

# THE TAB

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ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

## How U.S. Ambassador Tom Nides Became Israel's Arsonist-in-Chief

The U.S.-backed anti-judicial reform protests in Israel are being shaped by the intersection of two crises, one in U.S. Iran policy and the other resulting from the rise to power of religious communities in Israel

BY MICHAEL DORAN

**I**n the first weeks of February, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Thomas Nides was urging the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, both publicly and privately, to slow down its plan to reform the judiciary. On Feb. 19, Diaspora Affairs Minister Amichai Chikli responded to Nides in a radio interview. "Mind your own business," Chikli said. "You're not the sovereign here. ... We'd be happy to debate with you international or security affairs, but respect our democracy." Nine days later, Nides fired back. "Some Israeli official—I don't know who he is, I don't think I've met him—suggested that I should stay out of Israel's business," Nides said during an interview at a conference hosted by a think tank in Tel Aviv. "I really think that most Israelis do not want America to stay out of their business."

Chikli may be a minister in Israel's government, Nides implied, but so

what? When the U.S. ambassador needs the opinion of the Israeli people, he turns to his friends among the Israeli elite, who are openly gleeful to see the United States support them against their domestic political foes. Nides' intervention in domestic Israeli politics has become so open and self-assured that it is impossible to dismiss his behavior as the freelancing of an undisciplined envoy. His repeated public comments reflect the will of the president. In doing so, they also reveal, at best, a faulty reading of the American interest by Joe Biden.

Relations between the United States and Israel are now being shaped by the intersection of two very distinct crises. The first is the crisis in President Biden's Iran policy. By any sane measure, the gambit to resurrect the Iran nuclear deal has failed. Two years of diplomatic outreach to Iran have given it breathing room to enrich uranium to 60%, if not higher ("weapons-grade" uranium is enriched up to 90%). Tehran is now

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How Anthony Fauci manufactured consensus on the origins of COVID-19 with the help of science writers and the media

BY ASHLEY RINDSBERG



estimated to be 12 days from producing enough highly enriched uranium to build a single nuclear device. Meanwhile, it is openly pursuing plots to kill former American officials while murdering protesters on its own streets and working closely with Russia on the production of more advanced killer drones.

In reaction to the rising threat from Iran, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu is calling on Washington to develop a plan B, one based on compelling Iran to dismantle its nuclear weapons program by presenting Tehran with a credible military threat. The Biden team, however, refuses. Despite the fact that Tehran treats every American overture with undisguised contempt, the Biden

team insists that a “diplomatic solution” remains the preferred way to solve the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program—that phrase being a euphemism for continuing to avoid any serious effort to pressure Iran economically or militarily. Netanyahu, meanwhile, is developing capabilities that will allow Israel, if necessary, to remove the threat on its own, while, at the same time, ordering sabotage operations inside Iran. He and Biden, therefore, are set on a collision course.

The second crisis is over Israel’s judicial reform, which for nine weeks now has routinely flooded the streets with hundreds of thousands of protesters. The reform’s opponents depict it as nothing less than the end of democracy, and many of them welcome intervention by the Biden administration. Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, for example, recently urged J Street, a progressive organization that lobbies for the Iran nuclear deal, to encourage “every member of Congress ..., every member in the administration” to bring their influence to bear against the reform.

But the Biden administration needs no such prompting. Even before Olmert issued this call, Ambassador Nides was endorsing the anti-reform agenda. In remarks broadcast on Feb. 18, he urged Netanyahu to “pump the brakes” on the reforms, which he depicted as an impediment to U.S.-Israeli cooperation against Iran. “The prime minister ... tells us he wants to do big things,” Nides observed, referring to Netanyahu’s twin goals of normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia and thwarting Iran. “I said to ... the prime minister, a hundred times, we can’t spend time with things we want to work on together if your backyard is on fire.”

But Biden’s refusal to get tough on Iran, not Israel’s judicial reform, is what is preventing the United States from working together with Israel. Even if all that Netanyahu’s opponents claim about the judicial reform is true—that authoritarianism is on the march and Israeli democracy hangs in the balance—the American interest still dictates building a coalition with Israel and Saudi Arabia to thwart Tehran’s nuclear ambitions.

And Israel is a particularly desirable coalition member, because, unique among Middle Eastern powers, it has both the means and the will to carry out offensive countermeasures against Iran.

If Biden and his ambassador are busy adding fuel to the flames in Bibi’s backyard, Israel is not lacking for convincing voices who claim that the country is in fact being endangered by its elected government. “We are worried about the kids. We don’t want them to grow up in an undemocratic country,” a left-wing Israeli friend told me during a recent visit to Israel. A scientist with an international reputation, my friend served in a commando unit in the army. A patriot, he has put his life on the line for his country.

And by any conventional measure, he is a success. He leads his own company, which is doing quite well. His apartment in Tel Aviv would easily fetch \$5 million on today’s market, probably much more. Israel has been good to him, yet he and his wife are seriously considering emigrating. “I’m simply terrified,” she said. “I cannot sleep. I check the news every five minutes to find out whether the sky is falling.”

One look at the distress on her face tells you that she is not posturing. She is not an Israeli version of a Whoopi Goldberg or a Barbra Streisand who famously threatened, in 2016, to emigrate to Canada if Trump were to win the election. Her terror is real, and it is typical of a great many Israelis, especially the kind with whom Ambassador Nides feels most comfortable—secular, liberal, and cosmopolitan.

So what, precisely, is the source of the terror that these people are feeling? The reform is five conflicts in one. First, it is a debate about the proper role of the Supreme Court, which has usurped authorities that rightly belong to the Knesset. Yair Lapid, the leader of the opposition, now paints any attempt to change the court as a fascist putsch, but in 2016 he critiqued the court precisely as the reformers are now critiquing it. Indeed, any observer who examines the reforms with a traditional American understanding of checks and balances, cannot but conclude that many of the

demands of the reformers are not only reasonable but also desirable.

Second, it is a flash point between the two major political blocs, between the “pro-Netanyahu” and “anyone but Netanyahu” camps. Having bitterly divided over the rise of Donald Trump, Americans are familiar with this kind of tribal split. So too are citizens of Great Britain, who similarly clashed over Brexit. Four elections in two years were fought over Netanyahu’s leadership. This most recent election did not end the fight, which is now being prosecuted by means of the struggle over judicial reform.

Third, the reform is a fight over the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the issue that, 20 years ago, used to be the dividing line between left and right in Israeli politics. Opponents of the reform argue that it will facilitate the annexation of the West Bank. “I’m a member of an ever-diminishing minority,” my friend the scientist told me, “but the occupation of the West Bank remains the top issue for me. Ruling over another people is destroying us from the inside.”

Fourth, the judicial reform plays on feelings of discrimination among the Sephardim, the Jews from the Arab world, who see the Supreme Court as a bastion of Ashkenazi European Jewish power and privilege. Like the two-state issue, the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide is no longer the heated political issue that it once was. Intermarriage and socio-economic changes have opened up the Israeli elite, which is no longer an exclusively Ashkenazi club. But old resentments die hard. A taxi driver from Morocco, who was in his late 50s, told me, “Just a few days ago Aharon Barak said that they searched and searched but couldn’t find Moroccans qualified to be judges.” He was referring to the former president of the Supreme Court of Israel and the legal mind who laid the groundwork for the expansion of the court’s powers. The quote the driver attributed to Barak is apocryphal, but the feelings of resentment that it expresses are real and still of some importance politically. Chikli, the minister whom Ambassador Nides insulted, offered a related observation when he

“Mapped onto American politics, Netanyahu’s socio-political bloc would unite the ‘deplorables’ of Donald Trump with the ‘people of color’ on the progressive left.”

said that politics is 10% ideology and 90% sociology.

Fifth, and most importantly, the conflict over the judicial system pits secularists against both the ultra-Orthodox and the religious nationalists. The Israeli journalist Amit Segal sparked an animated debate when he suggested that the key indicator of whether an individual will support the judicial reform is whether he or she identifies as a Jew first or as an Israeli—the idea being that those for whom the religious tradition is most alive are the staunchest supporters of the reform. Segal’s dichotomy is perhaps too neat, but there can be no doubt that the most enduring split in Jewish Israeli politics is sociological in nature. The religious-secular split will likely define left and right in the country for the next two generations, perhaps even longer.

The greatest single source of the terror on the Israeli left is the demographic, cultural, and political rise of the religious communities. “We are going to turn into the Islamic Republic of Iran here,” a professor friend of mine said, with no hint of irony in his voice. In historical terms, what we are witnessing is nothing less than the second stage of the *Mahapach*, the election in 1977 that brought Menachem Begin’s Likud

Party to power. Begin’s election broke the monopoly that the Labor Party had exercised over the Knesset since the founding of the state. Yet while the traditional elite—Ashkenazi, secular, and associated with the Labor Zionist movement—lost control of the government in 1977, its offspring have continued to exercise influence over national affairs through the state bureaucracies, the universities, the press, and, importantly, the judiciary. (It is perhaps no accident that the usurpation of power by the judiciary took place in the 1980s, on the heels of the *Mahapach*.)

Mapped onto American politics, Netanyahu’s socio-political bloc would unite the “deplorables” of Donald Trump with the “people of color” on the progressive left. Imagine if Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump joined forces to advance legislation in Congress that would reduce the power complex that unites the government bureaucracies, the universities, and the press. Israel’s judicial reform will inevitably reduce the influence of the reigning elite, forcing it to become more responsive to a socio-political bloc that is both right-wing and religion-friendly. This bloc terrifies my friends in Tel Aviv, but it is not the “anti-democratic” or “authoritarian” behemoth that its opponents depict. It is exerting influence through electoral means and proposing reforms that fall within the bounds of established practice in parliamentary democracies.

Which brings us back to the role of Ambassador Nides. By intervening in domestic Israeli politics, Nides is demonstratively placing the power of the United States behind the opponents of the reform. However, after many weeks of blocking traffic, waving flags, and blowing shofars, those opponents have yet to propose a practical alternative to the government’s proposed reform. There can be no doubt that the intervention of Nides works to the benefit of Yair Lapid, who currently has no incentive to end the crisis. The polarization in Israeli politics has allowed him to rebound from his electoral loss and revitalize his anti-Netanyahu coalition. Recent polls suggest that, if the government were to fall, Likud would suffer in a new election. Lapid, no doubt, smells

blood and dreams of bringing down the government with the tacit assistance of the United States.

If the goal of the Biden administration were to work with Israel to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, then Nides would either avoid any intervention whatsoever in Israeli domestic politics, or he would urge Lapid publicly to put forth practical proposals that could lead to a constructive compromise. Nides has demonstratively done neither. He has thereby helped to destroy the middle ground in Israeli politics, the ground on which politicians such as Benny Gantz and Gadi Eizenkot stand. While they have associated themselves with the anti-reform movement, they are pragmatic military types, both of whom worked constructively with Netanyahu when each served as chief of the General Staff. Their public statements appear to imply an openness to compromise on the judicial reform, but in the current zero-sum atmosphere, they would face severe attacks from the left if they were to attempt to mediate.

The comparison with Poland is

instructive. In 2015, Poland's Law and Justice Party took power and embarked on a judicial reform, which the European Union and other critics, including prominent voices in the U.S. Democratic Party, depicted as a fundamental threat to democracy. "This is a serious issue because the requirements for cooperation within the European Union are the principles of the rule of law," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said of the reforms. "However much I want to have very good relations with Poland ... we cannot simply hold our tongues and not say anything for the sake of peace and quiet." While prosecuting this "values-based" conflict with Poland, Merkel was working hard to improve relations with Vladimir Putin, by, among other steps, developing the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that would bring Russian natural gas to Germany.

Eight years later, against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, we can now see that Merkel's fight with Warsaw was profoundly unwise. With respect to Russia, Poland is not just a frontline state, but also one of the very few

in Europe capable of posing a credible deterrent to the Russian military. It is no exaggeration to say that the security of Europe depends on Poland more than on any country other than the United States. Merkel's eagerness to pick a fight with Warsaw over judges while simultaneously courting Moscow, therefore, will go down in history as having helped persuade Russian leader Vladimir Putin that he could take Ukraine with impunity.

The Biden administration is now making an analogous mistake. If one year from now Iran acquires a nuclear weapon, who will say, "Well at least Biden tried to stop Netanyahu from reforming Israel's judiciary"? Instead of tacitly encouraging the Israeli opposition to bring down Netanyahu, Biden should cooperate with him against Iran. That is the most effective way for the United States to defend not just Israel and America, but democratic values as well. ■

*This article was originally published on March 6, 2023.*

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## NEWS

# Collapse of the COVID Truth Regime

California's new misinformation law aims to silence dissenting medical opinions while allowing state-sponsored falsehoods to proliferate unchecked

BY ALEX GUTENTAG

**I**n 1922, the American political commentator Walter Lippmann coined the term "manufacturing consent." In Lippmann's view, the best solutions to complex problems in a democracy could not be determined by the masses; rather, democracy should be managed by a "specialized class" and a "bureau

of experts" that could best understand common interests and shape public opinion through the tools of propaganda. Edward Bernays, sometimes called "the father of public relations" expanded upon Lippmann's thesis in his 1947 essay "The Engineering of Consent." According to Bernays, the right to free speech and a free press is accompanied by a "right

of persuasion," which is facilitated by mass media.

"All these media provide open doors to the public mind," Bernays wrote. "Any one of us through these media may influence the attitudes and actions of our fellow citizens." For much of the 20th century, Lippmann's specialized class could dominate media and communications in order to guide public opinion for commercial and political purposes. With the advent of social media, however, this dominance was upended and the "doors to the public mind" became more accessible to the average person.

On Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, the conclusions and assumptions of experts could be challenged both by their credentialed rivals and by uncredentialed laypeople. The election of Donald Trump, a figure who was broadly despised by the specialized class and whose social media presence was critical to his campaign, indicated that the soft, noncoercive style of engineering

consent had been outpaced by technology. In response, the FBI and State Department transitioned toward hard censorship, with full support of the legacy media, using Russiagate as a pretext to influence and infiltrate Facebook and Twitter, thus transforming these supposed “private companies” into arms of the state.

The initial justification for much of the COVID censorship that began in 2020 was that social media users could “cause harm” by discouraging others from taking proper precautions. Even though this censorship was a clear infringement on civil liberties, liberals readily accepted it because they had been primed through the false narrative that open expression on social media allowed Russian bots to rig the 2016 election. By this time, Democrats had also normalized the notion that free speech was intrinsically dangerous and that words literally cause violence.

While mainstream media outlets pushed a propagandistic narrative to build popular acceptance of radical and unprecedented measures, government agencies pressured social media companies like Twitter and Facebook to suppress analysis from skeptics. From the lab leak hypothesis, to natural immunity, to mask mandates, much of this analysis has turned out to be entirely legitimate. By skewing the scientific debate, social media “content moderators” allowed state-sponsored misinformation to proliferate unchecked. Three years later, the alarming trend of non-COVID excess mortality in Western countries is an indictment of the COVID response and the censorship that accompanied it. If the job of public health officials was to minimize harm, ongoing excess mortality after the peak of COVID is evidence of failure.

As this failure becomes undeniable, we are witnessing the collapse of much of the censorship campaign that helped shield authorities from criticism. Under Elon Musk, Twitter ended its COVID “misinformation” policy and reinstated many banned accounts. The “Twitter files” and the *Missouri v. Biden* lawsuit have revealed that the White House, the CDC, and even Pfizer were all involved in a coordinated, systematic silencing

“Medical censorship was about much more than doctors’ and scientists’ speech rights—it was also about the public’s fundamental right to informed consent.”

of dissent around COVID policies and vaccines.

Against this backdrop, one of the country’s most draconian censorship efforts is facing a major challenge. On Jan. 25, U.S. District Judge William Shubb granted a motion for a preliminary injunction in the *Hoeg, et al. v. Newsom* lawsuit, temporarily blocking California’s Assembly Bill 2098 (AB 2098). If AB 2098 is eventually implemented, the law will allow the California Medical Board to disbar doctors who disseminate COVID-related “misinformation” to patients. Judge Shubb called the state’s definition of misinformation (“false information that is contradicted by contemporary scientific consensus”) “nonsense” and ruled in favor of the injunction on the grounds that the vagueness of the law would violate doctors’ 14th Amendment right to due process.

The state has decided not to appeal Shubb’s decision, but the ultimate fate of the law is still in limbo, in part due to an ongoing separate lawsuit (*McDonald v. Lawson*). Nevertheless, the initial victory of the plaintiffs in *Hoeg, et al. v. Newsom* has highlighted the pernicious nature of speech restrictions and represents a major blow against the far-reaching censorship machine that shaped the COVID era.

“The corollary to the First

Amendment right to speak is a First Amendment right to receive information,” Jenin Younes, an attorney from the New Civil Liberties Alliance who is representing the plaintiffs, said. The battle over AB 2098 illustrates why medical censorship was about much more than doctors’ and scientists’ speech rights—it was also about the public’s fundamental right to informed consent for lockdowns, masks, and vaccines. As the COVID censorship campaign is increasingly questioned, it becomes clear that suppressing scientific dialogue was not just a free speech issue, but was a catastrophic violation of bioethics that harmed, injured, and killed people.

The doctors challenging AB 2098 in court are primarily concerned about how this law would impact patients. Doctors’ ability to speak frankly is essential to medical care and medical ethics. As doctors have an obligation to act as fiduciaries for their individual patients, a law forcing them to push a one-size-fits-all approach would undermine this obligation.

“When you are no longer telling the patient what you really think, you are no longer acting in the patient’s best interest,” Dr. Azadeh Khatibi, a plaintiff in *Hoeg, et al. v. Newsom* said. “So you are then, by definition, acting unethically.”

Dr. Aaron Kheriaty, another plaintiff and former director of medical ethics at the University of California, Irvine, echoed this sentiment. “Clinical care needs to be individualized to the particular needs of each specific patient,” he said. “AB 2098 is a law that says doctors’ primary duty is not to the sick patient in front of them, but to a social program that’s been basically determined by the California Department of Public Health.” This turns physicians into agents of a broad political agenda, but patients need to be able to trust that physicians are acting in their individual interests. “Without that, medicine collapses,” Kheriaty explained.

The law’s intent to use doctors for a larger social and political purpose is characteristic of the entire COVID censorship crusade, which often prevented scientists and medical professionals from engaging in open inquiry or offering the public a “second opinion” on



COVID prevention and treatment. This did not just penalize those who were prevented from speaking; it caused a societywide inversion of medical ethics in which every member of the public was instrumentalized for a “greater good” that could not be questioned. This inversion—the idea that your health as an individual only matters in service of collective ends—is the logic behind eugenics, organ harvesting, and non-consensual medical experiments.

The advocacy group that pushed for AB 2098, No License for Disinformation, was originally focused on California doctors’ social media posts (since this would not be legally defensible, the group shifted its focus to doctor-patient interactions). “I think this shows what the real intent of the bill was, which was to silence political opponents,” Younes said. This effort was often personal. Dr. Tracy Beth Hoeg, for instance, has received dozens of messages from one of the members of No License for Disinformation threatening that the law would be used to attack her license. Dr. Hoeg’s scientific work was crucial in re-opening schools, unmasking children, and raising awareness about vaccine-associated myocarditis in young men.

“It’s the patients who pay the biggest price when their doctors can’t give them accurate information,” Hoeg said. The attempt to target her has been disconcerting. “The really sad part is that there are doctors from all over who read this. Most will stay quiet, even about issues they really care about, because they don’t want to risk losing their job or medical license,” she explained. “That’s also how it stifles the scientific debate.”

Former State Sen. Dr. Richard Pan, a co-sponsor of AB 2098 and author of California’s strictest pre-COVID vaccine laws, has called anti-vaccine protesters “domestic terrorists” and has made disparaging comments about doctors who disagree with his legislative efforts, calling them “Covid minimizers” and “unlicensed pundits” (as if one needs a license for punditry in this country). “This is supposed to be a law about the public’s best interest, and yet it’s a law about personalities,” Dr. Ram Duriseti, another plaintiff in the lawsuit, explained. “It’s a

political law. It’s not a scientific or medical law.”

The law itself contains multiple debatable claims, including the assertion that “unvaccinated individuals are at a risk of dying from COVID-19 that is 11 times greater than those who are fully vaccinated.” As Hoeg pointed out on her substack, the estimate of an elevenfold higher risk is inaccurate: This number has changed over time and continues to change. More importantly, it is based on confounded data from the CDC, not randomized controlled trials. This demonstrates the problem that arises when a central authority is entrusted with determining and enforcing a singular scientific truth.

“It’s not a crisis of misinformation. It’s a crisis of institutional credibility,” Laura Powell, another attorney representing the plaintiffs, explained. Powell filed the original complaint and motion for the injunction. “The whole point is to scare doctors into keeping their mouths shut, and that will be achieved even if they never bring up any disciplinary action,” she said.

Over the past three years, COVID censorship has worked by making examples out of nonconformists and labeling them as heretics in order to discredit them. Censorship is not just about preventing access to certain perspectives, but about defining an in-group and warning observers that they might also be isolated and gagged if they stray too far from accepted narratives.

When these accepted narratives are actually false, reality is warped, and people are forced to participate in a bizarre and damaging theater in which they fight to defend ideas that are wrong. The alternative would mean risking association with those labeled as “covidots,” “anti-maskers,” and “anti-vaxxers.” In response to policies that marked certain positions as off-limits, many people in medicine, science, law, academia, and journalism responded by self-censoring for fear of excommunication. AB 2098 seeks to make this chilling effect permanent. The preliminary injunction against it, however, suggests that we have entered a new phase in which the COVID truth regime may be finally losing much of its immense power.

Central to COVID censorship was the notion that people simply cannot be trusted to evaluate evidence on their own and make health decisions for themselves. “Part of the censorship movement is so elitist,” Powell said. The assumption behind COVID “content moderation” was that a small cadre of anointed experts deserved disproportionate sway over public opinion because their views were objectively correct, but this has proven to be far from the case.

YouTube, for instance, suspended users for statements that disputed the efficacy of face masks; these statements have now been vindicated by a landmark Cochrane review of 78 randomized controlled trials, which found that masks made “little or no difference” in preventing the transmission of COVID-19. Resulting mandates negatively impacted deaf and hard-of-hearing people, affected the learning and development of young children, and impaired the social cognition of elderly dementia patients. Because they disallowed open public discussion of their favored policies, social media companies should be considered partially responsible for the collateral damage that ensued.

During school closures in 2020, for example, fatal teen drug overdoses doubled, the child homicide rate increased by 28%, confirmed evidence of child abuse rose by 30%, and there was a 31% increase in the number of child

## COLLECTION

### Figuring Out Feminism

Jewish women shaped the American feminist movement, leading the charge for everything from women’s suffrage to birth control and workplace equality. Decades later, a new generation of women, Jewish and otherwise, are navigating their own nuanced relationships to feminism—what it means for their religious traditions, how it intersects with their politics, and how it inspires them as wives, friends, leaders, and mothers.

[tabletmag.com/collections/  
jewish-feminism](https://tabletmag.com/collections/jewish-feminism)

sexual images online. Clearly a critical assessment of the COVID restrictions placed on children was morally imperative, yet Twitter blacklisted a prominent advocate for school reopening, Stanford's Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, as soon as he opened his account. As Dr. Bhattacharya recently argued in *Tablet*, this move and similar actions hampered the conversation around ongoing masking, testing, and quarantining protocols in schools, and these protocols continued in many states without evidence-based deliberation.

Social media companies often removed accurate estimates of COVID's infection fatality rate (IFR) or labeled them as misleading because low figures might prompt users to reject the rationale behind social distancing, stay-home orders, and mandates. Would the public have consented to the prolonged mass quarantining of young people and children (as well as the massive upward wealth transfer, infringements on human rights, and social costs that accompanied it) if they had been exposed to correct data about the risk the virus posed?

At the behest of the Biden administration, censorship escalated dramatically

in 2021. In an effort to boost vaccine uptake at all costs, Facebook told officials that it was censoring "often-true content" that did not contain misinformation but which might dissuade people from getting vaccinated. Many prohibited claims on social media pertaining to topics like natural immunity, breakthrough infections, and myocarditis proved to be true.

On Jan. 11, 2023, Dr. Anthony Fauci co-authored a paper in the journal *Cell*, arguing that viruses like SARS-CoV-2, which replicate in the respiratory mucosa, cannot be effectively controlled through vaccines that create systemic immunity, such as the current mRNA vaccines. Anyone making similar assertions on social media before 2023 may have been deplatformed, or their post might have been removed. Today it is worth asking how many people would have declined vaccines or boosters if this kind of commentary had been widely available.

One of the key problems with AB 2098, Hoeg explained, is that its vagueness "puts us all at risk of 'misinformation' not being defined using scientific data but by the beliefs of the dominant political party." Throughout 2020,

2021, and 2022 "misinformation" and "settled science" were not determined through objective criteria—they were determined by the political preferences of those wielding power in state bureaucracies, tech companies, and mainstream media. In consequence, we are facing a snowballing economic crisis, children have been plunged into an academic and mental health catastrophe, and the country has seen non-COVID excess deaths of tens of thousands of people under 45. The bureau of experts has inflicted bottomless stress on the population as a whole and has shown a total disregard for basic civil rights and human dignity.

Free speech is rarely just about free speech for its own sake; it is about placing checks and balances on the ability of an authority to shape reality. "Nobody has a monopoly on the truth," Younes explained. Ending the COVID truth regime is not only a matter of correcting the record on misguided policies. The underlying set of assumptions that led to mass censorship and rule-by-technocrat must be dismantled as well. ■

*This article was originally published on March 5, 2023.*

ARTS & LETTERS

# Actually, You Don't Know That Much

The problem on campuses isn't 'wokeness'—it's certainty

BY ILANA REDSTONE

**S**tories of campus political excesses pile up like bodies. To cite a few recent examples: There was the law student group at Berkeley that banned Zionist speakers, the Stanford Elimination of Harmful Language

Initiative, and the Valdosta State University professor who taught that sex isn't dichotomous.

I am not a fan of the word "woke." I find it to be dismissive, snarky, and generally unhelpful. Yet, it's the go-to term for many people who wish to express their concerns about colleges

today. It's meant to refer to a narrow, progressive political ideology that, critics say, limits free speech, suppresses debate, and forces students and faculty alike to self-censor. But the very real challenges have been misdiagnosed by both higher education's critics and its defenders. Campuses don't have a "wokeness" problem. They have a certainty problem.

Righting the ship, as they say, requires understanding what's making it sink. I've written here and here about the "Certainty Trap." The Certainty Trap refers to a resolute unwillingness to consider the possibility that we're wrong or that we're not right in the way we think we are. It has cousins in intellectual arrogance and incuriosity, but those concepts don't quite go far enough. After all, if I tell someone to be intellectually humble or curious, there's

a tacit assumption that they can identify where they lack those things in the first place.

It turns out that we're not great at recognizing exactly what it is we should be either humble or curious about. It's a bit of a paradox in the sense that, if you understand your own need for humility, you're already halfway to a solution. So how do we tackle a problem we can't directly observe? We tackle it by learning to think differently—by recognizing that our clue that we're falling into the Certainty Trap *isn't* a feeling of being certain. No, the clue that we're falling into the Certainty Trap is when we feel the urge to harshly judge and demonize those who disagree with us. When we see the answers as simple, only a stupid or evil person could think otherwise.

Here's what this can look like in practice, taking the three examples I mentioned at the beginning. First, when things get heated over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, don't just point to the need for viewpoint diversity. In the Berkeley case, when a student group at Berkeley Law School "barred supporters of Zionism from speaking at its events," it was because they thought the right answers were obvious. The trick is to show them they're not. As I wrote here, this might include asking questions like: Can people on both sides be aggressors and victims? Whose claim to victim status matters more? What is the difference between self-defense and unprovoked aggression? What is the right way to compensate people who have been wronged? Who deserves compensation, in what form, and when? And, of course, who should decide all these things? Certainty keeps us from considering these questions.

Second, when Stanford initiates its "Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative" to "address harmful language in IT at Stanford," they're making various assumptions that have gone unspoken. One of the biggest is that intent doesn't matter. To take one example from the linked document, "crazy" is considered offensive. But, who declared this to be the case? How should we think about people's sensitivities? Are the norms of what's acceptable set by the most sensitive person in every room? Should they be? Taking it one step further,

## "Are the norms of what's acceptable set by the most sensitive person in every room? Should they be?"

how *should* we think about the role of intent? My point isn't that people's feelings of being offended don't matter or that having good intent is exculpatory. The point is that certainty keeps us from diving in.

In the third example, at Valdosta State, a parent complained about the "woke" way the professor was leading a discussion about gender and biology. The instructor had taught that "sex, instead of being a dichotomy, is bimodal, meaning there are two large lumps (male and female) with other in between (intersex)." The real problem? Certainty. There are debates in biology about whether what the professor said is right (which is part of the reason this is in the opinion section). There are also debates about the prevalence of intersex conditions and whether biological sex should be considered binary or bimodal. None of this means the instructor shouldn't have said what she said. But it can't, in good faith, be presented as definitive.

Certainty has at least two implications, both of which are powerful. One is that it leads us to stop asking questions. Given we can't know ahead of time where the next question will lead, this forecloses our ability to create or access new knowledge. The second, related but subtly different, is that it leads us to conclude that there *are* no

questions to be asked, by anyone. And *this* changes social norms. It changes what we think is socially acceptable and what isn't, leading us to view dissenters and contrarians as moral abominations who deserve to be punished.

The good news is that the problem of certainty is actually easier to solve than a battle over political ideologies. That's partly because certainty can come from the left, right, or center. Right now, the certainty that underpins several of the left's views on hot-button issues has powerful effects on higher education, simply because that's the prevalent political orientation on campus. But, if the pendulum were to swing in another direction, and campuses were made up of people convinced the 2020 election was stolen, certainty would still be just as much of a problem. The way to address it is twofold. The first step is to recognize the root problem. The second is to start asking questions, and to do so while understanding that the most important thing often isn't answering the questions, but generating them.

Certainty can take any of these forms: declaring knowledge as definitive, treating the path forward or the solution to a contentious problem as though it's obvious, behaving as though there is a clear "right" decision in conflicts between different values or the interests of different groups, or failing to recognize that, when it comes to heated issues and problems we care about, pretty much any solution has both costs and benefits. Each of these elements of the Certainty Trap assumes a simplicity that not only doesn't stand up, but actively constrains our thinking.

In 2023, lean into ambiguity. It's not as bad as you think. ■

*This article was originally published on March 7, 2023.*

### ISRAEL & THE MIDDLE EAST

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## THE REST

→ Two of the **four Americans who were abducted after crossing the Mexican border on Friday for what had been a trip for a cosmetic surgery were ultimately killed** during the shootout between rival cartel gangs that led to their kidnapping, officials said Tuesday. The remaining two survivors were escorted by the Mexican military and U.S. National Guard back onto U.S. soil, where they are now being treated for injuries. It remains unclear if the bodies of the deceased will be returned to the United States. “Those responsible will be found, and they are going to be punished,” Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said during a news conference, though he added that the American media was sensationalizing the incident. “It’s not like that when they kill Mexicans in the United States. They go quiet like mummies.”

→ Are we in the middle of a **work-from-home baby boom**? It’s possible, says researchers Lyman Stone and Adam Ozimek, whose new study found that **2022’s bump to the U.S. fertility rate could be attributed to the flexibility and reduced commutes of parents** who worked from home. For decades, the U.S. fertility rate has declined, and while the 2021 total of 3.66 million births beat out the year prior by half a million, it’s still a far cry from the totals of 4 million or more a decade prior. Still, the survey of 3,000 American women found that those working remotely not only were more likely to be married in the next year compared to their in-office counterparts but also were having more babies—especially women who were wealthy or educated. The boom, the researchers said, wasn’t directly attributed to remote work but to the way it allowed mothers to “balance the competing demands of work and family.”

→ **Public schoolteacher turnover has hit its highest level in five years.** That’s according to a new Chalkbeat study that attempted to compensate for the lack of federal government data on teacher turnover with a study of teacher-employment figures across eight representative states. Citing new and intensifying behavior challenges among students and more workplace stress as schools become political battlegrounds for the culture war, teachers are leaving at a rate roughly 2% higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic, a decline made worse by the dwindling enrollment in teacher education programs that’s been ongoing since the 2009 Great Recession.

→ With NASA preparing to put four astronauts in orbit around the moon next year and to land a crew on the moon in 2025—the first crew to do so since 1972’s Apollo 17—the age-old question persists: **What time is it on the moon?** Generally speaking, lunar missions have adhered to a time zone set in the country that launched the ship. But NASA’s revamped lunar ambitions, along with upcoming missions out of China, Japan, and South Korea, now have the European Space **Agency advocating for a universally recognized lunar time zone** that would make it easier to coordinate missions on or orbiting the moon at the same time. The big issue now is how to synchronize a lunar clock, as they run some 56 millionths of a second faster per day than clocks do on Earth.

## THE BIG STORY

The White House said it would back the bipartisan RESTRICT Act unveiled by a dozen senators on Tuesday, which would broaden President Joe Biden’s authority to effectively ban the use of TikTok nationwide, though the app is not mentioned by name. “Our beef is with the Chinese Communist Party,” Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA), the co-lead on the bill, told reporters at a press conference. TikTok, which collects more data on its users than any other social media platform, is owned by Chinese company ByteDance, which has ties to the government of China.

As written, the bill would tap the Commerce Department to restrict or ban social media platforms, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing technologies owned by the foreign entities deemed a national security threat for operating in the United States. Critics say TikTok continues to be a risk as Chinese law requires companies like ByteDance to share internal data with the government—though TikTok contends its U.S. operation is independent from Beijing influence. After similar security concerns led the European Commission to ban staffers from using TikTok in February, the app announced on Wednesday that it would open three European data centers that would strip users’ personal information from aggregated data.

—Sean Cooper

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# Remembering a CIA Coup in Iran That Never Was

Mohammed Mossadegh was not a democrat or democratically elected, nor was he toppled by nefarious foreigners

BY PETER THEROUX

When anti-regime protests spread like wildfire throughout Iran in mid-October of 2022, the regime's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was quick to lay the blame on the usual foreign suspects. "I say explicitly that these riots and this insecurity were a design by the U.S. and the occupying, fake Zionist regime and those who are paid by them," he told a class of cadets at a police college in Tehran. He suggested that the ultimate goal of the U.S. and Israel was regime change in Iran.

This elicited a response on Twitter from Iranian rapper Hichkas, who defended foreign support for the uprising, saying that it represented solidarity, not collaboration. He ended his riposte with a taunt that was retweeted or liked more than 50,000 times:

"And you can shove that Mossadegh tale you've lived off of for a lifetime."

The rebellious young hip-hop star was connecting dots that Khamenei had only implied: that in 2022, the United States and its allies were once again seeking to overthrow an Iranian leader, just as in the summer of 1953 the United States had cooperated with players inside and outside Iran to help end the political career of the doomed nationalist prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh.

For anyone who needs a reminder of the significance of that episode, whose 70th anniversary falls this year,

let Columbia University's professor Hamid Dabashi provide one, from his book *Iran: A People Interrupted*:

As Iranians never get tired of repeating (for this is the defining trauma of their modern history), the CIA, aided by British intelligence, mounted, paid for, and executed a military coup, overthrew the democratically elected government of Mosaddeq, and brought the corrupt Mohammed Reza Shah back to power.

This Ivy League encapsulation of the events of August 1953 in Iran contains at least four remarkable untruths, though "As Iranians never get tired of repeating" is not one of them.

First, the CIA did not mount or execute a coup. Second, Mossadegh was not democratically elected. Third, the shah was not yet corrupt. Fourth, he was not brought back to power, because he had never left it: Assassinations were a fact of life in 1950s Tehran, and having survived an attempt on his life in 1949, Mohammed Reza chose to wait out Mossadegh's fall in Baghdad and Rome but never abdicated.

What actually happened in the land which once harvested prime ministers more promiscuously than Henry VIII harvested queens was this: After Shah Mohammed Reza's Prime Ministers Mohammed-Ali Foroughi, Ali Soheili, Ahmad Qavam, Mohammed-Reza Hekmat, Ebrahim Hakimi, Abdolhossein Hazhir, Mohammed Saed, and Ali Mansur,

came Ali Razmara, who was assassinated in March 1951. Following the brief caretaker premiership of Hossein Ala, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi wanted Seyyed Zia Tabataba'i, but in deference to the aged Qajar aristocrat Mohammed Mossadegh, had him offered the job, feeling confident he would decline. To everyone's surprise, Mossadegh accepted, and the Majlis concluded a brief poll to endorse him. Then the shah gave Mossadegh the job. Again, the sequence of events is significant: The shah chose a prime minister, the parliament consented, and the shah appointed him.

Between 1953 and 1979, the shah would appoint and dismiss 10 more prime ministers, including Mossadegh twice. Not even the most overheated Iran historian, in Islamic Iran or American academia, describes these changes as coups. The difference is that when Mossadegh's second government went down in flames in August 1953, there were some American would-be arsonists in the wings who may or may not have shared responsibility, but who insisted on claiming the lion's share of the credit, however implausibly or unwisely.

Constitutionally, appointing prime ministers in imperial Iran was the sole prerogative of the shah. As Gholam Reza Afkhami wrote, "The Constitution ... gave the Crown and only the Crown the power to appoint or dismiss the ministers (Article 46, Supplementary basic Law) ..." In George Lenczowski's *Iran Under the Pahlavis* we read that "The Shah's authority embraced the right to appoint and dismiss the prime minister and ministers." However, according to Afkhami, "over the postwar years it had become the accepted practice for the shah to ask the Majlis to express its preference before he appointed a prime minister."

Article 46 of the Supplemental Constitutional Law of the Iranian constitution in force at the time was blunt: "The Ministers are appointed and dismissed by the decree of the King." The poll noted above to align king and legislature behind a prime minister was "a tentative consent of the majority of the Majlis which was ascertained in the form of a vote of investiture known in Iran as *raye tamayel* ("vote of inclination"),

prior to the issuance of Royal *farman* appointing the prime minister,” as Iranian American scholar Sepehr Zabih put it in *The Mossadegh Era*. Mossadegh scholars Darioush Bayandor and Christopher de Bellaigue call it a straw vote or straw poll.

The Iranian parliament’s role in the choice of a prime minister was similar to, but weaker than, the U.S. Senate’s role in confirming presidential appointments, such as, among others, Supreme Court justices, some cabinet posts, and ambassadors. Yet despite this even stronger legislative role, no one refers to “the democratically elected Justice Samuel Alito,” the “democratically elected Secretary of State Anthony Blinken,” or “the democratically elected Ambassador Pamela Harriman.”

This fetishistic formulation, applied to Mossadegh is even odder, for reasons that are worth examining. First, though, it’s worth retracing Mossadegh’s steps on his way out of power.

The story of Mossadegh’s departure from power is notorious among Middle East scholars, on par with the JFK assassination or abdication of Edward VIII. Hence retelling it is a little laborious, with sensationalism vying in a death match with numbing familiarity.

Once in power, Mossadegh quickly achieved national hero status by getting a bill through the Majles nationalizing the Iranian oil industry. However, negotiations with the British Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, AIOC, went in circles over details such as management and future compensation to the British. As the U.S. worked with the British toward a solution, the Brits were annoyed by the Washington upstart’s idealism towards Mossadegh, while Washington was peeved by London’s anachronistic, patronizing greed.

The U.S finally dispatched Averell

Harriman to work with Mossadegh toward a resolution. The canny old man’s posturing and slippery illogic inclined the Americans to sense that he plainly did not want an agreement. As the Iranian prime minister himself conceded, he was wary of “my fanatics” in the Iranian polity who would kill him for making concessions. Harriman went home empty-handed, and Eisenhower soon replaced Truman.

The British, having been talked out of military action by the Yanks, pulled AIOC staff out of Iran. The British pull-out and boycott, combined with the lack of domestic Iranian expertise to produce or market oil, proved catastrophic for the economy, as increased production in Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia made the renamed National Iranian Oil Company, NIOC, irrelevant. Mossadegh and his advisers were blind to these realities amid the nirvana of unanimous domestic support for their anti-imperialist bluster. Worse, his decision to end the oil talks were a signal event for Washington, who now joined London in seeing the prime minister as unstable and untrustworthy.

As the political and economic tides turned against him, Mossadegh sparred with the shah over who had the right to appoint the minister of war. This demand was a red line for the shah, who prized the military as his key constituency. The prime minister resigned in protest, but his brinkmanship got him what he wanted, his job back along with power over the War Ministry. He was quick to rename it the Ministry of Defense and appoint himself to head it, cut its budget by 15%, purge the services of 136 officers, install men loyal to himself, including his nephew General Vossuq (whom he named assistant minister), and obtain six months’ emergency powers, including the power to legislate. He then dismissed the Supreme Court, and, lacking support in the Majles, sought to dissolve it, too—a power that the constitution reserved to the shah.

This was the beginning of the end for the prime minister who spoke eloquently of democracy but, when given opportunities to exercise it, always showed a dictatorial bent. Claiming to seek legitimacy not from the legislature but from “the people,” Mossadegh set up

a national referendum on dissolving the Majles, with no secret ballot: Yes and no votes were cast in different locations. Mossadegh’s stacked referendum gave him a landslide victory, which cost him the support of the Shia clergy, the National Front coalition, and even family members. Sattareh Farmanfarman, his niece, wrote in her memoir, *Daughter of Persia*, of how “wretched” she felt over this betrayal. Majles Speaker Ayatollah Kashani denounced him, and his former National Front allies called him a “worse dictator than Reza Shah.”

Having lost nearly all political support except the communist Tudeh party, and with even his pro-oil nationalization supporters split, Mossadegh found himself with a reduced base composed of radical supporters and an increasingly united front opposing him: the clergy, the military, and the bazaar, with the U.S. and Britain now both solidly behind the monarch. Most importantly, the absence of a functioning Majles offered the shah an opening to remove his unpopular prime minister.

Previously, the shah had rejected repeated advice, domestic and foreign, to fire Mossadegh, though it was within his constitutional powers. There had already been 14 recess appointments or dismissals of prime minister, which Mossadegh knew well, but he boasted that the shah would not “have the guts” to dismiss him. His bluff backfired. Absent a parliament, Mossadegh could now be removed from power. All it took was royal will.

Despite the cresting of the feud between Mossadegh and the now less-differential young shah, the latter hesitated to oust his prime minister. The British succeeded in persuading Eisenhower to connive against Mossadegh. Hands-off Ike bucked the conversation down to the working level, which was the Dulles brothers, Alan and John Foster, and the operational components of the CIA. London favored some form of a palace coup, using its network of Iranian agents, who with the rupture of Tehran-London relations had been passed to the local CIA station for handling.

The agency was barely six years old and years away from having its own headquarters in Langley. Still, it had already



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adopted practices like the secretive use of cryptonyms to conceal identities.

Long since declassified, TPBEDAMN was an anti-communist covert influence program in Iran. KGSAVOY was the shah, and TPAJAX was the plan for the rather tame machination—far removed from a British military invasion—to remove Mohammed Mossadegh from power legally and constitutionally, by persuading the shah to use his prerogative to replace him.

Enter RNMAKER, true name Kermit “Kim” Roosevelt, Teddy’s grandson and no stranger to the sandbox. In his book *Arabs, Oil, and History* (1949), he devoted a chapter to Iran, which in his telling is one of the “fringe lands,” as a Muslim but non-Arab country in the suburbs of the Middle East (there are Iranians who would punch him in the nose for this alone). On a trip through Iran, Kim is lectured by ragged tribals about bad royal priorities: “Why does [the shah] not give away some of his lands? Or spend what he spends for a B-17 on a program to combat trachoma?” Our good listener and deft name-dropper tells us that on a recent visit to the country, “The shah had told me much the same thing ... As long as Iranian people are ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-educated and just plain ill there could be no real security against outside aggression.”

In a subsequent book, *Countercoup: The Struggle for the Control of Iran*, published in 1979, Roosevelt detailed the course of his plotting. Like Stephen Kinzer’s 2003 book *All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, which relies heavily on Roosevelt, it is overly padded and suffers from what H.R. McMaster would call strategic narcissism—the tendency to put the United States at the center of everything, deserving of both glory and blame, whether rightly or wrongly. Fittingly, McMaster uses the term, in his book *Battlegrounds*, to describe the posture toward Iran adopted by President Obama (who we shall see would also weigh in on the Mossadegh affair).

A good example of this world view occurred in the movie *Shakespeare in Love*, where we see the cast of *Romeo and Juliet* taking a break in a tavern. When the portly actor who plays the

nurse is asked by a fellow drinker, “So what’s the play about, then?” he starts to explain, “Well, you see, there’s this nurse ... “

This gets to the heart of the narratives around Mossadegh’s political demise. The isolated prime minister was entirely correct in his complaints to everyone from the shah to Harriman that he was being plotted against. Ray Takeyh writes that Mossadegh’s coming ouster was “the worst-kept secret in Iran.” While Roosevelt strategically and narcissistically spins tales of CIA plotting in Washington and London and secret meetings with the shah, the Iranian army brass was already assessing its options against Mossadegh, and had even approached the British Embassy in Tehran for support. Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi in Qom, Ayatollah Behbehani in Tehran, and Ayatollah Kashani, who had been dismissed from his Majles speaker post by Mossadegh, had already lined up against him.

One of the best accounts of the movement to oust Mossadegh is in Ervand Abrahamian’s *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, and in a dozen dense pages he scarcely mentions the CIA. Having inherited the (still closed) British Embassy’s human intelligence network, the CIA station in Tehran, in the person of Roosevelt, held secret meetings and moved some money around. Yet the already-existing network, meeting in the capital’s Officers Club, lacked neither motivation nor money. Abrahamian notes that Roosevelt’s support did help Major General Fazlollah Zahedi—the declared candidate to replace Mossadegh—win over key allies such as Imperial Guards Commander Nassiri, Air Force Chief Gilanshah, gendarmerie Chief Colonel Ardubadi, secret police Chief Mu’tazed, and the senior tank commanders of the Tehran army garrison.

The TPAJAX plan unfolded on the night of Aug. 15. Colonel Nassiri arrived at Mossadegh’s house with the royal edict, or *farman*, signed by the shah. This one dismissed Mossadegh as prime minister, another appointed Zahedi to replace him. Despite the weird circumstances—it was nearly midnight, and Nassiri was accompanied by two truckloads of soldiers—this was a legal

and constitutional action. But because it was the worst-kept secret in Iran, Mossadegh had been tipped off. Tudeh had penetrations of the Imperial Guard and the military, according to Bayandor, and Abrahamian even names the leaker, one Captain Mehdi Homayouni. (Mossadegh may have had multiple sources—senior Tudeh leader Noredin-Kianuri claimed in his memoirs that he too had personally tipped off Mossadegh.) Mossadegh signed a receipt for the edict but refused to comply, and his men placed Nassiri under arrest.

The plan had failed, and the Americans had no plan B. Roosevelt was asked to return to Washington but preferred to stay in Tehran. The CIA passed a memo to Eisenhower conceding the failure and assessing that the U.S. would “probably have to snuggle up to Mossadegh.” The U.S. ambassador, Loy Henderson, who like the shah had sat out the operation abroad, returned to Tehran to meet on the 16th with Mossadegh, who denied having ever seen the royal edict dismissing him, but went on to say that even if he had and if it were real, he would have ignored it. When Henderson gave his account of the meeting to the media, he pointedly omitted the title of prime minister when referring to Mossadegh. Despite all the confusion and contradiction, the underlying fact was that Zahedi was the legitimate prime minister of Iran.

That was Roosevelt’s focus for the next couple of days. He arranged for photostats of the two *farmans* to be circulated to local newspapers, who published them. Skeptics of the Roosevelt legend point out that the only papers the CIA could suborn were low-circulation organs in south Tehran and thus of limited citywide influence.

On Aug. 19, demonstrations and counterdemonstrations broke out in Tehran, eventually converging on the radio station and Mossadegh’s house in Kakh (Palace) Street, which was defended by tanks. If Mossadegh’s fall is analogous to the JFK assassination, 109 Palace Street was Dealey Plaza. Violence broke out, and dozens were killed. The former prime minister’s house was damaged by gunfire. In the late afternoon, a tearful

Mossadegh heard the public radio broadcast of Zahedi's victory speech saying that Mossadegh's "coup" had failed. He learned, but refused to believe, that his relative, the police chief Col. Daftary, had turned against him. When his house was overrun, he fled and turned himself in to Zahedi's government the next day. He was treated respectfully.

Before flying home, the shah sent telegrams to Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi and Ayatollah Behbehani. The more senior ayatollah responded with elaborately polite hopes that the shah could now put an end to the country's ills and bring glory to Islam. He closed, "Do return as Shiism and Islam need you. You are the Shiite sovereign."

More than one Iranian historian has derided Roosevelt's memoir as "prophecy made after the fact," and Afkhami complained that "[t]his false history, fostered by pro-Mosaddeq Iranians and liberal and leftist westerners, has diminished Mosaddeq, demonized the shah, and turned Iranians into traitors or wimps."

The highly detailed, if also highly redacted, U.S. government histories of the so-called coup make the same point. While rich on details of secret travels and meetings, money changing hands, successive British and American drafts of the TPAJAX plans, and intragovernmental communications, all of them—the National Security Archives' "Secret History of the Iran Coup, 1953" of 2000, "Zendebad, Shah!" by the CIA history staff, partially declassified in 2017, and "Planning and Implementation of Operation TPAJAX, March-August 1953," an archive of documents published by the Office of the Historian of the State Department, all concur that it is impossible to establish who, if anyone, was directing the protests and mob actions on the fateful and chaotic day.

In retrospect, Roosevelt did himself no favors in *Countercoup*. He places himself at the center of the action, including instances that stretch the imagination. He gives us a shah who spends long evenings listening to him and gushing with praise, as well as a remarkable instance of him lying to the monarch: In a final meeting before the ruler left Tehran and Nassiri would

**“The myth is that the CIA dispatched its serpent, Kim Roosevelt, into a democratic Iranian Garden of Eden, and everything bad that happened over the next half-century can be attributed to this original sin.”**

start enforcing the two royal edicts, Roosevelt lacked a message from Eisenhower, so he made one up. "Since [Eisenhower] had failed to send one, I put into words what he must surely be feeling," he wrote. His fabricated message from the president to the king was, "If the Pahlavis and the Roosevelts working together cannot solve this little problem, then there is no hope anywhere!" That he chose to publish it just as the shah was overthrown provided the nascent Islamic Republic and its partisans with yet more reasons to hate America. Eisenhower, who had died a decade prior, would have been furious.

It is unsettling that the cult of democratic Mossadegh exists, even in the United States. When I asked a friend of mine who served as the CIA's chief of Iran analysis—albeit more in the Qassem Soleimani than the Mohammed Mossadegh era—to explain this bizarre interpretive slant, he blamed "bias" and "an overinflated view of U.S. power and influence," which he called "bullshit." He added, "Whatever the wisdom of U.S. and UK involvement in his ouster—which was likely near at hand even absent foreign involvement—his removal from power sparked mostly public

indifference and some celebration. His contemporaries, including many former supporters, were glad to see him go. Mossadegh's fictional status as a victimized, heroic advocate of democracy was only later cynically conferred by those who sought and supported the decidedly undemocratic dictatorship that rules Iran today."

Reuel Gerecht, another former CIA observer, but from the operational side, put it this way: "Look, the focus on '53 among Iranians is primarily a reflection of, one, left-wing, *tier-mondiste* critique of American power after the Vietnam War went south—starting in the West before it started in Iran—and two, the growing dissatisfaction among Iranian leftists, most tellingly the Islamic left, with the course of the revolution. Imagining Mossadegh triumphing allowed them to see a democratic Iran where the Shah *and* Khomeini, Khamenei, Rafsanjani, et al, get deleted."

Back home, there is a thread that runs through the Mossadegh literature, from Roosevelt's and Kinzer's wildly tendentious accounts, down to Shahzad Aziz's *In the Land of the Ayatollahs Tupac Shakur Is King*, and even the *Cambridge History of Iran*. The thread combines hindsight versus historical context to connect American villainy, lack of Iranian agency, and an alarmist view of the future, always panicking about the folly of Washington's next terrible moves but never Tehran's. And then there is the purely magical phenomenon of those who loathe the CIA and its operatives yet who naively take Kim Roosevelt's self-centered memoirs at face value. American spies overthrow democratically elected governments, but they never tell a lie.

The enduring myth is that the CIA dispatched its serpent, Kim Roosevelt, into a democratic Iranian Garden of Eden, and everything bad that happened over the next half-century can be attributed to this original sin. (The "original sin" metaphor is everywhere—*The New York Times* even worked it into Ardeshir Zahedi's obituary). On this, the *tier-mondistes*, American progressives, and Qajar memoirists all agree. A quick sampling:

Not only did Kinzer blame



Mossadegh's fall for the Islamic Revolution, he wrote that "From the seething streets of Tehran and the other Islamic capitals to the scenes of terror attacks around the world, Operation Ajax has left a haunting and terrible legacy." His book is a warning against the U.S. projecting power—fair enough—but not satisfied with blaming the September 11 attacks on the Mossadegh action, his reissued 2018 edition contains a new and unhinged preface titled "The Folly of Attacking Iran." In it, he slays vast legions of straw men, such as "the idea of attacking Iran and seeking to decapitate its regime," which, he judiciously informs us, is "dangerous."

I served in two of the most hawkishly anti-Iran administrations, Bush 43 and Trump, and while we heard out a foreign ally or two talk about hitting Iran's nuclear program, no one spoke of anything more than that, and in fact no U.S. president, as we have seen, has ever agreed with those foreign allies, or done more than a single targeted attack against an internationally sanctioned Iranian terrorist.

In a similar but also unhinged and infinitely more turgid work, *Going to Tehran*, the team of Flynt and Hillary Leverett castigate Washington for overthrowing the democratically elected prime minister. The entire book makes the case for the U.S. to fold to the ayatollahs and for the U.S. president actually to go to Tehran, something the Tehran regime would never dream of allowing. Leverett is a former CIA analyst who has been wandering toward Code Pink territory for years now.

Obama repeats the "democratically elected" canard more than once in his memoir *A Promised Land*, unsurprisingly from the leader who would use the feckless John Kerry to negotiate the weak JCPOA and seek a legacy of accommodation with the regime. Those who recall Obama's speech to the Muslim world in Cairo will remember that he not only mentioned Mossadegh but used Kinzerian wording.

Also unsurprisingly, Princeton University's unsavory Hossein Mousavian, who served as Iran's ambassador to Berlin during the Mykonos Café massacre

of dissidents, wrote in his *Iran and the United States* (in which he denies that Tehran ordered the Mykonos killings or the Khobar Towers bombing), "the 1953 coup that toppled Iran's first democratically elected government." His whole book pleads the wounded innocence of the Islamic Republic.

Dabashi, unsurprisingly, lines up with Mousavaian on Mossadegh, with the difference that he opposes the Islamic regime, though he shares the mullahs' hatred for Israel. He outdoes Kinzer in alarmism, lobbing brickbats not only at "warmongers" but at "native informers, imperial strategists"—Azar Nafisi and Ken Pollack—Bernard Lewis, and "self-loathing Oriental" Fouad Ajami. (He also thinks Salman Rushdie is Pakistani.)

Even innocuous books by writers with no apparent agenda repeat the error. Akbar Ganji, Mark Bowden, and Scott Peterson have all done it. I have a gripe with the monumental *Cambridge History of Iran*, whose chapter "The Pahlavi Autocracy" by Gavin R.G. Hambly tells us that "Iranians have never had the slightest doubt that the C.I.A. ... organized the conspirators and paid the pro-Shah mobs ... By 1982 this tenacious rumor had been fully confirmed and is now incontrovertible." Hambly footnotes Roosevelt's book, seeming to take its contents at face value.

For neutrality, readers must turn to the relatively obscure work of Diari-oush Bayandor—fittingly, a resident of Switzerland—who possesses the most impartial moral sense among all Mossadegh historians. In his fastidiously sourced *Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mossadegh Revisited* (2010), he delivers the verdict, that while "It is fair to conclude that even if the Shah's dismissal order was not *stricto sensu* unconstitutional ... it was a feature of a foreign scheme to bring about a change of government" and thus was of questionable legitimacy.

However harsh that is—and it is distinctly harsh, considering that at no time did the shah ever breach the laws of his country, while Mossadegh did promiscuously, and unapologetically—facts remain: Mossadegh was not democratically elected. He was not a democrat. He

was not overthrown by the CIA, but by domestic forces he had repeatedly manipulated or misunderstood, and who welcomed a foreign hand of unmeasurable and uneven utility.

The controversy lives on in late prime minister's story as told on stage and screen. The film *Mossadegh*, directed by Roozbeh Dadvand, recounts the man's final days in under 30 beautifully shot minutes, but the opening title cards contain the jarring untruth that Mossadegh was "overthrown from power by U.S. and British forces." Reza Allameh-zadeh's moving play *Mossadegh* concluded with his trial. When the military prosecutor tried to shame Mossadegh for his foreign minister's having proclaimed that Iran no longer wanted a king (by then His Majesty had fled Tehran), Mossadegh brought the audience to its feet with the taunt, "And *where was* this king for anyone to want or not want him?"

Sentimentality toward Mossadegh is understandable. His nationalization project boosted the morale of a proud and often-humiliated country. He did seek a system with a weaker king, although more to gain power for himself than to pass it on to the people. He undoubtedly won hearts and minds with small acts of integrity like making his aristocratic mother pay her back taxes. Even more endearing is the incident when his daughter reported to him an altercation with a policeman who didn't buy her "Do you know who I am?" defense. She demanded her father act, and he did—rewarding the cop with a promotion for his honesty. But character is fate. The prime minister had a deep strain of decency, but was an inept visionary who overplayed his hand. ■

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## HOLIDAYS



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# The Lower East Side Madam

'Mother' Rosie Hertz ran a network of brothels in the early 1900s and spent years paying off corrupt cops—until she finally ended up behind bars

BY ALLAN LEVINE

*Chronicled and mythologized in scholarly and popular history books, novels, films, and plays, New York's Lower East Side in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was overcrowded, and teeming with peddlers, tailors, sweatshops, and barely livable tenement houses. By 1910, an estimated 540,000 Jews resided within the neighborhood's 1.5 square miles. The poverty, hardships, and daily struggle to survive drove some Jewish immigrants to seek other ways to make a living, even get rich. Hence, the Lower East Side also had a vast collection of crooks, pimps, prostitutes, thieves, pickpockets, gangsters, fraudsters, forgers, arsonists, and hoodlums. Offered here and in future articles are portraits of some of these nefarious characters, who also left their mark on the Lower East Side's historical legacy.*

**M**other” Rosie Hertz could have been mistaken for just another Yiddishe mama of the Lower East Side—albeit one who favored expensive jewelry, fancy lace, and fine furs. In 1912, she was in her mid-50s. At 5-foot-4, she was short, but not yet rounded like other women of her age. She preferred wearing a big white apron over her dress and like any doting Jewish mother she often pinched the cheek of any young woman or man she was speaking with. She always had pennies for the eager children who roamed the streets of the congested East Side.

Behind this façade, however, was a sharp and cunning businesswoman, who for close to three decades was

the most notorious madam in New York City. Judge Joseph E. Corrigan described her in 1912 as a “kind of godmother for the prostitutes of the East Side, whose shop for disorderly women was as much a public feature of the Lower East Side district as the Brooklyn Bridge.”

Along with her husband, Jacob, or Jake, who, at 65 years old in 1912, was short and bald with a moustache; her two brothers, Dave and Max Rosenbach; a couple of cousins; and other clerks, procurers, and watchmen, she oversaw at the height of her notoriety, from the late 1880s to 1913 or so, at least nine brothels—disorderly houses or “resorts,” in the parlance of the day. They were all located in or near the Lower East Side; in 1913, it was reported that there were approximately 420 brothels in the neighborhood. Hertz employed dozens of mostly Jewish prostitutes in a criminal enterprise that had by 1912 made her and Jake close to \$1 million (about \$30 million today). “It is better to stay away from Allen, Chrystie, and Forsythe streets,” the Yiddish newspaper the *Forverts* (*Forward*) advised its readers in 1898. “There is an official flesh trade in the Jewish quarter. In the

windows you can see human flesh instead of shoes.”

As the undisputed “Queen of the Harlots,” and one of the chief sellers in this “flesh trade,” Rosie held court from her home on Keap Street in Brooklyn, which she and Jake owned. In February 1913, *The New York Times* described her operation like this: “Every Saturday afternoon Mrs. Hertz would dress herself in the brightest colors of silk and laces, place jewels upon her head and around her neck, fill her fingers with diamonds, and then sit in a large chair placed on dais in the parlor of her Keap Street home. At a certain hour the eight women who managed the disorderly resorts for her would call and remain huddled in a little ante room until she gave the word, and then they would go before her one at a time. They would have to partly prostrate themselves when they reached the dais and hand to her their books, and all the money they had taken in enclosed in chamois skin bags. Mrs. Hertz would count the money, go over the accounts, and administer words of praise or blame as the occasion seem to warrant. Business over, tea would be served, and while the social function was going on Mrs. Hertz would give little lectures about how to succeed in business and by what trials of strength and endurance she had built up her business.”

The story Rosie related to her “management team” began with her immigration to New York City from Hungary in 1882 when she was almost 30 years old. She was most likely already married to Jake, who preceded her to the U.S. by several years. Her mother, Gittel Rosenbach, had also immigrated from Hungary by then. According to the resourceful Abe Shoenfeld—who in 1912 at the age of 21 was hired by Rabbi Judah Magnes, then the head of the recently established New York City Kehilla, the Jewish community’s central organization, to be the chief investigator of its Bureau of Social Morals with the aim of monitoring rising local Jewish crime, and prostitution in particular—Gittel Rosenbach may well have been the first Jewish madam in the city.

Rosie followed her mother into the family business and worked as a

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traveling prostitute, going “from one coal cellar to another—from one shoe-making basement to another and thus making money,” Shoenfeld recounted in a report. By 1885, she had opened her first brothel in a small apartment and faced her first of many arrests for “keeping a bawdy house.” But the charges, as with many that followed, for her, Jake, and other members of her family, were dismissed. And her business continued to expand.

Jake, too, attracted unwanted attention from the police, district attorney’s office, and civic reformers intent on ridding New York of this “social evil.” In October 1901, an official with the Committee of Fifteen, a New York citizens group that targeted prostitution and gambling—one of the committee’s major supporters was the Jewish financier and community leader Jacob Schiff—castigated Jake Hertz, as “the most notorious vender in this class of crime in the city ... He is head of the ‘Red Light District Trust.’” (This probably refers to the Independent Benevolent Association, a burial and mutual aid society created in 1896 mistakenly suspected of being a Lower East Side “vice trust” of brothel owners, pimps, and everyone else involved in this enterprise.) Jake was said to be “pretentious and aspired to social standing, keeping carriages, a coachman and two liveried footmen.” He was arrested in late October 1901; the case vanished after an initial court hearing.

How did the Hertzes evade justice for so many years? Rosie befriended Democratic and Republican organizations and made generous donations to both annually. In 1904, William Gaynor, a friendly judge and liberal reformer when it came to constitutional legal rights (he was later the mayor of New York City from 1910 to 1913), granted a permanent injunction against the police standing in front of the Hertzes’ brothel at the Dry

“Over more than 20 years, Rosie had no choice but to regularly hand over thousands of dollars to police inspectors, captains, and patrolmen ‘on the take.’”

Dock Hotel at Bowery and Third Street and intimidating customers. This action outraged more conservative judges and magistrates, like Corrigan.

If the police were bothering Rosie and her various businesses, it was not because of the moral implications of what she was doing, but rather because they were not satisfied with the amount of the so-called “protection” fees she offered them. Rosie and nearly every other madam in New York benefited, legally at least, from widespread police and political corruption. Despite major investigations into the sordid inner workings of the police and the Tammany political (Democratic Party) machine in the 1890s and early 1900s—most notably by the Lexow Committee of 1894-95, led by New York state Sen. Clarence Lexow—the payoffs continued unabated. Over more than 20 years, Rosie had no choice but to regularly hand over thousands of dollars to police inspectors, captains, and patrolmen “on the take.” Often the funds were transferred via Tammany ward heelers, who worked for political bosses, who in turn were in cahoots with the police. It was simply the cost of doing business.

In 1913, the reform-minded Manhattan District Attorney Charles Whitman (who was elected as governor of New York in 1914 and served a four-year

term) estimated that Rosie, at one point, was doling out as much as \$2,400 a month (about \$72,000 today) in graft. Thus, during this period, the police, “far from protecting the city from vice, were rather actively engaged in aiding and abetting the very conditions which they were obliged to protect,” Willoughby Cyrus Waterman pointed out in his 1932 study of prostitution in New York City. Nonetheless, it was a dangerous game. The police often reneged on assisting Rosie or one of her associates beat an arrest and a few nastier cops she dealt with over the years kept on upping their demands and became violent with her if she did not comply. She eventually paid them what they wanted.

Rosie was no saint or victim however—far from it. While many of the Jewish women she employed willingly chose to work as prostitutes and accept the reprobation of their families and community because it paid so much more than working in a sweatshop—\$4 or \$6 a week in a garment factory or doing piecework versus \$12 to \$15 (or more) a week “entertaining” male clients at a disorderly resort—some did not. (It should be added, as historian Edward Bristow notes, that in 1909 a Lower East Side physician “asserted that 80% of the prostitutes in New York suffered from venereal disease.”)

“White slavery,” which received much attention by politicians, social reformers, and the press in the first decade of the 20th century, may be now regarded as something of a moral panic, yet it did exist. And while Jews might not have been at the center of it, as the muckraking journalist George Kibbe Turner claimed in his sensational 1909 *McClure’s Magazine* article, “The Daughters of the Poor,” many Jews were indeed involved. Young Jewish women in Russia and Eastern Europe were conned by Jewish men into bogus marriages and brought to New York (or Buenos Aires and other locales), sweet-talked by Jewish cadets (pimps) on the lookout for single girls arriving at Ellis Island, seduced at dance halls by Jewish swindlers, and even kidnapped and then literally sold to an East Side brothel. It was brutal human trafficking that drove some of these young women to suicide

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by ingesting carbolic acid. And Rosie, whether she admitted it or not, sustained it, or at the very least, was willfully blind to the abuse happening in the commercial enterprise she cultivated for much of her life.

In one case, as Abe Shoenfeld reported, a young girl was ensnared by a pimp at an East Side dance hall. She was taken to one of Hertz's brothels "where she was ruined and left as a prostitute." Like other members of the Jewish community, Shoenfeld regarded Rosie and her family with disdain. "The operations of Jake and Rosie Hertz and family have been such that due to them firesides have crumbled—hearts have been broken—virginity has been polluted—virtue has been contaminated—and the very East-side [sic] was leperously [sic] disgraced by the Hertz activities," he wrote. "Rosie Hertz has been the teacher and mother of more prostitutes, whore madams, etc. than any other individual woman in the world. They would bring recruits to Rosie and she would show them the way. She would open up avenues of vice to the minds of innocent girls, and she would act motherly to these girls—and when I say motherly, I mean that she would relieve them of as much of their earnings as she could."

Her luck ran out early in 1913. On Feb. 3, Rosie was convicted of operating a disorderly house at 218 East Ninth Street and incarcerated at the Tombs jail in Manhattan. A few weeks later, she received a one-year sentence to be served at the penitentiary on Blackwell's Island (now Roosevelt Island). "Your name has long been notorious in connection with [prostitution]," stated Justice Cornelius Collins. "Only God knows the number of your victims."

There was, however, a ray of hope for her. In the aftermath of the murder of Herman ("Beansie") Rosenthal, a Jewish bookie and gambler, in mid-July 1912, DA Whitman wanted to get to the bottom of police corruption.

**"Rosie Hertz has been the teacher and mother of more prostitutes, whore madams, etc. than any other individual woman in the world."**

(Rosenthal's killing was allegedly ordered by New York Police Department Lieutenant Charles Becker, who was subsequently convicted and executed in July 1915. While Becker had been extorting brothel owners and illegal gambling operators like Rosenthal—who, tired of paying graft, had exposed Becker's actions in an affidavit published in the New York newspaper *The World* and threatened to tell Whitman about it—questions have been raised about his guilt in the assassination plot.) Whitman offered a possible deal to Rosie, but first she had to confess to everything she knew about payoffs to the police. Her immediate response to this proposal was a definite "no." She claimed she had been threatened at the Tombs and said she "would be cut into little bits before she would tell anything."

It was later learned that following her arrest, she had paid Jacob Reich, alias Jack Sullivan, a Jewish fixer and bodyguard—who was initially implicated in the Rosenthal murder though

later released by the authorities—more than \$12,000 after he promised he could "deliver" an assistant district attorney who would see to it that the charges against her were dropped. She soon realized that neither Sullivan nor her so-called friends in the police department and the district attorney's office were going to save her. On March 10, she met with Whitman for two hours and told him about paying graft to a long list of crooked cops and politicians for decades. When her meeting with Whitman ended and she was being led back to her cell at the Tombs, she began weeping and believed that her life was in danger because she had spoken to the DA. No one touched her and Whitman never came through with a deal to lessen her sentence. She lost her appeal in April and in early July she was transferred from the Tombs to Blackwell's Island. "Woman White Slaver Goes to Jail," *The New York Times* headline on July 6 declared.

Thereafter, Rosie Hertz more or less vanished from the public record. She presumably served most or all of the 12 months of her prison sentence. Then, she resumed her career as a madam. On Oct. 12, 1916, in one of the last newspaper articles to mention her, she appeared in women's night court on a charge of running a disorderly house on Broadway and released on bail.

Jewish participation in prostitution in New York City, at least, began to wane by the early 1920s. According to Bristow, by 1924 only 11% of the women arraigned on sex-related crimes in New York City were Jewish. No doubt, there were Jewish madams still operating brothels in the Lower East Side into the 1930s, but Rosie Hertz, who would have been close to 80 years old if she was still alive by then, had likely retired before that. ■

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# 'In the Basement,' a Short Story by Isaac Babel

A new English translation

BY MAXIM D. SHRAYER

**I**n my boyhood, I was prone to lying. This resulted from reading. My imagination was always inflamed. I read during lessons, on breaks, on the way home, at night—under the table, disguising myself behind a drooping table cloth. Over the book, I missed out on all the affairs of this world. I didn't ditch lessons and run off to the seaport, or observe the start of the billiards game in the coffee houses of Greek Street, or go swimming at Langeron beach. I had no companions. Who would care to associate with such a person?...

Once, in the hands of our top student, Mark Borgman, I saw a book about about Spinoza. He'd just finished reading it and couldn't resist telling the boys who surrounded him about the Spanish Inquisition. It was all educated mumble, what he was saying. There was no poetry in Borgman's words. I couldn't help butting in. I told those who were willing to listen about old Amsterdam, dusk over the ghetto, and also about the philosophers—the polishers of diamonds. I added much to what I'd read in books; I just couldn't do without embellishment. My imagination enhanced the dramatic scenes, rearranged the endings, tied the beginnings into knots of mystery. In my imagination, Spinoza's death, his free, lonely death, appeared as a battle. The syndrion tried to coerce the dying Spinoza into repenting, but he didn't give in. I also managed to weave Rubens into this fabrication. I imagined that

Rubens stood at the head of Spinoza's bed and executed his death mask.

Mouths agape, my classmates listened to this fantastical tale. I told it with a great deal of feeling. The bell rang, and we reluctantly scattered to our classrooms. At the next break, Borgman came up to me, threaded his arm through mine, and we started strolling together. Very soon we discovered lots to talk about. Borgman didn't embody the vile variety of the top student. To his powerful brain, the scholastic wisdom of what we were taught was but chicken scratch in the margins of the real book. He thirstily sought after that book. Twelve-year-old halfwits, we knew already that Borgman was cut out for a life of learning, an extraordinary life. He actually never studied, but only listened to the lessons. This sober and reserved boy became attached to me because of my knack for transposing all things in the world, even things so simple that they just couldn't be made up.

That year we had finished sixth grade. My grade sheet was piled up with C-minuses. With all my gibberish I was so strange that the teachers, after some reflection, couldn't find it in themselves to give me Ds. At the start of the summer, Borgman invited me to his villa. His father was the director of the Russian Bank for Foreign Trade. He was one of the people who were making Odessa into a Marseille or a Naples. With his vintage of a classic Odessan merchant, he belonged to the set of skeptical and courteous bon vivants. Borgman's father avoided the use of the Russian language;

he employed the rough-hewn, choppy language of the sea captains from Liverpool. When in April the Italian opera came to town, a dinner for the troupe was held at the Borgmans' apartment. The bloated banker—this last of the grand Odessan merchants—got himself embroiled in a little affair of the heart with a chesty prima donna. She carried back memories that didn't burden her conscience and a collar necklace that was chosen with taste yet didn't cost too much.

The old man was engaged as the Argentinian consul and the president of the stock exchange committee. And I was now invited to visit his home. My aunt—her name was Bobka—had made sure our entire courtyard heard about it. She dressed me up the best she could. I took the steam tram to the 16th station of the Big Fountain. The villa stood atop a small red cliff by the shore. On the cliff there was also a cultivated garden with fuchsia and manicured balls of eastern arborvitae.

I came from a penniless and senseless family. The atmosphere of the Borgman villa affected me deeply. In the alleys, concealed by verdure, wicker armchairs showed white. The dinner table was covered in with flowers, the windows adorned with green shutters. A wooden colonnade, spacious and not too tall, stood in front of the house.

In the evening, the bank director arrived. After dinner he placed a wicker armchair by the edge of the cliff, facing the seething plain of the sea, put up his legs clad in white trousers, lit a cigar, and started reading *The Manchester Guardian*. The guests, Odessan ladies, played poker on the veranda. A samovar with ebony handles puffed in the corner of the table.

Card sharks and gourmands, untidy fashion plates and secret adulteresses with perfumed lingerie and pear-shaped bodies, these women flopped their black fans and bet five-ruble gold coins. Pushing through the fence of wild grapes, the sun clung to them. Its fiery nimbus was immense. Copper reflections weighed down the women's black hair. Sparks of the sunset pierced their diamonds—the diamonds that were nestled everywhere: in the clefts of their outpouring



breasts, in their touched-up ears, in their blueish, distended matronly fingers.

The evening came. A bat rustled by. The sea, turning blacker, rolled over the red cliff. My 12-year-old heart puffed up from the joy and lightness of other people's wealth. Holding hands, my friend and I sauntered in a distant alley. Borgman told me he was going to be an aviation engineer. It was rumored that his father was to be sent to London as the envoy of the Russian Bank for Foreign Trade, and Mark would get an education in England.

In our house, the house of Aunt Bobka, no one talked about such things. I had nothing with which to repay Mark for all that unending splendor. It was then I told him, that even though things were very different in our house, both my grandfather Levi-Yitzchok and my uncle had circled the whole world and experienced thousands of adventures. I described those adventures in order. The sense of the impossible instantly deserted me, and I led Uncle Wolf through the Russo-Turkish War—all the way to Alexandria, to Egypt ...

The night straightened the backs of poplars; the stars leaned heavily on bending branches. I spoke as I flailed my arms. The fingers of the future aviation engineer fluttered in my hand. With difficulty he awakened from the hallucinations, and then he promised to visit me the following Sunday. Having secured this promise, I took the little steam tram back home to Bobka.

For the whole week that followed I had visions of myself as a bank director. I transacted millions with Singapore and Port Said. I acquired a yacht and traveled in it all by myself. On Saturday it was time to awaken. The following day little Borgman was coming over for a visit. None of what I had told him ever existed. And that which existed was so much more wondrous than what I had made up, but at the age of 12 I had no idea what to do with the truth in this world. To our neighbors and local street urchins, Grandfather Levi-Yitzchok, a rabbi who had been expelled from his shtetl because he had forged the signature of Count Branicki on IOUs, was a madman. And I couldn't stand Uncle Simon-Wolf for his shenanigans

chock-full of pointless fire, screaming, and abuse. Only with Bobka could I get along. Bobka was very proud that the son of a bank director was friendly with me. She regarded this acquaintance as the start of a career and baked a strudel with jam and a poppy seed cake for our guest. The whole heart of our tribe, a heart so good at powering through times of struggle, lived in those desserts. We put away Grandfather—torn top hat and rags on swollen feet—at the house of our neighbors the Apelchots, and I begged him not to show his face until the guest had already left. Things also worked out with Simon-Wolf. In the company of his horse-trading pals he went to drink tea at The Bear. In this tavern they guzzled down vodka with tea, and one could expect Simon-Wolf to stay there for a while. Here I must add that the family I come from was unlike other Jewish families. We had drunks in our lineage, and also those who seduced the daughters of generals and then abandoned them before having reached the state border, and our own grandfather forged signatures and composed blackmail commissioned by abandoned wives.

All my efforts went into deflecting Simon-Wolf for the entire day. I gave him three rubles I had saved. To spend three rubles ... this takes some time, and so Simon-Wolf wouldn't be back until late, and the son of the bank director would never know that the tale about my uncle's kindness and prowess was full of lies. To be very honest, if I only thought with my heart, it was actually all true and not a lie, yet at the first glance at the dirty and loud Simon-Wolf, one just couldn't figure out this incomprehensible truth.

On Sunday morning Bobka put on her brown satin dress. Her fat, benevolent breasts were hanging all over the place. She put on a headscarf with black incised flowers, of the sort they wear to synagogue on Atonement Day and Rosh Hashanah. Bobka set the table with the cakes, jam, and pretzels and started waiting. We lived in the basement. Borgman raised his eyebrows as he traipsed on the corridor's hunchbacked floor. In the entryway, there was a wooden tub with water. As soon as Borgman came in, I bombarded him with a display of

all sorts of curious objects. There was an alarm clock Grandfather had made by hand, down to its last little screw. Attached to the alarm clock was a lamp; when the alarm clock counted off the half hour or the hour, the lamp light came on. I also demonstrated a little vat with blacking. The formula for the blacking was Levi-Yitzchok's invention, and he didn't reveal it to anybody. Later Borgman and I read a few pages from Grandfather's manuscript. He wrote in Jewish, on yellow square sheets each the size of a geographical map. The manuscript was called *A Man Without a Head*. Described in it were all of Levi-Yitzchok's neighbors from the 70 years of his life—first in Skver and Belaya Tserkov, then in Odessa. Coffin makers, cantors, Jewish drunks, women who cooked for bris ceremonies and fraudsters who performed the ritual circumcision—all of them were among Levi-Yitzchok's heroes. They were cantankerous folks, tongue-tied, with bulbous noses, pimples on the crowns of their heads, and slanted behinds.

As we were reading, Bobka made her appearance in the brown dress. Padded on all sides with her fat, benevolent breasts, she sailed in with a samovar on the tray. I introduced them. Bobka said: "Nice to meet you," extended her perspiring, immobile fingers and clicked both her heels. Everything was going well, exceptionally well. The Apelchots weren't releasing Grandfather. One by one, I hauled out his treasures: grammars of all sorts of languages and 66 volumes of the Talmud. The vat of blacking, the miraculous alarm clock, and the mountain of Talmud dazzled Mark; one couldn't have seen all of these things in any other home.

Each of us drank two glasses of tea with the strudel, and Bobka, nodding her head, disappeared. Overcome by an elation of spirit, I struck a pose and began to recite the stanzas I loved more than anything in the world. Anthony, bowing before Caesar's corpse, addresses the people of Rome:

Friends, Romans, countrymen,  
lend me your ears;  
I come to bury Caesar, not to  
praise him.

The evil that men do lives  
after them;  
The good is oft interred with  
their bones;  
So let it be with Caesar.

Thus Anthony begins his game. I  
lost my breath and pressed my arms to  
my chest.

Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.  
He was my friend, faithful and just  
to me:

But Brutus says he was ambitious;  
And Brutus is an honourable man.  
He hath brought many captives  
home to Rome  
Whose ransoms did the general  
coffers fill:  
Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?  
When that the poor have cried,  
Caesar hath wept:  
Ambition should be made of  
sterner stuff:  
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;  
And Brutus is an honourable man ...

Before my eyes—amid the smoke of  
the universe—hovered the face of Bru-  
tus. It became whiter than chalk. Brood-  
ing, the people of Rome charged at me.  
I raised my arm—Borgman's pliant eyes  
followed it—my clenched fist trembled  
... I raised my arm and saw in the win-  
dow that Uncle Simon-Wolf was tra-  
versing the courtyard in the company of  
the trader Lekach. They were dragging a  
coat hanger made of deer antlers and a  
redwood trunk chest with padlocks that  
looked like lion heads. Bobka also saw  
them through the window. Forgetting  
all about our guest, she flew into the  
room and grabbed me with her shak-  
ing hands.

"O dear heart, he bought furniture  
again ..."

Borgman, dressed in his neat school  
uniform, jumped up in his chair and  
bowed to Bobka in bewilderment.

They were noisily opening the door.  
The roar of jackboots and the rumble of  
the trunk chest resounded through the  
corridor. The voices of Simon-Wolf and  
red-headed Lekach drowned out every-  
thing. Both of them were merrily under  
the influence.

"Bobka," screamed Simon-Wolf.

"Try to guess how much I paid for  
these antlers?"

He screamed like a giant trumpet,  
and yet there was fragility in his voice.  
Drunk though he was, Simon-Wolf  
knew how much we hated red-headed  
Lekach, who incited him to all sorts of  
purchases and deluged us with needless,  
purposeless furniture.

Bobka was silent. Lekach squeaked  
something to Simon-Wolf. To mute his  
snakelike hissing, I now screamed in the  
words of Anthony:

But yesterday the word of  
Caesar might  
Have stood against the world;  
now lies he there.  
And none so poor to do  
him reverence.  
O masters, if I were disposed to stir  
Your hearts and minds to mutiny  
and rage,  
I should do Brutus wrong, and  
Cassius wrong,  
Who, you all know, are honourable  
men ...

At this point we heard a thud. That  
was Bobka who fell, knocked off her  
feet by her husband. She probably  
made some kind of a bitter comment  
about the deer antlers. The daily per-  
formance began. Simon-Wolf's copper  
voice was plugging up all the crevices  
of the universe.

"All of you here pull glue out of me,"  
my uncle thundered. "You pull glue out  
of me to stuff your dog mouths shut ...  
Work has beat the soul out of me. I have  
nothing to work with, I have no hands, I  
have no legs ... You've put a stone around  
my neck, a stone hangs on my neck ..."

Cursing me and Bobka with Jewish  
curses, he promised us that our eyes  
would leak out, that still inside the ma-  
ternal womb our children would start  
to rot and decompose, that we would  
be racing to bury one another and they  
would drag us by the hair into a pau-  
per's grave.

Little Borgman got up from his seat.  
He was pale and kept turning around.  
He couldn't comprehend the twists and  
turns of the Jewish blasphemies, nor  
was he acquainted with the *mat* of the  
Russian obscenities, which Simon-Wolf

wasn't too squeamish to use. The son of  
the bank director mashed his little peak-  
ed cap. He kept doubling in my eyes, and  
I ventured to scream louder than all the  
evil in the world. My near-death despair  
and the carried-out murder of Caesar  
have merged into one. I was dead, and I  
screamed. Wheezing ascended from the  
very bottom of my being:

If you have tears, prepare to shed  
them now.

You all do know this mantle:

I remember  
The first time ever Caesar put it on;  
'Twas on a summer's evening, in  
his tent,  
That day he overcame the Nervii:  
Look, in this place ran Cassius'  
dagger through:  
See what a rent the envious  
Casca made:  
Through this the well-beloved  
Brutus stabb'd;  
And as he pluck'd his cursed  
steel away,  
Mark how the blood of Caesar  
follow'd it,  
As rushing out of doors ...

Yet nothing in the world could  
drown out Simon-Wolf. Sitting on  
the floor, Bobka kept whimpering  
and blowing out her nose. Behind  
the partition, unperturbed, Lekach  
kept moving the chest trunk. At this  
point, my madcap grandfather decid-  
ed to come to my rescue. He released  
himself from the *Apelchots*, crawled  
up to the window and started sawing  
on the violin, perhaps so the passersby  
wouldn't be able to hear Simon-Wolf's  
swearing. Turning his gaze to the win-  
dow that was cut out at the ground  
level, Borgman retreated in horror.  
My poor grandfather's blue ossified  
mouth made grimaces. He was clad in a  
bent-up top hat, a black cotton mantle  
with shell buttons, and ragged cuff-off  
boots on his elephant feet. His tobac-  
co-stained beard hung in shreds, flut-  
tering in the wind. Mark was making  
his escape. "That's nothing," he mut-  
tered, breaking free, "nothing at all..."  
His neat little uniform and peaked cap  
with a folded-up brim flashed across  
the courtyard.

My anxiety subsided after Mark's departure. I was waiting for the evening to come. After Grandfather, having filled an entire square sheet with the Jewish hooklets (he described the Apelchots, with whom he had spent the entire day), stretched out on his cot and fell asleep, I emerged into the corridor. The floor was earthen. I moved in the darkness, barefoot, in a long and patched-up night shirt. Through the chinks in the boards, cobblestones flickered with pointy flares of light. As usual, a wooden tub of water stood in the corner. I lowered myself into it. The water cut me in half. I submerged my head, choked, popped up. From the shelf above, a cat looked at me with sleepy eyes. The second time I was able to stay longer; the water squelched

around me, my moans disappearing into it. I opened my eyes, and at the bottom of the tub I saw the sail of my long night shirt and my legs pressed tight to one another. Again I ran out of strength and popped up. Beside the tub stood my grandfather in a robe. His only tooth vibrated.

"Grandson mine," he articulated his words with contempt and clarity. "I'm going to take castor oil, so I would have something to bring to your grave ..."

I screamed with abandon and threw myself into the water. Grandfather's feeble hand pulled me out. It was then I cried for the first time since the start of the day, and the world of tears was so immense and beautiful that everything except the tears disappeared from my eyes.

I came to already in bed, wrapped in blankets. Grandfather paced the room and whistled. Fat Bobka warmed my hands on her chest.

"How he trembles, our little fool," Bobka said. "And where does the child find the strength to tremble so? ..."

Grandfather tugged on his beard, whistled and continued shuffling. Behind the wall, Simon-Wolf snored, exhaling up a torment. After fighting his fill during the day, he never woke up during the night. ■ (1929)

*Translated from the Russian by Maxim D. Shroyer.*

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FOOD

# The Flavors of Netivot

Once an absorption center for North African immigrants, this city in southern Israel has developed a culinary scene that draws on its past, but with the occasional new twist

BY DANA KESSLER

**A** one-hour drive to the south from Tel Aviv brings you to another world. The southern Israeli city of Netivot is not generally considered a tourist attraction (except for the tomb of the Baba Sali, the city's leading Moroccan rabbi and miracle worker who died in 1984 and whose grave has become a pilgrimage site for his followers). But enthusiastic recommendations on Facebook of a culinary tour held in the city sparked my curiosity, and prompted a visit: I wanted to find out more about the food of Netivot.

Originally known as Azata, Netivot was established in 1956 as a *ma'abara*—an immigrant absorption camp providing temporary housing—populated by

*olim* from Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Soon after, the name was changed to Netivot and it grew into a "development town," which was the name for new permanent settlements that popped up in the Negev in the south, as well as in the Galilee in the north, as a means to spread the population all over Israel, so it's not all in the center of the country or around Jerusalem.

Like its original settlers, Netivot's culinary profile is North African. The city's history makes it a great place to eat an authentic Tunisian brika (a deep fried, wafer-thin pastry filled with a raw egg) or a Tunisian fricassé sandwich (a fried bun filled with potato, harissa, tuna, black olives, and a hard-boiled egg), or perhaps to buy Moroccan spices. But Netivot isn't a little development

town anymore, and its culinary palate grew beyond the traditional recipes that its early settlers brought with them to Israel. In the 1990s many immigrants from Russia and Ethiopia came to Netivot and in the year 2000 it was officially declared a city. Today it is considered a metropolitan area for the northern Negev, and it is rapidly growing with the help of government funding. Nowadays Netivot's population counts more than 42,000, while 10,000 of those moved to the city in the past 10 years alone.

Our tour guide—35-year-old local entrepreneur and social activist Einav Levi—was born in Netivot to a Moroccan family. After a few years living elsewhere, she returned to Netivot. She comes from a background in film and owns a company specializing in visual media and independent films. To that she added an initiative called "I Love Netivot" in which she hosts culinary tours.

"I love my city and I feel there is a huge gap between how I view Netivot and how it is perceived in the rest of the country or how it is portrayed in the media," she told me. "People talk about Netivot as a peripheral place, of low socio-economic status with a mostly Haredi population, and it isn't like that anymore—if it ever was. I feel people view Netivot very stereotypically and

I felt that through culinary tours, I can invite people in and let them make up their own minds.”

One of the things Levi shows in her tour is that even the traditional Jewish North African cuisine that the people of Netivot grew up eating has developed and changed over time. Take, for example, popular food stand Yawaradi (a slang word meaning “wow!”), which operates every Friday in the lot where Netivot’s old market used to stand. The market moved to a new location about 20 years ago, but Yawaradi, as well as a few sporadic and changing stands, still operate in the old lot on Fridays. Yawaradi, which is packed and full of atmosphere with Mizrahi music blasting from the speakers, specializes in Moroccan-style fish in spicy red sauce served in frena bread, which is baked fresh right in front of your eyes in a portable tabun oven. But it’s no ordinary Moroccan fish and no ordinary frena bread, either.

Frena is Moroccan flat bread, reminiscent of a very fluffy pita. Usually, the frena dough is left to rise for between three and five hours, depending on the weather. But at Yawaradi they leave it to rise for 72 hours, like Neapolitan pizza dough. Inside your frena bread you can choose one out of three options—tuna fish, fish roe, or fish patties—all cooked in a Moroccan style with a twist. For instance, Yawaradi’s red sauce includes Greek Kalamata olives, and the side dishes that you can add to your frena fish sandwich are more Mediterranean than Moroccan: garlic confit and anti-pasti, for instance.

“Netivot is a city of people who know good food,” Levi told me. “Everyone grew up with ethnic home cooking. Everyone’s mother and grandmother cooked. Nowadays Netivot’s food scene has many influences from the outside. People are open and curious to new tastes, as long as it’s kosher.”

The majority of Netivot’s population is observant, with a large Sephardic Haredi population. And all of the restaurants, food stands, or eateries in Netivot are kosher. (Not all of them are certified, but all of them are kosher.) What people do in their own homes is their business, however, and even

though most of Netivot’s population is religious, they welcomed Russian and Asian supermarkets into their city—the latter opened to cater to migrant workers—even though they carry nonkosher products.

David Peretz, a journalist and musician who grew up in the south of Israel and still resides in Be’er Sheva, is a big fan of local, home-cooked cuisine. “For years I found it funny that people came to look for restaurants in Netivot,” he told me. “The best food you could find in Netivot was to knock on any door and say you’re hungry. The best food was cooked at home by the mothers and grandmothers who came as immigrants from North Africa. They brought with them recipes that were perfected and honed through the generations. The Jewish cooking in North Africa was very different to the cooking of their Arab neighbors. It was its own language. It wandered between Jewish communities throughout North Africa and in each place developed a different accent. The *olim* from North Africa were sent to development towns, so places like Netivot, Yeruham, Sderot, and Ofakim kept North African cooking traditions alive.”

The Baba Sali gazes upon patrons at a store in Netivot Dana Kessler

For years, in Netivot, this cooking remained in the homes. There was no one to sell it to because everybody had this food at home. “Generations had to pass for it to be rediscovered,” Peretz explained. “Many women of my generation abhorred the idea of staying in the kitchen like their mothers and grandmothers did. Luckily the young generation, the grandchildren, understood what they have in their hands and the fact that they can use this knowledge to make magic, as well as money. Since Netivot is a very traditional city, it retained this knowledge. Nowadays there are many stands selling this food in Netivot and it’s suddenly becoming fashionable. And rightly so. It has exaggerated tastes, it’s in your face, and it is filling and fulfilling. There are many great food stands in Netivot but they’re still not as good as what you’d find at the Shabbat table or at a wedding table.”

One of the things you would find at any of these tables is the aforementioned Moroccan frena bread, which is the most widely consumed type of bread in Netivot.

Netivot Bakery is an old-school style bakery that provides baked goods to a large part of the city’s population as well as to many of its eateries and catering businesses. It, too, had to develop from how things were traditionally done. Traditionally, frena was baked in a small mud oven, in which they were baked one by one (or two by two, tops). This was done manually: You put the frena in the oven and pull it right out. In a commercial bakery this obviously isn’t possible because you have to make thousands of frena breads a week. So, at Netivot Bakery they tweaked the recipe to be able to keep the original flavor and consistency while using an industrial-size oven and baking on a large scale.

Everybody eats frena in Netivot, and some find new uses for it. At La Frena restaurant, for instance, they serve hamburgers, schnitzels, and kebabs in frena bread. La Frena is located in the new Manhattan-Netivot neighborhood, which includes 15 new buildings and a replica of the Statue of Liberty, holding an apple with the number 15 instead of a tablet in her left hand. Local real estate magnate Oded Shriki, who had recently been in the news in a less favorable context (he was questioned in regard to tax evasion), is the man behind this as well as another international monument that has made its way to the south of Israel: Netivot’s very own replica of the Eiffel Tower. This Instagrammable structure stands proudly in the middle of Shriki’s Paris Center, a stylish open mall with Parisian chic.

These two Vegas-like monuments in Netivot are secondary in landmark status only to the tomb of the Baba Sali. And indeed, any bakery, falafel joint, and grocery store I entered during my visit to the city had at least one portrait of the Baba Sali hanging on the wall.

But the Baba Sali is the past; hamburgers in frena bread are the future. ■

*This article was originally published on March 7, 2023.*

# North African 'Brik'

With Tuna and Cilantro (Plus: Harissa)

BY JOAN NATHAN

## INGREDIENTS

### FOR THE BRIK

- 2 5-ounce cans tuna in olive oil (preferably Cento brand, which is certified kosher)**
- 2 hard-boiled eggs, diced**
- 1 cup finely chopped fresh cilantro**
- 1 small onion, finely diced (about 1/2 cup)**
- 2 tablespoons crème fraîche or sour cream**
- 1 tablespoon pine nuts**
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste**
- 1 package brik leaves cut into 5-inch squares, or 5-inch wonton wrappers**
- 1 egg, beaten**
- Peanut or vegetable oil for frying**
- Harissa or the hot sauce of your choice for dipping (I like the harissa from pereg-spices.com or see recipe below)**

### FOR THE HARISSA

- 2 ounces dried hot red chili peppers, such as tiny New Mexican or cayenne**
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more as needed**
- 8 cloves garlic, peeled**
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin**
- ½ teaspoon ground coriander**
- 1 teaspoon coarse salt, or to taste**

## PREPARATION

### TO MAKE THE BRIK

#### Step 1

Put the tuna in a mixing bowl with a little of the oil, and break it up with a fork. Fold in the hard-boiled eggs, cilantro, onion, crème fraîche or sour cream, pine nuts, and salt and freshly ground pepper. Taste and adjust seasonings.

#### Step 2

Put a teaspoon of the filling near the bottom of a wrapper. Using your finger, brush the edges of the wrapper with the beaten egg and fold over the sides to enclose the filling. Roll up the package like a jelly roll, sealing by pressing the edges together with extra egg wash if needed. Put all the turnovers on a baking sheet, and refrigerate or freeze until ready to fry.

#### Step 3

Heat at least 2 inches of oil in a wok or large sauté pan until the oil reaches about 375 degrees. Fry the brik in batches for 1 to 2 minutes on each side, or until golden. Drain on a paper towel and serve immediately, with a dab of harissa on top, or with a bowl of harissa alongside for dipping.

**Yield:** About 48 brik

### TO MAKE THE HARISSA

#### Step 1

Cut the stems from the peppers, remove half the seeds, and soak the peppers in warm water until soft; drain, and squeeze out any excess water. Grind the peppers, 1/4 cup of the olive oil, garlic, cumin, coriander, and salt in a food processor fitted with a steel blade. The consistency should be that of a thick purée, and the color bright red. Put the harissa in a jar, pour the remaining olive oil over the top, then seal and refrigerate.

#### Step 2

Let sit for a few days before using, until the harissa becomes less opaque and the flavors meld. Use sparingly—it is very hot!

**Yield:** About 1 cup