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The Altalena Affair: Is Israel Heading Towards a Civil War?



Image by Taylor Brandon.

“There will be no civil war” in Israel, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on June 18. But he might be wrong.

Netanyahu’s statement was made in the context of the growing popular protests in Israel, especially following the long-anticipated resignations of several Israeli War Cabinet Ministers, including Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot – both former chiefs of staff in the Israeli army.

These resignations did not necessarily isolate Netanyahu, as the man’s popularity rests almost entirely on the support of the right and the far right. However, the move further illustrated deep and growing rifts in Israeli society, which could ultimately take the country from a state of political upheaval to an actual state of civil war.

Divisions in Israel cannot be viewed the same way as other political polarizations currently rife among Western democracies. This assertion is not necessarily linked to the legitimate view that, at its core, Israel is not an actual democracy but, rather, due to the fact that Israel’s political formation is unique.

The story began long before the current Gaza war.

In February 2019, the leaders of three Israeli parties formed a coalition, Kahol Lavan, or 'Blue and White'. Two of Kahol Lavan's founders, Gantz and Moshe Ya'alon, were also military men, widely respected among the country's powerful military establishment, thus society at large. Despite their relative electoral successes, they still failed to dislodge Netanyahu from office. So, they went to the streets.

Taking the conflict to the streets of Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities was a decision not made lightly. It followed the collapse of a strange government coalition, cobbled up by all of Netanyahu's enemies, unified around the single objective of ending the right and far-right reign over the country. Naftali Bennet's failure was simply the last straw.

The terms 'right' and 'far-right' may give the impression that the political conflict in Israel is essentially ideological. Though ideology does play a role in Israeli politics, anger at Netanyahu and his allies is largely motivated by the feeling that the new right in Israel is attempting to reconfigure the very political nature of the country.

So, starting in January 2023, hundreds of thousands of Israelis launched unprecedented mass protests that lasted until the start of the Israeli war on Gaza. The initial collective demand of the protesters, supported by Gantz and the who's who of the Israeli military and liberal elites, was to prevent Netanyahu from altering the political balances of power that have governed Israeli society for the last 75 years. With time, the demands, however, turned into the collective chant of regime change.

Though the issue was largely discussed in the media as a political rift resulting from Netanyahu's wishes to marginalize Israel's judicial institution for personal reasons, the roots of the event, which threatened a civil war, were quite different.

The story of the potential Israeli civil war is as old as the Israeli state itself, and recent comments by Netanyahu, suggesting otherwise, are yet another false claim by the prime minister.

Indeed, on June 16, Netanyahu lashed out at rebellious military generals, stating that "We have a country with an army and not an army with a country." In truth, Israel was founded through war, and was sustained also through war.

This meant that the Israeli military had, from the very start, a special status in Israeli society, an unwritten contract that allowed army generals a special and often a central seat in Israel's political decision-making. The likes of Ariel Sharon, Ehud Barak and others, including the very founder of Israel, David Ben Gurion, have all reached the helm of Israeli politics namely because of their military affiliations.

But Netanyahu changed all of this when he began to actively restructure Israel's political institutions to keep the military marginal and politically disempowered. In doing so, Netanyahu has violated the main pillar of Israel's political balance, starting in 1948.

Even before Israel finished the task of ethnically cleansing the Palestinian people during the Nakba, the nascent country almost immediately entered into a civil war. As Ben Gurion issued an order regarding the formation of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on May 26, some Zionist militias, including the Irgun and Lehi – the Stern Gang – fought to preserve a degree of political independence.

That was the start of the so-called Altalena Affair, when the Haganah-dominated IDF tried to block a sea shipment of weapons on its way to the Irgun, then under the leadership of Menachem Begin who, in 1967, became Israel's prime minister. The confrontation was deadly. It resulted in the killing of many members of the Irgun, mass arrests and the shelling of the ship itself.

The reference to the Altalena Affair is heard quite frequently in Israeli media debates these days, as the Israeli war on Gaza is splintering an already divided society. This division is compelling the military to abandon the historical balance that was achieved following that mini-civil war, which could have ended Israel's future as a state only days after its formation. The internal Israeli conflict over Gaza is, indeed, not just about Gaza, Hamas or Hezbollah, but the future of Israel itself. If the Israeli army finds itself scapegoated for October 7 and the assured failed military campaigns that followed, it will have to make a choice, between accepting its indefinite marginalization or clashing with the political institution.

For the latter to take place, a civil war might become a real possibility.

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