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Zionism on the Brink: The Gaza War Beyond Netanyahu



Image by Taylor Brandon.

The idea that the war on Gaza is essentially waged and sustained by and for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has, for long, dominated political analyses on the subject.

The notion is often kept alive by public opinion inside Israel.

Most polls produced since the start of the Israeli genocide on Gaza suggest that an overwhelming majority of Israelis believe that Netanyahu's decisions are motivated by personal, political and familial interests.

This conclusion, however, is too convenient and not entirely accurate. It wrongly assumes that the Israeli people oppose Netanyahu's war in Gaza though, in reality, they have been quite approving of all tactics used by the Israeli army, so far.

For example, over 300 days into the war, 69 percent of all Israelis support Netanyahu's desperate tactics of assassinations, including the killing of Hamas' top political leader, Ismail Haniyeh, who was killed in Tehran on July 31.

While Netanyahu's decision to target a political leader reflects his own failure and desperation, how is one to explain the Israeli people's enthusiasm for the expansion of the circle of violence?

The answer does not lie in the event of October 7, namely the Palestinian assault on the Gaza Envelope region and the unprecedented defeat of the Israeli army. Indeed, it is time to start thinking beyond the confines of the revenge theory, which has dominated our understanding and analysis of the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

For years prior to the current war, Israel has been moving slowly to the right and far-right, whose political extremism has surpassed that of any generation of Zionist leadership that has ruled over Israel since the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948.

According to an Israeli Democracy Institute poll, published in January 2023, 73 percent of Israeli Jews, between the ages of 18 to 24, identify as 'right wing'.

Considering that the likes of current Israeli ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir, Bezalel Smotrich and Orit Strook, are also classified as 'right-wing', one can conclude that the majority of Israeli youth practically identify as right-wing extremists.

These youth are the core of the Israeli army and the settler movement. They are the ones carrying out the genocide in Gaza, the daily pogroms in the West Bank and serving as the foot soldiers for the widespread racism campaigns targeting the Palestinian Arab communities inside Israel.

There is a good number of analysts who tried to explain how Israel became a decidedly rightwing society and how youth, in particular, emerged as the gatekeepers of Israel's version of suicidal nationalism.

The explanation, however, should be straightforward. Israel's far-right extremism is only a natural evolution of the Zionist ideology which, in its most 'liberal' forms, was always predicated on ethnic hatred, a sense of racial supremacy and predictable violence.

Though ideological Zionism in all its manifestations has essentially followed the same trajectory of settler-colonialism and ethnic cleansing, a conflict existed between the various strands of Israeli society.

The so-called liberals – represented by the upper echelons of the military, business circles and some centrist and leftist political groups – worked to maintain the balance between a

colonial, apartheid regime in occupied Palestine, and a selective liberal order that applies only to Jews inside Israel.

The far-right had other ideas. For many years, the Israeli right camp, led by Netanyahu himself, has perceived his ideological enemies inside Israel as traitors, for even daring to engage in a ‘peace process’ with the Palestinians – even if that process was a facade, to begin with.

The right wanted to ensure that the territorial contiguity between the so-called ‘Israel proper’ and the illegal Jewish settlements was not only a physical one but an ideological one as well.

This is how the settlers moved slowly, over the years, from the margins of Israeli politics to the center.

Between April 2019 and November 2022, Israel underwent five different general elections. Though the focus of most remained fixated on Netanyahu’s role in dividing Israeli society, the elections, in reality, were a historic fight among Israel’s ideological groups to determine the future of the country and the direction of Zionism.

In the last elections, the far-right extremists won, forming the most stable Israeli government in years. While the right was ready to permanently reconfigure Israel, its political, educational, military and, most important, judicial institutions, October 7 took place.

Initially, the Hamas assault and its aftermath posed a challenge to all segments of Israeli society: the humiliated army, the degraded intelligence, the humbled politicians, the confounded media and the angry masses.

But the greatest challenge was faced by the far-right, which was about to shape the future of Israel for generations. Thus, the Gaza war is not just important to Netanyahu, but to the very future of Israel’s far-right camp, whose entire political and ideological program has been shattered, most likely beyond salvation.

This should help explain the obvious contradictions in Israeli society, for example, the mistrust in Netanyahu’s motives, yet the trust in the war itself; the widespread criticism of his overall failure, yet the approval of his actions, and so on.

This seeming confusion cannot be explained simply based on Netanyahu’s ability to manipulate Israelis. Even if the Israeli right has lost all faith in Netanyahu, without him as a unifying figure, all is lost, not only the chances of the far-right camp to redeem itself, but also the very future of Zionism.

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