



From within: How Israel's domestic crisis is shaping its foreign policy

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When he was the US secretary of state in the early 1970s, Henry Kissinger quipped that “Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics.” More than 20 months after the start of the war in Gaza, the truth behind this observation is more evident than ever.

At the time of the murderous, Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was (and indeed remains) a defendant in a corruption trial.¹

His political survival, and the likelihood of avoiding conviction and a possible jail term, are dependent not only on the coalition government he formed in December 2022 with the most extreme right-wing elements in Israeli politics, and a divisive political agenda that has polarized Israeli society, but also on the continuation of a war in Gaza that the extremists within the administration are determined to pursue with the ultimate aim of occupying the territory and evicting its Arab population.²

It was Netanyahu who, before Israel's most recent general election, in November 2022, legitimized ultranationalist religious

political parties with the sole objective of winning enough seats in the Knesset to enable him to form a coalition government. His new friends replaced his previous political partners, who had declined to participate in a government led by a politician facing several criminal cases.³

The coalition government that emerged from this was not a product of shared ideologies but an exercise in mutual opportunism. Netanyahu joined forces with two ultraorthodox parties — Shas and Agodat Israel, who exist to advance the interests of very specific segments of Israeli society — along with elements of the ultraright comprising disciples of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, an American-born ultranationalist who in the 1980s was barred from running for the Knesset because of his racist ideology.⁴

It is a measure of how far to the right the political discourse in Israel has shifted that the parties Religious Zionism and Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), led by Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir respectively, gained nearly 11 percent of the vote and 14 seats in the Knesset in 2022.

Both men are in Netanyahu's Cabinet — Smotrich as finance minister and Ben-Gvir as national security minister — and



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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks at the opening of the 25th Parliament session in Jerusalem in October 2024. AFP

both are settlers in the West Bank.

This opportunistic alliance, with its antidemocratic agenda, siege mentality and territorially expansionist dreams, had already divided Israel before the start of the war in Gaza in 2023, not least because of the government's so-called "judicial reform" project, which was designed to free members of the government and their actions from judicial scrutiny, and was denounced by critics as an attack on the very foundations of Israel's democratic system.⁵

In the aftermath of the Hamas assault, Netanyahu's need to keep the coalition together, and himself in power, has become the most crucial consideration in deciding the manner in which the war is conducted. It is the reason why the conflict has dragged on, on multiple fronts, long beyond the point where it serves Israel's best interests.

The result has been a war with no clear military strategy which, having cost the lives of tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians, has not only lost Israel the support of many of its global friends, it has in the eyes of many earned it instead the status of pariah state.⁶

Since the 1948 war for the newly formed Jewish state — known by Israelis as the

War of Independence and by Palestinians as the Nakba, or catastrophe — Israel's military thinking has been governed by four strategic imperatives: to conduct only time-limited conflicts and avoid becoming embroiled in never-ending wars of attrition; to avoid conflicts on multiple fronts; to ensure that the vast majority of the Israeli people stand firmly behind the aims of a war; and to ensure that at least one major power supports Israel (since 1967 it has increasingly had the full backing of the US).

In pursuing the ongoing war in Gaza, however, the present Israeli government has abandoned all of these principles, to the detriment of the interests of its own people, the Palestinians and, in some cases, its allies.

It is true that at the outset, this war was largely imposed on Israel, firstly by the Hamas attack and then by Lebanese Hezbollah's decision to join forces with Hamas, albeit in a limited fashion but still with far-reaching implications for Israel's ability to ensure the security and safety of its citizens living close to its northern border.⁷

Yet it is clear, without even remotely attempting to justify the Hamas outrage, that the domestic political scene in Israel under Netanyahu played a major role in creating the conditions that made the



Above: Israeli MP Simcha Rothman (C) chairs a session debating a controversial judicial overhaul bill, which proposes changing the ombudsman for judges' appointment process. **Left:** Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir joins Jewish nationalists, including far-right activists, rallying at Jerusalem's Damascus Gate during the so-called Jerusalem Day flag march. **Next:** Demonstrators unfurling a giant banner against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a rally against the Israeli government's judicial overhaul plan in Tel Aviv. AFP

events of Oct. 7, 2023, all but inevitable, by preventing any possible progress toward a peace agreement with the Palestinians based on a two-state solution.

Instead, in the years leading up to 2023 Netanyahu had actively propped up Hamas. He viewed it as a tool to be used to perpetuate the divisions between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza, all in the cause of indefinitely delaying any prospect of Palestinian statehood.

Netanyahu was instrumental in moves that allowed the transfer of money to Hamas, which was intended to pacify the group but instead paid for the very weapons that were used to massacre more than 1,200 Israelis, and others, on Oct. 7, 2023.

As an op-ed in The Times of Israel put it on the day after the attack: "For years, Netanyahu propped up Hamas. Now it's blown up in our faces."⁸



Other factors created by Netanyahu's self-serving brand of politics contributed to the explosion of violence. For 20 years, Gaza, an open prison ringed by a high-tech "Iron Wall," was subjected to a punishing Israeli blockade. And under pressure from extremists settlers in his Cabinet, Netanyahu had allowed the confiscation of Palestinian land and homes in the West Bank, and large-scale illegal settlement.⁹

Then there were the frequent incursions into Al-Aqsa Mosque's compound in Jerusalem, encouraged and led by Netanyahu's extremist cabinet colleagues, aided and abetted by the Israeli army. These provocations were referenced by Hamas in the choice of codename for its Oct. 7 assault: Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.¹⁰

Netanyahu's policies were designed not only to ensure Palestinians remained divided, but also Israelis. In his attempts to ensure his own political survival, the self-proclaimed "Mr. Security" needed Israel to always have an enemy. Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinians, they all filled this role, helping him continue to win elections while those Israelis who opposed his tactics were dismissed as traitors.¹¹

In the specific case of the formation of the current government, by consolidating his base, by appeasing the antidemocratic elements in his coalition, and by severely undermining the judiciary, Netanyahu and his political partners left Israeli society polarized, projecting weakness that might

well have emboldened Israel's enemies in Gaza, Lebanon, Iran and Yemen.

If Israel's domestic politics had been dictating its foreign and military affairs before Oct. 7, 2023, its response to the massacre was a clear indication of the extreme nature of the nation's present government.

As the mass destruction in Gaza and the killings of women and children escalated, it was only a matter of time before the few level-headed members of the war cabinet would leave, unable to support Netanyahu's desperate efforts to remain in power, or the messianic agenda of their extremist coalition partners.¹²

The initial Israeli response to Oct. 7 was an understandable reaction to the collective shock, trauma and anger. The stated objective of finding and freeing the 251 hostages taken by Hamas enjoyed universal support, in Israel and elsewhere.

But the other objective set at the beginning of the war, the complete destruction of Hamas, was unrealistic and designed solely to appease an Israeli public whose extreme anger was directed not only at Hamas, but also at those in Israel who had been tasked with defending them and utterly failed to do so.¹³

Much has been said about Hamas being not merely an organization but also an idea. Its emergence in the first place, and the popular support it enjoyed, were the consequences of a harsh Israeli occupation and dissatisfaction with Fatah, the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, not only for the manner in which it has run Palestinian affairs but also its inability to bring the Palestinian dream of self-determination to fruition.¹⁴

Therefore, diminishing the power of Hamas could only have been achieved by ending the occupation and improving the governance and living conditions of Palestinians.

In service of Netanyahu's own political imperatives, Israel's war in Gaza has focused on seeking revenge, not only on Hamas but on the entire population of the territory.

A responsible government would have set achievable objectives and quickly realized that diplomacy was the safest path to secure the release of the hostages.

Throughout this tragic war, very few of those hostages have been rescued by military operations. Instead, according to a recent investigation by Israel's Haaretz newspaper, "multiple IDF (Israel Defense Forces) operations in Gaza endangered the lives of at least 54 hostages. At least 20 of them were killed as a result: some in air strikes, others executed by their captors due to military



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activity close to their whereabouts."¹⁵

More than 600 days of war have resulted neither in the release of the remaining hostages, nor in the complete defeat of Hamas, which although it has suffered massive losses, including many of its top officials, continues to operate, increasingly as a guerrilla force.¹⁶

The main victims of this war have been ordinary Palestinians in Gaza, their babies and their children. Of the more than 53,000 people killed, most were noncombatants.¹⁷

So much of this disproportionate death and destruction is the result of Israel's current nationalist coalition government, which has been reckless with the lives of Palestinians and Jews alike in the belief that it is getting ever closer to realizing the Zionist dream of occupying the entire "Land of Israel" and ridding it of as many Palestinians as possible.

Since the beginning of the war, what has mostly changed for the messianic right-wingers in the government, most of the support for whom is concentrated among illegal settlers in the occupied West Bank, is a return to an old ambition: the occupation and annexation of the entire Gaza Strip, the expulsion of its Palestinian residents, and the building of more Jewish settlements.¹⁸

Most of these people opposed even the first phase of the ceasefire deal with Hamas in January. Ben-Gvir and his faction withdrew from the coalition when



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Netanyahu agreed to it, and Smotrich warned that if the second phase was implemented, in particular the “end of war” provision, his party would also quit.¹⁹

One does not have to be a cynic to believe that the subsequent decision by the Israeli Cabinet to resume the war, on March 18, had something to do with this threat.

Moreover, Ben-Gvir and his party then immediately returned to the coalition fold, because — at a time when the prime minister was about to be cross-examined by prosecutors in his corruption trial — to its members, the stability of the coalition took precedence over an end to a war that continues to exact such a heavy price.

The ultraright members of Netanyahu’s coalition cling to the most distorted versions of both Judaism and Zionism, and so they perceive Oct. 7 as a directive from the divinity to use the might of the country’s military to defeat, occupy and expel the Palestinians, and then annex both Gaza and the West Bank.

No surprise, then, that in the past few weeks the Israeli Cabinet has announced the building of 22 new settlements in the West Bank, to appease the settler movement and its representatives in government, knowing full well that this move would anger many of the country’s closest friends and allies.²⁰

The hardcore of the settler movement, armed with the disproportionate power and influence it now wields in the government, is fueled by a dangerous creed: a mix of Jewish supremacist ideology, a deeply ingrained paranoid fantasy that all the world hates Jews and Israel, and a belief that the Almighty is on their side and therefore the

Previous: Aerial view shows displaced Palestinians returning to the war-devastated Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip shortly before ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas was implemented in January 2025. **Above:** Palestinian laborers, who work in Israel, walk to cross through a hole in a security fence in the village of Muqeibila near the West Bank town of Jenin. AFP

country should not give way to any form of international pressure, whether it concerns Gaza, the West Bank, striking at Iran or Syria, or even occupying more territories in neighboring countries.

In this distorted worldview, Israel can rely on no one but itself. Yet without reliable friends and allies — who, inexplicably, have until now been prepared to tolerate a great deal of unacceptable behavior by Israel, including that which has made the country a serial breaker of international laws — not only the nation’s economic prosperity but its very existence would have been in jeopardy.

It is also the case that one of the motivations behind the crippling of the checks and balances within the state’s democratic system, including the weakening of its judiciary, was to diminish even the very weak defenses it provides for Palestinians in the occupied territories, as well as the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

A toothless Supreme Court will not be able to block further violations of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories by settlers and the Israeli army, which will only make the lives of Palestinians even more intolerable.²¹

No nation’s foreign policy is completely unaffected by domestic politics and nor should it be. In Israel, however, the line between the two has been completely blurred. And under Netanyahu this situation, as with everything else, has been deliberately brought about to serve his own personal interests and those of the members of his coalition and their voters, on whom he depends for political survival.

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