IDEAS

# After 30 Years in Israel, I See My Country Differently

Inside the Israeli crack-up

By Matti Friedman

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Israel in the past six months has felt like a madhouse, a political protest the size of New Jersey, an unending traffic jam, a lab for bad ideas, a glimpse of the future of Western democracy in the social-media age. It has also been a classroom, even for those of us who think we're experts. I've lived and written here for nearly 30 years. But as I stood among thousands of other protesters outside the Knesset on Monday, the midday heat so strong that I almost longed for relief from the police water cannon, I realized that I was learning to see the country with new eyes.

Inside the Knesset, the most extreme government in Israel's history was legislating the first stage of its plan to move power from the courts and into its own hands, changing the rules of the democratic game. The law passed. The protest couldn't stop it. One opposition lawmaker described it as the hardest day of his life, and he used to be the No. 2 man in the Mossad. Like many people here, I've been at a demonstration almost every week since the beginning of the year. This one had the same chanting and flag-waving, but it seemed desperate, with an undercurrent less of defiance than of

fear. A chapter in Israeli history was ending. We don’t know what comes next.

The Israeli breakdown of 2023 has thrown into sharp relief the country’s submerged assumptions and blind spots, as well as my own.

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The state of Israel was declared in a rush on May 14, 1948, amid an attack by the combined forces of the Arab world. The declaration of independence in Tel Aviv that day promised a constitution “no later than the 1st of October,” but we never got around to it. Instead, we’ve relied on stop-gap measures, political deals that seemed logical at the time, and an unwritten idea of the way things are done. Israel was held together less by law than by custom. Like many Israelis, I sensed this without grasping the risk. These customs were almost invisible when they were in effect. They’re possible to see clearly now because they’re gone.

It was customary, for example, for a prime minister to resign if facing prosecution. It was customary not to put criminals in charge of law enforcement. It was customary to respect civil servants, to listen to the soldiers and spies who keep Israelis safe in a dangerous region, and never to politicize the judiciary.

The last norm, discarded along with the rest by the current government, is at the heart of our troubles. In the Israeli system, a simple majority had no official limit on its power. So the Supreme Court evolved into a check on the state, protecting civil rights and fighting corruption with legal tools that themselves had an ad hoc air. But early this year, having secured less than 49 percent of the popular vote, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's new government announced a "legal reform" that would neuter the court and thus remove the only institutional check on government power. Netanyahu hadn't presented this plan before the election. The press conference had the tone of a declaration of war. Without judicial review, the government can delay elections, outlaw opposition parties, expand the power of clerics, and appoint officials convicted of corruption. (All of these ideas have been suggested by members of his coalition.)

The truth was always that a majority in the Knesset could free itself from all restraints merely by voting to do so. The only barrier, it turns out, was the customary deference to norms. These existed only as long as we all believed in them, and the void left by their absence is now filled by suspicion and protest.

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Last weekend, tens of thousands of people marched with Israeli flags up the highway from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. As I write, a park near the Knesset is full of tents housing protesters. When I was at the encampment, volunteer teams were making food and distributing water bottles. Groups with flags were walking uphill to the protest zone outside the Knesset while others descended, red-faced and hoarse, to rest in the shade. Those looking for inspiration in this dark year have found it in this extraordinary mobilization, manifested not on Facebook but on the street, every single week since January. No one, least of all the government, saw it coming. This raises the question of where everyone has been until now. After all, Netanyahu and the right have been in power, with only a brief break, since 2009.

The short answer is, in tech and on vacation. After Palestinian suicide bombings and rockets destroyed Israel's political left in the late '90s and early aughts, and amid an economic boom, liberal Israelis of the middle class pursued prosperity, often found it, and fell into a political slumber. Meanwhile the settler movement and its sympathizers were hard at work gaining power in state institutions and gluing together an alliance with Likud and the ultra-Orthodox parties, using the language of Jewish tradition and of hostility toward the liberal state dreamed up by Israel's founders.

Liberal Israelis held to their old assumption about the settlements, which is that they're temporary and external to the state of Israel, and the settlers are fringe eccentrics. They assumed that Netanyahu's basic aim was to achieve peace and prosperity for citizens – the same goal as theirs, that is, even if he pursued it in ways they didn't like.

These assumptions have been shattered by the people now in power. Itamar Ben-Gvir, the minister in charge of the police, and Bezalel Smotrich, the finance minister, who also controls part of the defense ministry, come from the messianic settler movement, which has an entirely different goal: Jewish domination of the entire land of

Israel and a state governed by some form of religious law. This is the ideology that drove the assassin of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and the mass murderer of Muslim worshippers in Hebron in 1994, Baruch Goldstein, whose photo Ben-Gvir kept on his living-room wall until recently.

For this extreme element, war is not a horror to be avoided at all costs but a trial that would be justified to further God's plan, or an event that might even be desirable when the time is ripe. As cabinet ministers, they've been given the potential power to help start a war, whether with an expulsion of Palestinian residents in Jerusalem, for example, or a provocation at the Muslim holy sites on the Temple Mount. For level-headed Israelis in uniform, and for parents whose teenagers face the draft, this is the stuff of nightmares.

The protests erupted when Israelis were forced to realize that not only are the settlers not going anywhere in the West Bank; they've assumed central functions of government in Israel proper and are moving fast to knock out the only remaining brake on their power. With the Supreme Court out of the way, a transformation of the state will be possible. These are the stakes, and they help explain

the surge of anger and dread we’ve seen, and particularly the extraordinary announcement from thousands of military reservists, including pilots and command personnel, that they’ll refuse to report for duty. This is less a calculated pressure tactic than a howl of distress. Had I not aged out of the infantry reserves six years ago, I’d consider doing the same.

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Another unpleasant reality on display in the recent upheaval is the fault line that runs between Israeli Jews with roots in Europe (known as Ashkenazim) and those with roots in the Islamic world (Mizrahim, in our local shorthand). We expend great effort to pretend that our debates are only about policy, not identity, but that isn’t true. The grievance felt by many families whose roots are in places like Casablanca and Algiers, and who were sidelined by the country’s Eastern European founders and the official narratives, has not faded—on the contrary, it seems to have grown.

Anyone at the demonstrations understands that the protesters are mostly middle-class Ashkenazim. The cops guarding and occasionally manhandling us are mainly working-class Mizrahim,

as are the traditional Likud rank and file. Most people in fighter squadrons, commando companies, and intelligence outfits are Ashkenazi and liberal. The academy and the tech boardrooms are much the same. This sociological fact says nothing good about our society. At least half of the Jewish population here is Mizrahi, but we've never had a Mizrahi prime minister, and the Supreme Court has a woeful lack of ethnic diversity.

Good leadership could address the divide. But for politicians like Netanyahu, divisions aren't problems—they're weapons. He hoped to use the fury of this electorate as political jet fuel, gambling that it would propel him upward and not blow us all to pieces. Likud's grievance coalition with settlers and the ultra-Orthodox now openly derides the Supreme Court as a hostile Ashkenazi elite, the civil service as a "deep state," air-force pilots as privileged brats, and army officers as traitors.

Netanyahu's reputation, even among opponents, was that of a political grand master. This reputation joins many other assumptions on the trash heap of 2023. Netanyahu is a shell who's lost everything but his old baritone. The forces he released have escaped his control and now others are in charge, people who see

politics not as a mechanism for solving problems but as an arena for spoils, confrontation, and revenge.

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Never in all my years here have I heard so much talk of emigration. Israelis once thought our internal problems and external conflicts could be resolved, so sticking it out made sense. Today the opposite is true; we do not seem on our way to a happy resolution.

When I moved to Israel in 1995, finding Nikes or Levis was difficult and travel was a luxury. In 2023, the protesters are in the same Zara tank tops and Garmins you see in Berlin or Palo Alto. Middle-class Israelis speak English. They watch *Succession*. They have other options. If this government is not an aberration but the new normal, many will leave.

The rectangular bulk of the Knesset sits in a tidy section of Jerusalem, across from the Israel Museum and down the street from the Supreme Court, among fences and flowerbeds. I pass by often on my daily errands, and it always seems orderly and permanent.

But on Monday the same road was closed, a turbulence of police trucks and blue-and-white flags. Inside the building, the forces of disintegration were at work.  Everything seemed to be moving fast, faster than we could grasp. The edifices of state felt as tenuous as holograms, as if I could pass my hand through them. The pink flowers planted in rows on the median disappeared under the sneakers of protesters, and then under the hoofs of the horses pushing us back. I looked down again. The irrigation pipes had been ripped out and the flower bed was mud.

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