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15.03.2025

The Monkey's Tail: How Netanyahu's Ambitions Expose Israel's Vulnerabilities



Image by Timon Studler.

“The higher the monkey climbs, the more he shows his tail,” warns a timeless Chinese proverb. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, seems to neither heed the lessons of history nor the wisdom of such folk sayings.

By leading a vilification campaign against Egypt, the Israeli leader is further exposing his country’s vulnerabilities. This is yet another example of Israel’s inability to alter the political reality in Gaza, 17 months after it launched its devastating war on the Strip.

By targeting Egypt, Israel aims to project an image of prowess, and that it is unafraid to confront the most populous Arab nation. Yet, in doing so, it inadvertently exposes its own weaknesses. This behavior is wholly consistent with Netanyahu’s legacy of running away forward.

Long before the October 7, 2023, war, Netanyahu was riding a wave of political euphoria. At the time, his relentless climb to greater heights seemed justified. His Global

South diplomacy was reversing decades of Israeli isolation, and his success in gaining international recognition without paying a significant political price earned him immense popularity at home.

In Israel, Netanyahu kept winning one election after another. His latest right-wing extremist coalition secured a comfortable majority in the Knesset facing little pushback. The extremists were poised to transform Israel from within, reconfigure the region, and, with the usual unconditional support from the United States, position Israel as a global power commanding respect and authority.

However, October 7 and Israel's catastrophic failure on all fronts exposed Netanyahu's tail as a failed leader. The crisis quickly manifested in global outrage as Israel carried out a genocidal war on the Palestinians, killing and wounding over 160,000 people in the course of 15 months. The Israeli tail was further exposed as the once-confident leader, who tirelessly promised to reshape the Middle East to fit Israel's agenda, became a wanted criminal by the International Criminal Court on November 21, while his country faced investigations for the crime of genocide by the International Court of Justice.

Yet Netanyahu climbed even higher, doubling down on his approach. He insisted on continuing the war in Gaza, maintaining a military presence in Lebanon, and carrying out frequent and massive bombing campaigns in Syria.

Bravado aside, Netanyahu has still failed to achieve any of Israel's stated objectives through the devastating war on Gaza—a war that has also cost Israel unprecedented losses and casualties. Meanwhile, the divisions among the political and military elites are deepening. The latest manifestation of this is the firing of many top military brass and the reordering of the army to align with Netanyahu's political ambitions.

The more Israel's vulnerabilities are exposed, the more Netanyahu and his allies intensify their threats—not only against Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria but also against Egypt. In fact, Egypt, which is not a party to the war and has been one of three mediators in ceasefire talks, has become the primary target of Israel's new strategy aimed at ethnically cleansing Gaza's population into the Sinai desert.

But how did this come about?

Egypt was hardly a factor in the Israeli war on Gaza. Yet, as the war on Gaza dragged on, with no possibility of a “total victory,” top Israeli officials began pointing fingers at Egypt.

The idea of taking over the Philadelphi Corridor, separating the city of Rafah in southern Gaza from the Egyptian border was first floated by extremist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich. Others, including Netanyahu himself, soon began parroting the same words.

In the media, the language took an even more foreboding turn, with some accusing Egypt of arming Hamas, or of not doing enough to stop the flow of weapons to the Palestinian resistance.

When Egypt rejected Israeli accusations and refused to accommodate Israel's wish to ethnically cleanse Gaza, Israeli leaders began talking of an Egyptian military threat, alleging that Egypt was amassing troops at its border with Israel.

The original aim of roping Egypt into Israel's failed war was meant to create a distraction from the battlefield. Eventually, however, the distraction turned into deflection: blaming Egypt for Israel's inability to win the war or to displace the Gaza population.

To some extent, Netanyahu has succeeded in making Egypt part of the conversation on Gaza. With US President Donald Trump repeatedly proposing the displacement of Palestinians and the takeover of Gaza, the Israeli leader felt that, finally, he had a clear American commitment to export Israel's problems elsewhere.

Even the leader of the Israeli opposition, Yair Lapid, used Egypt to distract from his own failure to mount a serious challenge to Netanyahu's rule. On February 25, he proposed that Cairo oversee the Strip for a number of years at a conference in Washington.

While Palestinians, Arabs, and others reacted angrily to the Israel-US ethnic cleansing schemes, few paid attention to the fact that, historically, Israel has never sought permission to ethnically cleanse Palestinians. This was as true during the 1948 Nakba as it is today. Putting pressure on Arab countries to concede to Israel's ethnic cleansing plans is the strongest sign yet of Israel's weakness.

Tough talk and threats aside, Israel finds itself in a more vulnerable position than at any point in its history. It is clear that Israel is now using the Arabs to mask its own vulnerabilities. And though the monkey continues to climb, his tail has never been as exposed as it is today.

MARCH 14, 2025

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