



## ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel  
From the Bet El Twinning / Israel Action Committee of  
Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation*

elected legislative authority. The Supreme Court's decision harms, in an unprecedented fashion, the sovereignty of the nation and the sovereignty of the Knesset. The Supreme Court's decision undermines the basis of Israeli democracy."

## Commentary...

### **In his Final Act as Knesset Speaker, Edelstein 'Upholds Dignity' of Parliament** By Alex Traiman

In the latest chapter in Israel's political dysfunction, longtime Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein dramatically resigned his post on Wednesday rather than fulfill an overreaching order of the Supreme Court to hold an immediate vote on the assignment of a new speaker.

In Israel's 72-year history, a vote for a new speaker after an election has never taken place prior to the formation of a new ruling coalition.

Blue and White and its left-wing allies, together with the support of the Joint Arab List have been attempting to wrestle control of the parliament and to replace the speaker in order to pass retroactive and personal legislation specifically designed to make it illegal for Benjamin Netanyahu to form a new government.

According to Knesset bylaws, "The Speaker shall run the affairs of the Knesset, represent it externally, uphold its dignity, maintain order during its sittings, and oversee the observance of its Rules of Procedure. He shall preside over the sittings of the Knesset, and run them, determine the results of votes, and in addition fulfill any task assigned to him by law."

In between an election and the formation of a new government, Knesset bylaws state that the incumbent Knesset Speaker remains in his role. The bylaws also state explicitly that a new Knesset Speaker does not need to be voted upon until the very same day that a coalition is formed.

When Edelstein refused Blue and White's call to hold a snap vote for speaker prior to the bylaw's deadline, the party sent a petition to the Supreme Court.

The High Court could have decided not to accept the petition on the grounds that ruling on legislative bylaws oversteps judicial boundaries.

During the hearing, Knesset legal adviser Eyal Yinon objected to a snap vote to replace a speaker prior to the formation of a coalition, stating that such an unprecedented move "could harm democracy."

"We'll have a crisis every other day of opposition factions trying to foil the government. It will be impossible," he told the court, adding that appointing a speaker before the creation of a coalition would essentially be "planting a bug in the system, and that too constitutes harm to governance."

Yet the court, composed almost exclusively of left-wing justices who select their own replacements, quickly rejected the opinion of the legal adviser and ruled that the right-wing Edelstein must hold an immediate vote on his replacement. A snap vote is largely expected to result in the installation of a left-wing speaker.

"This is one of those exceptional cases"

In its ruling, High Court president Esther Hayut rejected Yinon's legal opinion as well as the authority granted to Edelstein as speaker, stating that, "The continued refusal to allow the Knesset to vote on the election of a permanent speaker is undermining the foundations of the democratic process."

She added that Edelstein's refusal to hold a vote before the legally prescribed deadline "clearly harms the status of the Knesset as an independent authority and the process of government transition, all the more so, as the days pass since the inauguration of the 23rd Knesset."

Hayut closed her remarks stating that "there is no escaping the conclusion that in the circumstances created, this is one of those exceptional cases where this court is required to intervene to prevent a violation of our parliamentary system."

Rather than being a party to gross judicial intervention, Edelstein decided that it would be better to resign his post.

In announcing his surprise resignation, the Likud Party member stated "the Supreme Court of Justice decided that the Knesset Speaker must hold a vote this week to choose a new Knesset Speaker. The Supreme Court's decision is not based on how the law is worded, but according to a one-sided and extremist interpretation."

Edelstein said that "the Supreme Court's decision contradicts the Knesset protocol. The Supreme Court's decision destroys the Knesset's work. The Supreme Court's decision is gross and audacious interference on the part of the judicial authority in the affairs of the

After spending years in prison as a Soviet refusenik before being allowed to immigrate to Israel, Edelstein told the parliament, "Knesset members, as someone who has paid a heavy personal price, of years in prison and slave-like work, for the right to live as a citizen in the State of Israel, there is no need for explanations regarding how much I love the State of Israel and the nation of Israel. And so, as a democratic individual, as a Jewish Zionist, as someone who has fought against evil powers, and as the Speaker of this hall, I will not allow Israel to deteriorate to anarchy. I will not play a part in a civil war."

Members of the opposition pushing to replace Netanyahu, have said that Edelstein's refusal to hold a vote undermines democracy and is creating a constitutional crisis, even though he has followed the Knesset bylaws to the letter.

But for Edelstein, who has loyally served the State of Israel in numerous capacities, including the last seven years as Knesset Speaker, his last act in his current position may have been finest. By resigning, he is refusing to allow the parliament he ran diligently to become an extension of the judiciary branch under his watch.

And resigning in this case may be the best way that Edelstein could adhere to the bylaws and carry out the Knesset duty vested in him as speaker to "uphold its dignity." The integrity Edelstein exhibited today is likely to bolster him in the next stage of his political career. (JNS Mar 25)

### **Hope is Nice, but Demonization of Israel is Unlikely to Change**

By Gerald M. Steinberg

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin recently tried to provide some optimism amid the gloom and doom of the corona epidemic. Noting the cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, he tweeted: "I just spoke to P.A. leader Mahmoud Abbas. Our ability to work together in times of crisis is also a testament to our ability to work together in the future for the good of us all." This peaceful scenario is worthy of the Jewish prophets, particularly Isaiah and Micah.

Unfortunately, the reality now, as it was then, is quite different. In contrast to Rivlin's optimism, the Palestinians and their allies are currently moving at full speed to continue their campaign of demonization against Israel.

Most notably, Palestinians, in coordination with an army of NGOs, are pressing the effort in the International Criminal Court to take the false "war crime" accusations to the next stage—a pseudo-investigation of Israel.

Over the past week, a number of these groups have submitted briefs (many of which go beyond the absurd in stretching historical truth) to prop up ICC prosecutor Fatou Bensouda's weak attempt to justify this travesty. The NGO list includes Al Haq, Al Mezan and the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR), which work very closely with the P.A. in this campaign and are funded by European governments.

Among their Israeli allies, the Israeli left-wing group B'Tselem wrote a report accompanied by a media campaign (also enabled by European funders). As usual, B'Tselem blamed Israel exclusively for the conflict, erasing the long history of Palestinian rejectionism and terror, and even accused Israel of exploiting the Holocaust in rejecting the ICC prosecutor's arguments. Breaking the Silence, Gisha and other NGOs continued to blame Israel for not doing enough to stop the spread of the coronavirus among Palestinians, repeating their one-line agenda—"occupation, occupation, occupation"—even in Gaza, where the "occupation" ended almost 15 years ago.

In parallel and also flying in the face of Rivlin's optimism is the continuation of the discriminatory BDS movement, which is trying to exploit its latest "achievement" in the form of a U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC) blacklist of selected businesses falsely accused of violating international law.

Human Rights Watch lobbied HRC Commissioner Michelle Bachelet to join this nasty form of warfare and is pressing this dubious success while the coronavirus pandemic rages. HRW head

Ken Roth's Twitter feed contains frequent propaganda, and Omar Shakir, who was hired by Roth to lead the BDS attack, finds gullible allies, like a student reporter for the Harvard Crimson, to repeat his lies. (Shakir left Israel a few months ago after his visa was not renewed.)

Sarah Leah Whitson, another veteran Israel-hater, continued along the same path in the face of the coronavirus. "Such a tiny taste. Missing a tablespoon of blood," she tweeted. (This was Whitson's response to Mairav Zonszein, who wrote, "6 million Jewish Israelis will now get a taste of what around the same number of Palestinians living under occupation have experienced for over half a century").

After almost 20 years as one of Roth's top warriors in the war to demonize Israel, Whitson recently left and joined the Quincy Institute—a new political "think tank" funded by billionaires George Soros and Charles Koch.

The ongoing demonization and political war against Israel, continuing unabated despite the global coronavirus disaster, is an important reality check for all of us. While hoping for a better future of beating swords (or keyboards) into plowshares is an important part of human nature and Jewish tradition, blind faith can also have dangerous consequences. (Israel Hayom Mar 26)

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### 'Coronavirus Ceasefire' Between Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah Won't Last

By Shaul Shay

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to spread, Israel, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas and other Palestinian terror groups in the Gaza Strip have reached an informal understanding about the need to maintain a de facto ceasefire.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said in a recent speech that "today, we are facing an enemy whose threat is clear, large and wide. This threat does not stop at borders, but rather involves the world. We are in the midst of a ... global war."

He added that "in any battle, there's a target and an enemy, the problem in this battle is that the enemy is 'coronavirus,' which is anonymous in all its aspects. Its threat has become obvious to all people."

The coronavirus pandemic is but the latest crisis to hit Israel's northern neighbor, which is already struggling with ongoing political turmoil, mass anti-government protests and severe economic crisis.

The first case of the coronavirus in Lebanon was reported on Feb. 23, when a 45-year-old woman tested positive after returning to Lebanon from the Iranian holy city of Qom. Many in Lebanon, including many in the country's Shi'ite community, had previously raised the alarm about the frequent flights arriving in Lebanon from Iran, as the Islamic Republic is dealing with one of the deadliest coronavirus outbreaks in the world. However, Nasrallah did not stop or explain the flights.

Many in Lebanon believe that these flights were not only bringing Lebanese back to Lebanon, but also Iranians infected with the virus to be treated at Hezbollah's private hospitals. The fact that the media were not allowed to enter the airport when these flights arrived, they believed, indicated that Hezbollah was hiding something, or someone.

In a recent speech, Nasrallah said the global war against the pandemic can be won if everyone does their part.

"Responsibility vis à vis coronavirus is comprehensive. The virus can be defeated if everyone takes responsibility and plays their part," he said.

The Hezbollah leader said that prayers were the "most effective weapon in the current battle," but urged people to pray at home and not to visit mosques or churches. He underlined the importance of self-isolation in stemming the spread of the virus, and called on all those with symptoms to report them immediately, adding that it was a religious duty to follow the instructions of the health authorities.

In his speech, Nasrallah also called on the country's banks to "act responsibly" amid the current crisis.

In Lebanon, the government, security forces and Hezbollah are working hand in hand to try to contain the disease. Lebanon has closed all educational institutions, restaurants, nightclubs, pubs, cafes, exhibitions, parks, cinemas, malls and other gathering venues, and has also, if belatedly, banned flights from 11 hard-hit countries, including Iran. Hezbollah, too, has frozen all travel to Iran, and imposed a quarantine in Syria on a group of students who were returning to Lebanon via Damascus airport.

The Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip is among the most densely populated areas on earth, and its health services are weak. As a result, there is concern that the pandemic could spread very quickly in Gaza, causing a humanitarian crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned Gaza's health-care system will not be able to deal with an outbreak, and Israeli officials have expressed fear that such a crisis is

only a matter of time.

Hamas, too, is very aware of the risk; the recent relative calm on the Israel-Gaza border stems from the Hamas leadership's understanding that it is dependent on Israel and Egypt to deal with this crisis.

Hamas and the other terrorist factions in Gaza are also worried that if any attack is launched against Israel, Israel may take advantage of the world's focus on the coronavirus outbreak to carry out massive airstrikes in Gaza, and possibly assassinate terrorist leaders. Hamas officials say the terrorist organization will maintain the current calm that this is not the time for clashes at the Gaza border.

The Gaza Health Ministry confirmed the first two cases of COVID-19 in Gaza on March 22. The two patients were placed in quarantine in a field hospital in the border town of Rafah upon arrival from Egypt. The hospital is designed to treat coronavirus patients entering the Gaza Strip through Egypt. The ministry said that tests conducted on 19 Palestinians who returned to the Gaza Strip through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt were negative.

It is in Israel's utmost interest to ensure that the pandemic does not hit Gaza, and Israel has already delivered 200 coronavirus test kits to Gaza as part of an effort to prevent an outbreak there. On March 22, Israel announced that all crossings into Israel from Gaza have been closed.

Hamas has restricted obligatory prayers in the mosques, encouraging people to perform prayers at home instead, and has closed women's prayer rooms. Gatherings have been limited to 100 people and schools will remain shut through March.

Palestinian health officials have expressed concern that amid a serious outbreak in the Gaza Strip, thousands of Palestinians may try to force their way into Israel and/or Egypt.

In the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, Israel, Hezbollah, Hamas and the other terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip are in agreement that controlling the spread of the virus is the highest priority. However, the current lull in violence is temporary, and will last only until the virus is defeated.

The pandemic is also serving as an object lesson in the risks of biological weapons, which do not distinguish between religions, ideologies and borders. It is possible this may deter groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas from seeking to obtain or use biological weapons in the future.

Regardless, Israel must heed the lessons learned from this pandemic to prepare for a future bioterrorism threat. (JNS Mar 25)

*The writer is a senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council.*

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### Responsibility for Gaza will Fall on Israel's Shoulders

By Eyal Zisser

Some 55 Palestinians in the West Bank have tested positive for coronavirus so far, and last Thursday the first two cases were reported in the Gaza Strip—both Palestinians who had recently returned to Gaza from Pakistan via Egypt. The two are now quarantined in Rafah.

The Gaza Strip faces a very problematic combination of third-world health care, one of the highest population densities in the world and difficulty in enforcing instructions issued by the Palestinian Health Ministry.

The Palestinians are being pushed into Israel's arms by the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic, since they are entirely dependent on the medical aid Israel provides to stop the spread of the virus. The crisis has put the spotlight on a familiar and complicated truth, which many still deny: It is difficult and maybe impossible to separate the Palestinians and the Israelis, and the 2005 disengagement from Gaza did not truly "disengage" Gaza from Israel.

Day-to-day life in Judea and Samaria, where Jewish and Palestinian communities exist side by side, along with the fact that tens of thousands of Palestinians make their living in Israel, makes any attempt to separate the two populations as part of efforts to control the outbreak impractical. But Gaza, too, which is supposedly cut off from Israel, is becoming Israel's responsibility; Hamas can rain missiles on Sderot or Tel Aviv, but cannot care for the residents of Gaza in a humanitarian crisis of the kind the world is currently facing.

So Israel is shouldering responsibility for Gaza, both because it wants to contain the epidemic in Gaza and because it wants to avoid criticism at home and abroad for not taking responsibility for the health of Gaza's residents. In fact, Israel is already supplying coronavirus testing kits to the Hamas government and preparing to provide medical aid, including field hospitals, for thousands of Gazan

coronavirus patients if the situation takes a turn for the worse, as has already happened in many places all over the world.

When it comes to the P.A. in the West Bank, for now Israel is just stepping up coordination between the Israel Defense Force's Civil Administration and Palestinian authorities. But it's clear that if the coronavirus situation there worsens, Israel will need to get more involved in attempts to stop it from spreading throughout Judea and Samaria, or across the Green Line.

The near-total quiet on the Gaza and West Bank borders does not necessarily mean that the Messiah has arrived and the Palestinians have turned into Zionists because of their increasing dependence on Israel. Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh, for example, is demanding that terrorists be released from Israeli prisons to keep them from contracting coronavirus, and Hamas isn't doing anything to reduce tensions, either. But the facts on the ground speak for themselves, and reflect a reality of intertwined lives that cannot be changed by rhetoric.

The corona crisis could turn out to be a positive turning point in Israeli-Palestinian relations, in which the latter acknowledge the importance of their ties to Israel, making them not only difficult to cut, but also in the Palestinians' interest to maintain. (Israel Hayom Mar 23)

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### **The Enduring Rift** By Jerold S. Auerbach

Amid the rising panic over the spreading coronavirus, I have retreated to the comfortable security of my study at home. Surrounded by books about Israel and Judaism, fascinating antiquities and alluring 19th-century lithographs of the Holy Land (all acquired during two years of residence in Jerusalem and decades of visits), I do my best to remain calm.

Several days before our local public library suddenly shut down for the duration, I borrowed *We Stand Divided: The Rift Between American Jews and Israel* (2019) by Daniel Gordis, vice president and distinguished fellow at Shalem College in Jerusalem. American-born and now an Israeli citizen, Gordis explores the enduring tension between the world's two largest Jewish communities, between American universalism and Israeli particularism.

The core values between American Jews and Israel, Gordis astutely concludes, are "diametrically opposed." This first became evident more than a century ago, after Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State* appeared. Prominent Reform rabbis insisted, and endlessly reiterated, that Jews comprise a religious community, not a nation. America was their Zion. Anything less could provoke dreaded allegations of dual loyalty against Jews who desperately wanted acceptance as genuine Americans.

After World War I, the emerging Zionist movement and the determination of its pioneers to return to their biblical homeland heightened the concern of prominent American Jewish leaders. With support from the League of Nations for Palestine (on both sides of the Jordan River) as the Jewish national homeland, the already fraught relationship between Reform Jews and Zionist pioneers intensified. America, they insisted, "is our Zion."

Nor, as Gordis documents, did their discomfort diminish over time. For the prominent (and wealthy) among them who found their organizational home in the American Jewish Committee, Zionism was intensely discomfiting lest, in the eyes of non-Jews, it be seen as compromising their loyalty to the United States. Former Committee president Joseph M. Proskauer, a respected New York lawyer, was furious that Israel intended to place Adolph Eichmann on trial. Nazis, he insisted to Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, had committed "unspeakable crimes against humanity, not only against Jews."

Over time—following the Six-Day War that returned Jews to their biblical homeland and, if briefly, sparked euphoria among American Jews—the two Jewish communities have drifted apart. Gordis understands that American universalism, in conflict with Israeli particularism, became "the new Judaism" for liberal American Jews. Their admiration for Israel faded once Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu became its elected leaders.

Perhaps the schism was inevitable, given what Gordis identifies as "the radically different purposes at the heart of each of the two countries." The United States welcomed immigrants worldwide (most of the time) while Israel was born "to foster the recovery and renewed flourishing of the Jewish people." For Israeli Jews, this defined Zionism and expressed the purpose of Jewish statehood. But for many American Jews, Gordis astutely observes, "there is something deeply disturbing about the legal and cultural implications of a country being a specifically Jewish country."

That may help to explain why American Jews of my parents' generation—born to refugees from Russia, Poland and Rumania—kept their distance from Zionism and Israel, which were never discussed at

our family gatherings. But my father tracked family members from Romania who relocated to Israel, generously providing them with desperately needed financial support. I was more interested in who these strangers were, not where they lived, although Israeli postage stamps on their responsive letters of appreciation did intrigue me.

Gordis suggests that Israel "desperately need[s] ongoing substantial interaction with—and learning from—American Jewish life." And American Jews are more comforted than they acknowledge with Israel as their source of Jewish inspiration and, if ever needed, their place of refuge. Both Jewish communities, he understands, are vulnerable, if in different ways. American Jews confront the "challenges of assimilation." Israelis confront, as they always have, the challenges of survival in an unstable, often hostile, neighborhood.

My own Jewish trajectory, not unlike my generation of assimilated American Jews, carried me from boyhood and young adult indifference to the Jewish state that was born on my 12th birthday to a momentary spark of curiosity in June 1967, when television broadcasts revealed triumphant Israeli soldiers at the Western Wall.

But it took a chance encounter five years later with a former colleague who had just returned from an Israel trip for "disaffected Jewish academics" to perk my interest. I applied, my qualifications were recognized, and my life was transformed by the experience. Frequent visits followed, including two sabbatical years in Jerusalem that included teaching a seminar on American Jewish history to Tel Aviv University students who were astonished by the rejection of Jewish norms and indifference to Jewish history that was so common among American Jews.

My first trip to Israel had also included a brief visit to Hebron, whose place in Jewish history was then unknown to me. But a glimpse of the Machpelah burial site of the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs at the edge of the virtually deserted Jewish Quarter sparked my curiosity. Return visits eventually included fascinating conversations with founding leaders and devoted residents of the restored Jewish community that had been decimated by rampaging Arabs during the 1929 riots. My Hebron experiences, and the research they inspired, culminated in the first English-language history of the Hebron Jewish community.

Gordis traces, explores and explains "the more central causes of the complex, fraught, love-filled, hate-filled relationship" between American Jews and Zionists" before and since the birth of Israel. The "rift" between us that is the focus of his illuminating book was, for me, healed decades ago by my own explorations and encounters in the biblical homeland of the Jewish people.

The "stumbling" relationship that Gordis perceptively scrutinizes (and yearns to heal) may yet result in "the fracture of the Jewish people into two largely disconnected communities." But even though I will remain in the United States, my Jewish heart and soul will always reside in Israel. (JNS Mar 24)

*The writer is the author of "Print to Fit: The New York Times, Zionism and Israel 1896-2016," which was selected for Mosaic by Ruth Wisse and Martin Kramer as a "Best Book" for 2019.*

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### **The Diseased Attitude of the 'Coronavirus Rebels'**

By Ruthie Blum

Dozens of the 1,100 Israeli backpackers airlifted from Peru a few days ago threw a hissy fit upon landing at Ben-Gurion International Airport. Though greeted graciously by ground crew, the exhausted 20-somethings, who had begged the government to rescue them from their treks in South America when they were unable to find flights back home before the coronavirus-necessitated border closures left them stranded, behaved like a bunch of entitled brats.

Peru, like practically every country in the world, was about to go on lockdown for an unspecified period. To get stuck in a foreign land—far away from one's family and without fluency in the local language—is nothing to sneeze at, especially when every sneeze these days is interpreted as a symptom of COVID-19.

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz promptly responded to the tearful pleas for help from the young travelers, who were encountering great difficulty in purchasing airline tickets due to a dearth of available seats and to the exorbitant fees now being charged for them.

In a mission of the sort that does the Jewish state proud, Katz dispatched four El Al 787 Dreamliners to Lima to pick up the distraught Israelis and return them safely to Tel Aviv—at no cost to them or their anxious parents, many of whom, by this point, had been fired from their jobs or put on unpaid leave, thanks to the shuttering of businesses.

Rather than express gratitude at being back on Israeli soil (as

most of their fellow passengers did), these 30 or so backpackers not only refused to sign a form obligating them to self-quarantine for the following two weeks, but began to shout at and taunt immigration officials by coughing on them.

Population and Immigration Authority Director-General Shlomo Mor-Yosef rightly called the incident a "disgrace." The least that those backpackers could do, he said—after the "enormous effort and expense" that was spent on repatriating them—was sign a quarantine declaration.

Talk about understatements.

It is now up to the Health Ministry and police to guarantee that the ingrates abide by the rules or suffer serious consequences, including heavy fines and possible criminal prosecution. But the fact that a group of young adults did anything other than express gratitude is disturbing. That they went as far as to make a mockery of infecting the staff handling their re-entry—during a global health crisis, no less—is as incomprehensible as it is reprehensible. What they really deserve is the kind of good spanking that they were spared as children.

If such an appalling display of disrespect, which can't even be called "anarchy" since the punks in question had no problem seeking aid from government and other authority figures when it came to bringing them back to their mommies and daddies, were particular to Israelis, it would be alarming enough. Apparently, however, the coronavirus crisis has exposed some equally diseased attitudes among European and American members of the younger generation as well.

Less at risk of dying from corona-related complications than their parents and grandparents—but serious spreaders of the virus even when asymptomatic—they ought to feel a heightened sense of responsibility towards the elderly. And many, if not most, young people do seem to be trying, at least, to engage in social distancing and isolation.

The trouble is that during a pandemic, even a minority of people disregarding the rules and recommendations for flattening the curve can wreak massive havoc. When such people do so on purpose, it beggars belief.

Which brings us to the budding phenomenon of Western "corona rebels" who proudly thumb their snotty noses at anyone who dares require that they remain indoors.

In Germany, for instance, the younger crowd is flaunting "corona parties" and making a point of coughing at older passers-by. In France, a young person bit a cop patrolling a suburb for violators of confinement, and in a different location, young "rebels" threatened to spit on officers urging them to cease hanging out in groups. Ditto for Spain.

In Florida, college students have been crowding beaches, acting as though spring break came early this year, rather than heeding repeated warnings that they are endangering themselves and others.

It's not clear whether all of the above indicates a false sense of invincibility or a death wish for the parents and grandparents without whose money they wouldn't have the luxury to be so footloose and fancy-free. Let us hope that it's the former.

Let us also pray that the young Israelis about to be evacuated by the Foreign Ministry (albeit this time not for free) from Australia, Brazil, Costa Rica, India and Thailand have the good sense to be thankful and the moral fiber to do as they're told—and do their part in keeping the pandemic at bay—without lip. (JNS Mar 24)

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## **Pandemic is No Reason to Let Iran Off the Hook**

By Jonathan S. Tobin

The whole world is dealing with the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, but among the countries that have suffered the worst is Iran. And as far as some critics of the Trump administration are concerned, the blame for the growing toll of the sick and dead in that country belongs to the United States.

As the Washington Free Beacon reported earlier this week, former members of President Barack Obama's foreign-policy team are using the crisis as an excuse to re-litigate President Donald Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the 2015 nuclear deal and to reimpose sanctions on the Islamist regime. According to Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor, the continuing sanctions on Iran are a "moral abomination" that is leading to the deaths of innocent Iranians.

Rhodes is remembered for dubbing the Washington press corps his boss's "media echo chamber" because of the ease with which Obama's team manipulated them into repeating their often-duplicious talking points favoring the nuclear pact. But in this case, he is acting as an echo chamber for the theocratic regime in Tehran, which has also been appealing to the world for sympathy because of the devastating impact of the coronavirus. They, too, are claiming that the economic sanctions that America has reinstated are the reason why so many of their people

are dying from the virus.

A spokesperson for Iran's UN mission claimed that Washington's move this week to add to the existing restrictions on Iran by sanctioning five international firms that were assisting Tehran's efforts to sell its oil abroad was "beyond cruel" and demonstrated Trump's lack of "humaneness."

On the surface, these complaints about Trump's policy seem reasonable. At a time when the world ought to be coming together and putting differences aside in order to fight the virus, why would the United States continue its efforts to isolate Iran? The pandemic's impact on Iran has been particularly harsh with it suffering the fifth most reported cases, and trailing only China and Italy in the number of reported coronavirus-related deaths.

Seen from that perspective, maintaining US sanctions on Iran at this time – let alone toughening them – does seem harsh or even vindictive.

But the argument in favor of lifting sanctions rests on a false assumption that the sanctions are preventing Iran from getting material that might alleviate the suffering there. That is completely false. Humanitarian aid and medical supplies are exempted by law from the American sanctions that much of the world has been forced – often reluctantly – to observe.

As US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Friday at the president's press conference about the coronavirus, the humanitarian channel to Iran is "wide open." Indeed, the administration offered to help Tehran fight the pandemic last month, as its spread there became an issue and weeks before Americans started treating the threat seriously.

The problem in Iran is twofold.

The toll of victims there is so high for the same reason that the virus killed so many people in China. As soon as cases of coronavirus suffered there, the despotic Iranian government sought to cover it up rather than to spread the alarm about the peril.

The Iranian people have good reason to find fault with the ayatollahs who rule them. Instead of devoting its oil wealth to helping its citizens, they have lavished it on foreign terrorist groups that serve as the regime's auxiliaries, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. Rather than invest in their own people's welfare, they have engaged in foreign adventures. Their intervention in the Syrian Civil War, which helped keep their barbarous client – Bashar Assad and his terrorist partners – in power in Damascus, was a military success but did nothing to help ordinary Iranians. The same is true for all of the oil wealth that they have squandered on a nuclear program that Obama's deal allowed to remain in existence, and thanks to that pact, will allow the regime to acquire a weapon once the agreement expires.

There's also the fact that both the country's "supreme leader" – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – along with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the regime entity that both runs its foreign terrorist efforts and controls much of Iran's economy, are sitting on vast fortunes that could alleviate much of their nation's suffering. Instead, they continue to use their considerable resources to finance terrorism and keep a tight lid on dissent. The IRGC murdered hundreds of Iranians who protested against the regime's misrule last fall, not to mention the many women who have been beaten and/or imprisoned for refusing to wear hijabs – a true war on women that most Western liberals have ignored.

While Trump's critics want him to let up on his "maximum pressure" campaign aimed at forcing Iran to start behaving like a normal country and cease its terrorism, as well as give up any hope of a nuclear weapon, Tehran hasn't let up on its misbehavior. Iranian proxies are still attacking Americans in Iraq, and aiding terrorists in both Lebanon and Gaza, where they continue to push for conflict with Israel, which the regime has vowed to destroy.

While Americans are sympathetic to the suffering of Iranians, the answer to their problems is in efforts to force the regime to change its behavior. The only way to do that is to continue Trump's pressure campaign.

Iran's leaders are counting on Trump being defeated in November. That's why former Vice President Joe Biden, the likely Democratic nominee, ought to give them no encouragement and declare that the United States won't return to Obama's policy of appeasement. But if Biden is intent on reviving a failed nuclear deal that enriched and empowered the regime, that won't help the Iranian people. It will just mean more grief and suffering for Iranians who were left vulnerable to oppression, as well as disease, by the cruelty of their own leaders and the naïveté of those who supported the nuclear pact. (Israel Hayom Mar 23)

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