he was able to cope with long, exhausting intelligence work better than many others and that he was most productive when given to-do lists.

He couldn't elaborate on the specifics of what he does.

The IDF and Ro'im Rachok members spoke on the condition that Insider use initials or only their first names, citing the secrecy of their work.

A typical IDF open-source project might involve trawling social media and obscure sites for intel on everything from the effect of sanctions on the Iranian economy to the size of Hezbollah's arsenal.

An IDF minder sat in the meeting room throughout, ready to intervene if Sgt. I. accidentally divulged anything classified.

On occasion, Sgt. I. said, his daily work routine is interrupted by "stimming" — a behavior often associated with autism that can involve repeating words, sounds, or movements to cope with stress.

Sgt. I. tends to flap his hands when he's excited or overwhelmed. "It's an urge, like blinking," he said.

He'd always been taught in special-education settings, so he wasn't self-conscious about doing this before he joined the IDF and started working in an office alongside neurotypical soldiers. "So, yes, I've had to adapt," he said.

Many autistic teenagers are exempt from military service

Sgt. I. is a graduate of Ro'im Rachok — an innovative Israeli program founded in 2013 to match young adults on the autism spectrum with military professions that need manpower.

Unlike most Jewish Israelis who are conscripted to join the army, usually at 18, many autistic teenagers are exempt.

Ro'im Rachok, however, allows them to sign up as volunteers.

Speaking to Insider from his office at the Ono Academic College in Kiryat Ono, Tal Vardi, a Mossad veteran who helped found the program, said he wanted to make something clear: It's not an act of charity.

"Nobody wants somebody to do them a favor," Vardi said, describing the program as mutually beneficial for the IDF, people with autism, and their families.

Autistic volunteers are assigned to units where they are deemed to have a comparative advantage — usually military intelligence.

Though military intelligence and analysis are vital to every modern army, Israel places a particularly high value on it, Nimrod Goren, a senior fellow for Israeli affairs at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC, told Insider.

Countries like Israel that "feel that they're under existential threat" put a premium on intelligence-gathering, he said, so skilled recruits are highly coveted.

In return for volunteering, recruits with autism are offered the skills and connections that could help ease them into an independent future working in civilian professions.

"The idea is to put together real needs with real capabilities to create this win-win," Vardi said.

Military divisions in the UK, the US, and Singapore, as well as civilian industries in Israel, have shown interest in developing the model, he added.

So far, more than 300 soldiers have been recruited from the program to the IDF and serve across 27 different units.

Unit 9900 is the 'eye of

the country'

The first unit to recruit from the program was the classified Unit 9900 — a prestigious visual-intelligence outfit.

Unit 9900's Maj. R. was approached a decade ago about including graduates of Ro'im Rachok's aerial-photo-analysis course.

He said he agreed even though he didn't really know what autism was at the time. His unit, he said, needed strong photo analyzers to support its secretive work.

Maj. R. described his unit as "the eye of the country." Unit 9900 collects, analyzes, and interprets visual intelligence and provides it to commanders on the field and other security forces.

These images can come from satellite images, drone footage, and reconnaissance flights over areas like the Gaza Strip and Syria, The Jerusalem Post reported.

An IDF spokesperson told Insider that the unit played a part in Operation Breaking Dawn — the Israeli name for the Gaza-Israel clashes in August 2022.

During this three-day operation, 49 Palestinians in Gaza were killed, at least 22 of whom were civilians, and around 360 Palestinians injured, per the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Israeli authorities said that 70 Israelis were injured by mortars and rockets launched by Palestinian militants.

The IDF spokesperson said Unit 9900 "helped protect civilians" and provided operational support in the clashes. Amnesty International described the operation as unleashing "fresh trauma and destruction" on Palestinians.

Maj. R. said he noticed early on that many autistic soldiers seemed to have a natural aptitude for aerial-photo analysis.

His neurotypical soldiers easily got distracted, he said, whereas the autistic soldiers seemed able to hyperfocus on the tasks at hand.



Tal Vardi, the cofounder of Ro'im Rachok, in front of a banner for the program. Israel Defense Forces/ Insider

Tal Vardi, the cofounder of Ro'im Rachok, in front of a banner for the program. Israel Defense Forces/ Insider

Research from the Wellcome Trust indicates that many people with autism have a "higher perceptual capacity" and show an increased ability to focus their attention on certain tasks.

"Most of them aren't interested in their surroundings. They don't want to talk to their friends, they want to sit and work," Maj. R. said. "They are very focused on what they are doing."

Intensive training

Although Ro'im Rachok's first training course was in photo analysis, it now offers courses in data tagging, GIS mapping, and electronics.

Each course sets up students to serve in specific IDF units, but at this stage, they participate in the training courses as civilians.

Insider was granted rare access to the electronics course of Ro'im Rachok's intensive training program, which lasts up to four months at Ono Academic College.

It's November, and students of the Ro'im Rachok electronics course are approaching the final month of their training.

Sitting in a circle, surrounded by computers and maps of Israel, the students are reflecting on why they signed up for the training program, which, if completed successfully, will allow them to become full-fledged members of the IDF.

There's unanimous agreement that employability plays a big part. Even though it's technically illegal for an employer to ask directly about military experience, in practice, it does matter.

"If not for the army, it would be very difficult to make a future, get a job, make rent, buy an apartment," says Natir, an 18-year-old from Holon, as his classmates nod.

Roni, a 19-year-old from Rishon LeZion, raises her hand to speak. "I'm joining the IDF to have better chances in the future," she says.

It's not only the addition to her résumé that will make her more employable, she adds, but also the skills she and her classmates develop along the way. "It makes a lot of people more confident in what we're doing and more communicative in language," she says.

Ron, an 18-year-old from Givatayim, says the course has helped him work on his "short fuse" and has been vital to his personal development.

The skills and unique perspectives that autistic people can bring to the table are advantageous to the army because "we see the world in a different way," he says, "that offers creative solutions."

For example, Ron says his intense and highly focused interests, which are common among people with autism, make him a dedicated worker and a quick learner.

"I know when I'm fixated on something, when something really gets my interest, it's hard for me to stop thinking about it and enjoying it," he adds.

I can't change the army, so I need to face it with them --Cmdr. A., Unit 9900

The training program can be challenging for students, said Cmdr. A of Unit 9900.

"At their schools or home, many of them were getting adjustments," he said. "Here, we're not making it easier for them. I can't change the whole army, so I need to face it with them."

This could involve bracing them for situations they haven't encountered before, from teaching would-be recruits how to navigate public transportation to preparing them for possible interrogation by enemy forces.

Students in the program work with therapists to help them understand and embrace their autism. Some students were diagnosed with autism when they received a military exemption; others have known for most of their life.

Roughly 10% of students in each course don't graduate. But the vast majority go on to take part in a four-month-trial period with the IDF before being formally recruited.

Usually, for conscripted soldiers, men are expected to serve for a minimum of 32 months, and women are expected to serve for at least 24 months. But because Ro'im Rachok enlistees are volunteers, they can drop out after a year.

Pvt. E., an autistic soldier in Unit 9900, has been in the IDF longer than a year and decided to continue.

He said that he finds his work for the IDF enjoyable, and it's easier for him than many of his neurotypical colleagues.

"I don't want to say I'm slightly superior, because that's condescending, but it sometimes really is annoying when you can clearly see something that others don't," he said.

I'm just another soldier--Sgt. I.

Sgt. I., the web specialist in the open-source-research unit, also said he finds specific tasks easier than his neurotypical colleagues, but that's balanced out by things he struggles with.

"If the average person has things that they're good at and bad at that, then for a person with autism, it's more extreme," he explained.

His strengths, Sgt. I. said, involve following long lists and instructions. "My brain works best when there's this sort of structure and order," he said. "No matter how tiring it can be for someone else, like some of my coworkers, I would have an easier time on average."

However, he said he doesn't think his skills are exceptional or that he's a "super genius" — a "dehumanizing" stereotype that "others" autistic people.

"To be honest, I don't really feel like I have a special skill set that is so incredible that I need to be like some grand asset," he said. "I'm just another soldier."