

Elite Capture in Israel – An Anthropological Perspective



by **Geoffrey Clarfield**

My favorite explanation of Hamas' and its Iranian sponsors' latest war against Israel is the erudite Israeli expert on the Arab and Islamic world, Professor Mordechai Kedar, an Israeli Jew who teaches at what Westerners would call Israel's only conservative university, Bar Ilan.

It is conservative because it supports Jewish tradition. Almost all of the other institutes of higher learning in Israel are avowedly and sometimes militantly secular.

[Kedar](#), a former officer in the Israeli Defense Forces, has

spent his academic life studying Islamic and Arab history and society. He explains that the animus of Palestinians, Arabs, and Islamists against the Jewish state is based on the consensus of Islamic religious thought that believes that Jews as a religion, people, or nation are never to be the equals of Muslims, and so their independent state, Israel, must be “struck down.”

This simple truth is rarely taught and explored in North American institutions of higher learning as accusations of “Islamophobia” must be avoided at all costs, even if true. It is difficult to sustain this position as an academic in Israel’s secular institutes of higher learning.

Then there is [Caroline Glick](#), an Israel-based American resident of Israel who was once an embedded reporter with the U.S. Army in Iraq during the second Gulf War. Today as an English-speaking Israeli journalist and commentator on political affairs, Glick honestly and clearly explains that today’s American government, the Democratic Party, and the so-called “deep state” are ambivalent and one-sided when it comes to the security of a close ally and the Middle East’s only democratic government—Israel.

Some of these characters go beyond ambivalence and actively root for the U.S. and Israel’s mortal enemies in the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as the recently shamed Iran envoy Robert Malley.

Then there is California-based [Professor Victor Davis Hanson](#), a farmer, classicist, and military historian who has documented the rise of wokeness in American higher education and their related Washington-based think tanks. His book, *Who Killed Homer*, is an important text on the decline of the proper study of the classics.

Hanson understands that American exceptionalism is fundamentally linked to Israeli exceptionalism and that

Israel, by right, must be supported by this latest world power. And, he knows that the wokeness and anti-democratic ideologies that afflict most Ivy League institutions in the U.S. such as Harvard, Yale, and Columbia are the mirror opposite of the U.S. Constitution.

And so, on an almost daily basis, I read Kedar, Glick, and Hanson, as well as a few others such as Canadian journalists [Rex Murphy](#) (from independent thinking Newfoundland) and [John Robson](#) who represents the pro-Israel, Burkean version of Canadian conservative intellectuals. These five writers keep me reasonably well informed.

But what these very talented and gifted analysts have missed is the anthropological perspective. Given the colossal intelligence and military unpreparedness of the Israeli establishment during this latest incursion by Hamas, perhaps there is a deeper explanation as to why the Israeli elites were so unprepared.

One such explanation is that Israeli intellectuals, academics, professionals, and the Israeli mainstream media have been “captured” by the same liberal left-leaning ideologies of [wokeness](#), which for the last thirty years have permeated European and American academia and professional schools. So, one must engage in a preliminary anthropological explanation of how “elite capture” has blinded and weakened Israeli professionals and decision-makers, even in the military.

Elite capture in Israel is something that you must experience to appreciate. It permeates the middle and upper classes, which means the legal, medical, academic, political, and most military elites, in ways that only an ethnographer can discern as so much of this behavior is implicit and not explicit.

I will describe how elite capture operates and manifests in the daily lives of Israelis, drawing from my extensive experience living and working among individuals of this class

(specifically the middle and upper-middle classes) during my time abroad in Israel and regular visits. I will elucidate the Israeli terminology that underpins this perspective and delve into some of the associated practices and beliefs. This approach to cultural analysis, known as the “emic” or insider’s approach, was first articulated by anthropological linguist Kenneth Pike.

The first and widely popular Israeli word is “America.” This is a term used by native Israeli Hebrew speakers when confronted with any situation that spells “abundance” “ease” or “luxury.” Here are some common examples. Someone lays on an incredible spread of food and drink for friends and family during one of the many Jewish holidays that punctuate the working year. A man will walk into his relative’s house and see a table spread with fine food and drink and exclaim, “America.”

Or an Israeli couple will sign into one of the world-class Israeli luxury spas on the shores of the Dead Sea. A relative will call them on the phone and ask how the facilities are. One of many answers can be, “America.”

This term can also be used to describe appreciation for any fancy gadget that may still be hard to get in Israel but is thought of as a luxury import. “America” becomes a way of expressing their appreciation for this special gadget in Israel, which is a gadget-obsessed society (explaining much of the emotional motivation behind Israeli high-tech genius).

Then there is the word “Chul,” which is the Hebrew short form for “Chuts Le Aretz,” meaning “overseas.” A family friend or relative calls the office line of an important industrialist, politician, or academic and asks to speak to them. The secretary replies, “He or she is in Chul.” Not France or England or India but Chul. Then and only then can one ask, where particularly that notable may be, which may then be interpreted as actually being nosy in a society famous for

loose social and interpersonal boundaries.

When the notable returns to Israel the first question one asks is, how was "Chul?" Travels and visits to less developed parts of the world like Asia or Latin America are sometimes referred to as Chul, but more often by their proper geographic names, Kenya, India, and Latin America. So when someone comes back from a safari the question is specific, "How was Kenya, or South Africa, or Vietnam?" It is a subtle distinction but shows that Israelis are enamored most by Europe and North America.

The Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, M.I.T., and McGill (plus a few other institutions of higher learning in California), this is where aspiring Israeli academics and scientists want to do their Ph.Ds. or post-doctoral fellowships.

When I worked for Technion, I worked with every department, which included the medical school. I noticed then (in the 1990s) that about 80 percent of the staff had either received their medical diplomas in the U.S. or, having obtained their diplomas in Israel, had gone to the States to study and work for a good three years. This is now common practice.

So what happens when a young Israeli couple, both who have done their military service, both who have academic degrees, but one spouse is invited to the U.S. or Canada to study and work? They go. By that time they often have young children. They arrive in their city of choice and are directed by other Israeli professionals to where there is good housing – perhaps a local Jewish community and reasonable public schools.

Here are some of their initial reactions.

Let us take Canada and the U.S. for example. First, they are amazed at the space. These large countries have spacious cities with fine schools, libraries, shopping centers, and downtown cores which are centers of culture. They find that

life in North America is child and family-friendly and that in most cases the non-Jews with whom they interact do not make a big deal about them being Israelis.

The level of anti-Semitism in North America is lower than in Europe and these visiting Israelis are usually accepted as academic and professional equals. Their children make friends in school and everyone's English improves, as fluency in this language is not only socially prestigious back in Israel but of great practical value in the professional world.

In the course of their work, they may meet citizens of countries who are still at war with Israel or hostile towards its independence, such as Egyptians, Saudi Arabians, Pakistanis, or Indian Muslims. It is unlikely that they will become friends. But, in the workforce, these non-Canadian or American professional visitors or immigrants from the Muslim world, know that they cannot openly sling racial slurs. If they did, they may be censured or deported.

Some of these Muslim immigrants or visitors may indeed be fed up with the corruption of most Islamic countries and the shariah-driven Islamic fanaticism that structures these societies and may, in some instances, discover that Israelis are not the demons that they were taught to believe.

The young professional Israeli family in Chul becomes a base for parents and relatives who visit them in their new homes and together they often visit towns, cities, and national parks—the jewel in the crown of North America. They celebrate and enjoy being Israelis in the Western World.

During the last 20 years, even the sciences at North American universities have gone [woke](#). The humanities and social sciences have long ago gone woke. So those Israelis in the STEM world keep a low profile and go to their sensitivity training sessions without complaint, thinking of it as “michigas”—a Yiddish word based on the Hebrew word for

“madness,” and they get on with their careers.

When the inevitable periodic anti-Semitic anti-Zionist sentiments flood the campuses and professional schools, these visiting Israeli professionals choose to keep a low profile and let the native Jewish and non-Jewish friends of Israel take up the local argument against these opponents of Western civilization. They shrug and get on with their lives. Despite these periodic institutional outbreaks of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist sentiments on campus, some visiting Israeli professionals are so taken with the liberality of North American life that they stay on.

I remember clearly having dinner with one such family when I was working in Manhattan, just over a decade ago. The father of the family was an Israeli-trained physicist who was invited by his American university where he did his post-doc to stay on in a tenured position. He succeeded and made the United States his home. He eventually became department head at a young age.

Clearly, he felt that he was existing in the best of all possible worlds, a Jew, an Israeli, and a success in American academia with all the material and professional prestige that one could want. He had “made it” in both Israel and now in America. This brought him extra prestige from his parents, family, and colleagues who remained in Israel.

His daughter did not have the scientific inclinations of her father and chose to study for a degree in the social sciences and journalism. She eventually got a job as an intern for one of the Manhattan-based legacy news institutions. When Israel was attacked once again by Hezbollah or Hamas, she was shocked and overwhelmed to be face to face with the visceral anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist rhetoric that periodically explodes in the U.S. liberal media.

As I have seen this numerous times over the decades, I am

never surprised by it, however, she and her family were in shock. In disbelief, they kept asking me, "How could they behave like this, how can they do and say such things?"

Clearly, they had misread the nature of a divided American society, not fully recognizing that the Ivy Leagues, the think tanks, the media, and most of the Democratic party (whose voters comprise 90 percent of American academics) have become more and more anti-Israel since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Why?

They have been captured by cultural Marxists who have succeeded in their "march through the institutions." Not being trained as cultural anthropologists, Israelis in North America often find it hard to distinguish the difference between being tolerated and accepted. They are tolerated and only occasionally fully accepted.

These new immigrants' existential need and justifiable right to expect unequivocal North American support for their independent Jewish state has been less and less accepted by the liberal "establishment" that now run the American legacy media and institutions of higher education. Oddly, these same Israelis would have had to live in the deep south to get the kind of support and understanding of Israel that they expect from "Americans.

Among Israeli professionals, the hierarchy of prestige follows a specific pattern. In this order, science, engineering, medicine, and law take the top positions as the most esteemed professions within the Israeli middle and upper-middle classes. Business ascends to prominence primarily when linked to high-tech ventures or entrepreneurial endeavors that yield substantial wealth. This ability to create value from minimal resources, a trait for which both Jews and Israelis are renowned, carries its own distinct prestige within the country.

And so when anthropologists, sociologists, literary historians, Middle Eastern experts, and the lesser orders of Israeli academics go to pursue their doctorates or post-doctorates at the Ivy Leagues they often already believe that “Israeli intransigence” of some sort is what is really stopping Middle Eastern peace. Many Israelis get Stockholm Syndrome after such an experience and begin identifying with people, cultures, and a religion that are hell-bent on destroying them as a people and a nation.

Let me quote one representative of a disproportionate number of elite, extreme left-leaning Israeli academics whose minds have been captured by their enemies.

In 2012, Israel-born, British university-based anti-Zionist professor, Ilan Pappé wrote this historical nonsense:

Today, Israel is a formidable settler-colonialist state, unwilling to transform or compromise, and eager to crush by whatever means necessary any resistance to its control and rule in historical Palestine. Beginning with the ethnic cleansing of 80 percent of Palestine in 1948, and Israel’s occupation of the remaining 20 percent of the land in 1967, Palestinians in Israel are now enclaved in mega-prisons, bantustans, and besieged cantons, and singled out through discriminatory policies. Meanwhile, millions of Palestinian refugees around the world have no way to return home, and time has only weakened, if not annihilated, all internal challenges to this ideological infrastructure. The Israeli settler state continues to further colonize and uproot the indigenous people of Palestine.

This is the song of the anti-Israel academic left, which has been dominant for some time in Europe and the United Kingdom, and now is mainstream among the Ivy Leagues of North America and among far too many of the professional elite in Israel.

At Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, Pappé is idealized. His views,

or milder variants of them, are close to mainstream among many returning Israeli social scientists. Simply put, the argument is that "Israel" somehow is the obstacle to "peace." Academics like Pappe are saying nothing new. They are simply aping the worldview of anti-Zionist academic elites.

And so, the dear reader may ask: Are Israeli students abroad not already intellectually vaccinated so to speak by their own Israeli institutions of higher learning? The answer is no.

These institutions continue to be dominated by left-leaning, largely ethnically Ashkenazim (Jews descended from the pre-Holocaust communities of Eastern Europe) so many of whose parents and grandparents a mere two generations ago considered themselves "Marxist Zionists!"

And so it is with great irony that one reads that Harvard is now the intellectual center of support for this latest pre-civilizational pogrom against Israel by Hamas and this has finally caused one of its most generous American Jewish donors, Mr. Wexner, to suspend funding for one of his programs.

Well, this program has been sending successful Israeli professionals and military leaders to Harvard to study at the Kennedy School, a hotbed of left-leaning "soft power" advocates. Clearly, the project has been a failure, and suspension of funding suggests that the donor may have only recently realized this.

We can clearly state that so many of the Israeli elite see themselves, their country, and history through the eyes of non-Jewish and ideologically compromised foreigners. These Israelis believe that Israel's founding may have even been a "sin" and so tend to support two or three-state solutions (Gaza, West Bank, Jordan), which would give Israel what the late Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban described as "Auschwitz borders." At the same time, they downplay rampant

Marxist and Islamic anti-Semitism. How does this play out in Israel? Poorly.

Most Israeli institutions of higher learning may be just as good as those abroad, but in the eyes of the Israeli elites, they are second-rate. To really be someone in Israel, you need to experience or get a degree from "chul." And you must publish in non-Israeli journals, whose editorial boards are often rabidly anti-Israel (such as the American Anthropological Association, whose members recently voted for an academic boycott of Israeli institutions of higher learning).

The Israeli products of a degree from "Chul" can come home and say, "When I was at Harvard, Oxford, Yale, MIT, the Sorbonne, etc..." Then your unsophisticated relatives and colleagues (the ones who stayed behind in little, provincial Israel) will be intimidated by your worldliness, by your foreign degrees, your impeccable academic English or French, and the fact that you now see your country and people through foreign eyes.

Some years ago I was deeply disturbed to watch Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (an MIT graduate) on an Israeli TV talk show answering questions from a very young audience. They were enamored by his presence, and he can be extremely warm and charming in his native Hebrew.

In one of his remarks, he said simply, "The Americans like us." No one asked for an explanation. No one challenged him. He had been to "Chul," and they had not. He had a degree from Harvard and they did not. How naive and absurd this was. But essentially, he was implicitly boasting about having gone to "Chul" to get his degree and worldly authority.

The left-leaning majority elites of the West have been very, very successful in occupying the minds and world views of professional Israelis. They have captured most Israeli elites and turned these talented and hard-working professionals into

expatriates in their own country—many who use liberal phrases like “the cycle of violence” and often descend into absurd rants of moral equivalence between democratic Israel and its consistently murderous jihadi enemies. As a result, the Israeli elite have once again, and tragically, misread their neighbors in Gaza.

Professor Mordechai Kedar did not do his Ph.D. outside of Israel, nor his post-doc. Born and raised in Israel he did his Ph.D. at Bar Ilan. He is, however, fluent in Arabic and Al Jazeera’s (no friend of Israel) Israeli commentator of choice, who tells non-elite Israelis how to really think and feel. The Arabs are interested. CNN is not.

In Israeli slang, he is, from the Arab point of view, in the Arabic phrase used in spoken Hebrew, “min al balad,” from the local earth or soil. Simply put, he is “native and indigenous.” He represents the not-so-silent Israeli majority who recently voted in a democratically elected government supporting a judicial reform package that would restrict the disproportionate power of the left-leaning Israeli experts who are so proud to have been “abroad” in Chul.

The Arab journalists at Al Jazeera know this and know that Kedar speaks for the majority of Israelis, whose origins lie in the Near East, and whose parents experienced Islamic rule firsthand before coming to Israel.

Kedar is one of few Israeli intellectuals and near-Eastern experts who has rebelled against the largely Ashkenazic captured elite of Israel professionals. That is precisely why I read him. He is usually spot on. With the decline of the legacy media in Israel and abroad we will be hearing more from him, and a growing number of Israelis like him.

First published in [*Minding the Campus*](#).