

Roundtable Takeaways

The Shadow of Netanyahu

School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli

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Moderating:

- Virginie Collombier, Scientific Coordinator, Luiss Mediterranean Platform
- Luigi Narbone, Director, Luiss Mediterranean Platform

Speakers:

- Daniel Seidemann, Attorney and Terrestrial Jerusalem's Founder
- Eyal Lurie-Pardes, Visiting Fellow, Middle East Institute
- Mairav Zonszein, Senior Analyst, International Crisis Group
- Nomi Bar-Yaacov, International Negotiator and Associate Fellow, Chatham House

Introduction

The Gaza war has reached its 7th month with no signs of abating, complicating Israel's domestic political scene. Prime Minister Netanyahu's popularity is significantly declining, with widespread opposition demanding elections and the release of hostages in Gaza.

Despite this, support for the ongoing war remains strong. Rivals like Benny Gantz are emerging, but a leadership change during wartime is uncertain. The far-right and religious parties in the ruling coalition are pushing hardline policies, increasing settler violence and land dispossession.

The Iranian counter-attack has heightened the sense of threat, diverting attention from international criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza. This ongoing conflict is testing America's support for Israel and harming Israel's international reputation.

The situation raises questions about the prospects for change in Israel's policies towards Palestinians, the broader regional environment, and the impact of growing opposition to Netanyahu on domestic politics.

How did Israel reach the current crisis?

Mairav Zonszein

How did the situation in Israel get to this point?

We've had a political crisis for several election cycles. The far-right government that was elected in December 2022 is the most far-right Israel has ever had. It includes ultra-Orthodox and religious nationalist settler parties, along with Netanyahu's Likud party.

We got to this point because Netanyahu has been on trial for corruption for the last few years. His trial complicated his ability to stay in power and caused several right-wing defections because many people were unwilling to work with him. So, a split happened in the right-wing.

How did Netanyahu stay in power?

He's had to turn to the Jewish Power and Religious Zionist parties, which he'd said he'd never work with, especially Itamar Ben Gvir. Netanyahu needed their support after a short coalition led by center-right Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, [the latter] now head of the opposition.

What happens if Netanyahu is no longer prime minister?

He will lose his immunity and wouldn't be able to serve as a minister. His current hold on power is in many, many ways to evade trial and jail time. Many Israelis see this as his motive, and it's key to understanding the current Gaza conflict.

How have Israeli politics changed in the past years?

The entire body politic has moved to the right over the last decade or two. The atmosphere in Israel has been one without an alternative to Netanyahu's government.

What's the vision of this government?

It's right-wing vision, which is essentially: a rejection of a Palestinian State; a rejection of a two-state solution; and an assumption that occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem will remain part of a greater Israel.

These issues have been out of Israeli politics for a long time. Most Israelis even thought that they didn't have to deal with them anymore. But they were catapulted to the forefront after October 7th.

Who is the opposition? And what's their vision?

The opposition to Netanyahu is Benny Gantz – who's now in the War Cabinet with Netanyahu – and his faction. They have not presented policies that are any different than Netanyahu on the Palestinian issue.

There are nuanced differences in how Gantz's governance could look like as far as cooperating with the Palestinian Authority or the US so, but as a whole neither Yair Lapid nor Gantz have ever really offered anything of substance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. They definitely pay more lip service to the notion of a two-state solution, but even that has been lacking in substance, whether on settlements or to the east Jerusalem issue.

How are the divisions within the government impacting Israel?

Unfortunately, if Netanyahu goes for the Hamas deal, which demands a full stop to the war, it will break up his coalition. The far-right has threatened to leave and I believe that they would. And so, we're at a junction where most Israelis feel that it's either saving the hostages or that Israel is invading Rafah.

What's the future looking like for Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich?

They're doing everything they can to stay in power. Smotrich and Ben-Gvir are very different politicians, but they both understand that they're building a base and taking a lot of votes from Netanyahu and the Likud – they've already done this in the last election.

I think they're playing the long game. They know that Netanyahu will eventually be out of the picture. And so, they understand that if they break up this coalition, they're going to grab all the right-wing votes that Netanyahu will lose. Their base is counting on pro-greater Israel, pro-settlements, pro-occupation, and pro-annexation. And there's a big base out there for that.

They would lose in elections and go into the opposition. And when they come back later, they could grow. I'm not positive that they'd actually leave the coalition, it could be just a threat.

Who is the opposition in Israel and what does the future look like?

Daniel Seidemann

Where is there opposition to Netanyahu's government?

There's a huge opposition to the Israeli government within Israel. Virtually none of it is in the Knesset; it's on the streets. Over the past several years, there has been nobody in this Knesset or previous ones who has prioritized the issue of occupation. So, there has essentially been no political opposition since 2010 or 2011.

Why has that been the case?

The right has taken over and driven the events and discourse in Israel. This happened because the Israeli forces of moderation in the center-left and left didn't put up a fight. My generation takes the bulk of the responsibility for this and it's important to bear that in mind when you talk about alternatives.

What has been the general impact of the recent events?

What happened was an earthquake that shattered the way we look at things: both individual Israelis and ideology. For some, it's almost a near-death experience.

We are not witnessing a decline in the support of Israel; we're seeing a collapse of support for Israel in many ways.

And how have the events impacted Israeli politics?

This war has wiped out the careers of many Israeli politicians. Many understand that these are their last days, which is reflected in their policies. On the other hand, the right-wing knows they would have never had it this good.

Do you think Netanyahu will be able to weather this political crisis?

I believe his days are numbered. Netanyahu cannot move resolutely to return the hostages without stopping hostilities in Gaza. If he does that, he will likely lose his coalition. And if he pursues the military avenue, there will be hell to pay.

Does this put the political opposition in a better position?

No, not even the opposition is safe. Israeli public opinion is very divided, even among the forces of moderation, such as Gantz and Eisenkot, because Netanyahu is cutting them out of the loop. Neither Lapid nor Gantz are likely to come out of this conflict with more respect as potential leaders.

So, who can the new leaders be?

We cannot name them yet. There are a number of military analysts, who would've never approached politics in the past, who are now considering entering politics.

How has Israeli society responded to the recent event?

There are a couple of things to note here before answering this question. The Israeli public has reinvented itself twice since January of last year.

We reinvented ourselves when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in order to stop the judicial coup which was blocked by an unprecedented public uprising. And we reinvented ourselves again when the war broke out because we discovered that Netanyahu's neoconservative economic policies had gutted government and made it into a facade.

This shows that Israeli society has responded well to many of the social welfare challenges. But there is a growing sense that we need to reinvent ourselves again.

What is meant by reinvention this time?

We have a state to found. There is a broad sense among enough Israeli elites that Israel has to reinvent itself again along democratic values. This still will not provide an opportunity for a two-state solution. But it may change things.

What are the necessary steps to move forward now?

What we should be looking for now are opportunities that can somehow mitigate the horrible events that are taking place until things begin to be put in order.

I see Netanyahu as a problem to be solved and not an interlocutor who is engageable. He is less engageable than ever before and is driven exclusively by the survival instinct. Any efforts are damage control until Netanyahu is gone. The healing of Israel will only begin the day Netanyahu leaves and it's going to be a long and difficult process

How do you see the political future?

Whatever political future there's going to be, including for the Palestinians, it's going to be shaped by trauma, disorientation, and rage.

What are the prospects for change in Israel?

Eyal Lurie-Pardes

What are the possible alternatives within the Israeli spectrum?

I think there's a difference between discussing personnel change in the Israeli leadership and ideological change. According to polls and observations of Israeli society, it's very unlikely people within Israeli society will shift to the left in the absence of international pressure.

Why is that so?

In the last two decades, there has been a significant shift in society. Previously, after wars like the 1973 war with Egypt and the Lebanon war in 1982, Israeli society often craved change towards peace, leading to agreements like the peace deal with Egypt and the Oslo Accords after the Intifada.

During this time, there was a notion that Israel's security could be improved through peace negotiations and diplomatic measures. However, over the past 20 years, the Israeli public has moved further to the right, believing that more limitations on Palestinian rights and increased military action are necessary responses to conflicts in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.

What other factors have affected this shift to the right?

The demographics in Israel.

There is a growing sector of ultra-Orthodox Jews with sectorial politics. They have sectorial parties, and it's very hard to see that changing in the future because their political ideology and religion is connected to educational and welfare infrastructure set up exclusively for them.

This dynamic feeds itself and is likely to remain aligned with the right wing in Israel. Unlike in the 1990s, ultra-Orthodox parties today aren't willing to work with both sides of the Israeli public due to their liberal values.

This cycle is very hard to steer from its current direction. We have definitely been faced with an earthquake, and it's very hard to know exactly what will come in the end. We might see personnel changes, but I don't assume there will be ideological change.

How will the international community engage with Israel?

I think we have seen tremendous change in the past few months. The US inclination to use sanctions against Israeli settlers, followed by the UK and EU doing the same, shows another angle to influence Israeli policy.

The international community should step up and understand its role, especially once Netanyahu is not in power, to truly influence Israel's policy. Focusing on the Palestinian issue, it seems unlikely to see a change in direction within Israeli society itself without this international pressure.

Comments from the discussion and Q&A

On international engagement

Mairav:

US policy on the Israel-Palestine issue has long contributed to the current situation. The US and international stakeholders have not used their power effectively. Despite the current sanctions against settlers, there's no change on the ground.

Israel's impunity has been to its own detriment. If it had faced a higher price for its settlement project and occupation, the situation might be different. If the US really wanted, it could have secured a ceasefire and stopped Israel's military offensive in Gaza.

Danny:

No single factor has contributed to the perpetuation of the settlement enterprise than a lack of accountability for Israel full stop.

The relationship between the United States and Israel has been like a wealthy uncle who's been subsidizing our crack addiction instead of sending us off to rehab where we belong.

On a two-state solution

Eyal:

Whether the two-state solution is right or not is secondary. The primary focus should be on better protecting Palestinians' rights and aiming for self-recognition. This could happen in different ways, such as a confederation, for example. But we need to preserve protections for Palestinians and focus international efforts on this. Rehabilitating Gaza should ensure stability and prevent future bombings.

Danny:

There's only one way to end occupation and that's a border. The two-state solution may be dead but killing it does not create an alternative. There will be no possibility of a shared society until the divorce is completed and it's radical surgery.

In the next years, we may see the creation of a political process which credibly establishes the two-state outcome as the north star.