

Fantasies of Israel

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Watching the news in Israel this month, you'd think the country was under attack from all sides. Three Anglo-Israeli settlers were killed by guerrillas in the West Bank; an Italian tourist was killed and seven others injured in Tel Aviv, in what may have been a car accident but was widely presented as a terrorist incident; and the IDF claimed to have intercepted the largest salvo of rockets fired from Lebanon since 2006. As is usually the case, these reports studiously ignored the killing fields of the occupied territories, where Israeli soldiers are murdering young Palestinians in ever growing numbers, either execution-style or by bombing their houses into the dust. Yet what was novel about the media coverage was its air of bewilderment: how could Israel's hard-right government fail to provide security – or at least a sense of security – for its Jewish citizens? Who was to blame for this lapse?

For Benjamin Netanyahu, responsibility lay with the ongoing protest movement. Since early January, demonstrators have turned out in their hundreds of thousands to oppose his judicial reforms – which would enable the political takeover of the courts, allow the Prime Minister to escape conviction in his corruption trial, and increase the influence of Orthodox Judaism in both public life and the legal system. Netanyahu has accused his critics of dividing and weakening the nation, while lashing out at the reserve soldiers who threatened not to show up for duty were the measures passed. People close to him have also spread the rumour that the US was bankrolling the demonstrators (this was fake news, but it carried water given President Biden's public condemnation of the reforms).

Judging by the recent polls, Netanyahu's message has failed to cut through. For many Israelis, it was the PM himself who created such security risks. His popularity has reached a historic nadir, and he would likely lose elections were they held today. Having bungled his attempt to regain the trust of erstwhile supporters – bringing them into the warm embrace of the Zionist consensus under the threat of war supposedly emanating from Iran and its allies – he must now choose between two unappealing options: either jettison the reforms and quell the street-level resistance, or push ahead with them and deepen divisions among Jewish citizens. The prediction that these divisions could undermine the Israeli state from within seems premature at this stage. But there is no doubt that they have exposed serious cracks in the Zionist edifice – ones that may well widen over the coming years.

If social breakdown is not on the immediate horizon, that is largely because of the country's mammoth security apparatus. Israel is still very much an army with a state rather than a state with an army. There can be no substantive changes to security policy without the assent of leading military figures – whose hand will not be forced, even by the new authoritarian government. This stratum has clearly signalled its investment in maintaining the current framework. In essence, that means continuing the indiscriminate killing of Palestinians, the practice of home demolitions and the sanctioning of settler pogroms. It means enforcing institutionalized discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel, who are denied the right to free speech and assembly. And it involves the regular bombardment and besiegement of Gaza, as well as almost weekly air raids on Syria.

The apparatchiks who design and execute these activities comprise the core group behind the recent demonstrations. Military officials who have committed countless war crimes in the Gaza Strip, and before that in the West Bank and Lebanon, are now playing a crucial role in the emerging opposition bloc. They form part of a wider Ashkenazi (European Jewish) elite, which views Netanyahu's policy as an attack on their power bases within the state: not just the security apparatuses, but also the financial institutions, the judicial system and academia. They sense that the reforms would weaken their hold on these institutions, while empowering an insurgent coalition of orthodox Jews, settlers and Mizrahi (Eastern Jewish) Likud supporters who wish to make Israel more religious, more nationalist and more expansionist. As they see it, the triumph of this neo-Zionist coalition would threaten their secular lifestyle, compromise the state's security and further tarnish its international image.

Hence, Western media's depiction of the protests – as an attempt to save Israeli democracy from political overreach – is hopelessly distorted. The movement is not seeking to protect the rights of minorities (the first duty of any democracy) let alone the rights of the Palestinians on either side of the green line. During the first hundred days of the new administration, while secular Israeli Jews fought to preserve their hegemony, almost a hundred Palestinians – many of them children – were killed by Israeli forces. This killing spree did not feature in any of the demonstrations. Those who tried to raise Palestinian flags alongside the Israeli ones were forcibly ejected. Arabs evidently have no place in this feud between the Jewish families of Israel.

Instead, the protesters are motivated by what one might call the *fantasy of Israel*: that of a secular democratic state with enough moral capital to justify its occupation of Palestine at home and abroad. They are happy to be seen as exceptional nation – which must subjugate the Arabs to preserve the dream of a Jewish homeland – but they are also desperate to conform to the 'civilized' standards of the Global North. Their liberal Zionism is founded on a series of oxymorons: Israel as an enlightened occupier, a benevolent ethnic cleanser, a progressive apartheid state. Thanks to Netanyahu's government, this image is now under threat; its contradictions are no longer containable. The state's reputation is being damaged not only domestically, but also among the 'international community' that typically hails Israel as the only democracy in the Middle East and Tel Aviv as the LGBT capital of the world, while ignoring the besieged Gaza ghetto a few miles south.

This is why half a million Jews – mostly liberal, mostly secular, mostly of Western origins – have taken to the streets to defend the apartheid regime. Though they have forced Netanyahu to delay his proposed changes, their ultimate chances of success remain uncertain. Even if the reforms are scrapped, Israel will still be constitutively divided, with a secular Tel Aviv existing alongside a religious Jerusalem. How this tension might play out politically is anyone's guess. But one thing is clear: it will have little concrete effect on state policy towards the Palestinians. For all their differences, the two Israeli camps are united in their support for the settler-colonial project on which the nation was built. Settler colonialism invariably entails the dehumanization of colonized peoples, viewed as the principal obstacle to political harmony. It is based on the wish to eliminate the native population – either through genocide, ethnic cleansing, or the creation of enclaves and ghettos. In Israel, every Palestinian must be perceived as a savage or potential terrorist, every Palestinian territory as a theatre of war.

This underlying logic means that the Palestinians have nothing to gain from a return to the *status quo ante*. Indeed, the previous government, led by the 'centrist' Yair Lapid, was just as committed to maintaining the violent occupation. Its inclusion of an Arab party brought no tangible benefits for Israel's Palestinian minority. They were still liable to be shot by the criminal gangs or trigger-happy police officers while the state turned a blind eye; still designated second-class citizens under the 2018 apartheid law; still subject to legal and financial discrimination; and still spatially strangled by the proliferation of Jewish towns and settlements. By extolling 'democracy' while ignoring such abuses, the current protest wave has highlighted Israel's fundamental paradox: it cannot be both democratic and Jewish. It will either be a racist Jewish state, or a democratic one for all its citizens. There is no middle ground.

For precisely that reason, Israel is now viewed unfavourably by large sections of the global population. Although it has so far managed to maintain strategic alliances with governments in the West, the Arab World and occasionally the Global South, it risks becoming internationally isolated. The protesters rightly fear that if the country cannot sustain its fantasy image, it could suffer a fate similar to that of apartheid South Africa: a gradual decline in credibility, such that politics from below gains the ability to influence politics from above. In that case, Israel may still be viable on account of its military strength – but nothing more. This in turn could seriously jeopardize the Zionist project; yet, as with South Africa in the 1980s, it may also be the moment when the regime attempts to save itself by resorting to the worst forms of brutality.

One of the main differences between opponents and supporters of the current government is that the former care what global civil society thinks of Israel while the latter do not. The Ashkenazi elite are defending a form of 'Zionism with a human face' which the far-right administration is increasingly willing to abandon. The outcome of this conflict will partly determine whether Israel can preserve its aura of immunity and exceptionalism. During the recent history of Israel–Palestine, world opinion has often been diverted by other developments: first the Arab Spring, now the war in Ukraine. But the cause of the Palestinians has endured despite this wavering attention. Can it exploit the present moment to turn Israel into an international pariah?

Read on: Perry Anderson, 'The House of Zion', NLR 96.