

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Israel's Paradox of Defeat

—
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Last October 7, Hamas surprised Israel's famed military and intelligence agencies. Both had known, for years, about the Palestinian armed group's preparations to invade Israel and kill and kidnap its soldiers and citizens. But they failed to believe that it would dare or succeed to execute such an unprecedented operation. The Israeli military and intelligence services; Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu; and the wider Israeli public all believed that their country's fortified southern border was so impenetrable, and the balance of power so favorable to Israel, that Hamas would never challenge the status quo.

But Hamas did challenge it. In the days and weeks after it launched its devastating attack, a common refrain among Israelis was that "everything has changed." And for a time, it appeared that everything had: the assault shattered Israelis' fundamental self-confidence, upending long-held beliefs about the country's security, politics, and societal norms. The leadership of the Israel Defense Forces lost its prestige almost overnight as details emerged about how it failed to prevent the attack and then arrived too late to save border communities, military outposts, and defenseless attendees at a music festival.

The political drama that had gripped Israel over the nine months leading up to October 7—Netanyahu's attempt at a sweeping overhaul of the judiciary, aimed at curbing the independence of state institutions such as the Supreme Court, the office of the attorney general, and the technocratic civil service to direct more power toward his right-wing and religious allies—vanished from view. The overhaul's main architect, Justice Minister Yariv Levin, all but disappeared, presumably eaten up by remorse for his contribution to Israel's distraction ahead of Hamas's assault. Netanyahu assembled a unity war cabinet representing different—and normally bitterly opposed—political factions and, within days, called up about 250,000 reservists to launch a counteroffensive into Gaza.

Overcoming its initial shock, the IDF then fought back with a vengeance. Charged with dismantling Hamas's military and governance capabilities, it reduced large swaths of Gaza to rubble, made nearly two million Gazans internal refugees, and killed more than 40,000 Palestinians—about a third of them Hamas militants, according to official Israeli assessments. The IDF effectively stopped Hamas's rocket fire into Israel and dismantled much of its Gazan tunnel system; it says it has shattered the formerly well-organized terror group into scattered guerrilla teams.

But even with the IDF occupying about a third of Gaza's territory, to many Israelis, the current situation feels like defeat. Despite full mobilization and the near-unwavering support of the U.S. government, the IDF—still under the same command as it was on October 7—has failed to win. Hamas's leader, Yahya Sinwar, has not surrendered. And around 100 Israeli hostages remain missing in Gaza, about half of them still alive, according to Netanyahu's public statements.

This calamitous stasis, coupled with Israel's growing global isolation and increasingly gloomy economic outlook, contribute to a national sense of hopelessness and despair. In fact, paradoxically, important facets of Israeli politics and society have changed surprisingly little since the immediate aftermath of Hamas's attack. Citizens of border communities in the north and the south remain unable to return to their homes. Rather than uniting Jewish Israelis against a common external enemy, Israel's now multifront

fight against its external enemies has only widened preexisting social and political fissures between Netanyahu's opponents and his supporters. Beating the expectations of his foes and his friends alike, Netanyahu continues to act as the center of gravity in Israeli politics. The right-wing coalition that keeps him in power has amped up its quest to crush the Palestinian statehood movement and "replace the Israeli elite," a euphemism for demolishing Israel's democratic and liberal institutions.

Then, on September 17, the Israeli military began to mount a series of increasingly daring counterattacks against its most formidable neighboring adversary, the Lebanese militia Hezbollah—which opened a second front in the north a day after Hamas attacked in the south. Israel assassinated Hezbollah's longtime leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and launched a ground offensive into southern Lebanon. Much of mainstream Israel's media commentary has presented the expanding hostilities to Israel's north as an opportunity: not only for Israel to crush Hezbollah but for the country to prove to itself that it has finally turned the corner on its year of terrifying trauma and fragility, to prove that it has become its familiar clever, powerful, technologically awe-inspiring, and world-celebrated self again. But just as the war in Gaza did not change as many of Israel's menacing underlying realities as Israelis had anticipated, neither will this new front—not unless Israel faces the deeper changes it must make to its policy toward Palestinians and its own domestic politics.

PARADOXICAL MOTION

A week after the October 7 attack, if you had told an ordinary Israeli—even a Netanyahu fan—that "Bibi" would still be prime minister a year later, his power undergirded by the same right-wing coalition—that Israeli probably would not have believed you. Throughout Israeli history, after the country's worst security disasters, the civilian government has eventually fallen. After the military's failures during the 1973 Yom Kippur War and its 1982 invasion of Lebanon, angry reservists returned from the front to protest and drove Prime Ministers Golda Meir and Menachem Begin to resign. In both cases, within months, the government launched far-reaching inquiries into what went wrong.

It was reasonable to imagine Netanyahu would fare even worse. Over the course of decades in politics, he has presented himself as “Mr. Security.” He claimed that he understood how to keep the country safe better than Israel’s generals, whom he viewed as timid, unimaginative, and too attentive to the United States’ wishes. His fiercest political rivals have been former military commanders who have also served as Israel’s prime minister or minister of defense—men such as Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, Benny Gantz, and Yoav Gallant, the current defense minister. Traditionally, the highest echelons of the IDF and Israel’s intelligence services have been occupied by liberal Ashkenazis, an establishment that Netanyahu long vowed to usurp. It was this establishment that led the popular uprising against Netanyahu’s early 2023 proposal to overhaul Israel’s judiciary.

Yet Netanyahu’s persistence in power represents perhaps the past year’s greatest break with the status quo of Israeli history. To this day, Netanyahu has refused to admit any responsibility for the deaths of 1,200 Israelis; the rape and wounding of many others; the kidnapping of 250 hostages; the wholesale destruction, in a single day, of thriving border communities; and the ensuing evacuation of communities in Israel’s north. Netanyahu’s approval ratings did crater in late 2023; although they have steadily improved since then, his popularity still lags behind opposition figures such as former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett. A poll conducted after Nasrallah’s assassination by Keshet 12, Israel’s main news channel, found that if an election was held in Israel today, Netanyahu’s coalition—which currently holds 68 seats in the Knesset—would win only 46. An avid reader of opinion surveys, Netanyahu knows the Israeli public is angry, and he has pursued a many-faceted strategy to stay in power. For a year, Netanyahu and his supporters have steadfastly maintained that the blame for October 7 lies squarely with the IDF and the Shin Bet, the security service charged with monitoring the Palestinians, as well as with the Israelis who protested his judicial overhaul efforts, especially the reservists who threatened to fail to appear for their voluntary duties.

Netanyahu's persistence in power represents a break with Israeli history.

By shrugging off responsibility and carefully maneuvering to maintain his political bloc, Netanyahu has staved off a potentially devastating inquiry into his policy of coexistence with Hamas, his dismissal of the military's and the intelligence agencies' repeated warnings about an impending attack on Israel, and his efforts to weaken the Palestinian Authority, Israel's former peace partner.

Fearing defeat at the ballot box—and seeking a way to postpone his ongoing corruption trial—Netanyahu has also managed to avoid an early election. A key component of his strategy has been to prolong the war in Gaza, extend it to Lebanon, and avoid a cease-fire deal with Hamas—even at the price of abandoning the remaining hostages in Gaza, who are being tortured, starved, and murdered in Gaza's remaining tunnels.

To safeguard himself, Netanyahu has ceded an extraordinary amount of authority to his far-right coalition buddies, who vocally oppose any hostage deal that would entail an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza or the release of Palestinian militants from Israeli prisons. This, too, represents a 180-degree change in the national attitude. Israelis have always prided themselves on their willingness to do everything to bring home hostages and prisoners of war, as epitomized by the 1976 IDF raid in Entebbe, Uganda, to rescue the passengers of a hijacked Air France plane bound from Tel Aviv to Paris—a daring operation during which Netanyahu's older brother, Yoni, sacrificed his life. Just five years ago, the prime minister flew to Moscow and personally negotiated with Russian President Vladimir Putin to release a young Israeli woman detained for drug trafficking. He has not done the same for the hostages taken on October 7.

Understanding the leverage afforded to them by Netanyahu's determination to maintain power and his fragile approval rating, members of his coalition have pushed their priorities with renewed vigor, including calls to rebuild Jewish settlements in Gaza that Sharon relinquished in 2005. Although Netanyahu publicly rejects the idea, he may well be

tempted to become the first Israeli leader to expand Israel's territorial claims after decades of withdrawals from Palestinian land. In recent weeks, Levin, the justice minister, returned from the shadows to resume his push for a judicial overhaul; forgoing the legislative route, he switched to engaging in bureaucratic trench warfare, blocking judicial appointments and increasingly ignoring legal advice from Israel's attorney general, Gali Baharav-Miara.



A house burnt during Hamas's October 7 attack, Kibbutz Beeri, southern Israel, June 2024

Amir Cohen / Reuters

In the years preceding October 7, some Arab Israeli leaders were mounting a successful push to integrate Palestinian citizens of Israel into society by securing equal rights and more economic opportunities. Following Hamas's attack, the government has rolled back this campaign by detaining and indicting Arab citizens over their social media posts and preventing Arab antiwar demonstrations. Mainstream media outlets followed suit by avoiding adding Arab voices to their endless commentary panels. In less than two years, Netanyahu's coalition took political control

of the national police force and turned it into a personal tool of Israel's far-right, populist national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, a disciple of the racist rabbi Meir Kahane. Ben-Gvir embarked on a campaign of bureaucratic warfare, appointing cronies to top jobs, promoting officers who had unlawfully arrested or violently attacked antigovernment protesters, looking the other way as radical Jewish settlers carried out pogroms in Palestinian villages in the West Bank, and ignoring the sharp rise in violent crime in Israel's Arab communities. For Ben-Gvir, a champion of Jewish supremacy, the fewer Arabs there are, the better it is for the Jews.

Until recently, most Israeli Jews viewed such bigoted positions as disreputable. But by not vocally opposing them, Netanyahu has normalized them. Meanwhile, another far-right official in Netanyahu's cabinet, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, is leading an effort to grab land in the West Bank and undermine the Palestinian Authority by way of financial starvation. Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have clearly stated their aim: a full Israeli annexation of the West Bank, now compounded by a formal occupation of Gaza.

RANSOM BILL

The multifront war in which Israel is now embroiled is also a war within—a war mounted by the prime minister to change their norms and attitudes. Although he shares many of his right-wing allies' ideological convictions, Netanyahu has also maneuvered himself into a political position in which he is held hostage by them; now he is seeking to hold the Israeli public hostage.

The October 7 attack thrust secular and cosmopolitan Israelis, in particular, into a bind. Over the course of the three decades after the 1991 Madrid conference and the 1993 Oslo accords, these Israelis came to view their country as a proud and integral part of the West, and its conflict with the Palestinians as a residual problem that could be managed and lived with indefinitely. Managing the conflict while growing Israel's economy and avoiding major moves toward either war or peace was the approach Netanyahu successfully sold after his 2009 political comeback. And until

he turned against them with his judicial overhaul attempt, this strategy facilitated a tacit alliance between the prime minister and Israel's liberal elites. Even if they would never vote for him, they enjoyed the financial largesse his strategy yielded and thrived on praising Israel as a "developed Western country" and the world's burgeoning "startup nation."

Now Israeli liberals are facing the combined pressures of rejection abroad by the progressive West and, at home, demonization and marginalization by Netanyahu's base. Although conservative and religious Israeli Jews are also suffering from the devaluing shekel and rising inflation, they can find meaning in the struggle to prosecute the war. This is especially true for diehard West Bank settlers, who feel their opposition to the 2005 pullout from Gaza has been vindicated and sense an opportunity to raise their status within Israeli society, especially given their prominence in the army's fighting forces.

The most committed and battered liberals have turned to two strategies for survival. One is to emigrate, at least temporarily, or to apply for foreign passports based on ancestry. This phenomenon predated the war in Gaza: since the outset of Netanyahu's judicial coup, talk of leaving became popular among more affluent and educated Israelis, and it has grown in intensity as the war—and Netanyahu's rule—drag on. The hottest destinations appear to be Greece, Portugal, and Thailand, alongside more traditional havens such as London and New York. Some emigres have managed to keep their jobs in Israel, working remotely as digital nomads.

The other survival strategy is to dig in their heels and keep protesting against Netanyahu and his coalition while supporting the military struggle against Hamas and Hezbollah and calling for the remaining hostages' release. In late August, the hostage crisis reached a horrible climax when Hamas executed six Israelis in a tunnel in Rafah.

Agonized and angry that Netanyahu had not concluded a deal to save these six—and that he will not finalize negotiations to release the remaining hostages—hundreds of thousands of

Netanyahu's opponents are hoping that he will somehow run out of luck.

Israelis took to the streets in the largest antigovernment protests since October 7.

But so far, street protests have failed to shake the foundations of Netanyahu's coalition. The demonstrations have been backed by the same figures—including Gallant—who led the protests against Netanyahu's judicial overhaul, and the prime minister has shrugged them off, having already shrewdly portrayed such protesters as a politicized force that merely seeks his ouster and is now cynically using the plight of the hostages as a pretext.

Netanyahu's opponents are hoping that he will somehow run out of luck, or that an old fissure will miraculously generate an earthquake. One pressure point Netanyahu faces is the thorny issue of draft exemption for ultra-Orthodox teenagers. For decades, ultra-Orthodox leaders justified this exemption on the grounds that their youth needed shielding from the temptations of secular life that they might encounter in the barracks. The war has freshly exposed the cruel disparity between the ultra-Orthodox Israelis who do not have to serve and the rest of Israel's youth, now called upon to die for their country.

In June, the Israeli Supreme Court said unanimously that there was no legal basis for the ultra-Orthodox exemption and that the draft must treat both groups of young people equally. The government has dragged its feet in implementing this ruling, however, and the military has been reluctant to recruit by force. This issue will again come to a head soon, when the Israeli legislature votes on next year's budget. Ultra-Orthodox political leaders have threatened to topple the government unless it simultaneously enacts their coveted draft exemption. To protect his flank, Netanyahu recently lured an old rival—Gideon Saar, Israel's former justice minister—into his coalition.

SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS

Despite Israelis' protests against Netanyahu and their calls to bring home the hostages—and although their government has yet to achieve the “total victory” it promised—true antiwar sentiment is negligible in mainstream

Israeli Jewish society. Even many Israelis who hate Netanyahu and his socially conservative base, and who pride themselves on their cosmopolitanism and their belief in secular democracy, would never espouse what they perceive to be the pacifist values of post-World War II liberal Americans and Europeans. They prefer to live by a mantra made famous in the 1966 spaghetti Western *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly*, which has since achieved the status of a venerated cliché in Israeli commentary: "When you have to shoot, shoot. Don't talk." Israelis have long justified this belligerent philosophy by pointing to their position in a tough neighborhood. In orientalist language, Barak characterized this as being "a villa in the jungle."

Most of Netanyahu's most vocal opponents, including highly ranked members of the active and retired military and the relatives of the remaining hostages in Gaza, imagine something less final than peace when they call for a cease-fire: a temporary IDF withdrawal from parts of Gaza in return for the release of female, elderly, and sick hostages, followed by an IDF reoccupation and a resumption of war until Hamas is crushed and Sinwar killed—and then, presumably, a return to a harsher version of the prewar status quo, including the seizure of land in Gaza's north as a so-called security cordon. The new offensive in Lebanon is even less controversial; some leaders who oppose Netanyahu are, like the prime minister, encouraging a temporary reoccupation of the ridges across the border and the eviction of their Lebanese inhabitants. Netanyahu may be unpopular, but he is leading a popular policy.

The governments of the United States and major European countries have offered only token resistance to Israel's moves in Gaza and the West Bank. Canada, the European Union, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have levied sanctions on certain violent settlers who have attacked Palestinians, and Germany, the UK, and the United States have stopped selling select munitions, such as 2,000-pound bombs, to Israel. But overall, the West has given Israel a virtually free hand in its operations in Gaza and the West Bank and has so far made no real effort to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, caving to Netanyahu's

assertions that the time is not right. This policy reflects an age-old dynamic in Israel's relationship with the West and, in particular, with the United States: Western allies agree to follow Israel's lead on the Palestinian issue so long as Israel respects their concerns in the broader Middle East.

Yet despite Western governments' support of their war effort, Israelis feel increasingly distant from the rest of the world. Some of this sense of alienation is justified. Most foreign airlines have stopped flying to Tel Aviv. Israel's credit ratings are at historic lows. But some of the isolation is self-imposed: mainstream Hebrew media outlets highlight the pro-Palestinian protests on Western campuses and in public spaces as well as anti-Semitic incidents, largely accepting Netanyahu's claim that they represent incarnations of the oldest, most irrational forms of Jew hatred. Similarly, the assertions that Israel has committed war crimes or attempted genocide in Gaza—currently being litigated in two international courts—are generally depicted in Israel as vicious propaganda.

CHANGE OF HEART

Israelis got a boost to their self-confidence in September, when the government accelerated its attacks against Hezbollah. After October 7, Hezbollah had proved itself capable of destroying Israeli towns, airfields, and power stations as it backed Hamas, forcing the IDF to split its ground forces between Israel's south and north. For Israelis—downtrodden and demoralized since October 7—the IDF's counteroffensive recalled the 1967 Six-Day War, in which Israel also rapidly prevailed thanks to a superior air force. Netanyahu declared that Israel is “winning” the war and threatened Iran, Hezbollah's patron, with similar attacks. The Israeli Ministry of Education ordered celebratory dances performed in the public religious schools. Secular, liberal Israeli Jews were not pirouetting in public, but they, too, were joyful, crediting their brave pilots and smart intelligence operatives for a sense of victory.

But the euphoria evaporated quickly after Iran hit back with scores of missiles and terrorists killed six people on the Tel Aviv light rail. The

nascent ground operation in Lebanon has already proved costlier, in terms of Israeli military casualties, than the prior air raids and special ops. Obviously, a bigger regional war involving Iran will not offer Israel quick and lasting triumphs. And Israelis' sense that they are losing is bigger than anything successful missions against Hezbollah and even Iran can fix. It is imperative for them to accept that their broader reality has, indeed, changed since October 7, and that their strategy needs to change along with it.

A year later, the country is still mourning the losses of the massacre, with its scenes replayed constantly in the media. Israel is losing its economic edge and experiencing a significant departure of liberal elites. The government has failed to reinstate any sense of unity among its citizens, sticking instead to its divisive politics. Its military forces, and reservist combat troops in particular, are approaching exhaustion in the country's longest and most perpetually undecided fight. And even if international courts never issue arrest warrants for its leaders, Israel will have to live with the moral and reputational fallout, in the Middle East and around the world, of the death and destruction it has wrought in Gaza.

After a year of war, the long-term threats to Israel's democracy are graver than ever.

Rather than succumbing to intoxication over the killing of Nasrallah and lurching into a full-scale, devastating regional war against Iran, Israel should take advantage of its current battlefield edge and Hamas's and Hezbollah's weakened state. It should finalize a U.S.-brokered cease-fire on both its southern and northern fronts, get back its hostages, facilitate the rehabilitation of war-torn Gaza, and begin a process of national healing. Dragging out the war in a futile quest for "total victory" will entail more casualties and economic damage—even if, as Netanyahu hopes, Donald Trump wins the U.S. presidency in November. Both Gaza and Lebanon have been Israel's quagmires for decades; it must not repeat old mistakes but, instead, cut its losses and make a deal. A responsible Israeli government, assessing the country's

long-term strategic interests, would already have grabbed the opportunity to relaunch the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and advance a two-state deal with the aging Mahmoud Abbas, just as Begin signed Israel's historic peace treaty with Egypt after Israel's military eventually prevailed in the Yom Kippur War. Establishing a credible path toward a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza is the only foundation that can undergird long-term security and regional acceptance for Israel and guarantee the normalization of its relations with Saudi Arabia.

Israel's tragedy is that its current government is leading the country in the opposite direction. Netanyahu's lifelong mission has been to defeat the Palestinian national movement and avoid territorial or diplomatic compromise with it. His coalition's stated goal is to create a Jewish state from the river to the sea, extending limited if necessary but preferably no political rights to non-Jewish subjects, even those who hold Israeli citizenship. The calamity is only exacerbated by the fact that Zionist opposition parties call for Netanyahu's ouster but do not dare to raise the flag of peace and coexistence with the Palestinians, fearing to appear unpatriotic in wartime or to be smeared by right-wingers as traitors.

Rather than looking at the deeper meaning of October 7—and realizing the unsustainability of the antebellum status quo, acknowledging the self-delusion involved in the effort to “manage” the Palestinian issue while riding the wave of economic growth, and appreciating the perilousness of pretending the Palestinians don't exist, Israelis are being led to accept deeper institutionalized apartheid in the West Bank, permanent occupation in Gaza and perhaps south Lebanon, and growing autocracy and theocracy at home. Sadly, after a year of war, the long-term threats to Israel's democracy and liberal values have only become graver.