

Film

A controversial documentary upended the narrative on Jenin 20 years ago. Has anything changed since?

By Mira Fox

Two decades ago, during the Second Intifada, Israeli forces raided the Jenin refugee camp. In the aftermath of the 10-day battle, Israel blockaded the camp for days, forbidding medical teams, journalists and a U.N. fact-finding mission from entering. But Muhammad Bakri, an Arab-Israeli actor, snuck into the camp with a camera, interviewing numerous residents. The resulting film, *Jenin, Jenin*, which Bakri released shortly afterward, told the Palestinian side of what West Bank residents refer to as the Jenin massacre, painting a very different story — with a much higher civilian death toll — than the version from the Israeli government.

Last Thursday, the Israeli military entered the Palestinian city of Jenin, in the West Bank, killing nine Palestinians in the shootout, including at least two civilians. It was the deadliest day for Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in over a year — even given the fact that 2022 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in two decades. But this time, we don't need a guerilla documentary to know about it.

Within hours after the Israeli military attacked, videos emerged on Twitter of tanks rolling through the streets of Jenin. A viral clip showed mothers and children running through the halls of a hospital,

apparently fleeing tear gas from IDF soldiers. The daughter of Majda Naefa, the 61-year-old woman allegedly shot by Israeli forces, made a video showing exactly how the bullet hit her mother through a window. Others compiled a video of smiling photos of Naefa to mourn her death. Both videos quickly went viral.

Twenty years ago, Jenin, Jenin was one of the only ways to hear these sorts of stories. Otherwise, information about the battle was dominated by official government statements about death tolls and danger — Israel claimed they killed around 50 Palestinians, the majority of whom were responsible for bus bombings and terrorist attacks that killed hundreds of Israelis, while Palestinians alleged a death toll near 500 composed largely of civilians. But both sides of the debate focused on numbers instead of humans.

Bakri's documentary was one of the only ways to hear the stories of Palestinian people after the violence in Jenin. Though he only entered the refugee camp after the fighting had ceased, the descriptions are vivid. "They shot at everything that moved, even a cat," says one man. "Why does a sniper shoot a 12-year-old unarmed child who can barely walk? Why shoot an old woman? Why crush a young man under a

tank when he is holding his arms up in the air?”

Perhaps most shocking is the testimony of a young girl, perhaps around 12, who says she dreams of torturing then-prime minister Ariel Sharon. “I’m not afraid of these cowards. They’re like mice. Despite their great weapons, they still hide behind their tanks, afraid of civilians like us. Their cowardice is legendary,” she says. “I would sacrifice my life for the camp.”

Yet, today when social media has given everyone a platform to tell their personal stories, the stories in Jenin, Jenin feel almost commonplace. Now everyone has a camera in their pocket, and can capture the violence as it unfolds, unlike Bakri’s film which was limited to shots panning over rubble afterward.

And this access has changed the narrative. In Jenin, Jenin, residents say, frustratedly, that the world mourns a single Jewish death yet hardly cares about hundreds of Arab lives. Today, however, “Free Palestine” or the emoji of a Palestinian flag is a ubiquitous comment online.

A Jewish influencer posts a challah recipe? You’ll find Palestinian flags in the comment sections. At this year’s World Cup in Qatar, players from Arab countries wore the Palestinian flag as an armband. And even after an armed gunman killed eight Israelis outside a synagogue on Friday night, the day after last week’s Jenin raid, tweets mourning those deaths were ratioed by comments calling the Israeli deaths “karma” and otherwise referencing the Palestinian deaths the day before.

This scenario would have been hard to imagine in 2002 when Jenin, Jenin came out. Shortly after its release, the Israeli Film Ratings Board banned the documentary,

claiming that it showed only one side of the story. (Independent cinemas in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv continued to illegally screen the film.) Bakri countered that media only showing the Israeli side is widely distributed, and ultimately, the court overturned the ban, saying the film board did not have “a monopoly over truth.”

Today, banning a documentary seems useless — after all, what’s the point in an era of social media? A viral video is likely to reach more eyes than an independent film anyway, and courts have little sway over the moderation policies of social media companies.

This is not to say that the tables have turned entirely. While the Palestinian fight may be trendy online, the real-world changes have not been so abrupt. Palestinians still live under occupation, and Israel’s military might still greatly outstrips Palestinian insurgents. Part of the reason videos of Palestinians running down the street, throwing stones at tanks or being forcibly evicted from their homes, are so common online is because they’re so common in life.

And at least institutionally, Israel’s command of the narrative remains strong; The New York Times, the U.S. newspaper of record, sent a push alert about the Israeli synagogue deaths but not about the Palestinian deaths in Jenin the day before. Numerous American politicians released statements mourning the Israeli deaths though they had been silent about the Palestinian ones.

But online — where many of us conduct large portions of our lives — we no longer need to rely on a film like Jenin, Jenin to hear civilians’ voices.

Poland and Germany have long taken opposing approaches to Holocaust remembrance. Touring them with Doug Emhoff, the difference was stark

By Laura E. Adkins

BERLIN — It is one thing to acknowledge the dark parts of your country's history. It is quite another to reckon with them.

I've spent the past six days traveling through Poland and Germany with Doug Emhoff, the second gentleman of the United States, as he's toured sites of Holocaust atrocities and engaged in a series of conversations about rising antisemitism.

And at each stop, whether walking through the soggy woods in Gorlice, Poland — where Emhoff has family roots — or down the immaculate streets of Berlin, I tried to make sense of what had happened here.

It may sound trite: We know what happened, and it was bad. The Holocaust decimated European Jewry. Six million Jews, and millions of non-Jews, were murdered. The population — and in many ways, the Jewish people — have never recovered.

In Poland and Germany, I witnessed two dramatically different ways of dealing with these facts. Poland was home to some of the deadliest concentration camps during the Holocaust, but its approach to remembrance makes the brutal nature of

the Nazi regime feel distant and foreign. In Germany, the horrors of the past are an inescapable part of the present.

Berlin especially makes open acknowledgement of the sins of the past, both collective and individual. There are abundant memorials to victims of the Holocaust and markers of past Nazi sites throughout the city. While there, Emhoff participated in solemn conferences, where leaders from across Europe discussed strategies to combat antisemitism.

German authorities have worked to be painstakingly honest about how their society arrived at a point at which the Holocaust was possible. At the Topography of Terror Museum, which sits on the site of the former SS headquarters, a gripping visual timeline of Nazi rule takes visitors through the dramatic escalation of nationalist frenzy and calculated violence during the 1930s and 1940s.

What struck me most deeply was the efficient organization of it all: this was no accidental genocide. Everything was planned to get rid of Jews, the Roma people, gay people, and dissidents as quickly as possible. And it was effective. Of

the estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Jews that reside in Berlin, an estimated 90% emigrated from the former Soviet Union. Virtually no descendants of the Jews who thrived here before the Nazi reign of terror remain.

In Germany, you feel as if you're standing in the clearly defined and omnipresent shadow of those who came before you. In Poland, you're constantly chased by ghosts. There are plenty of markers of the country's dark past — well-preserved concentration camp sites, Holocaust museums, buildings bearing Hebrew writing yet lacking any Jews.

But Poland's leaders have consistently avoided acknowledging the antisemitism that still festers there, or that the Polish people were anything but the Nazi's victims. (It's true both that Polish citizens suffered intensely under Nazi occupation, and that many Poles were complicit in turning in their Jewish neighbors.) Publish the words "Polish death camps" and you'll receive a formal letter of reprimand from the government.

At a Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration in Birkenau, I felt that lack of self-awareness acutely. While the ceremony itself was held outside, on the site of demolished barracks, the press and translation room was set up in an outbuilding room equipped with ovens. Seeing a coat rack casually set up next to them filled me with rage.

The building isn't a crematorium, and they weren't the ovens used to burn the bodies of those murdered in the camp. But their significance as a symbol is unmistakable — as is the callousness of treating the room that houses them as just another space to store extra stuff. It felt as if the officials in charge wanted the credit and gravitas that accompanies Holocaust remembrance,

without grappling with the gravity of what actually happened in this place.

Mourning the past, preserving the present

Tuesday, as Emhoff prepared to fly back to the United States, we visited Berlin's New Synagogue, which was built in 1866.

The once-opulent synagogue was partially destroyed by Allied bombing on Nov. 22-23, 1943, and has not been fully rebuilt. The vast majority of what was formerly the main sanctuary was destroyed: Only rows of columns and an expanse of gravel remain. The space in which today's 100 or so congregants pray, a plain room up several flights of stairs, takes up just a fraction of the building. The ark is not ornate. It's a simple wooden box on wheels, covered with a simple white curtain.

The synagogue's dual functions — monument to the past, and home to a small, committed set of contemporary worshippers — make it a particularly emotional memorial to Germany's once-thriving Jewish community.

When we teach younger generations about the Holocaust, we usually focus on the brutality: the humiliation, the violence, the propaganda and the killing. That's the focus I saw in Poland: a sense that it's honorable to remember these terrible things, so long as remembrance doesn't extend to an admission of culpability.

It's Germany's approach, exemplified in the New Synagogue, that better understands what the real point of remembrance is. There are supposed to be so, so many more of us. Seeing the shul, once a seat of vibrant Jewish culture and life, now preserved in a perpetual state of violent incompleteness, made me want to weep.

News

Israeli emissary blames political foes for eroding relations with American Jews

By Jacob Kornbluh

Amichai Chikli, Israel's new minister of diaspora affairs, touched down in the U.S. as American Jews organized protests against his government, the most right-wing in the nation's history. These rallies are smaller than those in Israel, but their participants are as fearful as their Israeli counterparts that the country is veering away from democracy and pluralism, and taking a dangerously combative tack against Palestinians.

This makes Chikli's job — to strengthen ties between Israel and Jews abroad, most of whom live in the U.S. — exceptionally tough. The alliance had deteriorated under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who led Israel for a dozen years and, thanks to the November elections, leads it once again. This time he is flanked by coalition partners that many call extreme. They have backed legislation to curb the power of the high court and proposed changes to the law of return that would narrow the pool of people to which it would apply. Fears that violence will spiral have intensified. Many American Jews were unnerved last week by an Israeli raid in the West Bank city of Jenin that left 10 dead. And they mourned the

seven killed in a terror attack at a Jerusalem synagogue Friday.

American Jews, the vast majority of whom vote against right wing candidates in their own country, feel increasingly discouraged with Israel.

Chikli, 41, who landed the ministry job because he has been willing to make bold political moves and challenge members of his own party, is painfully aware of the disconnect. But he said in a recent interview that he believes Jews abroad still need to be heard by Israel. "We don't have better ambassadors than the Jewish communities in diaspora," he said. "Their voice is very important, and they all genuinely love Israel."

In the U.S. last week, Chikli sought to assuage Americans' concerns about the future of Israeli democracy.

But at the same time, he placed blame on the Israeli opposition and media for what he said was American Jews' wrongheaded understanding of the Jewish state's new leadership. He charged that they are being "greatly influenced" by relentless attacks on the new government. And he blamed Yair

Lapid, the former prime minister and the current opposition leader, for “causing massive damage” to U.S.-Israel relations and the Israel-diaspora relationship.

Listening — but not to everyone

In his brief visit to the U.S., Chikli packed his schedule, meeting with leaders of the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox streams of Judaism, as well as the heads of the Jewish Federations of North America, UJA-Federation of New York, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, and Jewish Community Relations Council of New York. He met with the board of Momentum Project, a group sponsored by the Israeli government that seeks to strengthen Jewish identity and connection to Israel. He also addressed an annual conference hosted by the Israeli American Council, a group of ex-pat Israelis, in Austin, Texas.

He refused to meet, however, with the leadership of J Street, the prominent liberal advocacy organization that calls itself “the political home of pro-Israel, pro-peace, pro-democracy Americans.” Chikli called the group “hostile to Zionism and the state of Israel.” He said its lobbying supports policies that “serve Iran and the Palestinian Authority” and “advances antisemitic trends.” Ron Dermer, the former Israeli ambassador to the U.S. who is now the minister for strategic affairs, also snubbed the group during his tenure in Washington, D.C.

Logan Bayroff, a J Street spokesperson, called it “self-defeating and short-sighted” for the government of Israel to refuse to meet with the group. “Israel is the national homeland of the Jewish people, not just those who agree with Benjamin Netanyahu and Itamar Ben-Gvir,” Baayroff said, referring to Israel’s national security

minister, who has been much criticized for inflaming tensions with Palestinians. He noted that J Street’s views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its focus on democracy are shared by a large portion of U.S. Jews. “It shows just how deeply out of touch this government is with much of our community,” he said.

Chikli himself is a hardliner on the conflict. He has called Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas “one of the greatest Holocaust deniers of our generation and a distinct antisemite” for accusing Israel of carrying out “50 Holocausts” of Palestinians as he stood alongside the German chancellor in Berlin last year. On Sunday Chikli called the Palestinian Authority a “neo-Nazi entity.”

“We may disagree on policy and criticism is welcome, but all we ask is the trust and backing from diaspora Jews,” he said.

From Camp Ramah to the cabinet

The son of an ordained Conservative rabbi, and an alum of Camp Ramah, a network of Jewish summer camps affiliated with the Conservative Movement, Chikli fashions himself as an independent who speaks his mind. In an interview with the Forward in 2021, Chikli said he had visited the U.S. numerous times and suggested that many American Jews are affiliated with “an anti-nationalistic, anti-liberal” ideology that will disconnect them from their ethnic origins.

“I have the ability to create an open and frank dialogue — though unapologetic — with American Jews,” Chikli said in last week’s phone interview, adding that his views “haven’t changed one iota” since he was in the political opposition.

He came to prominence in Israeli politics just weeks after he entered the Knesset in

2021 as the lone conservative rebel in the previous government. Formerly a member of the rightist Yamina party, Chikli accused its leader, Naftali Bennett, of allying with the left and an Arab-Israeli party for personal gain. Bennett's government lost its majority last April after additional members of Yamina quit the coalition.

After joining the Likud Party and following the election, Chikli asked to lead the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs, the Ministry for Social Equality, and also to head the campaign against the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

Netanyahu gave it all to him.

On Sunday, Chikli presented a comprehensive report about antisemitism in the diaspora at the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem. He related the rise in antisemitic incidents to a hostile atmosphere towards Jewish students on college campuses, and told his colleagues that he is working on a strategy to combat it.

On the offensive

As much as Chikli presented his trip as a listening tour, he also came to talk — to explain his government's thinking behind initiatives critics have labeled anti-democratic.

Currently Israeli Supreme Court judges are appointed by a committee that includes some, but not a majority, of lawmakers. A new government plan would give them a majority, a move the opposition said would politicize the judiciary. Chikli called it "ridiculous" to claim that the present method of seating judges is normal or "even close to what is custom in other western countries."

He urged American Jews to await committee hearings and Knesset debate on

the issue before drawing conclusions. "There will be changes," he said.

He also dismissed concerns about proposed changes to the Law of Return, which allows anyone with at least one Jewish grandparent to immigrate to Israel as long as they do not practice another religion. Some American Jewish groups have warned that restricting immigration by abolishing the so-called "grandchild clause" will alienate the diaspora.

Chikli in response referred to a presentation — prepared by a right-wing think tank, the Kohelet Policy Forum — that forecast that a majority of immigrants eligible for Israeli citizenship in the future would not be Jews, but mostly non-Jewish immigrants from former Soviet republics, Russia and Ukraine. "Right now, the law is broken and it's costing us dearly," he said.

But he said he told Jewish leaders he would serve as their conduit to the committee that will consider the bill and that he believes that, unlike decisions on homeland security and the economy, the concerns of Jewish leaders abroad should be taken into consideration as immigration reform is legislated.

The Likud politician said that religious matters concerning conversion, kashrut and the 2017 Kotel deal, which designated protected space at the Western Wall for various streams of Jewish practice, didn't come up in his meetings with Americans. And he said he doesn't foresee any legislation that would change the status quo at this point.

"We just had an election and the results were crystal clear," Chikli said about the positions of the new government. "We were very honest about our agenda, and it is our responsibility to follow this agenda."