**The FBI Investigation and Israel**

[**Dr James J Zogby**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/dr-james-j-zogby)

November 30, 2022

The announcement of the FBI’s impending independent investigation into the murder of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Aqla is not, as one Israeli journalist said, a “watershed moment” in the US/Israel relationship. But factors leading to this decision and the tensions flowing from it illuminate the changes underway in US attitudes toward Israel and its behaviours. Recall that immediately after Abu Aqla’s killing, the Israeli hasbara machinery swung into full gear with its signature combination of denying, lying, and obfuscating—buying time until the issue faded from the headlines.

“We don’t think we killed her.”

“Palestinian terrorists, firing indiscriminately, are likely to have hit her.”

“Our forces…returned fire as accurately, carefully, and responsibly as possible. Sadly…she was killed in the exchange.”

“They were armed with cameras.”

[PM forms committee to discuss medicine prices with pharma industry](https://www.nation.com.pk/30-Nov-2022/medicine-prices-likely-to-go-up-as-govt-forms-committee-for-negotiations)

“By not cooperating with us…perhaps Palestinians are covering up the truth.”

In the past, such a campaign might have worked. This time was different. Shireen Abu Aqla was a respected journalist and American citizen. There was ample video footage of the shooting. And reflecting the developing changes in US public opinion, some members of Congress demanded an independent investigation of her death. The American media’s sensitivity to the protection of journalists after Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi’s murder was heightened even more because Abu Aqla was a US citizen with a family who eloquently pressed US officials for support. Major US news outlets conducted their own investigations, interviewing witnesses, reviewing footage, and surveying the scene, and found, in every instance, Israel’s claims to be false. Most importantly, one-quarter of the Democratic members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to the Secretary of State and Director of the FBI calling for an independent investigation of the shooting. A similar demand was signed by one-half of Democratic senators in a letter to President Joseph Biden. Israelis hoped an inconclusive forensic analysis of the bullet that killed Abu Aqla would lay the matter to rest. Instead, four top Democratic senators decried the findings to the Secretary of State as inadequate, lacking in transparency, and in no way “meeting any plausible definition of…(an) ‘independent, thorough, and transparent investigation.” Four months later, the FBI announced its inquiry. One senator called the response “an overdue but necessary and important step in the pursuit of justice and accountability.”

[PTCL says internet services restored across Pakistan](https://www.nation.com.pk/30-Nov-2022/ptcl-says-internet-services-restored-across-pakistan)

Israel’s reaction was predictable outrage. Defence Minister Benny Gantz called the FBI announcement a “grave mistake,” pledging no cooperation. Outgoing Prime Minister Yair Lapid said, “Israeli soldiers won’t be investigated by the FBI.” With battle lines drawn, the White House and State Department sought to distance themselves, claiming no awareness of the FBI decision—which is unlikely. It’s even less likely the investigation can be aborted without further alienating important Senate leaders and generating intense political backlash. This tug of war plays out against a backdrop of growing tensions in the US/Israel relationship and a deepening partisan divide over holding Israel accountable for human rights violations. Polls show that Democrats are solidly in favour of such accountability, while Republicans are not. For example, on hearing of the FBI investigation, Republican Senator Ted Cruz called for Attorney General Merritt Garland’s impeachment.

[Govt providing all possible facilitation to investors: PM](https://www.nation.com.pk/30-Nov-2022/govt-providing-all-possible-facilitation-to-investors-pm)

Amplifying this growing divide is the election of a hard-right government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu and including racist, ultranationalist, and ultra-Orthodox religious political parties that are demanding top security posts. Democrats have warned Netanyahu about the dangers of bringing these elements into his cabinet (warnings he’ll likely ignore). Meanwhile, given the prominent role played by Christian Nationalists in today’s GOP, Republicans are either silent or supportive of Netanyahu’s government. Finally, there’s the role of the pro-Israel lobby AIPAC in the last election. Their dark money political action committee endorsed over 100 Republican “election deniers” and spent tens of millions opposing progressive Democrats—especially targeting women of colour and liberal Jewish incumbents deemed insufficiently supportive of Israel. These factors contribute to the erosion of the once bipartisan support for Israel in Congress. While there’s no certainty that the FBI will be allowed to carry out its independent investigation, its announcement and the forces at work in today’s American polity point to the changes afoot in the US/Israel relationship. It’s not yet a “watershed moment,” but it’s heading in that direction.