

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research informing New Yorkers and the world. Joining us today is Abraham Silberstein, a part-time graduate student in the Middle Eastern Studies master's program, who is also studying anthropology and history at the CUNY Graduate Center. He is a writer with several years of experience working in the American Jewish community and non-governmental organizations focused on Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He is currently the associate director of the North America office for the Abraham Initiatives, an Israeli organization founded in 1989 to advocate for equality between Israel's Jewish and Palestinian citizens. His published work has appeared in The New York Times, Haaretz, The Forward, War on the Rocks, The Times Literary supplement, UK, The Tel Aviv Review of Books and Israel Studies Review.

Tanya Domi:

In 2020 through 2021, he was a cohort member of Israel Policy Forums, Charles Bronfman Conveners program. He is also a graduate of Hunter College and New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. Just recently, the Israeli government, an odd coalition configured with parties from the left, center, and right, that includes the Arab Party for the first time in the history of Israel, seem to publicly differ on the Russian invasion of Ukraine with the leftist Yair Lapid, Israel's foreign minister condemning outright the unprovoked invasion by Russia while Prime Minister Naftali Bennett seemed to avoid addressing the issue publicly before he flew to Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin on Shabbat. It's complicated of course, with Israel and Russia having mutual interests in fighting against Iranians in Syria, thus the effort by Bennett to avoid the obvious.

Tanya Domi:

No sooner than Russia launching an invasion, Israel has been confronted with a wave of gun attacks at home by armed Israeli Arab ISIS sympathizers killing 11 people during the past week. This security threat could pose an existential threat to the Bennett government if the attacks continue. US Secretary of State, Tony Blinken made his first trip to Israel and to the Middle East to convene a meeting of the Negev countries, aiming for regional unity toward Iran, thus fostering Israel's ties with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, as well as its existing relationships with Egypt and Jordan and encouraging more countries to join the Abraham Accords. During Blinken's visit, Lapid and Bennett made overtures to Blinken, assuring him that Israel was reviewing the US sanctions of Russian oligarchs and even though Israel does not have a sanctions law, they committed Israel to honor the American sanctions, but beyond maintenance of America's relationship with Israel, the US government has gone out of its way to convey that a major diplomatic effort for peace is not a priority for now. Welcome to The Thought Project, Abe Silberstein.

Abe Silberstein:

Thank you so much for having me, Tanya.

Tanya Domi:

It's really great to meet you in person. I want our audience to know that we are in the studio in person, and I began following Abe more than a year ago on Twitter. He has a really active Twitter channel that is very educational on all things Jewish. And I just want to say how much I've learned from him on that

Twitter feed and learned to read articles and papers and to understand what is going on in the Jewish world. You're actually an advocate, but you're the associate director of the North America office for the Abraham Initiatives, which is an Israeli organization founded that advocates for equality between Israel's Jewish and Palestinian citizens. Tell our audience how you got involved.

Abe Silberstein:

So, this is work that I've done over the last couple of years since graduating college, I've been working in different capacities for either NGOs or in my capacity as a writer and a public, I guess, Twitter presence as you mentioned earlier. So, this was work that I've always been involved with. And the Abraham Initiatives is an organization that was founded in 1989 by an American philanthropist named Alan Slifka. And the purpose of the Abraham Initiatives was to advocate, as you said for equality between Jewish and Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel. So, we're talking about Jewish Israelis as well as Palestinians who are within Green Line in 1949 Armistice Line Israel. So they are full citizens entitled to a litany of rights. And the purpose of the Abraham Initiatives is to ensure that this translates into services they receive on the ground, community policing and things like that to just make sure the promise in Israel's declaration of independence that there will be-

Tanya Domi:

Is fulfilled.

Abe Silberstein:

... equality is fulfilled. Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

That's a wonderful aspiration and wonderful work. And secondly, I didn't know when I started following you that you were a Graduate Center student, but I was delighted to read your book review on Kissinger that was published by War on the Rocks last year. And that's how I found out you were a Graduate Center student and come to find out not only are you enrolled in the master's program in Middle East Studies, but you're also studying anthropology and history. Tell our listenership how you to that combination?

Abe Silberstein:

So, I started in the Middle Eastern Studies program as a part-time student. I still am a part-time student in the fall. It was kind of a decision that I made very quickly. I think CUNY is a very good institution for that, where you could see what you want to study, get what you want in without taking a major financial risk, at least for New York City residents, I think CUNY is a major boon. And I selected courses in history and anthropology. These were areas of study that I hadn't focused on in my undergraduate degree, which was largely in political science and some Hebrew and Judaic studies at Hunter College. So this was trying to understand parts of Middle Eastern Studies because it's an interdisciplinary field just that I hadn't explored before. And history and anthropology were really two disciplines that I hadn't gone much beyond the introductory level in the past. So, those were what I focused on and I was fascinated by it. I took classes is by Professor Dina Le Gall and Professor Christa Salamandra in the anthropology department and that was a great experience.

Tanya Domi:

That's wonderful. I was telling you before we went live, Louise Lennihan, former provost and anthropologist once told me that anthropology is really called slow journalism. And I love that idea because as anthropologists spend a lot of time in the field with people that they're working with and studying and they're interviewing people. So, I think it's a great training discipline-

Abe Silberstein:

It is.

Tanya Domi:

... in how to interview.

Abe Silberstein:

Yeah. And there are many similarities between ethnographic work and journalistic work. As you mentioned, it's the class that I was taking in the fall was on new ethnographies on the Middle East. So every week we were reading kind of a new book or they weren't particularly large as anthropology books are not, but they were about 150, 200 pages a week on just a different either country or different group that we were reading about. Some were written by people in the region, others by Western academics. And there is that kind of storytelling that's in anthropology that might not apply to other academic disciplines and that you're able to-

Tanya Domi:

But it's transferable to journalism.

Abe Silberstein:

Yes, at least that's my view of it. I know certainly people are more protective of their disciplines, but I certainly learned quite a lot of how to go about these situations.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. And you're an accomplished journalist and write, you have clips that have appeared in The New York Times, Haaretz, The Forward, War on the Rocks, The Times Literary Supplement, The Tel Aviv Review of Books and The Israel Studies Review. Now, that's not bad for early graduate student. You've done pretty well.

Abe Silberstein:

I'm not that young anymore. I'm I'm 27 years old, but it's very-

Tanya Domi:

Well, I'm talking about young maybe in the study of graduate education. That's what I mean.

Abe Silberstein:

It's interesting because I wouldn't have predicted this level of exposure a couple of years ago, but one lesson I learned over the last couple of years is that you just have to keep throwing things at the wall until something sticks-

Tanya Domi:

Sticks.

Abe Silberstein:

... so this is... Look, there's just many opportunities. The internet has created many new publications for instance, and even older publications now have greater capacity to publish new writers.

Tanya Domi:

That's true.

Abe Silberstein:

Which isn't good if you want to be a writer yourself because the market is flooded, but if you're looking to get exposure to place your pieces somewhere, if you try hard enough, eventually there will be some need for content that could be filled by what you're doing.

Tanya Domi:

Absolutely. So, I agree with that 100%. So, let's get to the news and the news this morning in Israel is that it has sustained a wave of attacks that have killed 11 Israelis in the last week. Some call it the biggest test so far for Israeli prime minister, Naftali Bennett and his very fragile, very unique coalition government. And if these attacks continue, how do you think he sustains the government and can continue to govern?

Abe Silberstein:

It's difficult because the government that you mentioned is this ideologically diverse government, goes from parties on the far right of the spectrum, which is where Bennett is from all the way to Ra'am, which is the Arab Islamist Party from the Southern Islamist Movement in Israel that sits in the coalition as a formal member, which is the first time in Israel's history that that's actually happened. These attacks over the last three weeks are clearly a major challenge for this government. Earlier today, or rather last night, Bennett issued a statement condemning Arab terrorism, and which is some reason like a reversion to form of maybe where he was a couple of years ago when he was a more younger firebrand right wing politician rather than the prime minister of this clunky government of all of these parties, there is certain amount of attention being paid to his right flank.

Tanya Domi:

And Netanyahu's not helping him [crosstalk 00:12:31].

Abe Silberstein:

No, not at all. Netanyahu over the last day or two has been furiously denouncing the government as he's been for the last year, as all but saying that they're in coalition with terrorists with Mansour Abbas and the Ra'am Party. I don't think the government will fall apart over this, at least as long as this doesn't turn into a longer trend of repeated attacks.

Tanya Domi:

Okay.

Abe Silberstein:

But that's of course too early to say. And the last week has been particularly, I think, traumatizing for Israelis who over the last 20 years have not had to face this kind of waking up in the morning and thinking you might get attacked.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Abe Silberstein:

Whereas that very much was the case during the Second Intifada. And it hasn't been for [crosstalk 00:13:18].

Tanya Domi:

And this security situation has really driven Israelis voting in elections in past years, over many years, right? And the idea of being secure and not being vulnerable to attacks, it's really driven their politics.

Abe Silberstein:

It's been a significant factor since what I mentioned earlier, the Second Intifada, where there was just these major attacks in metropolitan areas on civilian targets. And that collapsed, I think the left wing party certainly, but even when you had periods of more centralist rule like with Ehud Olmert, you still had this kind of looking to your right flank to make sure that you were convincing voters that you were Mr. Security, so to speak. And that all of the people who ran against Netanyahu over the 12 years that he was in power again, following his election in 2009 were always trying to portray themselves as being either just as hawkish as he is, or even more hawkish, which is how Benny Gantz-

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. Gantz-

Abe Silberstein:

... ran in 2019.

Tanya Domi:

Right. And also, wouldn't you say that this is sort of akin to... There's a parallel here to US and Israel. I mean, Biden got elected because he was not in many ways, he was not Trump. He was a noted politician at the national level for many years, had been the vice president, had been in the Senate almost 40 years and he was not Trump. And that this coalition government in Israel was not Netanyahu.

Abe Silberstein:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

Right? Now, I just want to make that comparison for our listeners.

Abe Silberstein:

It's fascinating because the coalition that's supported Biden because it's a very different system also-

Tanya Domi:

Of course-

Abe Silberstein:

... a presidential system and a parliamentary system-

Tanya Domi:

Very different. Very different.

Abe Silberstein:

... So, there's just less room for niche parties in the United States.

Tanya Domi:

That's right.

Abe Silberstein:

So, you generally have to coalesce behind someone. It is interesting to think about how many Republicans who oppose Trump, people like Liz Cheney and Mitt Romney.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Abe Silberstein:

You do have some parallel of that in Israel where the current justice minister for example, is Gideon Sa'ar who was a right wing politician for many years in the Likud Party, but was forced out by Netanyahu over personal petty political matters and sort of took his revenge by supporting this government. The same as true for enough Naftali Bennett, to a lesser extent, Ayelet Shaked who actually is the interior minister now and has had some controversies in recent weeks over Ukrainian refugees, but either way, all of these parties and individuals came together under that one banner of seeing off this threat. And that's what still keeps them together. As long as Netanyahu remains opposition leader, they have this incentive to stick together.

Tanya Domi:

Just to stick together. Very interesting. So, I mean the biggest thing in the world right now is the war in Ukraine, the Russian invasion that took place on the last week of February. Now we're going into the second month of this incursion. The Russians won't call it a war according to Putin, it's an action, some kind of operation that he likes to refer to somehow to avoid the appearance of war while the Russians are absolutely obliterating the country using artillery on civilian apartment buildings and theaters and schools and hospitals. As a human rights professor, which is what I am, there are just so many violations of the laws and customs of war that are already taking place and the International Criminal Court has announced that they've opened an investigation, documenting many crimes that actually go back to

2014 during the annexation of Crimea. And this was just completely condemned throughout most of Europe overnight.

Tanya Domi:

As a Europeanist, I was shocked by the solidarity and the rapidity of that condemnation. And yet I was not surprised, but I want to hear your thoughts that the Israeli government was of two minds or maybe two and a half minds where Lapid came out and condemned it almost immediately.

Abe Silberstein:

The foreign minister.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, the foreign minister and Bennett was not really saying much of anything. And then almost very quickly got on a plane and flew to Moscow to meet with Putin. Tell our audience why this happened. We've already talked about how strange the government is put together politically and why would Naftali Bennett get on a plane on Shabbat and fly to Moscow.

Abe Silberstein:

So, I think to understand Israel's place in this, we have to go back a few years to 2015, which is when Russia intervened in the Syrian Civil War quite forcefully through the air in almost similar ways it's doing now as it did to Aleppo-

Tanya Domi:

Agreed. Agreed. Agreed.

Abe Silberstein:

... in 2015. And this intervention changed Israel's calculations with regard to Russia because for a couple of years, Israel had striking convoys of Iranian weapons because Syria is both a close ally of Russia and Iran. And they had been striking these weapon convoys that they've alleged were going to Hezbollah and other proxy groups. And this was something that had been consistently happening between 2013 and 2015, or even perhaps earlier than that.

Tanya Domi:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Abe Silberstein:

With Russia's entry into the conflict, this became considerably more complicated. Israel is, I think we could say that here is a nuclear power, but so is Russia. And to attack in Syria while Russia's in the skies poses a very considerable security risk and the arrangement that ended up being made or an informal one between Netanyahu and Putin was that Israel would be able to continue striking these Iranian convoys and Russia would perhaps make a proforma protest, but wouldn't try to stop Israel from doing it, right? They would clear off, they would let Israel do it at once and then they would go back to supporting the Assad regime. So that's how it's been over the last seven or so years between Russia and Israel. And the concern here, at least from some Israelis is that this arrangement could be undone if

Israel speaks out too strongly in favor of Ukraine. Now, many analysts disagree with that. And I agree with those analysts because Russia doesn't want Iran to dominate Syria either.

Abe Silberstein:

And I think Russia is perfectly content with having Israel check the power of Iran in the North, by Israel's northern border with Syria near the Golan Heights, which has been occupied since 1967. So, I don't see the fear as being very credible, but I think that's still what's very much behind it. There's a little bit of a more minor point, which is that Israel likes to keep its options open. It is an ally of the United States, but at the same time, doesn't want to shut the door on Russia, doesn't want... And there are similar tensions that the United States has had with Israel over its dealings with China. There is that piece of it too that yes, Israel is a close ally of the United States, but it also has its own foreign policy and its own interests that may not perfectly overlap.

Tanya Domi:

Well, I'm going to say though, you don't need to say, but I'd like to hear your thoughts on this. I think that we, United States has its own self to blame for why Russia's back in the Middle East. And that goes to Obama in drawing the red line and saying, "If they cross the red line in Syria with gas, then I'm going to respond. The United States is going to respond," and didn't do it. And Putin moved right in. He moved right into that vacuum. And so, this is one of my issues that I like to talk about how Obama gave the Middle East back to Russia and allowed them to get back in for the first time since the 1970s.

Abe Silberstein:

Yeah. So, it wasn't just the Obama administration, right? The US has been aiming to pivot away from the Middle East since toward the end of the second Bush administration, through Obama, through Trump and now including the Biden administration. So, there is this long running priority to focus on Asia and now of course there's a focus on Europe because this was also another area that had been seen as older and as something that the United States may not

Tanya Domi:

Was neglected and [crosstalk 00:22:12].

Abe Silberstein:

Neglected. Yes.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah. And in my research area in the Balkans, I can assure you that they've neglected it.

Abe Silberstein:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

... for over 15 years.

Abe Silberstein:

Right. But in the Middle East, I think there is this more intentionality to where there's, "We've invested too much blood and treasure in this region. We need to either leave a security architecture that works, but either way we need to leave." And you're right that Syria, I think was a very important-

Tanya Domi:

Was a turning point.

Abe Silberstein:

... turning point for Putin as well to notice where the US was moving, but also Afghanistan over the summer where the US commitment was also seen as very lacking even if one agrees, I think with the Biden administration's decision to ultimately withdraw, it was done in a way that didn't suggest the US saw a long-term importance for Afghanistan stability.

Tanya Domi:

I completely agree. I completely agree. And I would submit that Putin moved on Ukraine in a moment where he felt United States was very soft in post-exit Afghanistan, weak and that the Europeans hadn't demonstrated much of any kind of ability to stand up to Russia. As a matter of fact, if you look at London and you look at the Germans, they're deeply in bed with them financially in investments and in all different kinds of ways. And so, I think Putin picked his moment. He's going to turn 70 in October and this is part of his, I believe he thought it was part of his mission or legacy to reclaim and reobtain part of the former USSR and I think he jumped the shark.

Abe Silberstein:

I guess, who knows what he's thinking, but there's-

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Well, I'm conjecturing for sure.

Abe Silberstein:

Right. There's this, just to know there were most Kremlin connected analysts who were at least speaking publicly in the months, in the weeks leading up to this. Almost all them didn't believe there would be a war, right? They said that there was this tension between Russia having its own security concerns about Ukraine joining NATO, but there wasn't this bellicose rhetoric leading up to the war. You had troop movements that the United States was broadcasting to the world, making that clear, but the actual message from everyone, but Putin because Putin has been fairly isolated over the last couple of years-

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Abe Silberstein:

... were essentially saying this was a bluff, this wasn't meant to actually be an invasion. I think that the fact that it actually happened really stunned Europe into action, Germany canceled or suspended Nord Stream 2-

Tanya Domi:

Nord Stream 2. Yes.

Abe Silberstein:

... very shortly after Macron has been... France tends to see Russia in a more pragmatic light.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Abe Silberstein:

But even they have become, I think, much more assertive over the last couple of weeks at ensuring European solidarity.

Tanya Domi:

I agree with that. I agree with that. Very interesting. So, in that vein, you're talking about the US trying to leave or get out of the Middle East. Blinken just made a trip to the Middle East and he met with the Israelis and it's been reported that the Israelis were reassuring Blinken, even though they don't have sanction laws in Israel that they're going to pay attention to the sanctions that have been applied and they will make every effort to uphold them. That's kind of blown up on them with regard to Yad Vashem, Abramovich that was a major donor, a Russian oligarch who owned the Chelsea Football Club and sold it, had to get out. What do you make of that? It's interesting, Haaretz editor in chief said that Israel should fully fund Yad Vashem, and people should know that Yad Vashem documents the righteous people that have saved Jews throughout history. They document those stories. They document the facts of those stories. And she has stated that the government of Israel should fully fund Yad Vashem and they shouldn't be dependent on any individual donors.

Abe Silberstein:

My concern with Abramovich and others like him giving money to institutions and organizations is not so much the money itself, but how these institutions behave upon receiving the money. Yad Vashem or its chairman rather unfortunately disgraced itself very early on in this conflict by signing onto this letter to the US ambassador to Israel, essentially testifying to Abramovich's character with the evidence for which was basically his willingness to give money to Jewish organizations. This I think is pretty much unacceptable and shouldn't be seen as acceptable, but it is a difficult question, I think for organizations just around the world, including universities, whether or not to take this money because this is on the one hand, yes, it's clearly an ill-gotten gain. Abramovich was one of the oligarchs who took advantage of the fire-sale of Russian state assets in the 1990s and has stayed wealthy and connected by dint of his relationship with Putin and the Kremlin.

Abe Silberstein:

So, this is certainly money that isn't clean in any way, but many other people in the West don't have clean money either.

Tanya Domi:

Very true.

Abe Silberstein:

And is Abramovich's money so much dirtier than that? And I think it's very difficult to draw that line. So, instead I think what should be done is to ensure that these donors are not unduly influential in these organizations. And oftentimes it's not even because they've exercised this influence. I don't suspect Abramovich leaned on Yad Vashem to do this. I think they actually reacted like that because they preempted Abramovich's request. It was an implied understanding. And I think that institutions around the world, including Yad Vashem need to take that into account and need to come up with internal procedures to make sure they aren't compromised in this way, if they're going to take this money at all of course.

Tanya Domi:

Of course, of course. So, the promise has been made to review the US sanctions and to ensure that Israel adheres to them and reassurances to Blinken on that matter. But also, he actually went to the Middle East to post this Negev countries summit. And what are your thoughts about that? And more broadly, let's talk more about what is the US foreign policy now and their relationship with Israel?

Abe Silberstein:

So, this trip by Secretary of State Blinken, I think is a very good example of where the Biden administration's policy in the Middle East is headed, which is one of maintenance rather than ambition to keep its alliances together in this case, Israel, but also with the Arab states who are now involved in the Abraham Accords and this Negev summits of this included the United Arab Emirates, which was an interesting storyline with them, was that they had not been supporting the US position on Ukraine at the United Nations. And according, I think this was in Axios a few weeks ago that Israel actually leaned on them a little bit to come back into the US fold, at least on those kind of matters.

Tanya Domi:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Abe Silberstein:

The ambitions of these summits, I think are just to keep the idea of normalization of Israel in the region going, but without seeking kind of the more difficult issues and trying to solve them mainly the Palestinian conflict, which was completely off the agenda. And in fact, at the same time as this meeting was going on in the Negev, King Abdullah of Jordan was meeting privately with President Abbass in Ramallah.

Tanya Domi:

Right.

Abe Silberstein:

There are these two separate tracks going and the US is mainly focused on not rocking the boat, so to speak.

Tanya Domi:

Exactly. I think you're spot on there. I would also add, they're not making any commitments, any commitments to like major undertaking.

Abe Silberstein:

No.

Tanya Domi:

And as J Street has said, the conditions right now aren't there to even begin negotiating a peace, whatever peace agreement would even be envisioned. It's just the conditions aren't there.

Abe Silberstein:

The conditions aren't there, but there's also an unwillingness to say what those conditions are, lest put into a situation where you are committed to a diplomatic process. So, I think that line is used quite a lot. I don't think it's fully genuine when that is said, because if there was... I don't believe the Biden administration is serious about launching a political diplomatic process. I don't think it has the pretense to do that. It's brought on some very experienced and significant diplomats and policymakers, people like [inaudible 00:31:15] and Tamara Coffman at USAID who are very experienced policymakers and diplomats talented through the roof, but they're there to bring slower changes that the Biden administration thinks it might be able to achieve, things that are people to people organizing or economic projects.

Tanya Domi:

I would say it's beyond Israel too, the way they're behaving. I mean, in the Balkans, they're saying, "We want to do this electoral law reform in Bosnia." Or, "We want to do this thing, but we're going to go in, we're going to do this and then we're going to get out." We're basically trying to maintain as you've suggested some level of normality in the relationship, but there's no indications of anything beyond that.

Abe Silberstein:

No. And in some ways that could be disappointing to people like as you said, groups like J Street, which are founded to kind of encourage a very progressive American policy in the region.

Tanya Domi:

To state solution. Yeah.

Abe Silberstein:

But then there's also this thinking of has US involvement in the region been positive or beneficial and is a more active political approach necessarily something that will be good for the people in the region. And that's actually something I touched on in the Kissinger book review that you mentioned.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. Yeah. Well, let's get to that soon, but let me just ask you, do you think that as you mentioned, some people might be disappointed by this. This follows 12 years of Netanyahu, and I imagine that there are people in Israel that are relieved that he's gone and that this presents an opportunity, but what do you say you about that?

Abe Silberstein:

It presents opportunities on a certain narrow range of issues one of which is not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unfortunately. Yesterday, I was at a meeting with the current minister of regional cooperation in Israel, individual named Issawi Frej, who was in fact only the second Arab Muslim minister in the history-

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, I saw your picture or photograph.

Abe Silberstein:

... of Israel. Yes. So, this was a meeting that he had with, it was an on the record meeting. So I don't think there's any problem with me saying this with like New York Jewish figures that he wanted to meet. And one point he emphasized again and again was that the left decided to join this government because to protect democracy, which they felt was under threat by Netanyahu and people to his right, and also to stop incitement against minorities, particularly Arabs, which was becoming a major problem also toward the end of Netanyahu's governments. On those issues, and also on issues, I think of local development of fighting crime in Arab communities, which has been a problem for the last 20 years, because policing has essentially been non-existent in some of these areas since certain events that happened in the early 2000s.

Abe Silberstein:

And on those issues, I think there's a great room for progress and groups like the Abraham Initiatives are doing that important work and coming up with policy recommendations and models and ideas that we think might be able to be adopted by this government, but on broader political questions, they can't touch them or else the government either falls apart, or it becomes clear very quickly that nothing is going to happen.

Tanya Domi:

Nothing's going to change. Speaking of which, you were talking about policing in these neighborhoods and in light of these recent attacks killing 11 people, the 972 Blog published an article about, well, during Netanyahu's time in office, which is 12 years, he ignored the gun proliferation issue. And we have a gun problem in America. And it sounds like Israel has a gun problem too.

Abe Silberstein:

It has a gun problem in its majority Arab communities, particularly in the north, where, as I said, like since 2000, since there was this terrible shooting of protestors that took place on an October of 2000, there had been this policy in Israel just not to put too much police in some of these neighbors to allow communities to police themselves. And there were certain arguments for that that made sense because there's also police brutality issues in Israel, and there are Arab communities and the police don't always trust each other in ways. So there is that very-

Tanya Domi:

Sounds like America.

Abe Silberstein:

... Yes. But unfortunately what happened was there was too much neglect and crime families and mafias et cetera, just were able to develop and weapons were proliferating in these communities. What's

happened more recently is that instead of just criminal elements using these weapons, now terrorists have started to tap into these illegal weapons networks. And now, the Israeli government is clearly much more concerned about it. Although to be fair over the last year, this government has prioritized law enforcement in Arab communities. It's not completely new to them, but that article you mentioned in 972 was completely right. This was neglected by Netanyahu for 12 years. He would often incite against Arab communities. He would call them terrorists, et cetera, but they never dealt with the actual problems. And now some of these problems are beginning to seep into other parts of the country as we've seen in the last week.

Tanya Domi:

Well, Axios does report with regard to this issue and the recent killings that there's a lot of concern about the month of April because Passover, Easter-

Abe Silberstein:

Ramadan.

Tanya Domi:

... and Ramadan all happen in the same month for the first time in a decade. And there's real concern with all these visitors that are going to come to Jerusalem, that security be maintained because given the holidays, there is going to be an influx of visitors.

Abe Silberstein:

Yeah, it's a very real concern because last May, if people recall there was this war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, but what precipitated that war was intercommunal violence in Jerusalem-

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Abe Silberstein:

... particularly around the Temple Mount and around Damascus Gate. And these are again, places that are going to become sites of pilgrimage and sites of worship over the next month in particular.

Tanya Domi:

Yes.

Abe Silberstein:

And this is clearly very concerning for the government. I hope that they will be able to maintain calm and to make sure through their relationships with Jordan and others to keep the peace in that area through the holidays and allow everyone who wants to worship to be able to do so peacefully and without being the victims of another horrific terror attack. But what I'm most afraid of is that this government can't necessarily stop certain provocations from far right actors, such as flag marches in the Old City, which is another thing that's kind of an inflammatory to this.

Tanya Domi:

And inciteful.

Abe Silberstein:

Yes. I think there are members of the coalition who can speak out. The current minister of public security is from the Labor Party. So they're in charge of the police. So, Bennett can keep himself away from that issue if he wants to and I think he will. It's another one of those issues that could potentially rip apart this government in a way.

Tanya Domi:

Let's hope that that doesn't happen. So, what I'd like now to talk about, what brought me into awareness of you was your essay in War on the Rocks. And for our listeners, it's a highly regarded security publication where it just gathers essays by people, publishes essays by people on security issues. And it's interesting because you reviewed the book by Martin Indyk, the great Martin Indyk, I would say one of the foremost significant diplomats in the Middle East and was highly engaged and influential in the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords and took place during the Clinton administration although it had been negotiated under the previous Bush administration and he wrote this book about Henry Kissinger and it's interesting because Henry Kissinger never struck me as really a Middle East diplomat.

Abe Silberstein:

Right.

Tanya Domi:

As a matter of fact, the guy who wrote the book is the diplomat in my view, in a significant part of my adult life. And when I was working on Capitol Hill, Martin Indyk was the go-to diplomat by both Democrats and Republicans. And so, tell me what you learned in this book about Henry Kissinger and the yard of Middle East diplomacy?

Abe Silberstein:

You're exactly right that Kissinger is not very well-known for Middle East diplomacy, even though kind of the term shuttle diplomacy that people use very frequently comes from Kissinger's Middle East travels in the seventies between Israel and Egypt following the 1973 war.

Tanya Domi:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Abe Silberstein:

But what I found most fascinating about this book was that for the first 600 or so pages, Martin Indyk kind of depicts this world that very clearly is no longer our world, a bipolar world between the United States and the Soviet Union, a world with an active Arab-Israeli conflict, a world where Iran is a Western ally. He was operating in a very different region compared to what the United States faces today. And ultimately the end of the book, I felt had this argument about how Kissinger provides some sort of model for future American diplomats working in the Middle East.

Abe Silberstein:

And although I thought the book was great in terms of as history and as narrative, I highly recommend it, but the problem with the argument that I have, and with this idea of looking at Kissinger as a model in particular, is that I think it presupposes the beneficence of US leadership in the region. And that's something that over the last two or three years, I've come to regard as a [inaudible 00:41:25] that should be challenged more often. And Martin Indyk is of course, a former US ambassador to Israel. He worked also, as you said during multiple administrations including the Clinton administration and the Obama administration, he's now at the Council on Foreign Relations. So, I think this is a topic that's very sensitive for him, but I'm still very much convinced as future US policymakers should not be thinking of themselves as leaders in the Middle East. And I think that might be a problem.

Tanya Domi:

Interesting. So, do you think given the world situation that we're confronted with and in the Middle East itself, do you think there's ever going to be another American diplomat in the profile of Martin Indyk?

Abe Silberstein:

It's hard to say. Right now, it doesn't seem so. If we take the long-term trends of what Washington says about its foreign policy, seriously, we are continuously pivoting away from the Middle East. We are refocusing our efforts on Asia. If there's now a new conflict in Europe that in fact takes up even more space that could otherwise have been spent on the Middle East. And there is this notion of finite attention spans of how can the United States focus everywhere at once. We aren't going to be the unipolar superpower that we were following the Cold War for very much longer. I think there is a certain feeling of inevitability of China's rise and the US needing to pivot towards there and to focus on the Asia-Pacific region at the expense of the Middle East and this is a very intentional shift.

Abe Silberstein:

So, I don't see that happening, but I also don't think we need to see that as necessarily a bad thing. It could be that the United States since the Oslo Accords, and I think the record shows this actually hasn't been an particularly effective mediator between Israel and the Palestinians. If we're focusing on that issue alone rather than the broader region, which is a separate matter, but there are plenty of opportunities that have been missed over the years because the US has insisted on a leadership role. I remember during the Obama administration, François Hollande and France wanted to play a more significant role in the Middle East, but the United States jealously guards its portfolios that way, but we're continuously failing to bring about a desired result. And I wonder how much of this is worth it. How much of this is worthwhile? We have this relationship with Israel. Yes, that's most likely going to endure, but should we be involved with its conflicts with the Palestinians? And I think my answer is increasingly no.

Tanya Domi:

Well, I think we're going to end this podcast here. This has been a really rich and wide ranging discussion. To all of guests who may be on Twitter, I urge you to follow Abe Silberstein and he is @Abe, S-I-L-B-E. Follow him. You will learn a lot about Middle East politics and about what is happening in Israel. Abe, I want to thank you so much for coming on The Thought Project today.

Abe Silberstein:

Thank you so much for having me, Tanya.

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Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Abe Silberstein, a graduate student in Middle East Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.