

Letter Nr. 27

Much of the controversy in Israel these days surrounds the establishment of a commission of inquiry into the recent war and the assignment of responsibility—or blame—for its shortcomings. As of this moment, there is still one body of a fallen Israeli soldier that has yet to be returned for burial in Israel, thus making it impossible for the warring sides to proceed to Phase Two of the Trump-brokered agreement.

Another “open wound” in Israel is the ongoing conflict between Minister of Security Yisrael Katz and General Eyal Zamir, commander-in-chief of the armed forces. They don’t speak for months at a time, but when they do, the tension is great. Katz and other politicians are less than happy with Zamir, as they perceive him as too independent. In the past, there have been ministers and generals who did not see eye-to-eye, but the rift has never been this public.

Pressure, including from the US, has been mounting on Israeli President Isaac Herzog to pardon Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Conducting the Netanyahu trial has been a lengthy and costly process and the defendant claims that it interferes with his handling affairs of state. The obstacle is that receiving a pardon involves admitting guilt, and Netanyahu has not been prepared to do that. Recently, he has been trying to set up a government- appointed commission of inquiry, as opposed to a more neutral or “national” one. The families of the former hostages have indicated their total dissatisfaction with such a move.

One might have hoped that these many arguments would be toned down and make way for some semblance of national unity during the festival of Chanukah. Unfortunately, what brought the various groups within Israeli Jewish society together was the tragic news of a horrific incident of terror on Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia, that took the lives of 15 Jews, gathered to light the first Chanukah candle. The gunmen who murdered them were affiliated with the notorious Islamist group Da’esh. The hero of this event was Ahmed al Ahmed, a Syrian-born bystander who neutralized one of the attackers with his bare hands and was himself shot several times, although he is recuperating from his wounds. His courage and altruism were certainly a ray of light at an event that was supposed to be all about bringing light into the world.

Mansour Abbas, a leading Arab politician in Israel, decided to drop the word “Islamic” from the name of his party, possibly signaling that it will be more likely for them to join a new government after the elections. By law, the elections must be held no later than October 2026 (four years after the last elections.) Turnout for voting is usually lower in the Israeli Arab sector than in the Jewish population. This time around, the Arab vote could be decisive in bringing down the present government in Israel and enabling the formation of a new one.

On December 13, the day before the shooting in Sydney, another significant figure within Hamas, Rayed Sa’ad, was killed by Israeli forces. The US openly questioned whether this

could be interpreted as a violation of the already shaky ceasefire. The Israeli government continues to ignore (and, some say, it actually encourages) settler violence against Palestinians on the West Bank. It is also preparing for re-settlement of some of the areas in Samaria that were evacuated in 2005, as part of the disengagement plan.

The Knesset is debating a bill that would allow the death penalty for convicted terrorists. In general, in the more than 77 years of its existence, the State of Israel has not mandated a death penalty. The last person to be put to death by the Israeli legal system was Adolph Eichmann in 1961. Given the dominance of right-wing and Orthodox parties in the Knesset, and the prevailing populist spirit of many Israelis, the bill is likely to pass.

For Chanukah, Hamas released footage of some of the hostages celebrating Chanukah during the first year of their captivity (two years ago.) The experience of watching them light the make-shift Menorah, knowing that six of them would be murdered by Hamas about eight months later, was heart-wrenching for any decent person. How much more so for their grieving families!

On a much lighter note: Israel will remain in the 2026 Eurovision song contest, but some key countries, including the Netherlands, Spain and Ireland, have pulled out, in protest.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all of you who have been reading what I write from Jerusalem and wish you a peaceful and joyous Christmas season and a healthy and happy New Year.