

ISRAEL IN CRISIS

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THE TAB

CONTENTS

Vol. 2 Issue 31

- 1 Biden Trashes the Abraham Accords**
Bibi wants peace with Saudi Arabia. The Saudis probably want it, too. But the White House has other ideas.
- 3 Israel on Fire**
U.S. support for demonstrations in Tel Aviv isn't about the future of Israel's judiciary. It's about handcuffing Israel while Iran gets the bomb.
- 5 Ties That Bind**
How the U.S. is working to constrain Israel before announcing its new Iran deal
- 9 Among the Protesters**
The fundamental question isn't whether Israel should be a democracy. It's whether it should be like everywhere else.
- 13 Israel's Elites Revolt Against Democracy**
The architects of the anti-Bibi protests are clear about their motives: defending elites from the masses
- 15 The New Herodians**
Herod the Great's alignment with the Roman empire led to both the high-point of Jewish power and the destruction of the Jewish state.
- 19 In Lebanon, Israel and America Are on Opposite Sides**
Israel backpedals, while Hezbollah grows bolder
- 25 The Suckers' Revolt**
Israelis who work, fight in the army, and pay taxes are wary of the new government

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Biden Trashes the Abraham Accords

Bibi wants peace with Saudi Arabia. The Saudis probably want it, too. But the White House has other ideas.

BY TONY BADRAN

In an interview a week before his victory in Israel's general election, Benjamin Netanyahu stated his intention to achieve peace with Saudi Arabia if he returned to the prime minister's office. "I think there's a chance I will achieve it, because I think Saudi Arabia ... know[s] that I'm absolutely committed to preventing Iran from having nuclear weapons," Netanyahu added.

The administration's response to Netanyahu's declared priority of seeking a peace agreement with Saudi Arabia took a page out of a familiar playbook: use the Palestinians to throw Israel on the defensive, this time in the form of an impending FBI investigation into the accidental death of reporter Shireen Abu Akleh. The fact that the U.S. had participated in Israel's own investigation of the incident, and approved its conclusions, meant nothing—as did the absence of any clear grounding for such

an investigation in U.S. law. The investigation was a "values feint"—highlighting how Israeli policies under Netanyahu supposedly clash with U.S. values, in order to make it harder for Israel to achieve its goals in other areas.

A TABLET SPECIAL REPORT

With demonstrators thronging the streets, the ruling Likud party taking on the Supreme Court, and military reservists, tech moguls, and even doctors threatening not to serve in order to preserve democracy, Israel's political system appears to be coming apart at the seams. At the same time, the United States has taken an active role throughout the region, sending billions to Iran while promising to broker peace with everyone from Saudi Arabia to Hezbollah. Beneath all the smoke and noise, a new American regional order is being created in the Middle East. We explain it to you here.

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Progressive Jews are on the rise and they are not liberals

BY SAMUEL J. ABRAMS

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BY ARMIN ROSEN

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BY ORGE CASTELLANO

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Over the past century, different pedagogical theories have transformed classrooms and teaching methods

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT



The Biden administration's policy is not driven by personal dislike for Netanyahu, as reporters and columnists never tire of asserting, or by any demonstrable interest in the welfare of Palestinians, but by the fact that its regional priorities are starkly at odds with Israel's.

A couple of days after Netanyahu's interview, U.S. special envoy Amos Hochstein pranced into Beirut to receive the Lebanese signature on his maritime border deal, in which the White House forced Israel to concede to all of Hezbollah's demands. Standing next to Hochstein at a press briefing was Elias Bou Saab, one of the Hezbollah cutouts in the "Lebanese government" who serve as interlocutors with the U.S. "I have heard about the Abraham Accord," Bou Saab opined. "Today there is a new era. It could be the Amos Hochstein accord."

Even in his clownishness, the Lebanese functionary correctly telegraphed the Biden administration's desire to replace the Abraham Accords with a different framework, representing a new set of priorities. Netanyahu's vision, expressed in terms of a regional alignment facing the Iranian threat, is one the administration is actively working to bury.

The Biden administration's discomfort with the Abraham Accords has been nothing short of comical, including a near-pathological aversion to using the term "Abraham Accords"—substituting instead the phrase "normalization agreements." The peak expression of that attitude came last year in a bizarre exchange between a State Department reporter and spokesman Ned Price, in which Price repeatedly refused to utter the words "Abraham Accords," replying each time to the reporter's use of the term with the phrase "normalization agreements," like a zombified cult member or one half of a diplomatic version of Laurel and Hardy.

The reason for the administration's hostility to the Abraham Accords goes beyond jealousy or the desire to deny credit to a hated predecessor. There are significant matters of substance and strategy at stake. The Abraham Accords framework is fundamentally opposed to the Obama-Biden vision for the region. Whereas the Abraham Accords framework draws a bright line separating the U.S.-allied camp from Iran and its camp, the Obama-Biden vision turns the very concept of friend and foe on its head, elevating Iran and downgrading allies under the pretext of creating "equilibrium" or "balance." The problem the White House faces is that

the accords are popular: The biblical name alone resonates with the American public.

In the wake of Ned Price's unintentionally comic attempt to disappear the term "Abraham Accords," the Biden administration made a tactical adjustment to its presentation, if not to its policy. Drawing on the practice perfected during its incarnation as the Obama administration, team Biden has manipulated language associated with or adjacent to the Abraham Accords to torque it toward its own alternative policy framework, thereby emptying the accords of their meaning—while keeping the popular name.

The administration continued this shift by reemphasizing the importance of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a change in policy emphasis that it accompanied with a shift in language. "While we support normalization between Israel and countries in the Arab world," Price explained, "it's also not a substitute for Israeli-Palestinian peace, and that's very important."

See how the shell game works? "Peace" is reserved for agreements between Israel and the Palestinians. The Abraham Accords are therefore not "real" peace agreements, but "normalization" agreements—which are meaningful only insofar as they lead back to the Palestinians, thereby reaffirming Obama's UNSCR 2334 parameters as the only meaningful avenue for U.S. regional policy.

Behind this lexical shift, of course, is something more than the desire to put Palestinians at the center of the region once more. An Israeli-Gulf agreement that might also include Saudi Arabia isn't a "peace agreement" because, whatever the economic and cultural benefits of closer relations might be, it is also an alliance of regional states against Iran. The administration's linguistic reshuffling is therefore needed to introduce its Iran-centric worldview into the vocabulary used for the Abraham Accords, imbuing it with new meaning that fits the administration's alternative vision for the region, which is centered around an American alliance with Iran.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statement on the second anniversary of the Abraham Accords provides an example of how the Abraham Accords

are being rewritten and reframed to fit a new regional agenda driven by the United States and not by any of the parties to the accords. Blinken's statement made sure to append the term "normalization agreements," thereby changing "the Abraham Accords" into "the Abraham Accords and normalization agreements."

More importantly, Blinken inserted the term "regional integration" in explaining the policy approach that the administration is promoting through the accords. A casual listener is thereby encouraged to imagine that "regional integration" means strengthening Israeli-Arab relations within the Abraham Accords framework, while the administration is in fact rewriting that framework to fit team Obama-Biden's focus on strengthening U.S. relations with Iran.

That disguising this policy switcheroo is indeed the function of "regional integration" is evident from an op-ed under President Biden's name that was published in *The Washington Post* a couple of months before Blinken's statement. The occasion for the op-ed was Biden's trip to Saudi Arabia in July, following a visit to Israel. The piece used that association

as camouflage to promote the "regional integration" alternative framework, which was unmistakably about pressing U.S. allies to prop up—"integrate"—Iran and its regional holdings. Hence, when offering an example of such "integration," the op-ed did not discuss advancing a Saudi-Israeli agreement. Rather, it pointed to the role one of Tehran's regional equities—Iraq—played in furthering Saudi dialogue ... with *Iran*.

A month after Blinken's statement, the administration announced it had successfully brokered the maritime agreement between Israel and Lebanon. When making the announcement, a senior White House official explained to reporters how the deal should be understood as a manifestation of the Biden administration's vision of "a more stable, prosperous, integrated region." The examples the official offered involved other Iranian puppet states: Yemen and Iraq. Peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia was notably absent from the "regional integration" agenda.

The Lebanon maritime deal, which the Biden team puffed up as "historic," consisted of a package of Israeli concessions to Iran's foremost regional equity,

Hezbollah. The administration's messaging infrastructure, in both D.C. and Israel, promptly classified the deal as more meaningful than the Abraham Accords—since it was an agreement with an Iranian asset, which is what the Obama-Biden framework defines as "peace." The Obama-Biden echo chamber amplified the "depressurizing/deescalating" message to magnify the importance of the maritime deal as one that actually "prevents conflict," as opposed to the Abraham Accords, which were "out of conflict zone" agreements—a riff on their initial derision of the Abraham Accords as not being "real" peace agreements, since those Arab states were never at war with Israel.

Taken together with the Biden administration's sustained information campaign against the Saudis over "values" as well as energy policy, the offer America is making its two leading regional allies is clear: Forget the anti-Iran Abraham Accords framework. The path to team Obama-Biden's approval is through "regional integration" with Iran. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Biden Sets Israel on Fire

U.S. support for demonstrations in Tel Aviv isn't about the future of Israel's judiciary. It's about handcuffing Israel while Iran gets the bomb.

BY LEE SMITH

Is the current Israeli government truly on the verge of an authoritarian turn? No, of course not. The mass protests and over-the-top rhetoric from Israel's domestic opposition, Joe Biden's warnings that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's reform agenda will curtail minority

rights, gleeful announcements by the U.S. ambassador about his right to interfere in domestic Israeli politics, group letters from 50 former commandos and 75 economists who all oppose judicial reform, the financing of Palestinian groups with terror links, public harassment of Netanyahu's wife: These are among the details of a single

blueprint. The fact that this blueprint is designed in Washington, D.C., gives courage and direction to the demonstrators acting out their color revolution fantasies on the ground in Tel Aviv. And it's evidence that Bibi is in Washington's crosshairs, for regime change has come to Israel.

The world has learned a lot watching America's Middle East freedom agenda wind its way through the Fertile Crescent, North Africa, and then up the Nile, first under George W. Bush and then under Barack Obama. The first of these lessons is that when U.S. policymakers selectively deploy the rhetoric of democracy and human rights against target governments, their words are typically accompanied by practical measures to destabilize those governments, including U.S. allies.

When the Freedom Agenda debuted after September 11, it described a set of dangerously wishful beliefs about how

some of the region's most repressive governments could become more democratic, provided their new leaders, like the Americans calling the shots, ignored historical reality and political culture. Then the concept transitioned, and by the time the Arab Spring rolled around, democracy promotion became cover for an arsenal of techniques deployed by U.S. intelligence services and NGOs to undermine governments that the White House, the State Department, and the CIA didn't like.

Perhaps most famously, the Barack Obama administration's pro-democracy campaign helped push out Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in favor of a government run by the Muslim Brotherhood, hardly an exemplary force for universal human rights. Then, during the Trump administration, the same Obama officials working while out of government partnered with foreign spy services to target Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with the goal of forcing him out of the line of succession in favor of a royal more likely to feather the retirement nests of agency officials.

A similar operation is now underway in Israel, where the Biden administration has departed from diplomatic protocol by repeatedly advertising its meetings with the political faction seeking to undo Israel's newly elected right-wing government. More significantly, Biden's State Department is now directly funding local activists organizing the protests. By publicly putting its prestige and money behind the coalition that lost the latest Israeli election, Washington is openly advertising its desire to bring down Netanyahu.

Maybe it seems strange that the current U.S. presidential administration considers Israel's government hostile to American interests. Why, it was just months ago that Biden aides mediated an arrangement between Israel and Lebanon over their maritime border. Even practical, hard-minded Israeli officials said the deal enhanced security and may even lead to more positive steps with the Beirut government. Surely that's indicative of good relations between Washington and Jerusalem, no?

In reality, the maritime agreement was just the latest in a series of initiatives to

realign U.S. interests with those of the terror regime in Tehran while alternately sweet-talking and threatening traditional U.S. allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia to fall into line. Accordingly, an Israeli prime minister like the one Bibi replaced, Yair Lapid, who wanted to ingratiate himself with the Obama-Biden faction by integrating Israel into its pro-Iran security architecture that augments Hezbollah's power, was indeed a friend of the current White House.

Netanyahu, however, is a problem for an administration still determined to reenter the nuclear deal from which Donald Trump withdrew. Netanyahu has opposed the deal since the Israelis got wind of it early in Obama's second term. Yet in his previous tenure as prime minister, he passed on several opportunities to disrupt Obama's negotiations and destroy Iran's nuclear facilities. But there's no guarantee the famously cautious Netanyahu wouldn't launch an attack now, especially with a right-wing government at his back and the U.S. seemingly preparing to accept Iran as a member of the nuclear club, so long as the terror regime's capacity is limited to just one bomb, or maybe just a few.

Betting that Netanyahu will continue to sit on his hands is not a strategy. So, the Obama officials running Biden's Middle East policy are set on bringing down Bibi. Their instrument is his domestic opposition, galvanized to thwart his proposed judicial reforms.

Netanyahu aides and supporters argue that far from weakening Israel's democratic processes, his reforms would make the country's democracy more dynamic by further empowering legislators, the elected representatives of the Israeli public. Thus, what Netanyahu's opponents hysterically describe as an anti-democratic putsch is in reality a plan for a modified version of the "checks and balances" system that would distribute power among equal and independent branches of government—i.e., an Israeli rendition of the U.S. Constitution. And whatever experts may think about the pros and cons of the proposed reforms, the fact remains that Israel's judiciary is less responsive to any kind of democratic

restraint than the judicial system of any Western democracy.

The issue then is not that Bibi's reform agenda endangers the rights of its citizens, Jews and Arabs alike. Rather, it attenuates the vast powers of the judiciary, a corps of lawyers tapped by their professional colleagues to serve lifetime terms in posts where they are unaccountable to the electorate at large. Instead, they represent the interests of a political, corporate, and media establishment determined to impose its will on the country.

In Israel the judiciary fills the role of the national security establishment in the United States. As American elites revere domestic U.S. intelligence services for waging an unlawful and ongoing campaign to ruin Trump and his supporters in order to, in their words, "save *our* democracy," the anti-Bibi rebels esteem the judiciary as the thumb tilting the scales of justice against those they detest.

For more than two decades, Israeli judges have imposed "ongoing investigations" on right-wing leaders to cripple their agendas. They developed the method with Ariel Sharon, then used it on Ehud Olmert (now, apparently converted by his experiences in prison, a hardline leftist) and repeatedly against Netanyahu. In 2019, he was indicted under charges so vague and elastic—including the assertion that a politician seeking better coverage from a media organization is a crime—that it is clear the judiciary molded them only for the purpose of asserting its authority over Israel's longest serving prime minister.

Israel's judiciary cornered Bibi the same way U.S. intelligence services framed Trump: Any attempt at self-defense against an element of the deep state is refashioned by the establishment media as evidence of guilt. Unable to get Bibi out of power at the ballot box, his enemies used the courts, until Bibi outmaneuvered them. With his November reelection, he won a mandate to reform the judiciary. And that's why the opposition has gone to the streets in much the same way U.S. progressives rioted alongside Democrat-supported street gangs in the spring and summer of 2020. The point is to make the majority

beg for an end to the chaos, a plea the motivated minority is glad to accommodate but only on its terms: Help us get rid of the man you elected.

The anti-Bibi coup looks and feels like the anti-Trump operation because it's run by the same people—the Obama operatives who hunted Trump and now run the Biden White House. It was Obama's spy chiefs who fabricated Russiagate, the politically funded smear campaign designed to destabilize the Trump presidency. And it's Obama's State Department that created the machinery to take down Netanyahu nearly a decade ago by funding anti-Bibi election campaigns with U.S. taxpayer dollars.

Obama's button men have made the "Get Bibi" machinery a permanent part of the Israeli political landscape: It's how they dress their never-ending Iran deal campaigns in the garb of domestic Israeli politics. After Obama's second term ended, his ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, stayed in country to service the anti-Bibi infrastructure while

warning Israelis that no matter how good Trump was for Israel—crashing the nuclear deal, moving the embassy to Jerusalem, etc.—they better not get too close to the Republican president, for there would be a price to pay once the Democrats returned to power. And now they have.

Netanyahu brought some of this punishment on himself. His March 2015 speech before a joint session of Congress warning against the Iran nuclear deal was celebrated by Republicans at the time as a bold gesture of defiance. They likened Netanyahu to Winston Churchill, with Obama scripted as the grand appeaser, Neville Chamberlain.

In retrospect Bibi's speech was a mistake. First, it was an announcement to the world that having gone all out—short of taking out Iran's nuclear facilities—Bibi lost. Second, it signaled that the crucial decisions about Israel's future were made not in Jerusalem but in Washington. This is what galvanized Bibi's domestic opposition.

Israel's anti-Bibi establishment was

pleased to do Obama's bidding. It didn't matter that he was empowering Iran. If America wanted a deal with the clerical regime, they would have it. What Bibi's domestic foes wanted was an imperial patron who would back their confrontation with the near enemy, Netanyahu, even as they continued to lose elections.

Now that there is no mistaking who is driving the coup against him, Bibi at least has a clearer picture of the game board before him. He can't do much about the "ally" that has legitimized BDS on a grander scale than its academic proponents in the U.S. could ever hope for by filling Israeli streets with opponents threatening to take capital out of the country and shirk military service. The only way out of this mess is to reassert his freedom of action by zeroing in on the Obama-Biden faction's favored foreign constituents, the regime in Tehran. If America wants to set fires in his backyard, Bibi can set fires, too. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Biden's Ties That Bind

How the U.S. is working to constrain Israel before announcing its new Iran deal

BY MICHAEL DORAN

Last November, after 22 months of failed negotiations with the Iranians, President Joe Biden said the Iran nuclear deal was "dead." In recent weeks, however, he has revived discussions with Tehran in a bid, reportedly, "to reduce tensions." But that phrase hides more than it reveals. While Biden and his team claim to be working to halt the advance of the Iranian nuclear weapons program, their unstated goal is to constrain Israel, permanently.

Upon assuming office in 2021, Biden

returned to the Middle East strategy originally charted by President Barack Obama, whose North Star was an accommodation with Iran. While Obama's strategy represented an ambitious, regionwide realignment of American policy, he packaged it as a narrow arms control agreement. In truth, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the nuclear deal is officially known, did not live up to its billing as a foolproof barrier blocking all of Iran's pathways to a bomb. But it did succeed in moving the controversy over Iran's nuclear weapons program off to one

side, so that Obama and his team could open direct channels to Tehran, which, they believed, would help stabilize the Middle East.

Obama's attempt to skirt the nuclear issue rather than solve it was key to the entire nature and structure of the JCPOA. The foundation for that agreement was set in 2013, at the beginning of Obama's second term, when the U.S. president buckled to Iran's demand that the United States recognize its self-proclaimed "right" to enrich uranium. At one stroke, Obama's concession removed the most formidable barrier preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon—namely, American political will.

In its public statements, the Obama administration hid the crucial role of its concession in kickstarting the negotiations, presenting its Iran diplomacy instead as the result of the election of Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president who took office in August 2013. With the help of an "echo chamber," to borrow the phrase of Ben Rhodes, Obama's

deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, Obama and his team created the impression that a change of heart in Tehran (from an election, no less) had produced a new dawn in relations between the West and Iran. Moreover, by depicting the negotiations as a peace train driven by the twin conductors, Obama and Rouhani, they placed an insurmountable political obstacle before an Israeli attack on Iran. They checkmated, that is, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Officials in the Obama administration openly gloated over the victory. In 2014, once the negotiations for the JCPOA were well underway and the momentum toward a deal was unstoppable, the officials spun cartwheels in *The Atlantic*, their mouthpiece. Under cover of anonymity, one official famously called Netanyahu “chickenshit.” Embroidering on the theme, another said, “It’s too late for [Netanyahu] to do anything. Two, three years ago, this was a possibility. But ultimately, he couldn’t bring himself to pull the trigger. It was a combination of our pressure and his own unwillingness to do anything dramatic. Now it’s too late.”

Indeed, we now know that Obama and his team worked in parallel or together with sympathetic Israeli officials to block Netanyahu from launching an Israeli strike in the period 2009-12. Biden, who staffed his Middle East team exclusively with alumni from the Obama administration, is working today directly from Obama’s playbook. As Netanyahu and his advisers mull anew a unilateral strike, the Biden team is restarting the peace train by reviving the “dead” negotiations with Tehran. At the same time, it is applying pressure inside the Israeli political and security structure. A main goal of Biden’s policy toward Israel today is to create a political atmosphere that will encourage Israeli officials and military officers to identify with Washington rather than with the country’s elected leadership and geostrategic interests.

By now, the depth of the Democratic Party’s commitment to Obama’s regional strategy and tactics should be obvious. Almost two years ago, Biden officials defended their supine policy toward Iran by suggesting that it was a

temporary posture, that their patience with Tehran was running thin, and that, if results weren’t forthcoming, a tougher policy would result. “We are committed to diplomacy, but this process cannot go on indefinitely,” Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in July of 2021. “Time is running short” for Iran, he said one month later. “If [Iran] doesn’t want to get back into the deal, if it continues to do what it appears to be doing now, which is to drag its feet at the nuclear diplomatic table and accelerate its pace when it comes to its nuclear program, if that’s the path it chooses, we’ll have to respond accordingly,” he said a month after that.

If patience is a virtue, Blinken is a saint. Since those expressions of flagging patience, the Islamic Republic has, to name just a few developments, brutally suppressed the worst protests in its history, advanced its nuclear weapons program considerably, pursued plots to murder former American officials on American soil, and developed a defense industrial cooperation with the Russian military—all while refusing to accept the generous terms for renewing a nuclear deal offered by Washington. None of these developments managed to try the patience of the Biden administration.

Why? Domestic political calculations partly explain Biden’s indulgence of Iran’s malignant behavior. Imagine how the progressives, the most dynamic element in the Democratic Party, would respond if Biden were to stand before them and admit, tacitly or explicitly, that President Donald Trump got it right: There is no purely diplomatic means to convince Iran to give up its nuclear program. “Maximum pressure” is the only rational way to deal with Tehran. The rebellion would be fierce and immediate. Progressives believe, as an article of blind faith, that a diplomatic path to better relations with Tehran exists. They resent Israel, its American supporters, and any policy designed to assist it.

But domestic politics is not the whole story. Among the American national security elite, there exists an entrenched school of thought supporting the Iran realignment, but which does not advertise its existence too loudly, for fear of

running afoul of the pro-Israel community. That school of thought rests on five core convictions. First, the Middle East no longer matters as much to the United States as it once did. Second, America’s allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, have forced the United States, historically, to take a tougher stance on Iran than is strictly necessary on the basis of a cold calculation of the American interest. Third, a major Israeli-Iranian conflict risks sucking the United States into a costly and unnecessary war with Iran. Fourth, offensive countermeasures, in the form of punitive military strikes or aggressive economic sanctions such as those imposed by the Trump administration, are also a slippery slope to war. Fifth, and most importantly, a war to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon is a worse outcome than simply containing a nuclear-armed Iran, just as North Korea, Pakistan, and other nuclear-armed states have been more or less successfully contained.

These convictions lead inexorably to the conclusion, always unstated, that Israel’s hostility to Iran is a threat to the national security of the United States. They turn managing Israel, suppressing its supposed bellicosity, into a strategic priority of American foreign policy.

Biden officials regard Netanyahu as their *bête noire* not simply because he openly objects to their approach or because he sides with Republicans, but because he is better positioned than anyone else to expose the egregious flaws of the strategy they favor, which is based on the assumptions that accommodation with Iran is both possible and in the American interest. Netanyahu is that rarest of things: a foreign leader to whom Americans directly listen as if he were one of their own. Israeli military capabilities amplify his voice and embarrass the administration.

Starting with Obama himself, supporters of the Iran realignment have never been open and honest with the American people about their true convictions. To advance their policy, they have always relied on misdirection, obfuscation, and half truths. Netanyahu has a unique gift for exposing this dishonesty.

He rests his case for military action on the time-tested logic of deterrence. If the United States and Israel truly seek to stop Iran from acquiring a bomb, then they must persuade Tehran that they will exact a price that is too painful for it to bear. Persuasion means taking military actions that demonstrate both a political and military capacity not just to punish Iran's leaders once or twice but to follow them in a dynamic fashion as they proceed up the ladder of military escalation, to absorb whatever counterattacks they unleash and to answer them with even more punishing blows.

This task of persuasion is best done jointly. Ron Dermer, Israel's minister of strategic affairs and one of Netanyahu's closest confidants, explained the challenge in a podcast last December, before he joined the government. For the Iranian regime, Dermer explained, the nuclear program is the queen in the chess game; the regime itself is the king. "The only way that you'll get Iran to give up its program peacefully is if the king is threatened," he said. "They will only sacrifice the queen to save the king." Israel, by itself, does not have the power to threaten the regime's existence. The United States alone can threaten the king. "Without the U.S. credible military threat, no diplomacy will achieve a positive outcome. Nothing you do will achieve a positive outcome," he added.

According to Dermer, Israel on its own perhaps has enough military capacity to prevent the Iranians from building a bomb, "but it will not get them to dismantle their nuclear capability." Dermer might have added that, even when acting entirely alone, Israel's ability to exact concessions from Iran increases exponentially if the United States offers it unqualified diplomatic support. Israel can strike Iran nuclear sites on the first day of the war, but on days two and three, it needs the convincing threat of American intervention to deter Iran from widening the conflict.

Based on this thinking, the Israelis have been proposing to the Biden administration a division of labor: They will carry out the strikes on sensitive targets, but the United States military must be visible in the background to

"For the Iranian regime, the nuclear program is the queen in the chess game; the regime itself is the king."

deter Iran lest it be tempted to widen the war. Though it is thoroughly rational, Biden will never accept this proposal. Nor will he reject it outright. Although the roots of the Iran realignment extend deep into progressive soil, the Democratic Party cannot rule without the support of pro-Israel voters. In addition, it must also manage disgruntled allies, Israel above all, who regard the Obama-Biden perspective on Iran as utterly delusional.

Formulating a policy that looks, tastes, and feels like a pro-Israel orientation but that delivers Iran appeasement is no mean feat. To accomplish this illusion, Biden and his team are proceeding along four tracks simultaneously.

First, they express strong rhetorical support for Israel and its security. "There can be no doubt that we are walking the walk and not just talking the talk when we say that our commitment to Israel's security is ironclad," said Biden National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan at a recent appearance.

Second, they sponsor joint planning and exercises between the American and Israeli militaries.

Third, now that Israel is a member of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the combatant command responsible for the Middle East, the United States

is sponsoring greater coordination between Israel's military and the militaries of other regional powers, working toward an integrated missile defense.

Fourth, Biden and his team are promoting normalization with Saudi Arabia.

None of these tracks—seen in isolation—is objectionable in any way. On the contrary, they belong, individually and collectively, in the category of "strongly advisable." To an untrained eye, however, they create the impression, as consciously intended, that the administration is building a regional coalition, centered on Israel, designed to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. In fact, Biden and his team are building a new regional order, centered on accommodating Iran. The purpose of the four policies enumerated above is to mislead and restrain Israel and its supporters. Let's take them one by one.

When it comes to military deterrence, actions send the most important messages. A recent exchange between Sen. Tom Cotton and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin at a Senate hearing was instructive. Since Biden had taken office, the exchange revealed, Iran and Iran-backed militias attacked American forces 83 times. The United States retaliated on only four occasions. "What kind of signal do we think this sends to Iran?" Cotton asked. If the United States refuses to lift a finger to deter attacks on Americans, it will never take military action to protect Israelis.

To the pro-Israel community, the administration presents its full slate of joint military exercises as an expression of deep love and affection. In reality, it is a "bear hug" tactic designed to incapacitate Israel's military from pursuing independent action, like a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Close cooperation between the two militaries allows the U.S. to monitor its partner more thoroughly and to penetrate and influence the officer corps, which, thanks to the turmoil in Israeli politics, is increasingly polarized, with some officers deeply disaffected from Netanyahu.

Integrated missile defense, also a bear hug tactic, will certainly deliver useful capabilities to Israel and to the Arab states who are also working with

CENTCOM, but their value should not be exaggerated. They are purely defensive capabilities. According to General McKenzie, the former commander of CENTCOM, Iran now possesses “overmatch.” This assessment, based on military science that is not up for debate among serious national security professionals, means that Tehran and its proxies can send drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles in configurations that will overwhelm even the most sophisticated missile defense systems in the world. The United States and Israel cannot deter Iranian attacks or prevent a nuclear breakout with purely defensive measures.

As for normalization with Saudi Arabia, it will likely happen one day, possibly relatively soon, but not before November 2024. The Saudis have well-founded concerns about the commitment of the Biden administration to their security—concerns based on the proven reluctance of Washington to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and to contain the ever-growing threat that its conventional military power poses. In return for normalizing relations with Israel, Riyadh has asked Washington for, among other things, security guarantees. Biden officials have demurred, precisely because doing so would require them to abandon their quest for a strategic accommodation with Tehran.

Of all Biden’s stratagems for misleading pro-Israel voters, advocating for normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia is the most delicious of all. The policy will not bear fruit, at least not in the short term. Washington will never give the Saudis what they are asking for, because, to repeat, doing so would sink the U.S. alignment with Tehran. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Netanyahu eagerly associates himself with Biden’s kabuki peace effort, thus fostering the impression of greater comity between him and the White House than truly exists. After all, no Israeli leader can publicly stand against either the U.S. or peace with Saudi Arabia. So Netanyahu is trapped.

In the end, when the policy fails to deliver tangible results, Biden and his team will enjoy the delightful opportunity of

choosing whether to blame the Saudis, the Israelis, or both. “We tried hard,” they will tell us in November 2024, “but Riyadh just wasn’t ready to take the risk.” Progressives will eagerly note that Netanyahu, the leader of an “extremist” government, was unwilling to make the concessions on Palestinian statehood that might have brought the Saudis around. Call it the peace trap.

The “extremist” moniker brings us, lastly, to the intersection between Israeli domestic politics and Biden’s Iran realignment. No sooner did the controversy over Israel’s judicial reform erupt than the Biden administration hoisted the anti-reform banner. “They cannot continue down this road,” Biden said in March about the Netanyahu government’s support for the reform. When asked in response to that statement if he intended to invite Netanyahu to the White House, Biden answered, “No, not in the near term.” In recent days, he has doubled down on the snub by inviting President Isaac Herzog, who holds a purely ceremonial office, to visit the White House instead.

For Biden, the judicial reform controversy is a godsend. In fact, with respect to his priorities of preventing an Israeli strike on Iran and preserving the Iran realignment, it is a trifecta. First, it offers camouflage. Opponents depict the judicial overhaul as an attack on democracy by a corrupt ruler hellbent on instituting an autocracy based on extreme religious and religious nationalist elements. By associating himself with this critique, Biden disguises his fight with Netanyahu over Iran policy to look like a principled dispute over “democratic values,” in which Biden rather than Netanyahu seizes the high ground.

Second, the dispute distracts the Jewish diaspora. The more America’s pro-Israel community debates judicial reform and the ideological character of the Netanyahu government, the less it will concentrate on fighting Biden’s Iran appeasement.

Last week, a senior Biden administration official harshly criticized Amichai Chikli, Israel’s diaspora affairs minister, for calling the Jewish progressive organization, J Street, a “hostile

organization” and for calling one of its funders, billionaire and progressive activist George Soros, “one of the greatest haters of Israel in our times.” Chikli, the anonymous Biden official said, “does not understand the American Jewish diaspora.” The official added that Chikli’s “comments have ramifications. The Biden administration is watching.” Clearly, if Biden has his way, many Jews will see him, not Netanyahu, as their community’s true champion.

Third, and most importantly, the judicial reform sows discord between the top ranks of the Israeli military and the political leadership. “[T]he growing rift in society is penetrating the IDF and the defense institutions,” said Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant on March 25. “This is a clear and present danger to the security of the state,” he continued, in a public appeal to halt the reform legislation. Netanyahu responded by sacking Gallant, only to reinstate him two weeks later, in response to public outcry. Even some supporters of the judicial reform balked at Netanyahu’s reaction. They understood Gallant, a career military officer before joining politics, to be sincerely conveying the concerns of military officers to the national leadership.

When Netanyahu debated about whether to reinstate Gallant, he no doubt mulled over the 2009-12 standoff between him and the IDF leadership over a strike on Iran. Top Israeli security officials, reportedly including Ariel Sharon’s close confidant Meir Dagan, played a restraining role, in close communication with the Americans. Whatever Gallant thinks about the judicial reform, he agrees with the prime minister on Iran. If push comes to shove, he won’t side with Biden. Indeed, Netanyahu packed the entire security cabinet with political loyalists and Iran hawks, precisely to avoid a replay of 2009-12.

But every strategy has its point of weakness. Three names in the security cabinet deserve special attention: Justice Minister Yariv Levin, Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir, and Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich. When opponents of the judicial reform depict it as a religious nationalist putsch, they point to these three men, together with Simha Rothman, the chair

of the Knesset's Constitution, Law, and Justice Committee, as the architects of the supposed coup. Regardless of the truth, these accusations fill the air in Israel today. If Netanyahu were to rely on these ministers to order a strike on Iran, the Biden administration would undoubtedly steal a page from Obama's playbook and amplify the accusations, feeding to the American and Israeli press lines such as, "The most extreme government in Israel's history is dragging Israel and the United States into a reckless war against Iran."

This prospect undoubtedly weighs on the minds of Israeli generals today. An attack on Iran large enough to set back the Iranian nuclear program for years could potentially spark a major war between Iran and Israel. Schooled in the thinking of Israel's founder, David Ben-Gurion, Israeli generals refrain from starting wars without great power support. In 2012, especially, they mounted significant opposition to the planned strike against Iran and thereby denied Netanyahu a needed majority in

the security cabinet. Would they behave any differently today?

Attacking Iran would be the challenge of a lifetime for Netanyahu even in the best of circumstances. To launch a strike while his society is bitterly divided over his premiership, while his security cabinet is at odds with the military brass, and while the Americans drip poison in the ears of his own generals would be nearly impossible.

Perhaps for that reason, Netanyahu shows signs of acquiescing in the interim deal that Biden is now cooking up with the Iranians. According to press reports, Iran will refrain from enriching uranium beyond 60%, and in return the U.S. will refrain from imposing stricter sanctions and will release Iranian assets worth billions of dollars. The deal is a victory for Iran, because it blesses a status quo on enrichment that violates previous red lines drawn by both Israel and the United States while also failing to address areas other than enrichment in which Iran's nuclear weapons program continues to advance. To be sure, the

Israeli prime minister is guarding his freedom of action by saying that Israel will not be bound by any agreement between Washington and Tehran. But on June 14, he also reportedly said, "What's on the agenda at the moment between Washington and Tehran is not a nuclear deal, it's a mini-deal. We will be able to handle it."

With that statement, Biden's *bête noire* signaled that between now and November 2024, he will take no military action that will disrupt the president's reelection prospects. Nor will he disrupt the realignment. With each passing day, Iran appeasement becomes the baseline American policy toward the Middle East. Iran's atomic weapons enterprise grows larger, more sophisticated, and more hardened against attack. The Biden administration says it is protecting Israel and preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. It is doing the exact opposite. ■

This article was originally published on June 20, 2023.

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

Among the Protesters

The fundamental question isn't whether Israel should be a democracy. It's whether it should be like everywhere else.

BY ANTONIO GARCÍA MARTÍNEZ

I'm jet lagged and jostled, in the back of a Maserati SUV driven maniacally by a guy named "Shay" on Israel's Highway 1 between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Next to me, also crammed between shrink-wrapped cases of drinking water, is Maya Zehavi, a member of the Israeli crypto community and the reason why I'm here. Riding shotgun is Sarit Radman, the mother of Moshe Radman, one of the handful of ad hoc leaders of Israel's protest movement around a judicial reform

bill that has divided the nation. The goal is to deliver *ima* Radman to her son at the head of the procession for the big photo op as they enter Jerusalem.

The Radman-finding challenge is made harder by the fact that the protest, a snaking, chanting mass absolutely festooned with Israeli flags, is hogging up most of the highway save for the left-most lane which is bottlenecked with cars. Wedged between police motorcycles and howling protesters, even Shay gunning the Maserati's sonorous V8 engine gets us nowhere.

Eifo Radman! Eifo Radman!? (Where is Radman?) our driver Shay yells at random *mishtarah* who've dismounted their motorcycles and are trying to channel the chaos. The sun is broiling, and some of the marchers have walked all the way from Tel Aviv, over 60 kilometers away. Many are soaked in sweat, holding homemade signs, and chanting slogans with transported looks on their faces. The march to Jerusalem was concocted, Arab Spring-style, in a WhatsApp group a few days ago, but the emotion culminates months of Israeli political infighting and cultural clashes between the secular left and the religious right.

Surprisingly, one of the police responds with directions to Radman, and Shay hurls us through a gap in the flag-waving bodies toward Jerusalem. We drop off *ima* Radman for the photo op—soon to be shared on WhatsApp and thence Twitter and the mainstream media—before packing into Shay's Maserati again and roaring up

the rolling Judean Hills toward Jerusalem proper.

We stop in the protest's staging area: under the monumental Calatrava-designed Chords Bridge, where Ben-Gurion Boulevard becomes Weizman Boulevard in front of the institute dedicated to Rav Kook (the founder of Religious Zionism). The irony of the secular revolt against religious rule happening in front of Mossad HaRav Kook, itself surrounded by housing blocks full of religious families, isn't lost on me. Orthodox families linger around, contemplating the gathering mob in mute bemusement on their day of rest.

We walk up the light-rail tracks of the bridge—we won't be run over since the trains don't run on Shabbat—to catch the bird's-eye view of the unfolding scene. Maya's shirt shouts SAVE OUR STARTUP NATION and she too is carrying an Israeli flag. Beneath us, there's a pooling mass of people as the torrent of highway protesters crests the last hill into the "City of Peace."

"OK, Maya, you absolutely insisted I come to this straight after my flight. I know the background story here, but why are you panicking?"

Then Maya hits me with a phrase I'd hear (and read) a lot in the ensuing weeks: "if we lose, then all of Israel will be like Jerusalem."

I'm looking around at the spectacular Calatrava bridge and Jerusalem stone buildings stretching in all directions across the Judean hills, and not getting the dystopia vibe.

Right that second, HaShem strike me blind if I'm lying (and I've got the photo to prove it) a Chabadnik, holding one of their $\eta\psi\eta$ flags, walks past a protester waving a Pride flag. They utterly ignore each other. "OK," I say to Maya, "I'm waiting for the theocratic fascism here."

"You have no idea how hard it was to do a Pride Parade in Jerusalem this year," she replies.

This business of Jerusalem being a horrifying warning of what's to come if the judicial reform goes through was a recurring refrain in both my time there, and after. Two weeks later, *Haaretz* writer Chaim Levinson continued the

trope with his thundering prophecy: "Jerusalem's Crumbling Present Is Israel's Likely Future."

To Levinson's view, Jerusalem once had history and culture, but no longer: There were intelligentsia and journalists [i.e., people like him]. People would come to clubs from all over the country to get their freak on. There were alternative bands, independent record labels, DJs, and artists.

"Culture," to Levinson, is of course the cosmopolitan salad bar of restaurants and musicians and media, a consumable good with accompanying Yelp reviews, a nonbinding spectacle in an otherwise atomized life with individual choice as the only moral good. Culture is most definitely not the *kumsitz* at the *Kotel* on Tisha B'Av singing "*MiMaa-makim*" shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of American Modern Orthodox kids and a few settler youth (as I did, or tried to, with my terrible Hebrew).

With such a superficial notion of culture, Levinson is mystified why diaspora Jews want to spend time there: "[Jerusalem] lives on immigration from France and the U.S., where people are so homesick for the motherland that they are blind to its flaws," he writes. Levinson describes his flight to Tel Aviv like an exodus from a crumbling failed state to the sunlit uplands of cosmopolitanism ("moving to another country would have been more difficult").


Let me tell you what Tel Aviv feels like to a longtime resident of that same nomadic cosmopolitanism: It's a rough-on-the-edges Miami with a high-rise office park of startups plopped into the middle of it. Israelis should feel rightly proud of building such a metropolis out of nothing, but it's like every other city in the global Borg now: Third wave coffee, craft beer, Asian fusion, artsy tattoo studios, "coworking" spaces, techno-capitalism driving skyrocketing real estate ... the full liberal catastrophe.


As I stood in Saron, in a street scene that resembled Miami's Brickell, it occurred to me: What the moneyed Jew in Paris or New York can't find anywhere other than Israel is precisely that *Kotel* scene in Jerusalem that I experienced. That's why diaspora Jews buy in Jerusalem instead of Tel Aviv: They don't

want a slightly Jewy version of Soho or Oberkampf. They want the historical capital of the Jewish people. They don't want what you can now get everywhere from San Francisco to New York to London, even in stops like Boise or Reno. The Borg's inhabitants—the professional-managerial worker bee, the sociopath startup founder, the leftist activist, the suave VC, the tattooed baristas, an overworked underclass—are the same the world over: the bugman with a thousand faces. They want something else altogether.

Other American parallels came to mind: This business of denigrating the opposition's home turf as pathetically backward and benighted sounded eerily familiar. The number of times I've had to bite my tongue over the past few years while some Californian explained to me how DeSantis has subsumed Florida into knuckle-dragging fascism—imagine being in Miami and thinking "fascism!"—is beyond recall at this point.

I'm wary of analogizing foreign politics to the American domestic political sphere—the classic mistake of the American provincial. But as my time among the protesters wore on, the Israeli drama felt more and more like a remake of the same American Netflix

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show—just with different actors, backdrop, and plot details.

“[T]he facts,” Levinson intones, “point to Haredi cities not being particularly attractive ... It may be a matter of priorities: Synagogues instead of theaters, mikvahs instead of soccer fields, cholent shops rather than haute cuisine.”

Every secular Israeli in Tel Aviv, attempting to frame the political problem to me, would do the same: The entirety of their political opposition, and the problem bedeviling Israel, was the benefits-consuming, military-service-avoiding Haredim. But the problem is, the 13% of the Israeli population that’s Haredi isn’t enough to get you the 64 Knesset seats in the current ruling coalition.

It’s exactly what happened with the American left after Trump’s electoral victory, somehow thinking that there are enough bucktoothed racist rednecks to win 46% of the popular vote. *You see, if we just didn’t have these Haredi deplorables, matters would be just fine*, goes the standard line. It’s best to pretend one’s enemies are backward, knuckle-dragging zealots, rather than your fellow citizens who simply aren’t buying the political future you’re selling. That’s a much more bitter pill to swallow, and one the Israeli left finds as unswallowable now as the American left did in 2016.

So what does the secular Israeli left do instead?

It proclaims that the end of their political regime (at the hands of democracy) is the end of democracy itself, with unbridled horrors to surely follow. This is the panicked death rattle of every liberal elite confronting an electoral revolt: *après moi, le fascisme!* That the anti-judicial reform protesters should call themselves “pro-democracy” is ironic doublespeak: By any objective description, what the anti-reform crowd wants is a check on democratic power via an unelected judiciary. That’s a valid political prerogative, and one that many constitutions (including the American) enshrine, but let’s be clear what the goal here is. They want that democratic brake for a good reason: Their side is destined to lose many elections to come.

“This is the panicked death rattle of every liberal elite confronting an electoral revolt: *après moi, le fascisme!*”

Here, the Israeli remake of the Netflix show deviates a bit from the plot of the American original.

While right-wing populism might win here or there—Trump in the U.S. or Bolsonaro in Brazil—it’s mostly an electoral fluke that gets reset in the next election, as it has with Biden and Lula retaking power in their respective countries. Israel however, unlike almost any other democracy, has only gotten more religious and moved more to the right in recent years. The answer to “why?” is so simple I can answer it anecdotally: When I had Shabbat dinner at my secular Israeli friends’ house, they’d introduce me to their two or three children. When I broke the Tisha B’Av fast with my Orthodox friend, his children numbered eight. In a democracy, demographics have a way of becoming hard politics very fast, which is what we’re seeing in Israel now. Democracy is removing the old secular Ashkenazi elite from power, which is why they must cry “Democracy!” as they mobilize to avoid their own political demise.

This reality gives the anti-reform movement in Israel an authentic “last stand” quality, unlike the hysterical doomerism of the American left, which fancied itself an insurgent resistance (#RESIST!) while having the entire corporate, political, and media

establishment on its side. Israel really, really is going right-wing and religious, and unlike a podunk country like Hungary, Israel actually matters in the world.

Here, the political parallel with the United States partly reasserts itself: “Moving to Berlin” is the Israeli version of “moving to Canada,” the last-ditch threat of the left-wing refusenik. Many in Israel told me they were prepared to do just that. Unlike all those Americans who never really moved to Vancouver, Israelis do pick up and go: In a recent poll, a large percentage of Israeli startups said they’d moved either money, offices, or headcount abroad as a hedge to the political risk. In an even bigger move within the Israeli political zeitgeist, many military reservists have said they’d refuse to serve under the new judicial regime, something of existential importance to a country perpetually at war.

This is all very self-fulfilling: If you pull all the capital and talent out of Tel Aviv’s startup scene, that tech scene will indeed die or at least be hobbled. If protesters refuse to serve in the military, an existential matter for Israel, the viability of the state is indeed thrown into question. Therein lies the problem: the reaction to a thing is very often worse than the thing itself, and that overreaction will produce the very outcome the bad thing is feared (and eventually blamed) for having caused.

Put another way, startup founders and fighter pilots bailing on the Zionist project will do more harm to Israel than the putative policies the right will attempt to pass under a changed judiciary. In the ’67 war, Israelis dug trenches in their front yards to die defending Israel, and now they threaten to leave and take their startups with them if the politics don’t go their way. That actually is what may destroy the Jewish state: the current elites kicking over the Israel chessboard because they lost the last game and are likely to lose a few more.

Jerusalem was so terrible—so “poor, ugly, boring, bereft of hope and a future”—that I went back after Tisha B’Av. To be candid, I found where I was staying in Florentin, Tel Aviv’s version of Miami’s Wynwood, somewhat poor,

ugly, and boring too. So I walked down Levinski Street to Ha'Hagana station, and took the impressively sleek train to Jerusalem, a shorter and easier commute than going from the Silicon Valley suburbs to San Francisco. Then I hopped on Jerusalem's equally sleek light-rail, and soon found myself getting shooed out of the way by the entourage of some Greek Orthodox cleric emerging from New Gate.

The sun blazed relentlessly and the Jerusalem stone was blinding in the mostly empty streets of the Old City as I meandered toward the Jewish Quarter; even the tourists seeking salvation couldn't deal with it. The *Kotel* itself was practically empty except for an old Jew in a black coat and tallit who was davening in front of stones laid in Herod's time. His observance seemed inhuman in its doggedness, unearthly in its persistence. And yet, two millennia of such doggedness is what had kept the Jewish people alive through the harshest of trials, from the destruction of the Temple through the Holocaust.

Following my 98-degree Fahrenheit encounter with the *shekinah*, I was dying for a cold beer, and decided to walk back to Mahane Yehuda. In my looming heat stroke, I got lost in the Old City and deviated into the Muslim Quarter, where I joined a crowd of Arabs that materialized out of nowhere and seemed to be heading west toward Jaffa Gate. In that unique way you see among the faithful of different religions in Jerusalem, we completely ignored each other—not even making eye contact or acknowledging the other—as we shared the same path toward different destinations.

Mahane Yehuda market on *erev* Shabbat resembles a mosh pit at a Nirvana concert in the '90s, but filled with Orthodox families and American Jewish kids on summer holiday. I've conceived children and had less body contact than I did with half of Jerusalem elbowing my way up and down Etz Hayim Street. The Orthodox women were the real professionals, using their baby strollers as battering rams to cut a path for themselves and their broods through the jostling mayhem. The American kids, still starry-eyed at *all this Israel stuff*, clustered in unhelpful groups with

“That’s what everyone using the ‘Israel will be like Jerusalem’ line really means: Israel will no longer be like everything else in the West.”

matching colored T-shirts, blocking the way. The only square foot of free space was around the Chabad cart, where *shluchim* tried lassoing in people with their tefillin, causing the crowd to keep some distance.

If this is Jerusalem being “abandoned,” I can't imagine what it was like before.

I bought some *yaprakes* and olives and found the craft beer spot in the market where an enormous Israeli flag hung over the many beer taps. Kippah-wearing Americans in their 20s were, I kid you not, having a debate about the whole trans thing next to me at the crowded bar. After pouring me a lifesaving wheat beer, my young (male) bartender abandoned his post and took up a stool next to a group of convivial Israeli women who ordered a round of shots (this tendency of Israeli bartenders to flip to the other side of the bar if the action there is more interesting seems universal).

Watching merchants busily packaging their spreads for sale, the bartender flirting with his clients, the mothers efficiently rounding out their Shabbat shopping lists while somehow minding their children, I thought: This is altogether different than San Francisco, where I recently witnessed a group of 30-somethings throw a birthday party,

complete with balloons and decorations, for a French bulldog; where autonomous vehicles with startup logos navigate through empty streets around homeless encampments filled with drug zombies; where the local Lego store doesn't gift wrap purchases because it's mostly adults buying Lego sets for themselves. That modern Borg that secular Israelis keep billing as a liberation from the straitjacket of religion contains its own horrors—ones that many would trade, in a heartbeat, for the supposed flaws of Jerusalem.

One senses the real problem with Jerusalem is that the Israelis who fled (or will flee) to Berlin or Brooklyn will find it supremely awkward and embarrassing to explain everything the Israeli capital represents, from the davening old Jew at the Wall to the soldiers to the Arab population and its never-ending issues. They want Israel to be, as Liel Liebovitz memorably put it in these pages, “a country like any other.”

What Jerusalem beams into your soul, from every sun-baked block of *meleke* at the Western Wall or on Jaffa Street, is that it's a place like no other with a people like no other. And that brand of stiff-necked particularism is a hard sell back in the Borg, across the fashionable restaurant table from your new friends in Cobble Hill or Prenzlauer Berg. *That's* what everyone using the “Israel will be like Jerusalem” line really means with the phrase: Israel will no longer be like everything else in the West, where all the secular pretty people live, whose women don't wear headscarves, whose men don't face Jerusalem in ecstatic prayer, and whose young men and women aren't willing to die to defend a national ideal.

If they win, all of Israel will be like Jerusalem.

My pint glass sits empty, and the hour grows late. The last train back to Tel Aviv is at 15:39, and after that you're stuck in Jerusalem until after *Havdalah* on Saturday. If I'd had a Shabbat dinner invite and a couch to crash on tonight, I would have stayed in Jerusalem, but I had to get back to the tattooed hipsters of Florentin. I begin to cross the light-rail tracks on Jaffa

Street ... and am almost instantly flattened by a Haredi kid zipping down the tracks in an e-bike, tzitzit flying, also hurrying back before Shabbat.

At the entrance to Jerusalem's Yitzchak Navon Train Station station, a blue-uniformed policewoman eyes me up and down while signaling at me to put everything through the X-ray machine. Hand resting on the 9 mm carbine slung around her neck, her face announces she's Beta Israel, a descendent of the Ethiopian Jews evacuated clandestinely in one of the Israeli state's many logistical coups.

I descend the station's impossibly long escalators, passing an immense set of steel doors: The train station doubles as a bunker against nuclear or chemical attack, and can provide shelter for thousands of Jerusalemites. On the train platform, men and women in Israel's citizen army get off from the last train from Tel Aviv, backpacks and rifles slung over their shoulders, rushing to make it home for Shabbat. An Orthodox teenager in a black hat, no older than 16, faces *Har HaBayit* in prayer while the crowd streams busily around him.

Once out of the deep tunnels under Jerusalem, the train slices through rolling, green Judean hills, the biblical landscape of the imagination. We're headed back to the "Tel Aviv spirit" of gleaming office towers among crumbling modernist low-rise, a skyline that could exist anywhere.

The train takes little more than a half hour to go from the City of David to the city of Startup Nation, the opposing poles of Israel's smoldering identity crisis.

As history has shown repeatedly, from the war of David against the house of Saul, to the infighting during the siege of Jerusalem that led to the Temple's destruction, to the *Altalena* incident in 1948, the great threat to Jewish autonomy in the ancestral homeland is as much strife with fellow Jews as any hostile outsider. "Don't you realize that this will end in bitterness?" we read in II Samuel 2:26. "How long before you order your men to stop pursuing their fellow Israelites?"

Indeed, what's funniest about a very

“What’s funniest about a very serious situation, having spent most of the week with both secular and religious Jews, is that they’re actually not that different.”

serious situation, having spent most of the week with both secular and religious Jews, is that they're actually not that different. Supposedly secular Israelis still do a Shabbat Kiddush with kippot, and dedicate their Saturdays to family and friends; "secular" Israelis are more observant than your average American Jew.

They're also socially conservative in a very un-self-conscious way. At a tableful of Israeli startup bros, almost all will be married and likely have kids, unlike the typical situation in the U.S., where no tech bro is married and children are a distant abstraction (if they're thought about at all). The real difference between the supposedly secular and religious Israelis is whether they have three kids or eight, but come Friday evening, both are sitting with family and friends at a Shabbat table, whether in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem.

When the Jerusalem protesters got to the Knesset, their first act was to collectively sing "Hatikvah" while waving their nation's flag. By contrast, Americans aren't able to collectively sing anything anymore other than Taylor Swift songs, and good luck hanging an American flag inside a Valley startup without a bitter debate in the company Slack. Red and blue tribes in the U.S. inhabit

separate and irreconcilable moral and social universes; the U.S. is no longer a single country.

The difference is that the United States can afford such a fractious political climate and such a threadbare (to not say nonexistent) social fabric. Favorable geography that puts all enemies at ocean's length, plus a mammoth amount of economic inertia, means there'll be no serious threats to America anytime soon. Lots of empty space and a federal system means Nevada can live like a libertarian right-wing paradise next door to the most progressive state in the union, California. American youth can grow fat and lazy shooting fictional M4s inside Call of Duty knowing they'll never have to carry a real one at a West Bank checkpoint.

Israel lacks the luxuries of space and federalism; it also lacks the luxury of distant enemies. A country that must build nuclear bunkers into its train stations is a country that can't afford showy acts of refusal and abandonment by its elites. It's a country that can't afford the corrosive effects of a contemptuous political dialogue that treats the opposition as beyond the pale of reason and solidarity. If Israel becomes more like Tel Aviv, and the wider liberal world that city aspires to emulate, there are dangers lurking there too, dangers that may prove fatal to a country in such exceptional circumstances. Israel is not, nor will ever be, "a country like any other," no matter how much its secular elites may wish it to be. If instead Israel looks a bit more like Jerusalem, and avoids the secular malaise currently afflicting the world's democracies, the Jewish people have pondered far grimmer futures. ■

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SCIENCE

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THE REST

→ **Najla Mangoush, the Libya foreign minister who was dismissed by the prime minister in an attempt to quell the uproar over her meeting with her Israeli counterpart, Eli Cohen, in Rome, fled to Turkey on Monday over safety concerns.** The two-hour meeting was unplanned but approved “at the highest levels in Libya,” Israeli officials said afterward, though such approval might have only agitated protestors who’ve gathered across several Libyan cities. Libya has a long history of hostile relations with Israel and does not formally recognize the Jewish state. The row over the Rome meeting has exacerbated ongoing political turmoil in Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dbeibah’s interim government, which was installed in 2021 with help from the United Nations but has been under fire by opponents who want to replace it with a national election.

→ **The village of Robotyne in the Zaporizhzhia region of Ukraine was liberated by Ukrainian forces, deputy defense minister Hanna Maliar said on Monday, as troops continued to move southeast against the displaced Russian military.** While the recaptured territory is being touted by Ukraine’s government, Western officials have expressed concern that Kyiv’s counteroffensive, launched a little under three months ago, has struggled to recapture significant territory from Russia, particularly across the southern coast where Russia maintains a land bridge between its mainland and the occupied Crimea peninsula. Military analyst reports show that Ukraine has moved past the first line of Russian forces beyond Robotyne and is pushing against the next layer, though further advances may be incremental at best, as Russia maintains a complex system of trenches and tunnels south of the village.

→ After months of speculation and some concern over the identity of the owner spending more than **\$800 million to scoop up thousands of acres of land near an Air Force base in the San Francisco Bay Area**, the *New York Times* reported on Friday that **Flannery Associates, the company making the buys, has been backed by some of the biggest names in Silicon Valley, including billionaire investor Michael Moritz, LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, Andreessen Horowitz principals Marc Andreessen and Chris Dixon, and Emerson Collective founder Laurene Powell Jobs, among others.** Worries among local officials that China made the bid to spy on American military operations have now been supplanted by questions about how exactly Flannery Associates plans to create from scratch a new city with “tens of thousands of residents, clean energy, public transportation and dense urban life,” as the NYT reports. More details should soon emerge as Flannery, which will need to woo votes from county residents for zoning and building approval, has begun setting up meetings with local officials.

→ The Pentagon will **produce thousands of AI-powered battle vehicles across “all domains” as a counterweight to China’s emergent military largesse**, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks announced Monday at the National Defense Industrial Association’s Emerging Technologies conference. The plan is to invest in a program called **Replicator, which will “counter the PLA’s mass with mass of our own, but ours will be harder to plan for, harder to hit, harder to beat,”** said Hicks. Military analyst John Robb commented on X (formerly known as Twitter) that it’s a good idea but that the execution may be difficult for three reasons: “A) Unable to get costs down to levels that allow it to scale. B) Unable to mass produce them (not enough manufacturing capability). C) The AIs (onboard and at the swarm level) will be lobotomized to make them safe.”

THE BIG STORY

President Joe Biden told reporters on Friday that he’s just signed off on a proposal for Congress to fund the development of “a new [coronavirus] vaccine that is necessary, that works,” he said while on vacation in Lake Tahoe, adding that his administration is “tentatively” going to recommend “that everybody get it no matter whether they got it before or not”—and apparently regardless of their health status and whether or not they had a previous COVID-19 infection that gave them natural immunity. The request to fund a new vaccine comes amid an uptick in COVID-19 cases and the spread of new subvariants such as the “Eris” strain.

Despite Biden’s assurances that the new vaccine was needed for “everyone” regardless of their immunity status, there have been questions about the efficacy of another vaccine booster in reducing the severity of the illness or the spread of the disease. “Clinical trials absolutely must be done for new covid shots,” Vinay Prasad, professor of epidemiology research at UC San Francisco, wrote on Twitter/X, referring to a Federal Drug Administration notice that says updates to the novel-coronaviruxs vaccines will not be tested clinically before release, a system that Prasad described as “just guessing [and] suboptimal.”

—Sean Cooper

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Israel's Elites Revolt Against Democracy

The architects of the anti-Bibi protests are clear about their motives: defending elites from the masses

BY GADI TAUB

In his *New York Times* opinion piece titled “The U.S. Re-assessment of Netanyahu’s Government Has Begun,” Thomas Friedman wrote that he likes to say of his job that he is “a translator from English to English”: He takes complex things and renders them understandable. Israel, he explained, is turning its back on the shared values which have underpinned the friendship between the American superpower and the Jewish state. As Friedman explains it, the judicial reform proposed by Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing coalition poses a grave threat to democracy because it would “change the long-established balance of power between the government and the Supreme Court, the only independent check on political power.”

It turns out that translating from English to English may not be the most useful skill when you need to understand something that is happening in Hebrew. Friedman is right that Israel’s democracy is in danger, but Netanyahu’s government is not the source of peril. The real danger comes from the court itself, which is now asserting a made-up “right” to remove a sitting prime minister—that is, to nullify the results of a legal election and eclipse Israel’s democratic politics and institutions through its own self-perpetuating fiat. The protest movement that arose to defend the court’s power (and its backers among the country’s economic and military elite) are together attempting to block the redemocratization of Israeli politics, as the reforms intended to do.

This is not some innovative

hypothesis. If you read Hebrew, you can hear some protesters and their backers in the country’s establishments announcing their intentions more or less explicitly: Democracy is the very thing they are out to prevent. The movement’s ideologues are longtime staunch opponents of the democratic form of government who have devoted whole academic careers to opposing it; their political leaders in parliament and outside it use the term “democracy” in a deliberately deceptive way, as they sometimes admit; and their street-level ringleaders more or less openly confess disdain for the mass of enfranchised citizens. Most poignantly, when it comes to the rebelling IDF reservists—virtually all of them from elite unites, mostly in the air force—they don’t even bother with lip service to the idea of majoritarian decision-making. Rather, they express open contempt for the majority of Israel’s citizens, peppered with thinly veiled references to ethnicity, religiosity, and class.

At least some of this unabashed condescension must be fairly obvious, even to foreigners—especially those like Friedman who claim to be in touch with Israeli opinion. At around the time that Friedman wrote his piece, it seemed like a military coup against Israel’s democracy was in the making. News stories accumulated about more and more reservists declaring they wouldn’t report to duty unless the reform was shelved. Speculation about Israel’s battle readiness, or lack thereof, filled the news cycle. For the most part the media framed the issue as a story about heroic reservist martyrs determined to fight “the battle for democracy” rather than calling it

what it was: a bunch of officers threatening to jeopardize Israel’s security if the parliamentary majority did not yield to their demands. As the title of one *Haaretz* piece read: “A Military Coup Is Underway in Israel—and It’s Completely Justified.”

Some writers were not content with cheering on the rebelling reservists. Sima Kadmon, a senior political pundit for the popular daily *Yedioth Ahronoth*, wrote a full-page piece on the paper’s prestigious page 3, calling on the brass to take command of the situation. The title said “Only They Can Make Him Stop” (July 19, 2023). The piece called on the IDF chief of staff, the head of Mossad, the chief of the National Police and the head of Shabak (Israel’s General Security Service) to walk into the prime minister’s office and tell him “Enough!” thereby forcing him to overturn his cabinet’s policy. In normal language, we don’t call that “democracy.” We call it a military coup.

Threats of a coup continued all the way up to the day of the Knesset vote on the first bill of the reform, a bill already diluted in the negotiations with the opposition, which nevertheless kept demanding more concessions. This was the by-now famous bill to limit the court’s use of the highly subjective “reasonableness” test. The vote was set for Monday, and on Friday a new petition of air force reservists was trumpeted in the press—1,142 signatories, or so we were told, all using only their initials, declared they would no longer report to duty if the bill was voted into law. Among them, we were told, were hundreds of active army pilots and navigators, along with air control officers and special air force personnel.

Shabbat was about to set in and there was no way to verify the initialed names in time for the vote, so nobody could tell how much of this was true and how much a publicity stunt. But that didn’t stop the mainstream press, along with the leadership of the protest movement and the opposition MKs, from rushing to deliver threats—thinly veiled as “warnings”—that Israel’s security would soon be dangerously impaired. Straight-faced pundits placed the blame on the government’s shoulders, attempting to

justify the threatened mutiny based on a look-what-you-made-us-do argument. It seemed not to have occurred to most of these journalists that forcing a parliamentary majority to surrender before a group of army officers is the way democracies are generally destroyed, not saved.

The coalition, this time around, saw the coup for what it was and closed ranks, leaving aside the few disagreements that still remained about “reasonableness.” It kept negotiating with the opposition in an effort to reach wider agreement till the very last moment. Yet it still made it clear that with or without agreement the bill would pass because the Knesset would not bow down to threats from army officers. The opposition, for its part, led by Yair Lapid, refused to take part in a vote, and in yet another show of its anti-democratic spirit marched out of the chamber to leave the coalition to vote by itself.

Read more on the Israeli protests

Lapid, a former caretaker prime minister, had signed an agreement on his way out of office to change Israel’s maritime border with Lebanon—essentially giving Hezbollah whatever it demanded in return for nothing—without even presenting it to the Knesset let alone putting it up for a vote, as the law demands. In fact, when it comes to changing Israel’s international borders, a Basic Law requires a two-thirds majority. But Lapid decided to bypass the Knesset because the opposition, he said, was “reckless.” Astonishingly the Supreme Court, which has no authority to do so, granted Lapid permission to sign the agreement without a vote. He did so, four days before Israel’s general election. But now, apparently, the same Lapid would have us believe that limiting the “reasonableness” test, which obviously does not apply to the court’s own decisions, is a dangerous first step on the way to a Netanyahu “dictatorship.” In fact, the opposite is true.

The “reasonableness” controversy is not about saving Israel from a future theocratic right-wing dictatorship. It is about releasing Israel’s democracy from the already existing juristocratic rule. This strange oligarchic arrangement,

which has placed judges and legal advisers above the executive and the legislator in a way unheard of in any other Western democracy, was established by old leftist elites, after they lost their power in 1977 and realized they were unlikely to win it back at the ballot box. It’s not just that there is no court as powerful as Israel’s in any proper democracy. There is no branch of government in any Western state that holds such unlimited sway over the other branches, with no check on its power, and nothing to counterbalance it.

Israel’s Supreme Court, which has usurped the authority to annul any action by the other branches of government, has already asserted its power of judicial review over Israel’s Basic Laws, which are what Israel has for a constitution. “Reasonableness” is just one of many tools it has invented for itself, so that it can strike down actions and appointments which it doesn’t like even when there are no legal grounds to do so, save a judge’s subjective tastes and prejudices. He need only crown his whim with the term “unreasonable” and it magically becomes the law of the land. This procedure radically differs from the idea of “extreme unreasonableness” (or in some systems “capriciousness”) that other democracies recognize, which enables a court to strike down things so crazy that “no reasonable person” can think they are sensible. Israel’s court has stretched the idea of “reasonableness” in an open-ended way to cancel government decisions and appointments at its own whim, as can be seen from the fact that the court uses the doctrine as grounds for decisions from which other judges dissent. So either some judges are unreasonable, or else the test is just a disguise for subjective views.

But the whole controversy is not really important, except symbolically. The reader may get the impression that forbidding the court to use reasonableness would be an important step on the way to curbing its arbitrary power, helping restore it to its proper role in a democracy. But that would be a naïve assumption. The court has invented for itself a host of other such instruments which have helped it subdue the other branches of government, and it can easily replace

the lost tool. It can, for example use its infamous postmodern conception of legal interpretation, which has entirely freed it from the letter of the law, or else it can just start ruling that some decisions and appointments are reasonable but do not conform to some power that it would grant to itself, like, say, a “common sense” test. And who better to decide what common sense is than the distinguished and learned judges?

The road to freeing Israeli democracy from the tyranny of the country’s Supreme Court and its auxiliaries is going to be long and difficult. This is not only because the court is not going to give up any of its powers voluntarily. It is also because Israel’s progressive elite rules through the court, and it is now thrashing wildly, threatening to burn the house down, tear the army apart, weaponize the law, and bring economic ruin in the country, if the plebs dare to challenge the patricians’ juristocracy. What Thomas Friedman mistakes for a popular uprising of “the people” to defend democracy is actually the well-organized and well-financed struggle of the country’s established elites to defend their existing privileges.

This is clear if you listen to their ideologues. Take Hebrew University professor Mordechai Kremnitzer, a leading thinker of the anti-reform movement, for example. Kremnitzer is a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, which thinks about democracy in about the same way that the Cancer Institute at the Shiba Medical Center thinks about cancer: It is busy dreaming up ways to get rid of it. Kremnitzer is also the senior legal commentator for *Haaretz*, where he weighed in on the “reasonableness” debate. The Supreme Court, he argued, must strike down the limitations that the Knesset is trying to impose on the reasonableness test despite the fact that they are being legislated as a semiconstitutional Basic Law, a category of law the court should clearly not tamper with.

“The Knesset has no authority,” Kremnitzer wrote, “in any format and with any majority, to undermine the stability of the basic, sublime moral foundations on which the state was built, and

in this case—the democratic system.” In other words, in his view, and in the name of democracy, the Knesset cannot amend our quasi-constitutional laws (which it alone can enact), without the permission of judges, while judges can change our constitutional arrangements over the objection of the Knesset. This means that, on this view, our Supreme Court is also our de facto constitutional convention, a theory that political scientists, unaccustomed to Israel’s psychedelic theory of government, would probably find hard to make sense of.

But these are not the only reasons why the Knesset cannot lay down the rules that govern our institutions. “All the more so,” Kremnitzer adds, “the current coalition lacks this authority, headed as it is by a criminally indicted person, and made up of a shamefully questionable human composition, which deprives it of all moral authority. A court worth its salt, cannot stand idly by.” It seems that in Kremnitzer’s world, “moral authority” is not derived from elections, nor do all citizens have equal power to bestow it. It has to come from the right kind of citizens, and the right kind of “human composition.” The idea that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed is not, it seems, part of what Kremnitzer, a scholar of constitutional law, considers “the democratic system.”

Or take another leading light of the anti-reform movement, professor Yaniv Roznai of the Reichman University School of Law. Roznai is by far the most prolific in supplying the protesters with talking points which have the ring of academic arguments, even if they make little sense upon any closer examination. Roznai is the foremost promoter of a strange anti-democratic theory, which he articulated in his 2017 book *Unconstitutional Constitutional Amendments: The Limits of Amendment Powers*. According to Roznai courts should have the power to strike down amendments to constitutions if they think the amendments contradict some fundamental value even when that value is not specified by the constitution. It doesn’t take a Ph.D. in law to understand that Roznai believes courts have powers which they do not derive from

“There seem to be few things Judge Barak loathes so much as democracy.”

constitutions or the will of the people. This is the theory that Israel’s Supreme Court is currently toying with to support its outrageous move to exercise judicial review over Basic Laws—the very laws that gave it, according to its own theory, the power to strike down regular laws. Imagine the American Supreme Court striking down parts of the Constitution, based on some unspecified list of values, and you’ll get a picture of just how far things have gone in Israel, and how urgent reform is.

But in the field of judicial hubris none can compete with professor Aharon Barak, former president of Israel’s Supreme Court. This is the man who augmented the powers of the court, step by step, until it achieved a stranglehold on Israel’s democracy. Barak has dedicated his entire professional career to transferring decision-making powers from the legislature and executive to “his” court. There seem to be few things Judge Barak loathes so much as democracy, which is why he reoriented the court based on the idea that fundamental conflicts of values should be decided by judges, not parliaments, and judges should reach their verdicts based only on the opinions of the “enlightened” part of the public. No wonder the “enlightened” part of the Israeli public is so fiercely against any democratizing reform.

It’s not only ideologues who think democracy is disposable. A recently surfaced video of former Prime Minister Ehud Barak speaking on Zoom to some 90 air force reservists and veterans back in 2020, has him laying out the plan that he is currently attempting, once again, to put into action—this time with no little success. The excuse back then was Netanyahu’s COVID policy, which was, Barak explained, the onset of dictatorship. The new pretext for the onset of dictatorship, according to Barak, is the judicial reform, as he keeps saying on every TV program that gives him a stage. From the aim (toppling Netanyahu) to the means (fomenting chaos in the streets and clashes with police) to the rhetoric (a combination of political science, dramatic prophecies, and an idea of himself as savior), the script now is the same one that Barak proposed in 2020. He recommends avoiding the term “left” and using “democracy” instead, since few, even on the right, would define themselves as anti-democratic. But Barak’s actual plan is more Bolshevik than liberal or democratic, and seems to aim at creating a state of emergency through which he would rise to power without bothering with the need to get elected.

The video became viral not only for its carefully worded insinuations—Barak says the forum is too large to go into details about the forms the civil disobedience he has in mind should take—but also because of a truly bizarre vision he laid out. In response to a question about whether he thinks he can reproduce his electoral victory over Netanyahu in 1999, Barak says that if the country faces a serious crisis he is the most qualified person to deal with it. Then, in what sounds like a megalomaniacal self-parody, he mentions a historian friend of his who told him that when the river Yarkon (which passes through the north of Tel Aviv) will be filled with floating corpses of Jews—Jews killed by other Jews, he stresses—then, his friend told him, “you would be called upon.” He did add, as a disclaimer, that he hopes that this will not happen, but his urge to verbalize these thoughts in public is still eerie.

Barak, who is now so diligently

shielded from criticism by the media, is usually considered unelectable. Not only because of his abject failure as prime minister, but also because of his continuing friendship with Jeffery Epstein, long after Epstein was convicted for procuring a child for prostitution. Barak was photographed covering his face with a scarf when entering Epstein's mansion, and Israelis mostly don't buy his explanation that it was a uniquely cold day. It also doesn't help that Barak received a \$2.3 million grant from the Epstein-connected Wexner Foundation for "research" on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and "leadership," the latter of which Barak failed to complete.

Many of the ringleaders of the current protest against the reform were among Barak's cadre of activists in 2020. You can see them discussing the plans for their protest on a panel at the end of that same Zoom meeting. Prominent among them is the handsome Joan of Arc of the Israeli protest movement, physics professor Shikma Bressler, who has made a spectacular comeback as an anti-reform warrior. She can be seen at the front of all important demonstrations, always carrying the flag, leading chants, and delivering fiery speeches. She has repeatedly declared that the reform was going to turn Israel into a "theocratic dictatorship." It later turned out, as she admitted in *Haaretz*, that she did not read the proposed legislation that constituted the reform.

One ringleader who was not there in 2020 is Moshe Radman, a young, athletic high-tech entrepreneur who rose to prominence in the protest movement thanks to his short social media videos which contained clear succinct messages, delivered in a sharp accessible style, radiating revolutionary optimism. His cropped hair and rectangular glasses notwithstanding, his energy and athletic build give him a Che Guevara vibe. He was right there in front when the anti-reform movement did a "January 6" on the Knesset, the day that the vote on limiting the use of "reasonableness" was held. Since the media was of course on the protesters' side, the event was never framed as an attack on democracy, but rather as a heroic effort to save it from dictatorship.

It was Radman's idea to stage the impressive march on Jerusalem in the days preceding the vote. The march ended in a park adjacent to the Knesset in preparation for the big day. Radman later gave an interview explaining how he came up with the concept. The idea came from a documentary he saw about Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, who led a march to challenge his predecessor. "Here the story is different" from that in Armenia, Radman explained to his interviewer. "There the lower classes fought against the rich. Here elites are fighting the government," Radman says, with admirable honesty, "and our aim is to convince the lower classes who are still hostages to a false Bibist conception." In other words, the privileged are fighting to topple the government which the deplorables elected democratically.

This is not, then, about democracy at all. It is about elites using their power to undo the will of the unenlightened majority. From now on, Radman explained, "it no longer has anything to do with the reform." He brushes off a question about the "reasonableness" debate. "The Supreme Court will simply find ways to bypass reasonableness," he says. The point now, for him, is to topple the government.

"So how does one topple a government?" the interviewer asks. "We are a democratic regime and there are no elections on the horizon?"

"You begin to make the economic situation much more difficult," Radman explains. "We already see money being withdrawn out of Israel, and soon we'll see a move to withdraw money from the stock exchange. Much to my regret," he says, "this will bring crazy inflation and a rise in interest rates, and this will be a heavy burden on the public. People will begin to suffocate under their mortgage, they'll have no money to go to the grocer's with."

Billionaire Kobi Richter, one of the most prominent backers of the anti-reform movement, and a close associate of Ehud Barak, explained it this way, adding an insinuation about the role of reservists:

The difference between Israel and other democracies that have turned

into autocratic regimes ... is that in our case, that has no parallel in other countries, the security forces are us the protestors, and the economic power is us, we are the economy, and we are the country's solution. (...) Towards the end of the year when it turns out that, with the lowering of our rating by the credit rating agencies, interest rates will go up by one and a half to two percent, that there are no resources for the state to draw on, and between this failing economy and a progressively eroding security [situation], there is no way for this government to continue [drawing on the support of] its current voters [who are poor and] who will be the first to suffer.

This seems to be a very different plan than the one Radman ascribes to Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia. There the poor rose to fight the rich. Here the rich plan to strangle the poor. And when the poor can take it no more, the coalition will crack and lose its majority.

People like Radman, Richter, Barak, and some opposition MKs are recklessly trying to plunge Israel into chaos, which they hope will lead—with or without floating corpses of Jews killed by Jews—to the downfall of Netanyahu's government. The court might have helped prevent this chaos if it had maneuvered toward compromise. But the court is at the forefront of the attack on democracy. Instead of seeking compromise, it seeks to turn the controversy over the reform into a full-fledged constitutional crisis, which it intends to use to augment its already wildly excessive powers.

Thus the court's latest, boldest move: It has accepted appeals for consideration against two amendments to Israel's Basic Laws, which it has no legal authority to do—the clause to limit the use of "reasonableness," and a clarification amendment to the Basic Law: the Executive, which makes clear that removing a prime minister based on "incapacitation" refers only to health problems. This is like an American Supreme Court exercising judicial review over ratified amendments.

But that is not all. The court is now asserting its authority to dismiss an elected prime minister since the amendment to the incapacitation clause—Israel’s equivalent to the American 25th Amendment—is, in the court’s opinion, a piece of “personal legislation” intended to personally protect Netanyahu, and must therefore take effect only in the next Knesset.

The issue is, of course, straightforwardly political. Here’s what’s behind it: When Netanyahu took office, the attorney general ruled that he is barred from dealing with the reform due to a personal conflict of interest. As long as Netanyahu’s trial is going on, he can’t intervene in any policy which has to do with the legal system. This is absurd on its face, not only because the reform has nothing to do with a criminal trial that is already underway, but also because a prime minister, who is the head of the executive, can’t be barred from dealing with the gravest crisis Israel suffered in years. But the AG and the

court want a sword above Netanyahu’s head, so they have hinted that disobeying the conflict of interest dictum can trigger the incapacitation clause—if the court so decides. The court does not want the legislature to take away its leverage on Netanyahu by clarifying that this would not be a legitimate use of the clause.

All this should have been laughed away. It’s obviously ridiculous. Except it may amount to the gravest threat to the democratic form of government in the only democracy in the Middle East: a court which asserts its power to nullify elections and remove prime ministers at its whim. Thomas Friedman notwithstanding, this is not a “check on political power”—this is raw political power, unchecked. Anyone who shares the belief in liberty, limited government, and democracy must be horrified by these developments.

But I suspect that none of this is what actually interests Friedman, who appears to be acting according to the

dictates of the current Democratic administration. In this sense he may indeed be translating from English to English: He is translating White House policy into simple threats calculated to put fear into the natives.

Biden has his own reasons to want to get rid of Netanyahu. In the run-up to the 2024 elections, no man can embarrass the Biden administration about its Iran policy more than Netanyahu can. Pretending that judicial reform is actually on the minds of the president or his team is a bit of a stretch. But there’s one thing Biden’s team does share with Radman, Ehud Barak, Richter, and many others in the protest movement: They all think the reform could be leveraged to topple Netanyahu. For in the end this is what all this is really about—finding a way to bypass democracy in order to remove a leader that can’t be beaten at the ballot box. ■

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

In Lebanon, Israel and America Are on Opposite Sides

Israel backpedals, while Hezbollah grows bolder

BY TONY BADRAN

P rime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s discussion on Sunday with senior IDF officials about Hezbollah provocations on the northern border was preceded by a flurry of press reports claiming that the IDF intelligence division had issued no less than

four warnings about eroding Israeli deterrence. Military intelligence officials, we were told, have been warning Netanyahu about how the political crisis at home and fraying ties with the Americans were undermining deterrence of enemies like Hezbollah.

People might differ on how to read such assessments of the impact of

Israel’s political crisis on the country’s deterrence posture. One could choose to read it as earnest analysis, or as political messaging whose point was to paint Netanyahu’s judicial reform as harming Israel’s security—a talking point of the prime minister’s opponents. However, in order to weigh the claim that fraying U.S.-Israeli ties are weakening Israel’s deterrence on the northern front, one would first need to examine the assumption that the United States and Israel share the same interests when it comes to Lebanon, and that this common front is being undermined by Israel’s reckless domestic politics. A sound assessment should begin by questioning the premise of U.S.-Israeli alignment in Lebanon—an alignment that demonstrably does not exist.

A year ago, leveraging a mock drone attack by the terror group Hezbollah against an Israeli offshore gas rig at the beginning of July, the Biden administration went to the caretaker Israeli government with an urgent demand: It must sign a maritime boundary delineation

agreement with Lebanon within a couple of months, before the parliamentary elections in Israel, giving potentially valuable gas fields to Hezbollah-dominated Lebanon and signaling Israeli willingness to retreat in the face of Hezbollah's aggressive threats and actions. This matter was a top priority of the president of the United States, the administration made public. Sure enough, the Biden team got its deal.

In the process, the Biden administration broadcast a new American posture in Lebanon. The U.S. now positioned itself between Israel and Hezbollah, taking on the role of protector of and advocate for Lebanon, which now figured in the imagination of U.S. policymakers and diplomats, if not in reality, as an independent country in need of buttressing. The maritime deal, a senior U.S. official explained last year, would serve as a security guarantee not just for Israel, but also for Lebanon—a territory now transformed in the language of U.S. diplomacy from an Iranian satrapy under the political and military control of the terror group Hezbollah to a sovereign state that might be the deserving recipient of nearly a billion dollars a year in U.S. aid.

As it turned out, the maritime deal did not, in fact, enhance Israel's security, as U.S. negotiator Amos Hochstein and his echo chamber validators in the U.S. and Israeli press all claimed it would. In reality Israel's security and deterrence has badly deteriorated on multiple fronts since the Biden administration came to office. The deal did enhance Hezbollah's security, though, and consequently increased the group's confidence to press its advantage against Israel.

Over the past few months, the terrorist group that rules Lebanon has conducted, in tandem with its auxiliary force the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), a series of border provocations and incursions

“Each time Hezbollah provokes, the U.S. reliably steps in to ‘mediate’ between the terror group and Israel, with the goal of ‘stabilizing Lebanon.’”

into Israeli territory. Hezbollah's moves were part of a larger, concerted campaign. As with the maritime border episode, Hezbollah is now locked in a dance with the Biden team to advance shared objectives and impose them on Israel.

Each time Hezbollah provokes, the U.S. reliably steps in to “mediate” between the terror group and Israel, with the goal of “stabilizing Lebanon.” Needless to say, the Israeli role is strictly to make concessions in the framework of a U.S.-brokered agreement, at the risk of displeasing its American patron. Hezbollah, meanwhile, knows that the structure of this Kabuki performance prohibits Israel from retaliating, making its provocations more or less risk-free—especially given the fact that the “Lebanese state” is a fiction.

In a speech marking the 17th anniversary of the 2006 war, Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, explained exactly how the terror group's dance with Team Obama-Biden and its emissaries works. Pointedly, his elucidation began with the maritime deal. The way Lebanon got everything it demanded, Nasrallah explained, was when “the resistance” threatened the Karish offshore platform, and when the official and popular supporting cast played their part. That's when the Americans and Hochstein came and delivered the Israelis.

Having internalized that precedent, Hezbollah then decided it was time to press its advantage on land, where again, Nasrallah's reading of the American posture had proven correct. The day before the terror leader's speech, Amos Hochstein, the Biden administration's special presidential coordinator for global infrastructure and energy security, who got the lame duck government of Yair Lapid to concede to all of Hezbollah's demands in its last days in office, arrived in Israel to discuss tensions along the land border with Lebanon.

Hezbollah's provocations on Israel's northern border had begun months prior to Hochstein's arrival. On June 21, Israeli media reported that Hezbollah operatives had entered Israeli territory several weeks earlier—the exact date was later said to have been April 8—and set up an outpost in the Mount Dov area, several meters inside Israel. Needless to say, this was months before the passage of Netanyahu's judicial reform bill.

That Hezbollah's actions took so long to surface in the Israeli press in part likely reflects the Israeli government's reluctance to advertise its own weakness. Instead, the government vainly hoped that this sign of its impotence might be quietly resolved through diplomatic channels and UNIFIL. Israel filed a letter of complaint with the U.N. Security Council and then threatened to remove the tents by force after an unspecified deadline—a threat which, as more time passes, appears increasingly hollow.

Israel's weak response to Hezbollah's symbolic invasion of sovereign Israeli territory suggests a failure to recognize that Hezbollah's cross-border encampment is, as Nasrallah explained, part of a systematic campaign. In turn, this failure appears to be embedded in an even larger refusal to comprehend America's new posture in Lebanon. As a result, Israel is responding piecemeal to a coherent Hezbollah strategy aimed at forcing Israel to make additional concessions, this time on land, while using the new constraints forced on Israel by the new American posture to establish new operational dynamics at the border.

The oddity of this situation, then, is that both Israel and Hezbollah appear

ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

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to be acting under the assumption that they have U.S. backing. In the case of Israel, however, this assumption is in part a mistake, and in part a bit of public posturing which has failed to convince their enemies to the north, who in fact know better.

Weeks before the story of the Hezbollah encampment came to light in Israel, the pro-Hezbollah press in Lebanon had already documented an episode in late May where Hezbollah had set up an additional outpost in the same region, in the outskirts of Kfar Shouba near the pond of Ba'athael (long a site of tensions involving Lebanese shepherds crossing into the area). Although Nasrallah would later claim that the second encampment was on the Lebanese side of the border, the ambiguity is deliberate. The episode in Kfar Shouba continued a few days later in June when so-called "locals" disrupted IDF fence construction and earthworks, which are aimed at fending off infiltration and livestock entering from the Lebanese side. A person identified as a local farmer who had blocked the IDF excavator in Kfar Shouba went on Hezbollah TV and declared that his actions were an example of Hezbollah's whole-of-society doctrine, which it dubs the "army, people, resistance" triad.

A couple of days later, the LAF once again crossed the border fence into Israel. The LAF—whose salaries the Biden administration underwrites—posed for pro-Hezbollah TV cameras, and took positions pointing their weapons at IDF soldiers.

As with the farmer in Kfar Shouba, the choreographed LAF deployment was intended to showcase Hezbollah's doctrine of synergy between the terror group, government institutions, and the citizenry. It underscored that Hezbollah was the spearhead of a position endorsed by the government and the country as a whole. The latter point was showcased further with trips to the outskirts of Kfar Shouba by members of the Lebanese parliament who expressed support for the liberation of "occupied Lebanese lands." The LAF would participate in another such stunt alongside Hezbollah operatives in the area opposite Menara, west of Kiryat Shmona, where they crossed

into Israeli territory to block IDF activity before being pushed back by the IDF.

The choice of the locations is not random. In 2000, Israel withdrew from Lebanon to the border line, known as the Blue Line, which was set by the U.N. based on historical maps. Aside from the northern part of the village of Ghajar, which the Blue Line cuts through, and leaving aside the Shebaa Farms and the Kfar Shouba hills, which are part of the Golan and which no one recognizes as Lebanese, there are a few points along the Blue Line that Lebanon contests. The Hezbollah stunts took place at some of these points along the security barrier in the area between Metula and Zar'it farther west. This is precisely the area where, in 2018, the IDF uncovered multiple Hezbollah cross-border tunnels.

In one instance near Metula in early July, Hezbollah operatives removed a security camera off the smart fence. In recent years, sabotaging surveillance equipment has been routine activity for Hezbollah, often assisted by the LAF. Hezbollah uses the cover of its so-called "environmental NGO" Green Without Borders both to plant trees that obstruct Israeli security cameras and to erect observation towers a few meters from the barrier. This past year, the group has erected 27 outposts along the Blue Line. Of course, Hezbollah also has its LAF auxiliary regularly disrupt the IDF from clearing the trees. In 2010, the LAF shot and killed an Israeli officer in the area west of Metula, as an IDF crew was removing trees.

To block Hezbollah operational plans of entering northern Israel in a future conflict, over the past several years the IDF has been building a concrete barrier and upgrading fortifications along the border with Lebanon, on the Israeli side. This effort has reached the Mount Dov region, opposite Kfar Shouba.

Some in Israel have assessed that Hezbollah's current campaign is aimed at disrupting the building of this barrier and of the IDF's security measures altogether. While that's true, it falls well short of capturing the full picture. In fact, Nasrallah openly clarified the purpose of this choreography when he spoke of the complementary and cooperative roles of the group and the government to obtain

territorial concessions from Israel, "as with the maritime deal."

Hezbollah has been rather open about what it's looking to achieve. First on the list is the village of Ghajar. The Blue Line cuts through the village located in the Golan, leaving the northern part of it in Lebanon. With Israel having committed to the Blue Line, the U.N. considers the northern section of Ghajar, that's on the Lebanese side, occupied and the Security Council routinely urges Israel to complete its withdrawal from that part of the village.

In the period following Israel's withdrawal in 2000 and leading up to the 2006 war, Ghajar and the Mount Dov area were targets of regular Hezbollah attacks, infiltration, and abduction attempts. Most notable was the November 2005 operation that simultaneously targeted an IDF post in nearby Mount Dov, around the spot where Hezbollah pitched its tent, and a post in Ghajar, in a failed attempt to abduct soldiers—in which they used motorcycles and ATV's, much like what they featured in their recent military display in May and in the video they released in July simulating a cross-border attack by the Radwan special forces. Less than a year after the 2005 attack, a successful abduction operation near Zar'it sparked the July 2006 war. Clearly, Hezbollah is signaling a readiness to reestablish an updated version of the pre-2006 reality at the border.

Right before the maritime deal was signed last year, the local council of Ghajar began constructing a high fence with cameras and sensors along the northern part of the town. Israel then began allowing unrestricted movement and touristic activity in what had formerly been a closed military zone. What existed before the fence was a stretch of barbed wire that made the village a security

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vulnerability, in addition to being a location of drugs and weapons smuggling from Lebanon.

The decision to build the new security fence has turned out to be a boobytrap for the current government. After waiting almost a year, Hezbollah decided to take advantage of this opening, and set in motion the same play it ran with the maritime deal. “What we did with the oil, gas and maritime border delineation, today also, through complementarity and cooperation between the state and the resistance and with support from the Lebanese people and the political forces in Lebanon, we can recover our occupied land in the town of Ghajar,” Nasrallah explained.

First, Hezbollah fired an antitank missile near the village and a few days later Hezbollah media published footage of Israeli military vehicles at the fence and declared it a “reoccupation” and “annexation” of the Lebanese part of Ghajar. Then it delegated the government to hand a proposal to the Americans: you need to force the Israelis to take down the fence and to withdraw from the northern part of Ghajar. Sure enough, the U.S. appears to have acted on cue as Hezbollah’s messenger.

The reason Hezbollah decided to focus on Ghajar is because it is the spot where it enjoys the strongest footing with the U.S. and the U.N., who have long been fielding proposals to Israel concerning the status of the northern part of the village. If the U.S. pressures Netanyahu to concede, that would be an easy victory for Hezbollah—achieved without the

“The decision to build the new security fence has turned out to be a boobytrap for the current government.”

need even for negotiations. If Israel does not agree, but at the same time opts, with U.S. encouragement, not to remove the Hezbollah tents by force, that would also be a win for Hezbollah—an affirmation of the perception that Israel is deterred. The latter point was the central refrain of Nasrallah’s speech: Israel’s hesitation is the direct result of the deterrence that Hezbollah has imposed.

Building on this perception of deterrence, one Hezbollah objective in the Kfar Shouba hills and the Shebaa Farms pertains to deployment and operations. Over the past decade, Hezbollah has been using the Mount Dov region as a theater for retaliation against Israeli strikes in Syria (and, rarely, in Lebanon) that the group deems to be violate the rules of engagement and the deterrence equation. Now it intends to turn the eastern sector of the Shebaa Farms/Kfar Shouba hills into an arena of regular active and visible deployment, much like in border points to the west.

After gauging Israel’s reaction to its activities in June, and especially after Hochstein’s July visit, Hezbollah has doubled down on its activities outside of Kfar Shouba. On July 20, it brought an excavator, removed IDF concrete obstacles, and proceeded to level the ground in front of the border fence. The same intrepid local farmer featured in the

previous episodes helpfully explained on Hezbollah TV that the plan was to create a road along the fence that links to the Ba’athael region, so as to “be at the nearest point to the fence with the Zionist enemy.”

Nasrallah added more detail in his speech. The area where Hezbollah set up the tents is Lebanese land, Nasrallah said, indicating he had no intention to take them down. We have the freedom to do and build whatever we wish there, he added. As he mockingly went through the various things Hezbollah might wish to construct there, he included “a tower” in the list. It remains to be seen if we will soon witness new Green Without Borders observation towers go up along the fence in the area, as is the case farther to the west.

To drive home the normalization of the overt presence of Hezbollah operatives along the entire length of the border line, the IDF filmed masked Hezbollah operatives in full gear patrolling openly along the fence near Moshav Dovev in the upper Galilee, and pointedly looking straight at the camera.

It’s worth placing the campaign at the border in the broader context of Hezbollah’s operations against Israel. If the tent was set up in early April, it was in March that Nasrallah set in motion the action by “locals” and the LAF obstructing Israeli “expansion beyond the Blue Line,” namely near Houla, west of Metula. March was also the month when Hezbollah sent a bomber from Lebanon deep into Israel in an attempted attack at the Megiddo Junction, as part of linking the Lebanese front with the Palestinian front backed by Iran. On April 6, Hezbollah orchestrated the launching of 34 rockets from Lebanon. Two days later, according to Israeli sources, the Hezbollah encampment was set up inside Israeli territory.

The signals Hezbollah is sending with its campaign in the Shebaa Farms/Kfar Shouba hills are of a return to a modified pre-2006 status quo in the area. What the 2006 war did was to upend the rules of engagement that had governed the battle with Hezbollah in the previous decade, especially after the 2000 withdrawal. The pre-2006 rules had allowed south Lebanon to be an arena for low intensity

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warfare with Israel without Hezbollah suffering major consequences.

Ever since the Biden administration came into office, Hezbollah has steadily raised the temperature in south Lebanon: From the rocket salvos of summer of 2021 through the mock drone attack on the Karish offshore rig in July 2022, to the Megiddo Junction bomber and the April 2023 increased rocket launchings, Hezbollah has been slowly normalizing the Lebanese front as an arena from which to poke at Israel, albeit at a much lower level than that of the pre-2006 period.

The bottom line here is still that whatever deterrence Israel had established with the 2006 war has now largely eroded. As Nasrallah underscored in his speech, Hezbollah does not believe Israel is willing to upend the new-old rules of engagement with another major war, certainly not over a tent. What's more, he has seen, most clearly with the maritime deal, that the Americans oppose Israeli escalation in Lebanon and are actively constraining the Israelis. That is explicitly the way the maritime deal was designed to work. Team Biden was clear about how it viewed the maritime deal: It guaranteed Lebanon's security and economic prosperity and precluded action that could destabilize it. In other words, it extended a protective umbrella to Lebanon and therefore to Hezbollah, by openly opposing Israeli kinetic action in Lebanon.

Sure enough, Nasrallah linked the American role and Israel's deterrence in his remarks: "The situation is different now ... That's why the Israelis did not dare to make a kinetic move against the tent. Why? ... Because the Israelis understand [that Hezbollah would retaliate]. And because they understand, they brought in mediation." In other words, Nasrallah recognized that the function of American mediation is to constrain Israel's actions in Lebanon while delivering wins that supposedly enhance the country's "stability" by rewarding the terror group.

At the time of the maritime deal last year, most observers, if they even noted it at all, dismissed the notion that Hezbollah could piggyback on the maritime deal

"The bottom line here is still that whatever deterrence Israel had established with the 2006 war has now largely eroded."

and leverage it on land, or that the two issues were intertwined. However, Nasrallah highlighted an additional linkage between the current campaign on the land border and Hochstein's maritime deal. In laying out Lebanon's territorial claims in the sector west of Ghajar, Nasrallah made sure to include Point B1 at Naqoura on the coast, as the terminus point of the Lebanese land border. During the maritime negotiations, the Lebanese insisted on Point B1 as the starting point on land from which the line at sea would begin.

Meanwhile, the Lapid caretaker government and its validators touted as a "key" win the maritime agreement's supposed recognition of Israel's so-called "buoy line" which extends out to sea from Rosh Hanikra. An anonymous Lapid government official fed reporters the following spin at the time: "The line of buoys is an important Israeli security line, that was never approved by any outside actor ... This will allow Israel to treat it as its northern territorial border."

In fact, the agreement does no such thing and leaves the situation unchanged, "without prejudice" to Lebanon's claim to the area, which, the agreement says "remains undelimited." The text further states: "the maritime boundary landward of the easternmost point of the [Maritime Boundary Line] is expected to be delimited *in the context of, or in a timely*

manner after, the Parties' demarcation of the land boundary." (Emphasis added.)

As a matter of fact, coupling the maritime border with their claims on land was the Lebanese demand from the outset on which they conditioned their participation in the maritime negotiations. The State Department under Mike Pompeo, in one of its mind-boggling displays of bad judgment, conceded and included a paragraph in the Framework Agreement about the U.S. "looking forward" to separate talks on "unresolved issues related to the Blue Line." In other words, the current situation on the land border is baked into the maritime deal—and that's how the Lebanese are treating it.

Echoing what Nasrallah would announce the day after, Lebanese Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, a Hezbollah ally and U.S. interlocutor, bundled all of Lebanon's claims on land and told his Western partners that "what is required of the international community is to oblige Israel ... to withdraw from the northern part of the village of Ghajar, the Shebaa Farms, the Kfar Shouba hills, and point B1." An article in the pro-Hezbollah *al-Akhbar* newspaper, which coincided with Hochstein's visit to Israel and was echoed elsewhere in the Lebanese press, claimed that "Western countries informed Lebanon that Israel was willing to enter into talks about land border demarcation, despite previously opposing it, and to limit the discussion to the [13] points of dispute [along the Blue Line]." The article then claimed, citing anonymous diplomatic sources, that "the American administration sees in this development an opportunity to complete the land border demarcation which it has been in a rush to achieve ever since it finished the maritime delineation."

Are these claims true? Who knows. What can be said with some certainty, however, is that the Biden administration has every incentive to try and lock Israel into such processes, as a continuation of the maritime agreement and the overall policy of "de-escalation" it is predicated on. The net result of such a course of action would be a win for Hezbollah: It escalated, Israel balked, the Americans stepped in the middle and discouraged the Israelis from taking forceful action, and instead encouraged them to enter

into another process to entertain Hezbollah's claims. Moreover, Nasrallah never once said anything about taking down the tents, even should Israel withdraw from Ghajar.

Of course, Hezbollah's demands hardly stop in Ghajar and the 13 points along the Blue Line. Hezbollah is also looking to use the Blue Line to secure additional objectives in the Golan region. "What is the value of the tents? The value of the tents is that they have put the spotlight again on the whole situation on the border," Nasrallah clarified. "You have seen what the value of the tent is, the value of the tent now is to open this discussion wide. We are a group with a goal."

Ever since the U.N. and the U.S. began peddling initiatives to resolve the status of northern Ghajar, the Lebanese have been open about that process being the springboard to addressing the status of the Shebaa Farms and Kfar Shouba hills—the Lebanese claim to which is a fiction invented at the time of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000.

Curiously, *al-Akhbar* framed Israel's fence construction in Mount Dov as an attempt "to take advantage of the American recognition, during the Trump presidency, of Israel's total sovereignty over the Golan Heights." The current U.S. position does not recognize the Lebanese claim to the Shebaa Farms and the Kfar

Shouba hills. It regards them as part of the Golan Heights. However, Hezbollah is well aware of Team Obama's support for UNSCR 2334 and its adoption of the 1967 lines, a policy which the Biden administration has followed faithfully in the context of Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories.

Obama administration officials, most of whom are now in the Biden administration, were never supportive of the recognition of Israeli sovereignty on the Golan. If Hezbollah can manage to induce a comment or introduce the slightest modification in the American position on the Shebaa Farms and Kfar Shouba hills, that would be another significant win.

How Netanyahu will decide to proceed remains to be seen. More than three weeks after Hochstein's visit, and after months of protestation and appeals through third parties, Israel has largely gone silent on the issue of the tents. Even as it advertised its military preparedness for any scenario, following the security cabinet meeting on Sunday, the IDF continued to send signals of its preference for de-escalation and for avoiding any confrontation with Hezbollah, and that the encampment situation will be resolved "at a place and time of our choosing."

It is unclear now whether Netanyahu

will make good on the threat to use force, with the understanding of the likelihood of conflict with Hezbollah, however limited, or whether he will play along with Team Biden's initiatives and wind up trapped in a new process in which Washington acts as Hezbollah's lawyer, like it did with the maritime deal.

What Israel must realize is that the U.S. is not aligned with it on Lebanon. Washington's policy in Lebanon makes it an amplifier, not a constrainer, of Hezbollah. Israel cannot rely on silly soundbites like demanding the LAF or UNIFIL take action or asking the U.S. to pressure the Lebanese government. All these soundbites advertise is a dated understanding of Lebanon's reality, and of the actual U.S. posture. The American impulse is to keep Israel off of Lebanon and to promote the latter's protection and prosperity—as a Hezbollah state.

However the Israeli government decides to deal with the tents—to take them out by force, or simply to do nothing—it therefore needs to stay far away from any U.S. initiative that further enshrines the precedent of the maritime deal that has positioned Washington as a broker between Israel and Hezbollah, and not as Israel's ally. ■

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STONE COLD TRUTH

Tablet

elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies, and it's a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left and right. It's the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies, and it's a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left and right. It's the elite against everyone else.... **College is pointless...** No one's having babies, and it's a problem... The vaccine-hesitant are not who you think... Abandoning your political affiliation is a sign of sanity... The divide today isn't between left and right. It's the elite against everyone else....

The Suckers' Revolt

Israelis who work, fight in the army, and pay taxes
are wary of the new government

BY NOAM MAITAL

I was standing with thousands of Israelis at the Tel Aviv station, waiting to board a train to Jerusalem for a planned protest outside the Knesset. If you know Israelis, you know that neither standing in line nor waiting patiently are among our strong suits. But on Feb. 15, 2023, when the national protests started to gain momentum, I felt a reassuring calm in the crowd. We boarded the train and stood shoulder to shoulder clutching our Israeli flags for the 30-minute ride. The protest was purposely scheduled on a Wednesday, a workday. Beside me was a man who had taken the day off work and brought his 7-year-old son.

Once the train arrived in Jerusalem, we poured out into the streets on our way to the Knesset and were met immediately by voices shouting at us from the apartment buildings above. People yelled “get out of this country” and “you’re not wanted here.” The insults infuriated us and served as further justification for our demonstrations.

When we reached the large stage set a few hundred feet from the Knesset, I looked around to find myself in a sea of thousands of blue and white Israeli flags waving in the crisp Jerusalem breeze, and I was suddenly overcome by a feeling of desperation and anxiety about where our country was headed and the long-simmering divisions that seem to be blowing us apart.

I grew up in Haifa with academic parents who made aliyah from the U.S. in 1967. The youngest of four siblings, I grew up in a family infused with Zionist values. All of my brothers went to elite units in the army. When I was 13, I started running on the beach and training with one of them to prepare for the

admissions tests for Sayeret Matkal, the top special forces unit in the IDF, modeled after the British Special Air Service. The exams were five years away, but I knew how challenging they would be. I made it into Sayeret Matkal, and later continued in another intelligence unit. In both, I was a member of close-knit teams that followed their commanders through the most difficult challenges with complete trust. I have put my life at risk for Israel, even when the government made choices that were at odds with my political ideology. The saying goes that the army is above politics. It’s our rock and our unifying common ground.

Only a profound disruption could have threatened that solemn bond. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, an alumnus of Matkal himself, and one of the country’s most decorated soldiers, stated at a protest that just as soldiers have a duty to refuse illegal orders, citizens are obligated to resist an illegitimate government. He said: “We have a social contract around liberal democracy, as defined in the Declaration of Independence. We don’t have a social contract with a dictator.” He encouraged the Israeli public to resist what he considers the impending dictatorship that could grow out of the proposed judicial reform, “with all the legitimate means at their disposal.”

In the past few weeks, more of our most decorated soldiers—pilots, former Mossad directors, retired generals, cyber security units—have voiced their concerns in great numbers about the upcoming “reform,” asserting that if this “contract” is broken, they will not show up for reserve duty. During the second week of March, 37 of 40 reserve F-15 pilots from the IAF’s famed 69th

Squadron, known as the Hammers, said they would boycott one day of training in protest of the judicial overhaul. They said they were afraid they would be commanded to carry out illegal actions, such as Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich’s call for the government to “wipe out” the Palestinian village of Huwara.

But back on the stage in front of the Knesset, opposition leaders (representative of the parties in the minority), took turns giving speeches against what they believe will be the disastrous consequences of this reform. Each offered a different nuance to his or her message. Yair Lapid, head of the opposition and the leader of Yesh Atid, the second-largest political party in Israel, was working hard to portray himself as the person in control of the anti-reform movement. His next in line, Benny Gantz, head of the Mamlachti Party, tried to take a more statesmanlike position, calling for dialogue between the coalition and the opposition. As the various politicians had their say, I noticed that each received boos from different sections of the crowd. After a few minutes, it dawned on me that the protesters gathered here, over 200,000 strong, didn’t seem to share a political ideology. What brought us all here is our desire to live in a functioning democracy.

I met my future wife at the end of my military service, when I was fortunate enough to be selected to join a Birthright trip. I completed my undergraduate degree in Boston and then we both spent several years working in New York. Moving back to Israel, I co-founded Waycare, a startup that uses AI to improve traffic safety in cities and towns. Soon after raising venture capital, we moved back to the U.S. so I could scale the company in the U.S. market. Three years later, the company was acquired.

It was time to return home. Although my wife and I knew before we got married that we would raise our children in Israel, it wasn’t the easiest thing to board that plane at LAX after four years in LA and head for Ben-Gurion Airport with our two young children. My wife is an American, without previous ties to Israel, and as a dual citizen myself the temptations of an easier life in the U.S. were clear.

I was well acquainted with the difficulties of living in Israel—its Kafkaesque bureaucracy, the frankness bordering on rudeness, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and extreme segregation between ethnic and religious groups, to name a few. Also, the burdens of citizenship seem to fall more heavily on the one-third of the population who work, fight in the army, and pay heavy taxes to support those who don't. You'll sometimes hear us call ourselves, self-mockingly, the "frayerim," or the "suckers." And now the so-called "justice reform" of the far-right religious coalition is trying to make our burden even heavier.

Israel has a parliamentary system with three branches—executive, legislative, and judicial. In Israel the executive and legislative branches are essentially joined at the hip; the governing coalition nominates the members of the executive branch and the executive controls the legislation in our Knesset through its majority. The courts are the only branch that is independent of the other two. Nearly all countries have written constitutions that protect basic human rights and values. But Israel is one of only six countries that do not have such a constitution. Israel instead relies on its system of checks and balances to ensure its democratic nature.

Is it perfect? Far from it. But the current system has allowed Israel, for over 75 years, to thrive as the only democratic country in the Middle East. Moreover, Israel was founded as a country that defends the sacred rights of freedom and equality for all. Our founding father David Ben-Gurion read aloud these words on the day of Israel's Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948: "The state of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture."

The judicial "reform" would

dramatically alter the balance of power between the judiciary and the executive and legislative branches, and essentially allow a majority-rule government to govern without offering any protections for minorities. At this point, the magnitude of the threat may seem theoretical, so I'd like to give some concrete examples of how this "reform" could tear Israel apart. One of the "reforms" states that any basic law (*hok yesod*, in Hebrew) can be signed into law with only a simple majority—61 votes in the Knesset, and it also prevents the Supreme Court from intervening in that establishment. How could this new proposal undermine Israel as a liberal democracy? For one, the government is trying, for the second time, to pass a law that would allow Knesset member Aryeh Deri, a convicted criminal, to serve as a minister for this government. While Prime Minister Netanyahu appointed him interior and health minister of the government sworn in last month, the High Court ruled that allowing Deri, the head of the religious party Shas, to assume a cabinet post was "unreasonable in the extreme," due to his past criminal convictions. So, the judicial reformers cooked up a new provision, an even more sinister law, that prohibits judicial review of the appointment of ministers, no matter what the circumstances. Meaning, according to the justice "reform," convicted felons, rapists, murderers, all are kosher to serve as ministers in our Israeli government.

Furthermore, under the ticking clock of the rushed changes, the Knesset has already brought to a preliminary vote the "*hametz* (leavened bread) rule" which would require hospitals to prevent people from bringing *hametz* into the hospital during Passover. In line with this rule, Smotrich, the finance minister, has said that he supports allowing business owners to turn away customers if serving them conflicts with their religious beliefs. This would allow a doctor to refuse to care for a baby with gay parents or allow a hospital to withhold bread from an Israeli Arab during Passover. These changes would undermine the very character of the country Ben-Gurion envisioned.

The vast majority of the demonstrators have served in the IDF—the melting pot of Israeli society. The same cannot be said of the coalition party leadership. Most never served in the IDF, but rather spent those years studying in a yeshiva. This brings us to an even more egregious abuse of power that could be deemed legal if the reform passes—our Conscription Law. Under this law, every 18-year-old must serve in the Israel Defense Forces. Yes, there are myriad exemptions today that address religious Jews who want to delay their army service to study in a yeshiva. Or the nuanced exemption for Israeli Arabs who often carry a dual identity of Palestinian and Israeli. However, the ultra-Orthodox seek to rewrite the law in such a way that would automatically exempt thousands of yeshiva students from military service.

In 2017, the Supreme Court struck down a 2015 law passed by the then right-wing government that largely exempted yeshiva students. The High Court struck it down by arguing it failed to treat citizens equally. If the current Knesset amended the law to allow this exemption, under the judicial "reform," the Supreme Court would not be allowed to take up the legality of the law under any circumstances.

In essence, these changes would forever subordinate the individual rights of citizens to the whims of the majority party. In turn, the nature of that majority is rightly concerning to anyone who believes in democratic norms. Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir was not allowed to join the IDF because of his radical anti-Arab views, and was convicted of racist incitement against Arabs and for supporting Kach, a group included on terror lists in both Israel and the United States. He was famously interviewed in his home on whose wall hung a picture of Baruch Goldstein, the Jewish terrorist who killed 29 Muslims and wounded 125, at the Cave of the Patriarchs in 1994, mowing down Muslims at prayer with an automatic rifle. Ben-Gvir recently "liked" a tweet by his radical counterpart Minister of Finance Smotrich to "wipe out" the village of Huwara after a Palestinian terrorist gunned down

two Jewish Israeli brothers caught in traffic in the Palestinian town. Smotrich later clarified that he didn't mean in his tweet that the village should be wiped out by civilians—but rather by the military. These are the people to whose whims all Israelis will be subject if this “reform” passes.

As the founder of a startup and current investor in a leading venture capital fund that invests in Israel startups, I am also deeply concerned about the economic impact of this “reform.” The flight of capital from Israel is already well underway and the effects could be disastrous. Israel's shekel-dollar exchange rate has plummeted 12.5%, from 3.20 per dollar in August 2022 to 3.60 in February 2023. This has made imports more expensive at a time when the cost of living has also been soaring. Furthermore, every day I hear about another founder deciding to move his money out of Israel. In a recent survey conducted by Adam Fisher, a partner at Bessemer, one of the leading venture capital funds in the world, and Michal Zur, president of the startup Kaltura, 90% of the entrepreneurs and managers of high-tech companies say that if they had to reestablish their companies today, they would register them outside of Israel. Israel's high-tech sector, its economic growth engine, is fueled by foreign investors who bring their money into Israel. Without such funding, Israel's economy will wither. The desert will no longer bloom.

Dr. Ilan Samish, CEO of Amai Proteins, was invited to speak before the Law and Justice Constitution Committee and pleaded with the committee to stop the “reform”: “Please, don't scare my investors and force me to transfer Amai Proteins to Amai Proteins Delaware while removing taxes and employment from Israel,” he said. On March 12, several former Finance Ministry officials announced, “We anticipate severe damage to the Israeli economy, with the first indications already visible today,” and urged Finance Minister Smotrich to halt the government's controversial judicial overhaul, saying it would “severely and irreversibly damage the Israeli economy.” Tom Livne, founder of the \$2 billion unicorn startup Verbit,

which provides accurate transcriptions using automatic speech recognition, is moving his family, company, and his money abroad and calls for other high-tech stalwarts to follow suit.

A member of my former unit, a generation older than me, who has been a leader in these protests, spoke out one day about what was motivating him. He made four points to the crowd: 1) Like in the Army, we're all united regardless of our individual political beliefs. 2) We're fighting for our homes, our values, and the future of our grandchildren. 3) We can no longer accept the fact that the Orthodox are not working, not serving, and not paying taxes, but using us as their debit cards. 4) Israel shall remain a democracy—and we'll fight for it to the end.

Don't be misled by claims from the government or even American journals that these protests are the result of foreign provocation or American dollars, that the U.S. is involved in an elaborate covert strategy to pressure the current Israeli government to subdue its extreme factions, or that our homegrown insistence that the government respect our basic rights and values is part of a bigger American plot to get Iran back to the JCPOA negotiating table, by distracting Israel from any attempts to sabotage the American effort.

No. I have been marching and protesting as these protests manifested themselves as a grassroots movement of ordinary people who are fighting for the future of our country. Young and old, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, women and men, it's clear as daylight that this fight is different from other battles—it's not about political ideology but rather a demand that we protect and maintain the only thing that holds us all together—our democracy.

While there is hope that this government sobers up and steps toward the negotiating table, many people are starting to imagine a once unthinkable reality: The “reform” will be etched into law. It will immediately be challenged in the courts. Likely, the Supreme Court will then strike down the reform, putting the IDF, Shin Bet, the police, and every citizen in this country between a rock and hard place. Should they follow

the courts and rule of law or the government? This will be a constitutional crisis.

I'm not sure it's consoling, but Israel is unlike most countries in the world in that existential threats are etched into our DNA. Since its foundation, we have faced many of them: the 1948 War of Independence, the Six-Day War in 1967, Yom Kippur War in 1973, First Lebanon War in 1982, Second Lebanon War in 2006, first and second intifadas, and many more in between. The bitter joke is that like the Olympics we can count on a war with Gaza every four years. Hotels in Israel even build that scenario into their pricing models to account for summers with lower tourism due to the frequent conflicts. I'd like to say we will surely surmount this threat, too. But it seems that the worst may be happening—the prime minister may have lost control of the coalition he put together to save his own skin.

March 1 was a watershed turning point. In a “day of disruption,” protesters tried to block the Ayalon highway in Tel Aviv; police used stun grenades, mounted police, and water cannons against the demonstrators, and arrested several people, including a former combat pilot who had been shot down in the Yom Kippur War and held as a POW in Syria. Shame on the government.

We have learned through tragic experience that we must never imagine we are invulnerable. Professor Yuval Harari was interviewed Friday on prime time television and when asked about President Herzog's fears that Israel was approaching the point of no return he replied: “We have already reached it—there is no going back. It is possible to advance to a dictatorship. It is possible we move toward a stronger democracy. But it is impossible to go back to Nov. 22nd, 2022. Things have happened that have completely changed the situation. I hope that the shock will bring us to a better place, to a stronger democracy.”

I share his hope—and that's why I'll be back out on the streets every week to protest until it happens. ■

This article was originally published on March 14, 2023,

Cauliflower

Simmered With Tomatoes and Capers

BY JOAN NATHAN

INGREDIENTS

- 1 medium cauliflower, trimmed and broken into florets**
- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil**
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped**
- 2 tablespoons flat leaf parsley, finely chopped**
- 1 cup canned plum tomatoes, forced through a sieve or pureed in a food processor**
- 2 tbsp salted capers, well-rinsed**
- 1 or 2 tbsp balsamic vinegar, to taste**
- salt**
- freshly ground black pepper**

PREPARATION

Step 1

Steam the cauliflower for 8 to 10 minutes or until it is tender but still has some crunch.

Step 2

Heat the olive oil in a large frying pan and add the onion and parsley. Cook over a moderate heat until the onion is softened. Add the tomato puree and capers and continue to cook for a further 5 minutes or until the sauce starts to thicken. Season with salt and black pepper. Add the cauliflower and balsamic vinegar and simmer for 5 more minutes to blend the flavors, adding 1 or 2 tablespoons water if necessary. Serve hot..

Yield: Serves 4

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