

Israel: between Political Crisis and Regional Challenges

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2 April was an eventful day for the Israeli political system. In the early afternoon, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called an unexpected news conference, in which he announced the signing of an agreement between Israel and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). According to the deal, Israel was to grant temporary residency status to half of the more than 32,000 African asylum seekers within its borders, and the other half would be resettled in Western countries.

Prime Minister Netanyahu described the agreement as “an unprecedented achievement,” but he failed to anticipate the backlash from the right. In the hours that followed, thousands of Israelis posted social media comments – many of them on Netanyahu’s own Facebook page – against allowing even half of the asylum seekers to stay; several pundits and ministers followed with criticism and warnings. Netanyahu changed course immediately. By midnight he decided “to reevaluate” the deal, and by lunchtime the following day, he abandoned it altogether. Instead, he announced his intention to renew forced deportation, if necessary through legislation that would also limit the High Court’s ability to intervene on the asylum seekers’ behalf.¹

The entire affair was another example of the way immigration became a defining political issue for nativ-

ist forces on the right, as well as for their liberal opponents. In Israel more than in many other countries, it is this ‘new right’ that became a dominant political force, to which the Prime Minister’s political fate is attached.

Entering its 8th decade since independence, Israel seems more stable and prosperous than ever. But the Jewish society is torn in a battle between right-wing populism and ‘the old elites;’ and the political system is transfixed by the drama surrounding the criminal allegations against Mr. Netanyahu, the country’s most powerful leader in recent history and its longest serving one.

As the Asylum Seekers fiasco suggested, these tensions limit the manoeuvring abilities of the political leadership and make the use of force and coercion the only available policy tools. And all this is happening at the same time as the status quo in the West Bank and Gaza is becoming less and less stable, and Israel is faced again with the one issue that it was never able to solve – reconciling the idea of an exclusive Jewish State on the historic land of Israel, with the presence of an indigenous population, equal in its size today to the number of Israeli Jews.²

A Decade of Political Stability and Prosperity

On the surface, things have never been better for Israelis. The country has dogged the financial crisis of the previous decade, and the high-tech sector continues to lead the entire economy on a steady growth.³

¹ PILEGGI, T. “Netanyahu vows to reopen migrant jails after deportation plan fails.” *Times of Israel*, 24 April 2018 www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-vows-to-reopen-migrant-jails-after-deportation-plan-fails/

² MORAN AZULAY and ELIOR LEVY. “Report: Equal number of Jews, Muslims live from river to the sea.” *Ynet News*, 26 March 2018. www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5198085,00.html

³ BARKAT Amiram. “Israel’s economy grew 3% in 2017,” *Globes*, 31 December 2017 www.globes.co.il/en/article-israels-economy-grew-3-in-2017-1001217569

Israeli start-ups are sold to foreign investors at record prices, and vast natural gas discoveries guarantee major foreign currency income for the foreseeable future. Unemployment has been low for several years and government tax collecting is at a surplus, resulting in several rounds of tax cuts.⁴ In recent years, the government completed or is about to complete major national projects – such as the desalination plants, which prevented a national water crisis,⁵ a new and fast Tel Aviv-Jerusalem train line, and a new international airport near Eilat. Even a long-awaited Tel Aviv light rail is being built. Inequality is still relatively high and the rising cost of housing are a source for ongoing complaints, but a major wave of middle class protest, like the one Israel experienced in 2011, seems unlikely. The political instability which seemed to characterize Israel is gone – Netanyahu has been in power since 2009, and his current government could complete more than four years in office.

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Many recent events have also played into Israel's hands. The Arab Spring shifted the regional focus from the Palestinian issue to events in Egypt, Syria, Libya and Iraq. More importantly for Israel, it aligned powerful stakeholders with Israel in a way few diplomatic breakthroughs ever did. The most surprising turn of events is the cooperation with Saudi Arabia, which has become such an open secret, that the IDF's chief of staff was interviewed by a Saudi publication based in London,⁶ while Crown Prince Mo-

hammad bin Salman told 'The Atlantic' that "Jews deserve the right to their own land."⁷ The Saudis and some of their Gulf partners seem eager to become Israel's – and the US' – partners in a looming confrontation with Iran, either in Syria or due to a strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities, while Egypt is receiving some military help from Israel in its battle against the Jihadi groups in the Sinai peninsula.⁸

All these developments, which seemed unthinkable just several years ago, are not just the result of the geopolitical changes, but of Israel's own emergence as a regional superpower, whose policy is politically and economically independent of its Western allies. Yet despite all this, Israel is unable to translate its strength to major long-term achievements. Relations with Arab states are limited to security issues, and are conducted mostly in the dark; despite an American decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, Israeli annexation of the eastern city is still unrecognized by the entire international community; and most importantly, Israel hasn't been able to reach an internal consensus (let alone an internationally-recognized agreement) regarding the Palestinian issue, which remains the unsolved existential challenge the State is facing.

The Palestinian question is not just a security or diplomatic problem. Rather, it cuts to the core of the Israeli identity, and to the various tensions that are at the heart of the idea of 'a Jewish and Democratic State' – the common phrase used in Israel to describe the constitutional definition of the State (the built-in contradiction in the formula accounts for the reason Israel has no constitution).

A Prime Minister under Investigation

Since he reentered the Prime Minister's office in early 2009, Prime Minister Netanyahu has made the preservation of the status quo in the West Bank and

⁴ ARLOSOROFF, M. "Netanyahu's Economic Adviser: High Growth Is Israel's New Normal," *Haaretz*, 13 November 2017 www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/netanyahu-adviser-high-growth-is-israel-s-new-normal-1.5465288

⁵ SIEGEL, S. "How to Defeat Drought," *Foreign Policy*, 9 April 2018 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/09/how-to-defeat-drought-israel-south-africa-cape-town-water/>

⁶ BEN-YISHAI, R. "The strategic interests behind Eisenkot's Saudi interview," *Ynet News*, 19 November 2017 www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5044785,00.html

⁷ GOLDBERG, J. "Saudi Crown Prince: Iran's Supreme Leader 'Makes Hitler Look Good,'" *Atlantic*, 2 April 2018 www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/mohammed-bin-salman-iran-israel/557036/

⁸ Aiding Egypt, Israel Conducted 'Over 100 Airstrikes' Against ISIS in Sinai, *Haaretz*, 4 February 2018 www.haaretz.com/israel-news/nyt-israel-conducted-over-100-airstrikes-in-sinai-against-local-isis-1.5786828

Gaza into his trademark policy⁹. He was able to manoeuvre himself out of the peace initiative presented by the Obama Administration; and while he initiated three military campaigns in Gaza, he didn't try to reconstruct the political reality by toppling Hamas, or by annexing new territories, as the most expansionist elements in his coalition sometimes demanded. Netanyahu understood that the status quo provides Israel with the highest reward, at the lowest price. It brings Israel many of the benefits of peace, without requiring it to pay in territory. The military regime that governs the West Bank not only makes settlement efforts easier (since the government is not bound by the constraints of the civilian legal system) – it allows the State to maintain a separation between Jewish settlers, who are full citizens and governed mostly by civilian authorities, and the Palestinian civilian population, which is governed by the army's civilian authority. From the Israeli perspective, annexing the land – the Israeli version of the one-state solution – simply makes no sense.¹⁰

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Israel's occupation is not recognized by the world, but it is tolerated. Predictions of international pressure and isolation turned out to be grossly exaggerated, and Netanyahu was rewarded by Israelis in the polls again and again. He was supported by a coalition of smaller parties, representing Jewish Orthodox, the settlers, Mizrahi Jews (Jews who came from Muslim countries; many have a lower social status or live in Israel's periphery), and immigrants from the

former Soviet Union. In Netanyahu they saw not just the opportunity to strike a fatal blow to the two-state solution (which many of them opposed), but also a man who could lead a vast social and cultural change within Israel: taking down 'the old elites' of the upper middle class, mostly European Jews, and replacing them within Israeli bureaucracy and institutions with their own people. This dual role was and remains the key to Netanyahu's success.

In recent years, the dominant voice in Netanyahu's coalition is 'the new right,' led by young populists and settlers¹¹. Unlike the old right, their focus isn't (just) on the West Bank. Their demands are to make the entire state 'more Jewish' – to limit the power of the Supreme Court; to make the school curriculum 'more Zionist' and religious; to limit critical views in state-owned media; to ban foreign-funded human rights organizations; to promote right-wing and religious security officials; to deport all African asylum seekers; to speed up the construction of new Jewish settlements and to limit Palestinian construction on both sides of the Green Line. It was this new right that went to the polls in record numbers in 2015, and delivered Netanyahu with a surprising landslide victory. Since those elections, the public debate became increasingly toxic; with the right speaking of 'an institutional revolution,' while the left warns of 'the end of democracy.'

The criminal investigations against Netanyahu and his wife have turned this confrontation into an all-out political war. Netanyahu is involved in several cases, mostly dealing with alleged attempts to manipulate the media in his favour in exchange for regulatory benefits (another case centres on lavish gifts Netanyahu and his wife demanded and received). Early in 2018, police recommended filing criminal charges against the Prime Minister. Netanyahu refused to resign, and hinted that if taken by the attorney general to court, he might conduct his trial from the Prime Minister's office. The allegations actually have made Netanyahu more popular with his base, which views the affair as a conspiracy by the old elites and by the

⁹ SHEIZAF, N. "One or two states? The status quo is Israel's rational choice," *+972 Magazine*, 25 March 2012 <https://972mag.com/one-or-two-states-the-status-quo-is-israels-rational-third-choice/39169/>

¹⁰ See for example THRALL, Nathan. *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine*. Metropolitan 2017, pp. 190-209. Also: SHEIZAF, N. "Decades of failed peace talks: How Israel negotiates with itself," *+972 Magazine*, 28 June 2017, <https://972mag.com/decades-of-failed-peace-talks-how-israel-negotiates-with-itself/128401/>

¹¹ HOD, R. "Who Will Fight the New Israeli Right?" *Haaretz*, 13 March 2018. www.haaretz.com/opinion/premium-who-will-fight-the-new-israeli-right-1.5896334

State's bureaucracy to take down their leader. It seems that the entire country is headed for an unprecedented legal and political crisis.

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At the same time, developments in the occupied territories are challenging the status quo. In Gaza, the humanitarian toll of the decade-old blockade on the strip is putting pressure on both Hamas and Israel, and could lead to a new military confrontation¹². In the West Bank, the wave of stabbing and ramming attacks of 2015-2016 has subsided, but the violence has never returned to the pre-2013 levels, which was one of the lowest on record.

The coming end of Mahmoud Abbas' term as the head of the Palestinian Authority will bring uncertainty to a new level. Abbas, the last founding father

of the PLO still active, kept a close military coordination with Israel, which his predecessors would find difficult to maintain without losing their local credibility.

Faced in the past with Palestinian uprisings, Israeli leaders were able in the past to initiate pragmatic moves, such as the signing of the Oslo deal or the disengagement from Gaza, which allowed them to hold on to all the major assets in the land. The toxic political atmosphere and the strength of the new right will make it very hard for any leadership to follow these examples. The temptation to answer every challenge with military force – already very high in Israel – would only increase.

This is also true for internal issues – from the fate of asylum seekers to the challenge to Israeli identity posed by the Palestinian citizens of Israel (the 'Palestinians of 48' make up more than 20% of the population). The ability of the political system to create consensus seems at an all-time low, and politicians are increasingly moving towards direct coercion.

Adding to all this is a looming confrontation with Iran, not over the nuclear issue, as everybody expected, but due to the permanent presence Tehran aims to maintain in the post-civil war Syria – a step Jerusalem views as an act of direct aggression. Israel has enjoyed a decade of growth and relative stability as the entire world around it shook, but storm clouds are gathering fast.

¹² Loveday MORRIS and Hazem BALOUSA "Behind bloody Gaza clashes, economic misery and piles of debt," *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2018 www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/behind-bloody-gaza-clashes-economic-misery-and-piles-of-debt/2018/04/23/b4e6476c-3744-11e8-af3c-2123715f78df_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.44c7e6f50557