



Photo: Trump and Netanyahu meet at the White House in 2020 via Wikimedia Commons

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

An earlier version of [this article](#) appeared in *Ha'aretz* on Dec. 3 (before Assad fell)

Despite His Destructive Instincts, Trump May Not Be That Bad for the Middle East

[Paul Scham](#)

Dec 13, 2024

As an American with strong ties to Israel and its disheartened peace movement, I am of course dismayed and dejected by the election of Donald Trump to a second term as President. I am concerned about the destructive inclinations abroad, and about his negative (to say the least) effect on democracy at home.

But to my own surprise, I am beginning to think it's possible that his accession may have some positive effects on the current fraught situation in the Middle East and, [contrary to some warnings](#) by friends, there are currently various reasons for cautious optimism, at least in the short run. Let me stress that I would have much preferred if Kamala Harris had won – and I will be the first to admit I am wrong if the Middle East goes south after January 20.

Clearly, Israel's primary mission, now that there is a (seemingly successful) cease-fire in place in Lebanon, must be to bring home the survivors among the 101 hostages still held as soon as possible, and, to accomplish that, Israel must agree to leave Gaza and free a (probably large) number of Palestinian prisoners. It should move forward on

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that mission without delay, and I assume the main reason it hasn't done so, in spite of the apparent urging of the Israel Defense Forces high command, is the baneful and decisive influence of Ministers Smotrich and Ben-Gvir over the prime minister, and their credible threats to bring down the current coalition.

My prediction is that, nevertheless, Israel will agree to some sort of deal by January 20. Why? Because Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will [point out to Smotrich and Ben-Gvir](#) that there is a new sheriff in town, who has made it clear that he wants current wars over with before his inauguration, and that Israel needs to stay on his good side, something they clearly do not care about with President Biden. Trump has proclaimed there will be [ALL HELL TO PAY](#) if the hostages are not released by January 20. For that reason or not, [there seems to be optimism](#) regarding a fairly imminent cease-fire.

Since this article was originally published, the Fall of the House of Assad has changed political, diplomatic, and military calculations in ways that will be evolving and in directions no one can predict. Trump (actually predictably enough), has sternly ordered, [“DO NOT GET INVOLVED.”](#) but that is impossible, and not only because of the 900 US soldiers already on the ground in the northeast of the country, tasked primarily with forestalling a resurgence of ISIS. Immediate consequences are virtually all favorable for the US under whatever administration, including serious humiliation for Russia, Assad's patron since 2015, even if it gets to keep its naval base at Latakia; loss by Iran of the only state-member of its axis of resistance (or “ring of fire”), into which it had poured huge amounts of money, men, and materiel for support during and after the brutal Syrian civil war; isolation for Hezbollah by ending its supply route through Syria; and joy for Israel because of all of the above, besides [taking credit](#) for creating the situation giving rise to Assad's fall. There is general satisfaction at the flight of a dictator whose brutality greatly exceeded even the the norm tacitly accepted among Mideast potentates. The Trump administration will have to factor all of these into its

policy even if it seeks to retrench. Israel has already seized the buffer zone that separated its troops from the now-nonexistent Syrian army and [virtually destroyed Syrian offensive capability](#) in a coordinated series of 350 airstrikes all over Syria; the new regime has no way to respond.

American Iran expert Vali Nasr thinks the time may be ripe for an [Iran-US rapprochement](#), while the [Times of Israel](#) reports Trump is weighing options for a renewed maximum pressure campaign, as long as it can be done without plunging into war, Trump's seemingly most important criterion.

Even with regard to preventing attempts by Israel to annex the West Bank and retain Gaza there are some grounds for optimism. Of course it is concerning that Trump's first appointment was [Mike Huckabee as ambassador to Israel](#). Huckabee has no Mideast or, indeed, any international experience or expertise; he is a devout Evangelical Christian and strong supporter of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich's agenda.

Nevertheless, any annexation plans will unquestionably be strongly opposed by all Arab countries, very much including the Persian Gulf monarchies, and particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The UAE is the one Arab country with diplomatic relations with Israel that has not withdrawn its ambassador, and it has been more sparing than any other Arab government in its criticism of Israel.

Moreover, both their leaders were close to Trump in his first term (remember the sword dance!) and there is no reason to think that has changed, especially since neither went out of his way to be over-friendly to Biden. Thus, Smotrich's plans that “2025 is the year of [sovereignty in Judea and Samaria](#)” are likely to be foiled. The Saudi and UAE autocrats have no love for the Palestinians, but since October 7, they know that support for a Palestinian state is a requirement for every Arab leader, while their U.S. and Israeli counterparts, listening to the siren song of fulfillment of the Abraham Accords, are unlikely to ruin their relationship through untimely annexation.

It is indeed likely that Trump will attack and sanction the International Criminal Court over its issuance of [arrest warrants for Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Gallant](#) – and it is cold comfort that Biden has also sharply criticized the ICC's decision. There is a path for Israel to potentially get them withdrawn, but that would involve creating a full scale investigative commission, a proposition that scares Netanyahu to death, so it is highly unlikely under any government he heads. Trump, who hates any constraint on his power, especially if internationally inspired, will probably work with Israel to defy the ICC, as Harris might possibly also have done.

Finally, there is the vital issue of Netanyahu's attack on Israeli democracy, the opposition to which is likely to be revived in the streets well before the next election. This is something that Israelis alone can control. We who live abroad can and will cheer on Israeli democracy from the sidelines but even if [Democratic office-holders do likewise](#), the effects are negligible. Trump's looming presence will do the cause of democracy no good anywhere; however, Biden's loud and active support for international democracy has had very little positive effect. Israel and the rest of the world will have to do their best to endure a second Trump presidency, but it is primarily up to each individual country to maintain its own democratic institutions.

Thus, it is with mixed feelings that I conclude that the incoming Trump presidency will probably not immediately help the plans of the far right to extend Israeli control and advance its agenda, and fear of Trump's wrath may well obstruct them. The record shows that the Biden administration, with an agenda (after October 7, 2023) that supposedly focused on limiting and curtailing violence, was not particularly successful. Even its main accomplishment, the recent [Israel-Hezbollah cease-fire](#), is being partly credited by some to Trump's second coming.

God help us all.

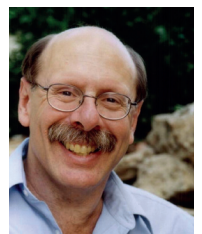
AFTERWORD

The Trump administration, and everyone else concerned about the Middle East, are being suddenly presented with an explosive issue that all of them were sure would remain quiescent for at least the immediate future. Instead, the overthrow of the brutal (even by Mideast standards) Assad family dictatorship should give rise to some joy among even the most cynical observers (namely, Israelis). Apparently it has not. As of Dec. 16, "[Israel has struck Syria more than 450 times since the collapse of the Assad government](#)" according to the reliable Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, in an effort to eliminate any possible Syrian offensive capability. It has also ("temporarily") occupied the buffer zone that has existed since 1974, as well as the Syrian side of Mt. Hermon and perhaps more. While Israel has every right to be concerned with major political changes on its border, serious unilateral violations of international law and practice now seem to have become ingrained in the current Israeli government's DNA. It is already on the road to pariah status as far as many UN states are concerned; it is very much against its own interests to go further along that highway to hell. Israel has long since shed its youthful "David" image; and Goliath doesn't get much leeway. It seems clear that most of the world is giving the victorious Hayat Tahrir al-Shams (HTS) the benefit of the doubt; Israel, as an actual neighbor, should do likewise, which means an immediate halt to both bombing and land-grabs, and a retreat in the very near future from the latter."Good fences make good neighbors," but multiple bombings definitely do not. Let's hope Israel suspends judgment on the new regime and, within reason, gives it the benefit of the doubt.

Paul

Paul

Paul Scham is President of [Partners for Progressive Israel](#) and a Professor of Israel Studies at the University of Maryland.



By Ari Chais



Photo: The Khallet a-Dabe school in Masafer Yatta in the West Bank. By Shai Kandler via Wikimedia Commons

Please note that the names of all children mentioned in this article have been replaced with pseudonyms for reasons of confidentiality.

Amir, a child I met in the Jordan Valley region, is five years old. He's strong, and very proud of that fact. He could carry my heavy backpack for me all by himself and maybe even believed me when I pretended to lose in arm-wrestling. A few days before I left the Jordan Valley, Amir was playing with a toy truck. **"It's Gill the Settler," Amir said as he moved it back and forth on the bench.** Later that day, Gill, an 18 years old settler from a nearby outpost, or *ma'achaz*, did show up on his mini-tractor, or *trucktoron*. He parked his *trucktoron* on a hill overlooking their property, just a few steps away and leaned on an Israeli flag that he or one of his friends planted a close to the Palestinian family's home to mark "their" territory.

He watched the family, arranged stones and walked around the property knowing his mere presence was enough to put the family in a state of panic. We filmed him and prepared to call the police. Meanwhile, 9-year old Zahir walked past me, chest puffed up, ready to take him on. Although I secretly admired him for his bravery, I had to chase after him and use my stern teacher's voice to tell him to go back to his family. I've been told Gill had punched him in the stomach, and when the settlers came the night before, they showed no hesitation putting their faces right in front of the women and children as they were sleeping. Gill eventually left, but we knew he would return soon.

Play is how children internalize the world around them. When Amir, on a day like any other, pretends his toy is the person who terrorizes his family on a daily basis, he is showing us that to him, Gill's violence is a normal part of life.

This normalization points to the systemic reality Amir lives in, where there is nothing to stop Gill other than activists doing protective presence, putting their own bodies on the line. In play, Amir acts out the world as he knows it. A world where the daily injustice his family experiences is in harmony with the machinations of the powers that drive it.

Amir and Zahir's family see more violence in a week than most will in a lifetime. Here's some of what I saw during my month providing protective presence:

There's physical violence: from settlers who steal, beat Palestinians and activists with sticks, throw stones, drive through herds of sheep and set properties on fire and an army that demolishes houses, arrests and tortures Palestinians without trial.

There's structural violence: Palestinians are not allowed access to water and refused building permits; checkpoints that can be closed at any moment, for any reason, are everywhere.

There is graffiti that says "death to Arabs".

There is the culture of minimization and naturalization of violence: the "responsible" settlers who, with an affectionate disapproval, called the one who set a field on fire "*shovav*" (a hooligan; like saying a child is being naughty); those who ask why don't we call the police, which they know will do nothing; those who use legalese to explain why land that this Palestinian family has lived on for generations is "state land." The kind of equivocation that's only said by people who know they can get away with saying anything.

Then there are the passive acts of erasure: road signs where the Arabic is crossed out, Palestinian properties with Israeli flags planted in them, and ponds rebranded with Israeli names (Palestinian families fear harassment if they go there).

Zahir and Amir's family have to deal with all of this every day.

It's not aimless violence. It's a deliberate campaign of erasure, enacted with the blessings and help of the government, military, and police. In the case of Palestinians in Area C, enacted via troubled youth [brainwashed by Kahanists](#) to do their biddings.

According to Israeli NGO Kerem Navot, [57 Palestinian communities](#) have been forced to flee since October 7th: 7 partially, and 50 entirely. This campaign of displacement makes Palestinians unsafe in their own homes, and creates a kind of psychological torture you see directed not only at Amir and Zahir, but within their families, too. Imagine that remaining in the land of your parents and grandparents comes at the cost of you and your children living in a state of perpetual fear. It's unbearable. If their violence is sustained for long enough, settlers hope people will leave "of their own accord" and that they can deny having had anything to do with it. They want to be able to say, by any means necessary, "see, of course we can build here, there's no one." And the ponds will have already been given Israeli names, and the Arabic will have already been crossed out of signs, and Israeli flags will have already been planted, and it will all have been *normal* and *allowed* in the eyes of the settlers' children and any new residents that join their communities afterwards. The purpose of their terror is not just ethnic cleansing, it's to manufacture a sort of amnesia that the land was ever Palestinian in the first place.

Israelis are obviously not all Kahanists. Many despise and resist Kahanist ideology. But this campaign of erasure can be seen everywhere from the river to the sea – [Kahanists are taking over the country](#). The idea that state-sponsored violence can be contained to one part of the country is an illusion. If it's somewhere, it's everywhere.

It's in a Palestinian store in Tel-Aviv adjacent Jaffa where the owner told me of his friend who expressed his grief about the reality in Gaza on Facebook, only to receive a call from Shin Bet threatening his job. (Suppression of free speech [is a common](#) occurrence

for Palestinian citizens of Israel).

It's in West Bank resident Ben-Gvir and his effort to turn the Israeli police into his own private militia. A militia which responds with violence against any of the 70% of Israeli citizens who want the war to end who protest it, even family members of hostages. A militia that is attempting to suppress the widespread belief that there is shared interest between all victims for a hostage deal and end the war and genocide in Gaza, because, as Minister of Settlements Orit Strook said, October 7th "was a miracle for settlement expansions."

It's in the movement to "resettle Gaza" which, according to fanatic politician Daniella Weiss, is modeling its action after the campaign to establish the West Bank settlement of Evyatar. While in the West Bank, I saw many pamphlets and stickers for it in bus-stops and newly rebranded "Israeli" ponds in area C. In their genocidal pursuit of "greater Israel" they have used every ounce of power they have to intensify the length and brutality of the war. [They also firmly believe they will be in Gaza this time next year.](#) Kahanist politicians are refusing to negotiate and are in the midst of implementing the "Generals Plan," which is the euphemism for the ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity currently unfolding in the north of Gaza.

This dynamic is present in Kahanists' attempts to radicalize soldiers and encourage them to commit war crimes against Palestinians. I learned on a recent tour with Breaking the Silence that Kahanists often co-opt "warm-corners," spaces for soldiers to receive free meals, which they then use to encourage violence against Palestinians. The ex-soldier tour guide told me how years ago, he was told by Kahanists at a "warm-corner" he would get free food if he had hurt a Palestinian that day.

This [startling admission](#) at the funeral of a settler and soldier is a damning example of how the racism and dehumanization in the West Bank can create war crimes in Gaza.

It's present at Israeli detention centers like Sde-Teiman, and beyond. I was told in that same Breaking the Silence tour that many of the alleged soldier-perpetrators of the horrible crimes which are being committed at the military detention center at Sde-Teiman came from Kiryat Arba, a settlement with a long history of terrorizing nearby Hebron residents and putting stones on [Baruch Goldstein's grave.](#)

It's in the media. One time, when we were providing a protective presence, Channel 14 came to document us as "radical leftists" creating problems in the West Bank. [The same channel has also called for genocide in Gaza over 50 times.](#)¹

Despite it all, Amir and Zahir's family are surviving. They shouldn't need your help- they *can* and *will* thrive if those who terrorize them stop, but even without the occupation's permission, they are surviving. I'd like to share a glimpse of the daily resilience it takes to do so:

One night, the mother of Amir and Zahir opened her phone, heard the news. She turned her phone off, sighed, and started singing "You Are My Sunshine." She watched her kids play soccer as the sun was setting on them. She didn't know whether settlers would come at night, as they did before in acts of psychological torture. But she knew she was on her own land, and that she planned to remain on it. This song, this moment, was her *surviving*. She was showing greater resilience than most people could ever understand. I've seen incredible resilience in activists too. Israeli senior citizens going

¹ It is in the genocide. Many scholars and human rights organizations have analyzed Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank against the legal definition of the word genocide. While this analysis is important, it has been my experience that if you are in the West Bank, the writing is on the wall. [Kahanists put a sign in the West Bank](#) that says "no future in Palestine"- and they mean it. The dynamics and crimes I've witnessed are a clear attempt at destroying a Palestinian future. For them to succeed, they don't need every Israeli to be a genocidal Kahanists like they are, they need an Israel that empowers them and disempowers those who try to stop them. The fact that not all Israelis are genocidal Kahanists does not mean that all Palestinians aren't endangered by their extreme actions. In a country where people, including decision makers, are freely allowed to call for their extermination both casually and from government posts, it takes hubris to disagree with Palestinians calling their experience genocide.

Reflections on Protective Presence in the West Bank

face to face with buff Kahanist teenagers on ATVs is a weekend ritual and Palestinians who, despite facing much greater risks, provide a protective presence too.

As we are fighting the long fight, we must not forget that these people are fighting to preserve Palestinian existence in Area C one day at a time.

If you would like to support them and the many Palestinians urgently facing ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, consider supporting Protective Presence through the organizations that facilitate them. Here are some of their names and contact information:

To support Zahir and Amir's family you can learn about the organization [Jordan Valley Activists](#).

There are many other organizations that do protective presence and other forms of activism in the West Bank. here is is a non-exhaustive list: [Fa3za](#), [ISM](#), [Achvat Amim](#), [Looking the Occupation in the Eyes](#), [Youth Against Settlements](#)” [“Rabbis for Human Rights](#)” and [“Combatants for Peace”](#).

The “Save Al-Makhrou” campaign is a self-initiated campaign by the Kissiya family to reclaim land that was recently stolen from them.

Finally, I am an organizer for a campaign led by Amira Musallam and Mel Duncan to bring 100 trained Unarmed Civilian Protectors to the West Bank. You can learn about our initiative [here](#).

Ari Chais is an Israeli-American musician, educator and activist. They organize regularly towards a ceasefire in Gaza and for an end to the occupation. They have recently spent a month providing a protective presence in the West Bank and volunteer at UCP for Palestine, an initiative to bring 100 unarmed civilian protectors to the West Bank. The views they express here are their own.



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For Two-Staters, Even a “Bite-Sized” Annexation Will Require a Wholesale Reappraisal

INSIGHTS

By Ron Skolnik



Photo: Approximately 5% of the solid wall constructed by Israel on the border of the West Bank. By Justin McIntosh via Wikimedia Commons

Six days after U.S. Election Day, Bezael Smotrich, the influential far-right Israeli finance minister, celebrated the victory of Donald Trump by publicly [declaring](#) 2025 to be “the year of [Israeli] sovereignty in Judea and Samaria,” the Biblical term for the Occupied West Bank. In our complex geopolitical world, there’s no certainty that Smotrich’s prophecy of annexation will be fulfilled. But his pronouncement also needs to be treated as more than idle bravado or a screwball rant that can safely be dismissed out of hand.

Not that long ago, Smotrich’s brand of Orthodox Zionism – not just expansionist, but supremacist, segregationist, and homophobic, too – kept him a junior partner in Binyamin Netanyahu’s government, a rankly illiberal figure whom the prime minister preferred to keep at arm’s length. But with his coalition options dwindling, and his corruption trials reaching a critical stage, Netanyahu embraced Smotrich and his associate, the Meir Kahane disciple Itamar Ben-Gvir, as his main allies during the

2022 election campaign.

Smotrich has long [advocated](#) for *Eretz Yisrael HaShlema*, the idea that the Jewish people holds exclusive God-given title to the “Complete Land of Israel”, from the River Jordan to the Sea Mediterranean; and that Israel’s Knesset must translate that into statute through the “application of sovereignty”, i.e. annexation. To advance that goal, Smotrich capitalized on Netanyahu’s limited alternatives during the post-election coalition bargaining season and extracted a major concession: In addition to the powerful Finance Ministry, he would also be given control of the Defense Ministry’s authority over all nonmilitary affairs (land management, planning and construction, home demolitions, trade and economy, and more) in the Occupied Territory.

For the last two years, as the de facto “Governor of the West Bank”, Smotrich has been using his expanded powers to extract IDF command from the area’s day-

to-day administration – a process he refers to as the “normalization” of Israeli rule. Now, he is [instructing](#) the Defense Ministry’s “Settlement Directorate” and the IDF’s “Civil Administration” to “prepare the necessary [bureaucratic] infrastructure” for full-blown annexation. Smotrich has indicated that he seeks to [shut down](#) these bodies so that Israeli government ministries can start to run the West Bank directly (while keeping the Palestinians there disenfranchised), just as they do within the Green Line, in Ashkelon, Beersheva, or Tel Aviv.

We should pause here to note that, while Smotrich’s goal is full Israeli sovereignty, not just over the entire West Bank, but all of [Gaza, too](#), his short-term plan is a more [limited annexation](#), taking in “only” Israel’s West Bank settlements. A believer in Divine promise, Smotrich clearly can’t abandon his “Complete Land” dream; but he is clever and experienced enough to realize that he’ll need American support to move the ball forward at all. Trump’s 2020 plan (“[Peace to Prosperity](#)”), let’s recall, involved an Israeli annexation of roughly 30 percent of the West Bank (but reportedly, [more](#) were the Palestinians to reject his so-called “Deal of the Century”). So Smotrich’s willingness not to go “whole hog” right away seems designed to avoid overstepping the good graces of the incoming president.

Smotrich, it must be pointed out, is not leading some rogue operation. His initiative is grounded in the [coalition agreement](#) itself, in which Netanyahu consented to “the formulation and implementation of policy [through which] sovereignty will be applied to Judea and Samaria”.

And the government’s very first policy guideline states that the Jewish people has an “exclusive and indisputable right to all parts of the Land of Israel.” In principle, in other words, Netanyahu is on board.

What would an annexation of settlements mean from the standpoint of land mass? That depends on what source you consult. The right-of-center “Jewish Virtual Library” claims that the “built-up settlement area is less than [two percent](#) of the disputed [sic] territories”. The Israeli human rights NGO, B’Tselem, dismisses that data point, however, [reporting](#) in 2010 that,

while technically true, “the municipal jurisdiction of the settlements and their regional councils” – i.e., the area demarcated for settlement – “cover more than 42 percent of the West Bank”. Not so, [countered](#) then-chair of the “Yesha” (Judea/Samaria/Gaza) Settlers Council, Dani Dayan: That number is really 9.2 percent. More recently, the Carnegie Endowment [reported](#) that Israel’s 199 authorized settlements and 220 supposedly unauthorized outposts take in about 201 square kilometers, “representing 3.6 percent of the total area”.

Clearly, the quantitative dimension matters in practical terms. But it is really only a secondary concern, compared to the immense challenge of principle posed by the annexation plan’s blatant unilateralism, which violates the most fundamental premise of the last three decades of on-but-mostly-off Israel-PLO diplomacy. Indeed, once the precedent has been set that Israel can annex land outside a bilateral framework, it will collapse the entire edifice of “negotiated peace”. In that sense, *any* act of unilateral annexation, even if it were just a single settlement, should be viewed as no different than if the entire West Bank was coming under Israel’s sovereignty.

(While it is true that sections of Occupied Territory were annexed by Israel in 1967 under the heading of Jerusalem reunification, that lengthily preceded Israel’s 1993 [commitment](#) to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians through a “peace process”. That process, Israel promised, would be based on “the implementation of Security Council resolutions [242](#) and [338](#)” which stressed “the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war”.)

It is incumbent on supporters of a two-state solution, therefore, not to be lulled into inaction by “just a small annexation”, should that come about. Here are some perilously soothing reassurances we’re liable to hear: “Well, it’s only the settlements, not the whole territory.” Or, “It’s only the Ma’aleh Adumim” – for example – “bloc, and that was going to be part of Israel under a deal in any event”. Or even, “well, this can always be reversed in the future”. (While outside the scope of this column, it’s important to note that Israel’s Knesset has, over the years, imposed much greater obstacles on ceding territory where the “law, jurisdiction, and

administration of the State of Israel” prevails. The Law Library of Congress provides [details](#).)

The danger, of course, is that, because the Israeli right’s overarching end goal remains unaltered, accommodating even the smallest legal change is a prescription for what might be called “*full de jure* annexation by a thousand cuts”. (By contrast, *de facto* annexation by a thousand cuts has been going on for decades.)

In response, therefore, an alternative path must be conceptualized. Rather than allow the annexationist movement to statutorily cement its gains, piece by piece, over the years to come, supporters of a two-state solution must regard even the most minute annexation as a trigger for adopting a new strategic orientation.

One theoretical path could be the idea of reaching two states through consensual partition by the Land’s populace, with both Israelis and Occupied Palestinians having voting and representational rights in such a process. This would *not*, to be clear, mean adopting the rather problematic idea of permanently packing two peoples, each seeking its own unique national self-determination, into one political unit. Nor would this involve asking the two peoples to suddenly become “post-national” in outlook and identity.

It would mean accepting, however, that, once any unilateral annexation takes place, the idea of achieving two states through the internationally accepted, Oslo-oriented, third party-brokered “land for peace” negotiating route might be irrevocably impaired.

In 2020, Israeli law professor Itamar Mann and sociology professor Yael Berda [argued](#) that, in a situation of “indeterminate occupation”, such as Israel maintains, the granting of the franchise to Palestinians under occupation is a human right, necessary for them to have “a voice in choosing the government that has effective control over them”. Holding such rights, though, would not amount to “forfeit[ing] their right to self-determination, nor the path to independent statehood” since they could be utilized to “help establish any political framework they want, including one state, two or a confederation”. (Mann

and Berda later published a more academic treatment of their idea in the [Texas Law Review](#).)

Perhaps, therefore, the proper response to partial annexation should not be “we mustn’t allow this to proceed any further”, but instead a call for the full democratization of the area under Israel’s control, from the river to the sea, so that all the people who live there can decide its future. The goal for two-staters, of course, would not be a transition into a single state, which would be unlikely to provide for both peoples’ national ambitions, nor produce outcomes of equality, balanced power-sharing, or interethnic tranquility. Instead, enfranchising all residents of the Land could serve as a transitional stage, a bridge to a “final-status” two-state arrangement – either “side by side” or in a confederative framework.

Clearly, the idea raised above sounds terribly fanciful. The same power imbalance that would enable Israeli annexation (even if piecemeal) in the first place will not quickly change; Israel will not rush to proffer any such voting rights to those under occupation. On the other hand, might it not appear even feeble and more Pollyannaish to adhere to the same-old call for the same-old process (U.S.-brokered Israeli-Palestinian talks) once Israel’s government, with American permission, had kicked the old rules to the curb?

If supporters of two states wish to avoid having their target goal look obsolete, even frivolous, in this new reality; if they wish to restore gravitas to the two-state vision, it might be necessary, once partial legal annexation gets underway, to consider a fairly radical reorientation: Acknowledging that the Oslo mindset needs to finally be put to rest, and that the search for alternate routes to the same destination must begin apace.

Ron Skolnik is an American-Israeli political columnist and public speaker, whose articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including Haaretz, Al-Monitor, Tikkun, the Forward, Jewish Currents, & the Palestine-Israel Journal.



The Jerusalem Youth Chorus: Voices of Peace in Times of War

By Micah Hendler



Dear Readers,

My name is Micah Hendler and I am the Founder and Artistic Director of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus (JYC), a choral and dialogue program for Palestinian and Israeli youth in Jerusalem.

Founded in 2012, and with nonprofit status in both Israel and the US, JYC's mission is to provide a space for these young people from East and West Jerusalem to grow together in song and dialogue. Through the co-creation of music and the sharing of stories, we empower youth in Jerusalem with the responsibility to speak and sing their truths, as they become leaders in their communities and inspire singers and listeners around the world to work for peace, justice, inclusion, and equality.

We envision a Jerusalem—and a broader Israel-

Palestine—defined not by hatred, division, and injustice, not by occupation, terror, and violence, but by acknowledgement of a shared connection to place, celebration of individual and collective belonging to that place, and systems that allow that belonging to be equally realized by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, Palestinians and Israelis alike. We reject attempts to pit Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, against one another in service of systemic violence that robs all of their agency to even imagine, let alone choose, a different way. Instead, as we create a home for all in the chorus, we seek to show what Jerusalem *could* be - and use our songs and stories, within a broad ecosystem of change, as a catalyst to bring that future about.

JYC's high school program includes kids between the ages of 13 and 18 years old who meet weekly. These music and dialogue sessions are facilitated in Hebrew and Arabic by professional music and programming staff. We often refer to these weekly sessions as a “music and dialogue sandwich”: we begin with singing as a group, which is scientifically proven to release oxytocin, our trust hormone. The singers then meet for professionally structured and translated dialogue sessions, with opportunities to gather separately across Israeli and Palestinian identities and as a full group. The sessions close with songwriting, music workshops, and rehearsals.

Our recruitment efforts begin in August and consist of bilingual promotion of the program on our various social media platforms and in e-newsletters, and through partnerships with local schools and other peace-building organizations. Because many students often do not wish to graduate from JYC, we have expanded to include an alumni program for young adults through their 20s.

The Jerusalem Youth Chorus is unique in its combination of music and dialogue programming, providing a transformative experience for our singers that yields both friendship and understanding on an individual and collective level across lines of religion, nationality, language, and culture. We go beyond simply singing together, delving deeper through dialogue into one another's identities, life experiences, communal narratives, religious traditions, and national histories, all within the safe space of the musical ensemble and the strong personal bonds and community it creates.

Our work has been even more crucial and challenging since this most recent war began over one year ago. After October 7, 2023, we thought JYC would have to cease operations, at least temporarily, and perhaps forever. How could we continue to ask that these young people continue to meet and discuss their experiences in a world that wants them to be enemies? How could we ask their families to keep sending their kids to rehearsal after they had lost friends and family members? After a unanimous vote from our singers as well as their parents, we decided to keep meeting every week without pause. We were told that JYC's music and dialogue sessions were, for many, the only space where these youth felt completely safe to have the tough conversations, and that we provide a catharsis and action steps against the fear and violence of their daily lives.

JYC has received a lot of international attention in recent months, from auditioning for [America's Got Talent](#), to giving a talk and performance at the annual [TED conference](#) in Vancouver. One of the most common questions we hear is: "is this for real? There's no way these kids from across dividing lines are actually friends." But the true beauty of our work is that they really are. Many of JYC's singers are tightly bonded and consider themselves to be as close as family. During a tour of the US in April 2024, our singers landed in Boston and turned on their phones to headlines of Iran carrying out direct

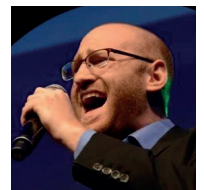
strikes against targets in Israel. The next day, two friends, one Israeli and one Palestinian, shared this at a performance:

"We were never supposed to be friends. We were always told to hate the other side and that they wanted to harm us. Yesterday was not an easy day. We felt really unsafe and our families were unsafe. Even choosing to continue to sing was a hard decision. Last night, I called my parents and I was so worried about them that I started crying. Then [my friend] came to help me, and she didn't leave my side until she saw that I was okay. I am so grateful for her, and I don't know what I would do without her."

And so we continue to sing, talk, and share our stories. We don't all share the same opinions—and we have hard conversations about them every week—but we do share the same future, no matter what the politicians say. In JYC we have a rare chance to truly hear each other, and that's what makes the chorus a home for all of us. Every kid deserves to grow up with that same safety and dignity. We know we don't have the power to single-handedly stop war, but we also know that the reason war continues is because people think there is no alternative. We **are** the alternative.

To learn more about the Jerusalem Youth Chorus, please visit our [website](#), and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter/X](#), and [YouTube](#).

Micah Hendler is the Founder and Artistic Director of the Jerusalem Youth Chorus.



By Mark Gold



Photo: An Israeli protestor blocking an intersection in Tel Aviv on "Disruption Day," July 2024. via Wikimedia Commons

The first anniversary of the October 7 assault has come and gone. What has changed in that time is that now, Israelis are fighting actively on three fronts instead of just one. For all the tactical successes, security still eludes Israel. Bibi's government has yet to articulate a program to end the war.

Yes, the Government says its war aims are to defeat Hamas and to bring home the hostages. These, however, are political slogans, not an actual program. For all the crushing blows, Hamas still fights. The IDF is currently engaged in intense combat in the north of Gaza, which the army had cleared of Hamas fighters early in the war. The IDF has no permanent control in the south either. Its forces raid various areas, shuffling Gazan refugees hither and yon with evacuation orders. To assert real control would require an occupation and Benny Gantz, the former IDF Chief of Staff and current opposition Knesset member and party leader, no longer with the government but close to army thinking, declared recently the army would need to have a presence in Gaza

for years. Military reoccupation of Gaza, however, is not politically popular.

Been there, done that. Still, Bibi's government permitted a conference to be held in a field near the wreckage of kibbutz Be'eri on the Gaza border, where Netanyahu's extreme right partners publicly planned a resettlement of Gaza. All this while the residents of the ruined communities along Israel's southern border continue to be displaced. For them, there are no concrete plans. As for the hostages, the government has prepared no conference. It still has no plan to return them home. They hold a low position, at best, in the government's muddled agenda.

To say that Hamas is an Iranian proxy is to be somewhat misleading. True, it was armed by Iran as part of a joint program of war with Israel. But Hamas has an independent agenda. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that Hamas is allied with Iran, and in its decision to wage war with Israel, it believed it would not act alone. With its attack, Hamas wanted to ignite a total

war with Israel. In that, it has not yet succeeded. But Hamas' allies have not been completely silent either. Hezbollah, the powerful Iranian-allied Shiite military force and social movement in Lebanon has been waging a low scale war with Israel since the start of the Gaza war, lobbing rockets into Israel's northern communities nearly every day. Roughly a hundred thousand Israelis have been displaced from their homes. To end this low-level war decisively, Israel launched a series of well-planned attacks, including a ground invasion. It killed Hezbollah's senior leadership and many of its mid-level commanders and occupied a small strip, several miles wide along the border, destroying tunnels and seizing weapons. At the beginning of the campaign, the IDF said it would need several weeks to bring security to Israel's northern communities. Finally a cease-fire has been concluded but very few have returned home. Southern Lebanon is a patchwork of Christian, Druze, Sunni, and Shiite communities. Forty years ago, Israel developed relationships within Christian villages during its futile occupation of Lebanon's south. In the mainly Christian village of Aitou, an Israeli air attack targeted a building housing displaced persons, killing 21. With the burning of these victims, and countless other innocent civilians, Israel has burned relationships.

It is not an accident that the violence has not abated. A cease-fire in Gaza would bring considerable political risks to Bibi and his government. While fighting continues, there will be no IDF investigation into the security failures leading to the October 7 calamity. Moreover, Bibi's extremist partners are using the war in Gaza to cover for a campaign of terror and displacement within the West Bank, and a program of political repression against critics, initially targeting Israeli-Palestinian citizens but lately expanding to include Jewish citizens as well. Bibi's extremist partners will oppose efforts to end the war. Playing for time, Bibi hopes that the fortunes of a forever war will improve personal political fortunes as well. In this, Bibi has been assisted by Hamas which, despite the incredible suffering of Gaza residents, also remains intransigent, hoping that a wider war will yet erupt, with attendant global political pressures to isolate

and weaken Israel.

Already, Hamas has achieved an important strategic goal. Sunni Arab states, upset by the Iranian program of arming Shiite proxies, until recently viewed Iran as their primary security threat and were willing to enter into security arrangements with Israel, which clearly had the military strength to counter Iran in the event of a wider war. Hamas's October 7 attack was timed to disrupt a formal security agreement, nearly completed, between Israel and neighboring Sunni states, brokered, in part, by the US. The thousands of civilian deaths in Gaza have compelled a political and strategic rethinking among the Sunni states, which have recently revived diplomatic dialogues with Iran.

War may be politics by other means but ultimately, the politics of diplomacy are required to reclaim stability from the chaos and destruction of war. The US has been working tirelessly, but so far fruitlessly, to construct a diplomatic solution to address not only an immediate end to the violence but to construct a broader program to generate stability and security. A cease fire agreement would necessarily include a return of the remaining hostages. Then the US and Israel could try to use their leverage to introduce a Sunni armed security force to curb Hamas and provide the environment in which Gaza reconstruction could begin. Reconstruction will require enormous resources which only will be mobilized within a framework of security and peace. Properly crafted, a process paved by diplomacy could create the environment in which everyone sees their interests advanced by peace and mutual security arrangements.

The alternative is a forever war. If the result of this war is just a new generation of aggrieved and angry populations, for all the tactical IDF successes, the Gaza war will have been an enormous security failure.

*Mark Gold is the
treasurer of Partners for
Progressive Israel.*



By Margo Hughes-Robinson



Photo: An empty Knesset chamber. via Wikimedia Commons

On November 21st, the International Criminal Court [announced](#) that it was issuing warrants of arrest for Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Gallant [alongside](#) a warrant for (the reportedly late) Hamas leader Mohammed Deif. The basis of the Netanyahu/Gallant warrants was highly specific, focused on the Israeli leaders' alleged limiting of humanitarian aid and basic supplies like water and electricity from reaching Gazan civilians during the war. The resultant humanitarian crisis in Gaza has led to ever-increasing civilian deaths, not only as a result of military violence, but also due to the near-famine that has plagued the entire area [for nearly a year](#).

The horrific ongoing conditions in Gaza are likely to only worsen now that Israel has [banned](#) UNRWA from operating in Gaza, the West Bank, and East

Jerusalem. While the organization has long been deeply controversial in Israeli society – and we are heartened to see the [thoughtful recommendations](#) from the United Nations' recent independent investigation of the agency – there is simply no practical replacement at present for its established and reliable infrastructure for distributing humanitarian aid.

As we continue to seek a future for Israelis and Palestinians based on human rights and equity, I meet this inflection point with grave concern. The involvement of the international community in this issue is reflective of the deep breakdowns in democratic norms in Israel, where the internal system of checks on executive power is being overridden: [Reports released last month](#), for example, confirm that Netanyahu is seeking to prevent the establishment of an independent state commission of inquiry into the events of October 7th, and thus prevent any accountability to the Israeli people, who overwhelmingly support an end to this war.

Had Israel taken the advice of its Attorney General, Gali Baharav-Miara (who Netanyahu has made it clear [he wishes to fire](#)), a few months ago, regarding beginning a formal investigation into the events of Oct. 7 and their aftermath, it would likely not be at this juncture. The ICC takes over if there is no reputable national investigation mechanism. Israel has such a mechanism – and it has worked well in the past. However, with the Prime Minister moving heaven and earth to prevent an investigation, the ICC is now involved. The arrest warrants are a stain on Israel that will remain for years, whether or not they are ever served.

Within Israel, pathways back to a functional internal

democracy remain, but will require drastic steps. Many experts on healthy democracy [indicate a number of factors](#) and national institutions that reflect a thriving government responsive to the needs of its citizens, among them a functioning rule of law, civil rights protections, free and fair elections, responsive governing bodies, robust civil society organizations and civic participation, as well as free press and media. A number of these appear to be crumbling in the wake of Netanyahu's past several years in power, even prior to October 7th. The attempted (and ongoing) [judicial coup and prolonged weakening](#) of the Israeli justice system, the [attacks on foreign news organizations](#) and Israeli [liberal media](#) outlets, and the [decade-plus erosion](#) of support for liberal NGOs leaves many of these national indicators in grave peril. For example, the new official suspension of due process for Israeli citizens of all ethnic backgrounds under the guise of "[addressing organized crime.](#)" This is a real issue, but one that many Palestinian citizens of Israel feel that National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir has actually purposely ignored or underprosecuted, putting their communities further at risk – and something that this new legislation does not actually address.

In the short term, there are immediate steps that can be taken towards restoring Israeli democracy. Some of these are bureaucratic: an actual appointment to the role of Supreme Court president, a post that the Likudnik Justice Minister Yariv Levin has neglected to fill [for a historic number of months](#); not just allowing, but supporting [internal probes into war crimes](#) in Gaza as well as [a state commission of inquiry](#) into the Israeli government's failures on and around October 7th; an end to the war with Hamas, accomplished through a bilateral ceasefire and a comprehensive hostage return deal. There are, in fact, a number of Israeli politicians [calling for these steps](#), including [seeking to directly prevent](#) the increase in police violence that Israelis citizens protesting for change have been met with on the streets of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and elsewhere.

But beyond these, a more fundamental reconsideration is required. As Hadash MK Aida Touma-Souleiman [remarked recently in the Knesset](#), it is impossible to keep one's eyes only on the day-to-day bureaucratic issues of functioning within Israel's national bodies while children are dying every day in Gaza. An effective democracy in Israel cannot coexist alongside the ongoing occupation of the West Bank, the administration for which has been moved from a military command to [a civil Israeli body under Betzalel Smotrich](#), who also loudly and frequently announces his plans for annexation. Nor can it exist alongside the current war and seventeen year blockade of Gaza, or in a country where the Nation-State Law remains on the books and in practice, now supplemented by what legal watchdogs have pointed to as increasing legalized segregation under July 2023's expansion of the [Admission Committees Law](#), already used in the Negev to create new Jewish-only towns on top of the ruins of [destroyed Bedouin villages](#). In the long-term, a secure and functional Israeli democracy will also require a healthy and democratic Palestinian state.

In this moment of great political darkness, it remains the role of Partners and many of our associated organizations to continue to provide American support and connection to the voices within Israel's political structures, in grassroots movements, and in the streets who are building the collective political energy to make these necessary changes. And we cannot abandon their vision, even when the challenges are this dire. The path forward towards a multiethnic, enfranchised democracy is possible, but it will require a frank reckoning with the facts on the ground, not the facts as we wish them to be.

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