

Opinion | Israel Is Facing Existential Threats From Inside and Out. There's One Solution

Israel needs a social-democratic movement that can renew the contract between state and citizen

Eva Illouz Jan 20, 2024 📌 Follow

Outside observers cannot understand the acute crisis Israel is going through. They cannot understand it because it resembles nothing they know. Countries can change their names (post-colonial Rhodesia became Zimbabwe) or their political regimes – as when czarist monarchs were replaced by Leninist revolutionaries in 1917, a right-wing coup d'etat transformed Chile in 1973 and the USSR collapsed in 1991. While these changes may come as shocks, rarely do they threaten the actual existence of these states.

It is, on the other hand, Israel's very existence that is threatened, on multiple fronts.

The first is an immediate military threat emanating from at least six sources: [Hezbollah](#), [Hamas](#), [West Bank Palestinians](#), [Yemen](#), [Iran](#) and [Syria](#). The circle of Israel enemies has not only widened. They have also become much better armed and organized, as they have the support of Iran, Russia and China, all of which aim to destabilize the Western world and Israel in particular. The fact that Israel is a regional power, that it still enjoys the support of a declining United States, and that it exercises colonial domination over Palestinians, is not sufficient to counter the

fact that both Shi'ite and Sunni enemies have become much better strategists and are, more than ever, determined to harm Israel, if not, when possible, to eliminate it altogether. No country would take lightly the genocidal intentions of neighboring states.

The second existential threat, an internal one no less frightening than the external, also has many fronts: A large contingent of power-hungry Jewish messianists want to expel the Palestinians from Israel and the territories, they view as traitors the descendants of the secular pioneers who helped establish modern Israel, and they aspire to impose a Jewish supremacist regime. To achieve these goals, they intend to destroy Israeli democracy. They have proven in the past that they know a thing or two about the use of violence to accomplish their political goals. (Yigal Amir, the murderer of Yitzhak Rabin, one of the architects of the Oslo peace accords, belongs to the messianist camp.)

The second domestic front is the steadily growing population of ultra-Orthodox Jews, who enjoy the privileges of a superior caste: They choose not to work, and are supported by taxpayer-funded allowances; they do not serve in the army and are represented by political parties that have no women in their leadership, with no intervention by the law. This group not only enjoys privileges that have no equivalent in the world: Its members also live under the delusional belief that their prayers are the essential weapon that keeps safe the secular people who finance them.

The majority of ultra-Orthodox are anti-democratic: Their schools don't teach the subject of civics, and their opinions on many issues – such as gender equality, separation of

state and religion, minority rights – are far from democratic, and thus they find themselves in a political alliance with messianists. Both groups are the happy recipients of resources sorely needed by secular Israelis at this critical moment, for example the families displaced from their homes in both the south and the north, and traumatized by the massacres and shelling on both fronts. Both groups would be even happier if they were living in a theocratic state, which places them at odds with the pro-democracy camp of Israel, but gives them a valuable ally in the current government.

The final front of this internal political threat is made up of Bibi-ists. Bibi-ism is a right-wing doctrine centered around the cult of one man. As has happened before in history (with Lenin or Mussolini, for example), masses can be hypnotized by a malevolent political figure and be in denial about his ruthlessness, egoism and ultimate readiness to thrust the nation into the abyss. Benjamin Netanyahu's malevolence is now in plain sight: He hijacked the state apparatus for his personal political interests when he initiated catastrophic judicial reforms (and before). He ignored security warnings in order to pursue those same reforms, which deeply divided the country and thus put Israel in immediate danger. He did not have the decency to accept responsibility for the horrifying results of his security miscalculations and sheer incompetence. He offered neither consolation nor even basic human warmth to the survivors and families of victims in the aftermath of the October 7 massacres.

He continues to incite and divide the population and attack his rivals in the midst of a war in which soldiers die every

day, and as a result of which more than 100,000 Israelis remain unable to return to their homes. He is willing to sacrifice Israel in the overseas arena by exposing it to prosecution in international courts, at least in part because of his unwillingness to fire from his government the extremists and racists Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. Netanyahu seems to have the psychology of a cult leader who is willing to sacrifice everybody with him as he goes down.

The third threat is the most difficult to describe. Israelis use the word *mehdal* (failure) to describe the lapse of their intelligence services, the naked defenselessness of their communities located near a critical border, and the excruciatingly long time it took to the army to get its bearings on October 7. But "mehdal" is also used to refer to a specific mistake that can be investigated by a committee with the aim of designating particular individuals as responsible. A mehdal is not what happened that Shabbat. This was not a Yom Kippur War-type of lapse or mistake. What happened on October 7 and after, is what I would call a systemic collapse. It was a breakdown of Israel's entire societal apparatus.

Where does such a collapse begin? Maybe with Netanyahu's indifference to the security warnings he received. Maybe with the arrogant indifference of the male military commanders to the warnings of an imminent attack by young women soldiers (why should the commanders be worried when the head of state himself was not?).

It continues with the fact that West Bank settlers received privileged treatment, in that they were given priority in the

assignment of army battalions that should have been in the south, near the border that was breached. It also continues with the spectacular disorganization of the army, which was not prepared for an emergency situation of this type.

Soldiers who tried to come to the rescue of the communities in the south were not guided by a master plan or a central command but had to use social media to find their way to the sites of combat. It ends with the shocking absence of the state and its total incapacity to provide help or direction to the traumatized families who were dislocated from their homes in the south or in the care of their untended agricultural fields. This mehdal was not a mehdal. This was in fact a collapse of the entire system.

The extent of the failures is so numerous, massive and profound that it reveals and exposes a more diffuse and intangible process at work, invisible to the eye: the ongoing, longtime collapse of norms, professional ethics, fundamental constitutional values inside Israeli society. After decades of Likud-led rule, many state institutions are headed by less-than-mediocre figures, with little or no professionalism, with little or no obligation to the public interest, animated by sheer greed and power grabbing.

The Likud ethos has spread to many sectors of society with its cronyism, lack of professionalism and, most importantly, indifference to the public good. All of these are qualities that start at the top. Like all populist leaders around the world, Netanyahu has appointed his cronies to the top of key institutions and made the state serve his personal interests. He is probably no worse in these tendencies than Viktor Orban, Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro.

There is, however, one key difference: Neither Hungary, the United States nor Brazil has the level of strategy vulnerability that Israel does. In any of those countries, having a populist, negligent and self-serving leader need not threaten the very existence of the state. But in Israel, bad leadership on this scale can mean, as we saw on October 7, death.

The catastrophic nature of such leadership continues to be apparent in the war Israel is waging against Hamas in Gaza. It's a war in which one would be hard-pressed to see a strategic goal in sight.

Because, to outsiders at least, this war does not seem to be guided by careful thinking, it seems reckless. The war has weakened Israel internationally in a way its public does not yet grasp fully.

The war has already undermined its economy, leaving many businesses owners who went off to fight to struggle on their own with their economic losses. It has killed far too many of our soldiers, has not brought back most of the hostages and every day demoralizes more civilians. Perhaps most demoralizing for Israeli citizens is having to witness the disgraceful spectacle of mudslinging by current ministers of the government.

These three fronts – the military threats, domestic political extremism and the decay of norms – may appear to be mutually distinct, but they are deeply intertwined and they form the core of a serious existential threat to Israel.

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Yahya Sinwar, the head of Hamas, and thus a mastermind of one of those threats, is a brilliant murderous psychopath because he and the Iranians understand something that Israelis do not fully grasp: Israel's military strength depends on its inner resilience. Israel will not survive if it is not a democracy.

For Israel, democracy is not a moral or political luxury. It is a matter of security. Russia can be a democracy or an autocracy. Germany can be Nazi or not. They will both survive. This is not the case for Israel, because it faces the most complex set of problems in the world. That is not to say that Israel has the worst problems in the world (Sierra Leone or Eritrea's problems are far worse), but it certainly has the most complex ones.

No other country has so many enemies who want it wiped off the face of the earth; no other country contains so many contradictory groups and conflicting political goals. No other country controls three million people by depriving them of basic human rights for more than 50 years. No other country has such a large contingent of delusional, anti-democratic extremists. Finally, no country in the world finds its legitimacy as a state questioned by both well-intentioned leftists and antisemites.

Without democracy and without a political solution to the continuing occupation, in its various forms, Israel will be viewed as a rogue and racist state and shunned by the world (I would not count on populist leaders like Trump to save Israel); it will become an economic backwater; its human capital will escape and its military capacity will dwindle.

Democracy is the only stable political regime capable of containing so many contrasting groups and conflicting interests. It is the only type of regime capable of producing trust in institutions, and thus be able to both attract and produce human and economic capital. And trust is precisely what has disappeared in Israel because the populist rule of Netanyahu has led to the rot of the key institutions of the state from the inside and is still attempting to do the same with the few that remain uncorrupted. No sane person would trust the captain of the Titanic to command a ship during a storm.

Sinwar understands these weaknesses, and is playing the long game. His goals are not military. Or at least not exclusively. He is betting that one or several more such military disasters will exacerbate Israel's divisions and sow chaos. He understands that Israel's divisions benefit him. He understands that bad leaders like Netanyahu undermine Israel's strength and help him.

The [people of Gaza](#) deserve the world's compassion and its commitment to help them rebuild their society, despite the fact that a majority of them support Hamas.

But the Israeli people too deserve the world's compassion, for reasons that include but go beyond October 7. Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas want to wipe it out; its malevolent leader has led it to an abyss; Israeli citizens live under an intolerable one-sided social contract with the ultra-Orthodox and the messianists; and finally, because of an odd alliance between leftists and Islam worldwide, its existence is still contested and questioned.

Without such compassion, however, and in the face of such multi-front threats, the Israeli people can only count on themselves.

There can be no solidarity with groups – whether inside or out – that are working for Israel's destruction. The physical security and moral integrity of Israel depend on the capacity of Israeli society to build a new social contract with itself. A people, like a person, must have will. To have will, it must have hope, and hope can be reborn only when the leader that has led Israel to the edge is gone.

I have never been more sure about something than I am about this.

A wide, centrist, social-democratic movement is needed to renew the social contract binding citizens to the state. Only such a movement can give Israelis the strength that has been taken away from them and rescue them from true existential risk.

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