# Israel

## Democratic Backsliding and Elusive Peace

EDITED BY KARIN AGGESTAM

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Karin Aggestam

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*Chapter 1*

# Introduction

*Karin Aggestam*

This book originates from a workshop held in May 2023, which examined the mass protest movement that emerged in Israel earlier that year in response to the government's proposed judicial overhaul. These demonstrations highlighted the deep structural tensions shaping Israel's political trajectory. The contributions collected in this book analyse the intersection of three overarching themes: the contestation surrounding Israel's national identity, the patterns of democratic backsliding, and the enduring impact of the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which renders peace elusive. Together, these aspects define Israel's core dilemma: how a state dedicated to Zionism and liberal democratic principles navigates persistent internal divisions and contradictions amid ongoing military occupation and protracted conflict with the Palestinians.

Since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel has been guided by the dual aspiration to serve as a national homeland for the Jewish people while upholding democratic principles. Yet, this duality has long created conceptual and political tensions. Scholarship has highlighted ongoing ambiguities in Israel's constitutional order—particularly regarding the balance between ethnic-national identity and civic equality, the role of religion in public life, and the status of non-Jewish minorities (see, for example, Peleg 1998; Kimmerling 2001). Periods of intense external security threats have often subdued these internal tensions, but many analysts have warned that their re-emergence in times of reduced conflict could reveal deep disagreements over the nature of the state, potentially leading to domestic unrest (Kimmerling 2001). The events of 2023 made this latent conflict evident.

The internal conflict that emerged in early 2023 marked one of the most significant challenges to Israel's democratic institutions since its establishment.

The government, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—regarded as the most far-right coalition in Israeli history—advanced a series of judicial reforms aimed at fundamentally reshaping the distribution of power within the political system. Key elements included restricting the Supreme Court's power of judicial review, altering the composition and appointment procedures of judicial bodies, and introducing an override clause that permits the Knesset to reinstate legislation invalidated by the Court (Roznai and Cohen 2023). These proposals sparked an unprecedented wave of social mobilisation in 2023. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis from various professional and political backgrounds participated in sustained protests to defend judicial independence. Critics warned that the reforms signalled a clear trajectory of democratic decline, undermining the separation of powers and weakening institutional safeguards vital for minority protection (Haklai 2024). The crisis thus sharply underscored the unresolved question of whether Israel can uphold its identity as both a Jewish and a liberal-democratic state, or whether demographic, ideological, and territorial realities will force a redefinition of this balance.

These internal debates occurred alongside the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which continues to significantly influence Israel's political system, security policies, and societal cohesion. Years of stalled negotiations, expanded Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and the marginalisation of Palestinian aspirations for national rights and statehood have widened the structural inequalities between Israelis and Palestinians (Khalidi 2020; Pedazhur 2009). Although these dynamics have long been one of the main source of regional instability, they were often overshadowed in Israeli political discourse by the perceived strategic threat from Iran and its regional proxies. The Hamas attack in southern Israel on 7 October 2023 radically altered this situation. The killing of more than 1,200 Israelis and the kidnapping of over 250 civilians and soldiers to Gaza—widely regarded as the deadliest assault on Jews since the Holocaust—shattered public trust in Israel's security doctrine, especially the longstanding "Iron Wall" strategy (Shlaim 2000).

Israel's response and subsequent military campaign in Gaza has resulted, as of November 2025, in over 70,000 Palestinians killed according to the Hamas-controlled Health Ministry. The majority of Palestinians in Gaza are internally displaced refugees, often multiple times, alongside an almost total physical destruction of Gaza's infrastructure (OCHA Update #342). Since December

2023, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has been investigating allegations of genocide in Gaza and in the summer of 2024, the ICJ issued a clarifying statement asserting that Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem is illegal and must end immediately (ICJ 2024 ). Additionally, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for leaders of both Israel and Hamas, citing alleged war crimes committed in Gaza and Israel (Gitten 2024).

Violence has escalated in the West Bank and across the region, with conflicts erupting in Lebanon, Iran, and other areas. On 9 October 2025, a ceasefire agreement was reached between Hamas and the Israeli government, described as the first phase of US President Donald Trump's 20-point plan. This represents an important yet fragile step towards ending the war in Gaza. While the agreement has facilitated the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners and enabled limited humanitarian access, the absence of a comprehensive framework for sustainable peace raises serious concerns regarding governance, legitimacy, and regional stability.

Taken together, the crises of 2023–2025 highlight the deep interdependence between Israel's identity politics, democratic institutions, and the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Hamas attack in southern Israel revealed a rupture in the social contract between the state and society, undermining the assumption that Israel could guarantee absolute security for its citizens (Forum for Life 2025). Simultaneously, the government's focus on extensive military operations over negotiated hostage deals increased public mistrust and further polarised Israeli society. These developments demonstrate how the ongoing conflict continues to shape Israel's democratic prospects and identity politics. The question of whether Israel can reconcile its Jewish character with the demands of a liberal democratic order remains central to contemporary politics. The unresolved tension between religious and secular communities, Jews and Palestinians, and majoritarian impulses and constitutional limits will continue to influence Israel's political and societal landscape. This book examines these dynamics by placing the protest movement against the judicial overhaul, the repercussions of the 7 October Hamas attacks, and subsequent military and political developments within broader historical, societal, and geopolitical contexts.

## State identity and democratic backsliding

The concept of state identity—the shared, socially constructed understanding of what a state signifies and its normative purpose—plays a vital role in shaping political structures and behaviours. In constructivist international relations theory, state identity is viewed as historically shaped, socially reproduced, and embedded within institutions (see, for example, Wendt 1999; Telhami and Barnett 2002). State identity provides cognitive and normative frameworks that influence policy decisions, patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and ideas of political community. This is particularly important for understanding democratic backsliding, as state identity can reinforce or weaken liberal democratic norms. Scholars argue that when a state's identity emphasises ethnic exclusivity or majoritarian nationalism over civic equality, it creates structural conditions that promote illiberalism (Laruelle 2024). Democratic backsliding often occurs not only through institutional decline but also via identity-driven political projects in which leaders harness ethnonational narratives to justify centralising power, restricting minority rights, or reducing judicial oversight (Grzymala-Busse 2019). In such contexts, political elites manipulate identity to redefine the boundaries of democratic inclusion, determining who is entitled to full membership and protection under the state. As a result, when a state embodies multiple identity pillars—as in Israel's self-definition as both Jewish and democratic—these tensions can become critical points of political contestation. The balance between these identity markers has direct implications for democratic resilience, minority rights, and the legitimacy of institutional constraints.

The creation of a homeland for Jews has been the main goal of Zionism, making Israel's identity closely linked to Zionist ideals. Since its establishment, the State of Israel has embodied the dual and often conflicting aims of being both a Jewish homeland and a democratic state—a tension that has shaped political institutions and social relations since 1948. Balancing the rights of the Jewish majority with those of the Palestinian Arab minority (around 20% within Israel's pre-1967 borders) remains a significant challenge, especially as more than three million Palestinians in the West Bank continue to live under occupation (Kimmerling 2010). Zionism emerged in the late 19th century as a national movement comprising various ideological strands, each presenting different visions for the Jewish state. These historical divisions continue to influence contemporary Israeli

politics, especially debates over religion, national identity, and security (Strömbom 2013). Key questions remain unresolved: Should Israel be governed more by Jewish Law (halacha), or be a secular ethnonational state defined by its Jewish majority? The absence of a written constitution reflects deep disagreements about minority rights, the role of religion, and how to reconcile a Jewish character of the state with democratic norms. The 2018 Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People heightened these debates by formalising Jewish self-determination and prioritising Israeli settlement in the Occupied Territories. Domestic and international critics argue that the law marginalises minorities, undermines equality, and signals a shift towards ethnocratic or majoritarian governance (Waxman and Peleg 2020). Scholarship on democratic backsliding notes that such legal changes exemplify how national identity can be legally reshaped to weaken democratic protections (Mounk 2018). Contemporary political parties reflect these longstanding Zionist and identity-based divisions. Far-right parties, such as Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionist Party, promote a maximalist territorial vision based on biblical borders and reject Palestinian self-determination. Parties like Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu similarly favour maintaining control over the West Bank but primarily justify this on security grounds. Centrist parties such as Blue & White and Yesh Atid argue that prolonged occupation threatens both Israel's democracy and long-term security; therefore, they support conditional territorial withdrawal to protect democratic institutions alongside Jewish statehood (Rahat and Hazan 2022).

A significant internal tension exists regarding the political status and socioeconomic rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel. Although equality is officially guaranteed, they frequently encounter institutional discrimination, underrepresentation, and unequal access to resources (Jamal 2011; Yiftachel 2006; Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005). This highlights the structural contradiction between Israel's Jewish ethnonational identity and democratic egalitarianism. The divide between religious and secular Jews further complicates identity politics: secular groups advocate for greater separation of religion and state, while religious groups seek expanded incorporation of Jewish law (halacha) and norms (Cohen and Susser 2000). Settlement expansion in the West Bank also intensifies demographic and ideological pressures. Supporters view Israeli settlements as fulfilling Jewish historical rights; critics contend they entrench inequality, undermine peace prospects, and threaten Israel's democratic character by increasing military control and occupation over a non-citizen population (Haklai 2007; Yiftachel 2006).

Therefore, the ongoing tension between Israel's Jewish identity and its democratic commitments has significant implications for governance and social cohesion (Cohen and Susser 2000). Political polarisation has intensified, with different factions promoting contrasting identity narratives. As research in comparative politics demonstrates, such identity-based polarisation can accelerate democratic decline by weakening institutional legitimacy, reducing protections for minorities, and justifying executive overreach (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2024; Waldner and Lust 2018). Consequently, analysing Israel's democratic future requires understanding how its dual identity creates ideological, demographic, and institutional pressures. The future of Israeli democracy depends not only on safeguarding institutions and ending its military occupation, but also on reconciling rival identity narratives and embedding democratic norms within the country's changing self-perception.

## Protracted conflict

The idea of protracted conflict, introduced by Edward Azar (1990), refers to long-term, violent conflicts between communities where fundamental human needs, claims to identity, and relations between the state and society are deeply intertwined. These conflicts are characterised by their endurance over many years, difficulty in resolving, and their entrenchment in historical grievances, collective memories, and asymmetric power dynamics. Protracted conflicts occur when groups perceive existential threats to their security, identity, or political rights, and when state institutions favour one group's interests over others. Scholars highlight several characteristics of protracted conflict. Collective identity often fuels insecurity, with threats interpreted not only as material but also as existential and symbolic (Kelman 2005). Historical trauma and narratives of victimhood and past violence also play a key role in political behaviour. Perceptions that any concessions are zero-sum are viewed as losses that threaten their survival. Actions taken in self-defence are thus often seen by opponents as offensive, heightening fears and hostility (Volkan 2001).

In the context of Israel–Palestine, scholars largely regard the conflict as a textbook example of a protracted conflict, shaped by opposing national narratives, collective traumas, and unequal power dynamics (Rouhana and Bar-Tal 1998). It has deep roots and, over time, has evolved into a complex geopolitical struggle

that affects not only the region but also global politics. Israel's national security approach, along with the focus on military strength and deterrence, should be viewed not merely as policy choices but as reflections of a deeply rooted identity formed through decades of existential fears, warfare, and mistrust. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has been driven by an enduring emphasis on security and survival. The traumatic legacy of the Holocaust has profoundly influenced Israeli political leadership, reinforcing a shared belief that Jewish vulnerability in the diaspora should never be repeated. For Israel's founders, the experience of powerlessness in the diaspora was meant to be replaced by a new identity rooted in strength, sovereignty, and independence, embodied by the "Sabra," the native-born Israeli Jew (Weitz 1995). From the perspective of protracted conflict theory, this transformation indicates the internalisation of historical trauma as a permanent element of national identity. Israel's early leaders recognised that the Jewish people must never again face existential threats without the means to defend themselves. As a result, a militarily strong Jewish state—together with the Law of Return, which guarantees a global refuge for Jews—became the ultimate safeguard of collective survival (Bar-Tal 2013).

Security thus became not only a policy priority but also a key normative pillar of Israeli national identity. Since its declaration of independence in 1948, Israel has participated in a series of wars that profoundly shaped its national security strategy. The 1948–49 conflict—known to Israelis as the "War of Independence" and to Palestinians as the "Nakba"—laid the foundation for enduring existential anxieties. In the 1967 war, Israel occupied territories including the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula, and Golan Heights. This expansion was framed within Israeli discourse as a necessity driven by Arab states' ongoing non-recognition and refusal to negotiate, exemplified by the 1967 Arab League Khartoum Resolution ("no peace, no recognition, no negotiations with Israel"). Accordingly, these wars are narrated in Israel as "wars of no choice," fought in unavoidable self-defence against overwhelming threats (Flamhaft 1996). This narrative mirrors a central dynamic of protracted conflicts: the shaping of collective memory around existential struggle (Bar-Tal 2013). Israel's national security strategy evolved, but its core remained unchanged: ensuring military superiority, deterrence, territorial depth, and strong strategic alliances (Freilich 2018) Israel's commitment to a qualitative military edge further illustrates how protracted conflict sustains a militarised security ethos. Israel's undeclared nuclear capability also serves as a fundamental part of its strategic deterrence (Peres 1998).

Territorial control is justified by the principles of strategic depth and pre-emptive action, especially considering Israel's small geographical size. Intelligence gathering also plays a vital role, with agencies like Mossad and Shin Bet essential for detecting, preventing, and managing threats, while cyber capabilities further enhance Israel's ability to pre-empt escalation. Ongoing threats from non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah have led Israel to adapt to asymmetric warfare through drones, precision targeting, assassinations and cyber operations (Bergman 2018). International alliances, particularly with the United States, have strengthened Israel's deterrent stance while supporting diplomatic efforts and regional partnerships through agreements such as the Abraham Accords (Fakhro 2024).

However, despite the dominance of military thinking, a growing number of voices within the Israeli security establishment argue that Israel's long-term survival cannot rely solely on military means. Former leaders of the Shin Bet, Mossad, and IDF have consistently called for diplomatic engagement to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, warning that occupation and political stagnation pose greater long-term threats than external enemies (Gatekeepers 2012). As former Mossad director Tamir Pardo states, "occupation is Israel's only existential threat … Israel is sticking its head in the sand regarding the conflict with the Palestinians" (Cohen 2017). Similarly, already at the end of the 1980s, former military intelligence chief Yehoshafat Harkabi (1988) warned against moral self-righteousness that blinds Israel to political reality. These warnings reflect an understanding within parts of the Israeli security establishment that the dynamics of the protracted conflict—identity entrenchment, cycles of fear, and zero-sum narratives—cannot be resolved through military means. Nonetheless, the dominant national ethos remains influenced by the historical experience of existential threats, reinforcing a preference for deterrence and military superiority.

Historically, security has often overshadowed efforts to achieve peace in Israeli political culture. This arises not only from tangible threats but also from Zionist narratives that minimised or denied Palestinian national identity and self-determination. The early Zionist slogan "a land without a people for a people without a land" reflected an ideological view that ignored the presence and political rights of Palestinians (Khalidi 2020; Shafir and Peled 2002). The displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians in 1948 led to a refugee crisis that Israeli leaders blamed on Arab neighbouring countries rather than Israel itself,

strengthening a narrative of non-responsibility (Morris 1999; Said 1992). This discursive exclusion of Palestinian identity remains one important factor in perpetuating the ongoing conflict.

## Why peace is elusive

Achieving peace in protracted conflicts is notoriously challenging, not because of a lack of diplomatic efforts, but because these conflicts become deeply rooted in the political institutions, identity structures, and socio-psychological landscapes of the societies involved. Protracted conflicts are fundamentally identity-based (Coleman 2006; Rothman 2012), in which each side develops narratives of historical memory, victimhood, and legitimacy that portray the conflict as an existential threat. Consequently, concessions are seen not as pragmatic compromises but as threats to collective survival. These competing narratives harden over time, creating mutually exclusive visions of justice and sovereignty (Aggestam 2012, 2025). Furthermore, asymmetric power relations, in which one actor holds significantly more political, military, and economic influence, tend to create unbalanced negotiation environments. In such contexts, the stronger party often seeks to manage rather than resolve the conflict, while the weaker party demands structural change (Aggestam 2002). As a result, peace agreements frequently institutionalise inequality rather than address it, leading to sustained instability or collapse.

Decades of violence also breed deep mistrust, fear, and dehumanisation, creating a socio-psychological infrastructure that sustains conflict (Bar-Tal and Salomon 2006). Delegitimising the other while perceiving oneself as a perpetual victim is common. This justifies their own violence as defensive and unavoidable. Furthermore, peace processes in protracted conflicts are highly vulnerable to spoilers—actors who use violence to undermine negotiations they see as threatening their interests or identity (Stedman 1997; Aggestam 2006). Extremists on both sides can sabotage peace efforts, reinforcing narratives of mistrust and delegitimising moderates. Additionally, internal divisions within one or all parties weaken their capacity to negotiate, implement agreements, or present a coherent diplomatic stance. Fragmentation often causes external actors to regard one side as an unreliable partner, further hindering progress. Finally,

the absence of a clear end-state or "peace vision" is frequently a central challenge in protracted conflicts. There is no mutually agreed roadmap for what peace should look like. Without consensus on key final-status issues—territory, refugees, sovereignty, security, and recognition—interim agreements become fragile and prone to collapse.

Despite the dominance of security over peace in Israeli policy, there have been moments when diplomatic breakthroughs seemed possible. The situation began to shift with the First Intifada in 1987, a popular Palestinian uprising that changed regional dynamics and international perceptions of the conflict. The intifada emphasised the importance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, demonstrated the unsustainability of the Israeli military occupation, and prompted Israel to reconsider its strategies. This laid the foundation for the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) and ultimately the 1993 Oslo Accord. It represented the first mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). It also outlined a phased plan for Israeli territorial withdrawals from Gaza and the West Bank and established the Palestinian Authority (PA) as an interim governing body. The five-year transitional period was designed to build trust and prepare for negotiations on key final status issues—Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders, and security.

However, despite its symbolic importance, the MEPP was structurally weak. It functioned as a process without a clearly defined end goal—a fact that would prove harmful. By the time final status negotiations were due in 1999, the peace process was already faltering. First, the peace process lacked a precise vision of a final peace. This created space for competing interpretations, allowed hardliners to undermine the process, and prevented any momentum towards resolving core issues (Ross 2004). Moreover, there was an escalation of peace spoilers. Terrorist attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and actions by extremist Israeli settlers—most notably the 1994 Hebron massacre and the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin during a peace rally in 1995—destroyed trust and undermined public support for compromise. Each side blamed the other for failing to uphold its commitments, reinforcing perceptions of bad faith. The structural asymmetry further eroded the negotiation process. Israel's overwhelming military, political, and economic power enabled it to shape the terms of negotiations, whilst Palestinians—lacking sovereignty, resources, and territorial control—were pressured into accepting unfavourable compromises.

These conditions led to widespread Palestinian disillusionment and feelings of marginalisation (Malley and Agha 2001). The final blow came with the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in 2000. Rising violence deepened mistrust and reinforced the belief on both sides that "there is no partner for peace" (Grosbard 2003). With negotiations collapsing and violence escalating, the peace process entered a prolonged state of paralysis.

The political divide between Fatah in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza after 2006 further diminished prospects for diplomacy. This split weakened Palestinian negotiating leverage and provided external actors—especially Israel—reasons to doubt Palestinian legitimacy and unity as negotiating partners (Aggestam 2015). It also divided Palestinian society, making it more challenging to reach an internal agreement on peace proposals. For Palestinians, peace initiatives increasingly seemed to favour Israeli interests and appeared disconnected from Palestinian realities. The ongoing failure to resolve core issues—particularly those of refugees, sovereignty, settlements, and Jerusalem—has increased scepticism about negotiations. As long as national grievances remain unaddressed, Palestinians believe there is no fair path to peace (Hammami and Tamari, 2001).

## Outline of the book

The book comprises nine contributions. These chapters explore how debates over identity, democratic decline, and ongoing conflict intersect to shape Israel's current political landscape. It also examines emerging policy frameworks—including new diplomatic proposals such as the Trump 20-point plan—and their potential impacts on Israel's societal cohesion and peace prospects. Each chapter examines the challenges Israel faces today, including the judicial overhaul introduced by the current Netanyahu-led government in 2023, which threatens the country's democracy, as well as existential issues related to peace and security, with particular attention to the repercussions of Hamas attack on 7 October 2023. Broader implications for the Middle East, including prospects for peace, are also discussed.

This introduction is followed by Chapter 2, authored by Isabell Schierenbeck, which examines the civil society protests in Israel during 2023 and is based on fieldwork conducted in Israel. The chapter utilises non-violent civil resistance

theory to analyse the scale, strategies, loyalty shifts, and resilience of the Israeli protest movement. It explores whether the protests against the judicial overhaul indicate a broader crisis within Israeli society and politics. Chapter 3, by Anders Persson, examines the "authoritarian turn" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Drawing on data from three leading democracy rating indexes, it analyses Israel's democratic decline in light of various forms of illiberal legislation. It also examines the autocratisation of Palestine, resulting from internal divisions and ongoing Israeli occupation. Chapter 4 by Liora Sion analyses how interactions between Palestinians and Jews within Israel have led to a rise in ethnocentric attitudes and moral anxieties among some groups. As the boundaries between Jews and Palestinians in Israel become increasingly blurred, the chapter identifies a sense of "moral panic" emerging within some dominant factions of Israeli Jewish society. However, it also suggests these similarities could create opportunities for both sides to recognise common ground and work towards future peace. Lior Lehr, in Chapter 5, analyses the transformative processes the conflict has undergone over the past two decades, emphasising the shift from the "peace process" framework to the concept of "shrinking the conflict." The chapter further considers the role of the international community and diplomatic efforts undertaken since 7 October 2023. Chapter 6, by Jacob Eriksson, explores the deep political divisions within Israeli society and how the question of peace has largely faded from political discourse in recent decades. Despite the resurgence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since 7 October 2023, the chapter argues that this is unlikely to revive the peace process. Lisa Strömbom, in Chapter 7, concentrates on grassroots activities of groups such as "Standing Together" and "Combatants for Peace," which rapidly mobilised for peace following the Hamas attack, aiming to counter heightened antagonism. The chapter applies antagonistic peace theory to demonstrate that, despite the shrinking space for peace advocacy, several of these groups continued their efforts to foster contact and engage in agonistic dialogues and peace practices between Israelis and Palestinians. In Chapter 8, Amnon Aran examines the interplay between the rise of Israel's radical right, domestic upheaval, and Israel's protracted war against the backdrop of foreign policy uncertainties, focusing on three arenas: the Palestinians, the Gulf, and the United States. The concluding chapter takes stock of the insights from the preceding eight chapters and emphasises that addressing the foundational dilemma of Israel and the ongoing protracted conflict will require bold political leadership and a renewed commitment to democracy and peaceful coexistence.

*Chapter 2*

# The Judicial Reforms and the Protest Movement in Israel

*Isabell Schierenbeck*

On the evening of 26 March 2023, I was sitting with a friend at a coffee shop on Bograshov Street in Tel Aviv. Suddenly, people began pouring out of their homes and down the street, carrying flags and whistles. We realised that something must have happened and turned to X and WhatsApp. Within seconds, we learned that Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant had been dismissed following a speech he had made the day before, in which he had called for a pause to the government's judicial reform programme due to security concerns.[1] In his speech, Gallant (2023) had specifically addressed the risk that the protests then taking place against the proposed judicial overhaul would spread to the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF):

> Over the past several weeks, something serious has happened. I meet with commanders and soldiers before operations, during military tours and exercises, and in briefing rooms. I hear their voices, and I am worried.

Gallant was responding to the rising number of Israelis protesting against the judicial overhaul. During the spring of 2023, Israel experienced some of the largest and most intense protests in its history. Some commentators even called the ongoing crisis the "Second War of Independence" (Abramowitz 2023; Dash 2023; Misgev 2023, see also Haklai 2024). Tens of thousands attended protests in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, and Beer-Sheva as well as at over 100 sites nationwide (Shafir 2023; Stephan 2023; Zilber 2023). On 7 October, when Hamas attacked Israel, the protests were immediately halted by the organisers. A few days later, an emergency government and war cabinet were formed. Benny

1 The Prime Minister later annulled his dismissal.

Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, from the opposition party National Unity, joined the war cabinet on the condition that, among other things, the controversial judicial overhaul be frozen. When Gantz and Eisenkot left the war cabinet in June 2024, the judicial overhaul continued with renewed vigour.

In this chapter, I analyse the protests against the judicial overhaul in Israel – their size, scope, tactics, and resilience – from January to October 2023. The chapter questions whether the protests reflect a broader crisis in Israeli society and politics, and how they should be understood as mass protests within the Israeli context. It concludes with reflections on recent developments in Israeli politics and society, as well as the (still) ongoing protests. The study is based on fieldwork conducted in March, June, and July 2023, as well as in July 2025, during which I carried out participant observation at demonstrations and protests against the judicial reforms in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and other smaller locations, on Saturdays and on additional "days of disruption." The data include informal conversations with protest organisers, participants, and ordinary people in taxis, coffee shops, markets, etc. Additionally, materials on X and secondary sources, such as reports, policy briefs, and news articles, have been utilised.

## The government reform agenda and the protest movement

In November 2022, Israel held its fifth election in four years. By a narrow margin of 0.5%, the pro-Bibi bloc won over the anti-Bibi bloc.[2] Moreover, Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of Likud, the largest party in the election, was asked to form a government. Towards the end of December, Netanyahu presented the new coalition government, comprising six parties: Likud, United Torah Judaism, Shas, Religious Zionist Party, Otzma Yehudit, and Noam. The coalition held 64 of the 120 mandates in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. This Israeli government is the most right-wing – and some would argue extremist – in Israel's history (Cohen and Shany 2023; Goren 2023). It was not just that Likud had lost some of its more centrist Knesset members, such as when Gideon Sa'ar left Likud and formed

2 The 'pro-Bibi bloc' refers to the parties that clearly expressed during the election campaign their desire to join a coalition government with Likud leader Benyamin Netanyahu (Bibi), while the 'anti-Bibi bloc' consisted of parties that explicitly stated they would not.

the party New Hope in 2020. Additionally, one of the parties in the new coalition, Otzma Yehudit, has its roots in the extremist Jewish supremacist Kahanist movement,[3] while the smaller party Noam has an openly homophobic platform.[4]

The minister of justice, Yariv Levin from the Likud unveiled the new government's programme for judicial reform a week after the government was sworn in. The main aim of the reform package was to increase the influence of the executive and legislative branches of the political system at the expense of the judicial branch, particularly the Supreme Court. The proposed judicial reforms included measures to restrict the Supreme Court's powers to review administrative acts and to strike down Knesset legislation (e.g., through reference to the so-called Reasonableness Standard Law); to overhaul the role of government legal advisers and the process of their appointment; and to involve more elected politicians in the committee that appoints judges (Cohen and Shany 2023; Navot and Lurie 2024; Starr 2023). If implemented, these reforms are likely to have a profound impact on fundamental values and principles in Israel, as well as on the nation's identity as a "Jewish and democratic state".[5] The core reason for this is that the Supreme Court remains the only body providing "checks and balances" within the Israeli political system. Israel does not possess a formal constitution; instead, it has 13 Basic Laws enacted over the years that regulate the powers and responsibilities of the three branches of government. In 1992, the Knesset passed two Basic Laws that limited its own legislative authority to enact laws that could violate certain fundamental rights. A few years later, the Supreme Court declared these Basic Laws to be "constitutional in nature" and significantly increased its own authority, in what is known as the "constitutional revolution" in Israel (Cohen and Shany 2023: 5; Segev 2024; Shafir and Peled, 2002: 263).

3 The Kahanist movement traces back to the political party Kach, led by Meir Kahane. Kach secured one seat in the 1984 election but was disqualified from the 1988 election due to its racist platform. The party was completely banned in 1994.

4 Gideon Sa'ar and New Hope joined the government in September 2024. In July 2025, Shas and United Torah Judaism left the government, while Noam had left earlier.

5 "Jewish" is defined in the Declaration of Independence of May 1948, and the word "democratic" was included in an amendment to the Basic Law: The Knesset in 1985. However, in the Declaration of Independence, it states that the state will "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."

The proposed reforms should therefore be seen as part of the longstanding and ongoing tension between the Supreme Court and right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties. This conflict reached an earlier peak in July 2018 when the Nation-State Law was passed – by a narrow majority (62 in favour, 55 against) – as a Basic Law by the Knesset (Jabareen and Bishara, 2019). The law's adoption sparked intense debates and internal protests, including from Israel's Palestinian and Druze communities, as well as civil and human rights organisations. One point raised by right-wing parties was that the Nation-State Law (as a Basic Law) should take precedence over Supreme Court rulings, a proposal later rejected by the Knesset.

From the perspective of Justice Minister Levin and other supporters of the judicial overhaul, the reforms launched in January 2023 aim to strengthen the democratic character of the Israeli state, as they believe the Supreme Court does not represent the wider Israeli society. They contend that the reforms are both necessary and legitimate — not only because the government is an elected body that reflects the majority of voters but also because the Supreme Court is seen as a liberal stronghold connected to the country's Ashkenazi liberal and secular elite (Cohen and Shany 2023; Shafir and Peled 2002). As Levin stated during the presentation of the reform package in January: "Democracy is in danger when we vote in the ballot box but each time unelected people decide for us" (Alterman 2023).

The opposition immediately criticised the judicial reform package, and grassroots-initiated protests started on the Saturday after Levin's speech. The protest movement and its supporters saw the proposed reform as a way to end Prime Minister Netanyahu's dealings in his ongoing corruption trials. However, they also expressed deeper ideological worries, saying the reform plan threatened the core values of Israel as a liberal democracy (Goren 2023; Haklai 2024; Navot and Lurie 2024; Plesner 2023). As Sikma Bressler, a prominent leader of the protest movement, said in an interview in March 2023: "Maybe it will sound dramatic, but what matters now is really to save Israeli democracy ... We are now, these days, facing a real coup … Israel will no longer be a democracy, and then once the point of no return has passed, it will take decades to get back from this point, and maybe it will not even be possible" (Borschel-Dan 2023).

It was argued that the reforms would turn Israel into a less democratic state (and even a dictatorship), which could result in the current government implementing policies targeting specific segments of the Israeli population – such as Palestinians, women, and the LGBTQ community (see also Persson in this volume).

Additionally, critics of the proposed reforms feared an increase in the influence of religious authorities within Israeli society and politics, which might be accompanied by the continued exemption of haredim from the country's compulsory military service and a complete annexation of the West Bank. Furthermore, many protesters regarded the proposed reforms as merely the beginning of a much broader agenda aimed at taking control of and further politicising Israeli media, civil society, and higher education (Dattel 2023; Freedman 2023; Sokol 2023). Members of the protest movement, as mentioned above, described the judicial reform agenda as a "coup" and compared the situation in Israel with developments in Poland, Hungary, and Turkey (Borschel-Dan 2023; Plesner 2023). Interestingly, however, as we will observe later, the reform agenda was also criticised from within the right wing, and even within the pro-Bibi camp.

## Social protests and nonviolent resistance

The protests in Israel can be described as nonviolent civil resistance against a democratically elected government.[6] In their influential work, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (2011) show that nonviolent resistance is currently the most common and effective way to achieve political change (see also Chenoweth, 2020, 2021). One of the main reasons for the success of nonviolent civil resistance is that it is widely regarded as a legitimate approach to creating social and political change. Consequently, it tends to strengthen both domestic and international legitimacy and to generate greater sympathy for those protesting.

There are several factors – or "legitimising attributes" (Bartkowski 2016: 10) – to consider if we seek to understand the conditions under which nonviolent civil resistance is successful (Chenoweth 2020, 2021; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). First, the scale and scope of the activities undertaken are important for successful mobilisation. It is simply politically impossible to ignore large-scale protests. However, it is not merely the numbers that matter: the broader and more diverse the base of participants, the more likely a movement is to succeed. Chenoweth (2021) even quantifies a level of involvement – at least 3.5% of the population —

6 In Erica Chenoweth's (2020: 70) words, nonviolent resistance is a "method of struggle in which unarmed people confront an adversary by using collective action – including protests, demonstrations, strikes, and non-cooperation – to build power and achieve political goals".

as a threshold for when protests are more likely to achieve their goals. The influence of a movement can be further reinforced if its protests are truly grassroots. Neither the movement nor its leaders seek formal power (Bartkowski 2016: 10). Importantly, the movement's diversity makes it harder for a government to accuse protesters of being part of the opposition.

Second, and closely related, loyalty shifts are crucial to successful mobilisation. Here, it is particularly important if the movement manages to shift the loyalties of individuals previously affiliated with the regime or government – for example, people from state institutions (military, security services, judicial branches, etc.), the bureaucracy, the economic elite, the business sector, or political parties and organisations. Even more significant is that such defections and related declarations are openly and publicly expressed, which further legitimises the social movement (Bartkowski, 2016; Chenoweth, 2021).

Third, employing a wide variety of tactics is vital for effective mobilisation. While the most common forms of mass protest, such as demonstrations, are crucial, others, such as marches, disruptions, strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience (for example, sit-ins and stay-aways) (Bartkowski 2016; Chenoweth 2021) are also important. All these actions share the characteristic of seizing power through nonviolent means and disrupting society and the economy. Research has increasingly highlighted humour as a powerful tactic for successful mobilisation, as it tends to undermine the legitimacy of a government and/or regime (Gallagher and Navone 2019). Additionally, jokes, satire, and parody can transform mass protests into lively, festive occasions, which can be particularly significant if the regime responds with increasingly repressive measures to suppress the movement (Chenoweth 2021).

Finally, sustainability and resilience are crucial for successful mobilisation. The average duration of successful mass nonviolent protests is around 16 months (Chenoweth 2021: 89). To sustain momentum over time, the leadership of a movement needs to communicate early in the campaign that the struggle is likely to be prolonged. Participants must also have a clear idea of the endpoint – that is, when the protest will have achieved its goals. Research emphasises the importance of moderation and the need for protest leaders to communicate this effectively. The end goal need not be the overthrow of a democratic system or the resignation of democratically elected leaders; it may be something in between (Bartkowski 2016; Chenoweth 2021).

# How can we understand the Israeli protests?

We now examine the Israeli case and the mass protests that began in early January 2023 and concluded with the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. What lessons can be drawn from the Israeli case by applying the four factors discussed above: scale and range, loyalty shifts, tactics, and resilience?

## Scale and range

It is estimated that between 220,000 and 250,000 people regularly participated in the protests (Goren 2023) – approximately 2% of the population. A survey revealed that about 23% of Israelis had taken part in the protests at least once, with the numbers consistently rising from January (Hermann and Anabi 2023). On certain occasions – such as in March 2023, when Defence Minister Gallant was dismissed, or during the weeks before the vote on the initial overhaul law in the Knesset – the figures exceeded 3.5% of the population (Zilber 2024).

In terms of diversity, 76% of the protesters identified as left-wing, 34% as centrists, and 10% as right-wing (in July 2023).[7] The most notable rise in the number of protesters since January 2023 involved left-wing participants, but a slight increase in centrist and right-wing participants over time can also be observed. It is beyond doubt that most of the protesters were liberal and secular. However, if we examine support (or the lack thereof) among the general population for continuing the judicial overhaul, the figures become clearer. Only 27% of Israelis supported continuing the judicial reform, while 58% opposed it. Additionally, only a slim majority (52%) of those who voted for the parties that make up the coalition government supported continuing the process. Among these, Likud voters were the least supportive of the reform (Hermann and Anabi 2023).

Setting aside political affiliations, the participants' diversity was evident. They represented a wide range of political, social, and economic actors and interests, including women's organisations, youth movements, religious groups, professional associations, labour unions, tech companies, reservists, and the

7 The data are from January–July 2023 and build on how respondents define themselves (i.e., left-wing, centrist or right-wing). Some respondents identify as both centrist and either right-wing or left-wing (Hermann & Anabi, 2023).

military/security establishment. Naturally, the composition of participants varies across different cities and locations. For example, in Beer-Sheva, the Bedouin community participated, and the number of traditional and/or religious individuals attending the protests was higher than in Tel Aviv. Nonetheless, a sign observed at protests in Tel Aviv read: "Religious? Haredi? Traditional? Secular? We stand together," aiming to present the protests as a collective effort uniting people across the secular–religious divide. As one participant mentioned in a conversation: "The first times, after Shabbat, when religious people came to the protests, there was spontaneous applause and appreciation when they joined" (Personal conversation, Tel Aviv, March 2023). Another person, part of a local organising committee, told me that a challenging issue was deciding at what time in the evening (after Shabbat) to start the demonstrations: "We want to make sure that secular families with kids are coming, so we do not want the protests to start too late. On the other hand, we want religious people to participate, and then we need to give them enough time after Shabbat to be able to join" (Personal conversations, Beer-Sheva, March 2023).

The diverse makeup of the protests was striking one Saturday evening in June 2023 in Tel Aviv. Walking towards Kaplan Street, the central gathering point for the protests in Tel Aviv, I passed by the HaBima theatre. At the square next to the theatre, there was a festive feeling, with music and dance. Members of the LGBTQ community and the Pink Panthers were calling out "De-mo-crat-ya" and singing what have now become acknowledged protest songs. One person was walking around dressed as Sara Netanyahu, wearing a yellow wig resembling Sara's hairstyle and carrying a sign saying, "Save democracy". To the left of the pink crowd was a smaller and quieter group, mainly men, from the tech sector, with a banner saying, "Save our startup nation". One of the leaders of this group was giving a speech. An hour later, both groups were marching towards Kaplan.

At Kaplan, the women's organisation Banot Alternativa was preparing, with red-cloaked women lining up in twos, heads lowered, ready to march. Later that evening, the leader of Banot Alternativa spoke, and I followed her address on the large screens at the centre of the demonstration. Walking down towards the epicentre of the protests, in front of the Azrieli Towers next to HaShalom train station, I passed a stage with veterans from the Yom Kippur War, old men in jeans and T-shirts; members of the IDF reservist organisation Brother and Sisters in Arms; professional corps for physicians and social workers; a youth movement

handing out T-shirts for teenagers stating, "This is our future", and, at the beginning of the protests, on the corner, the anti-occupation bloc with a sign saying, "Democracy and occupation do not coexist". I began to speak with one man, who was handing out material for Combatants for Peace and asked him about their presence at the protests: "Well, we are here, we must be here, but obviously what we are striving for is not what the protests are about. They ought to be about the occupation, but they are not" (Personal conversation, Tel Aviv, June 2023).

The protest movement was not affiliated with any specific political party. This did not mean it lacked support from opposition parties, their leaders, or Knesset members. In fact, opposition leaders were often invited to speak at various demonstrations. Importantly, however, the leaders of the protest movement, who emerged gradually, were not connected to any of the established parties, though some had activist backgrounds—primarily within liberal-left circles. For example, Shikma Bressler, a physics professor and member of the so-called Kaplan Force, was perhaps the most well-known figure among the protest leaders. She became politically active three years earlier during the pandemic, when Israeli courts were shut down and COVID-19 restrictions prohibited public gatherings and protests. Bressler and two of her brothers founded the Black Flag movement, which later evolved into the anti-Netanyahu protests in Jerusalem in 2020–2021.[8]

Another key figure, Moshe Radman Abutbul, a high-tech CEO, had no prior involvement in politics or activism. He began posting videos outlining his views on the judicial reform process when the government initiated it, and is now one of the protest movement's main strategists. Two other leaders, Ran Harnevo and Ami Dror, both successful businessmen, had no previous record of activism or politics. Meanwhile, Roee Neuman was involved in the Black Flag movement and, before that, led the LGBTQ protests of 2018 and co-founded the Pink Panthers. Additionally, while Moran Zer Katzenstein, a marketer who founded the feminist group Bonot Alternativa (Building an Alternative) in 2020, was initially hesitant about joining the protests, Bonot Alternativa ultimately joined following a spontaneous decision by its members (Borschel-Dan 2023; Kaplan Sommer 2023). Many of the movement's key figures, particularly Shikma Bressler, have repeatedly stated that they have no intention of engaging in party politics, which they consider a dead end for the protest movement. As Bressler

8 The black flag symbolised the death of democracy.

expressed it, "if you jump into the political system and establish a party, by definition you are losing the support" (Borschel-Dan 2023).

## Loyalty shifts

I was walking towards the protests in Jerusalem during a day of disruption. When I reached the demonstration, I decided to stand aside to observe the gathering from a distance this time. The crowd was much smaller than the one in Tel Aviv, and the number of men wearing kippahs was more noticeable. A man with four children approached me. He was of Mizrahi origin, and I could tell this was not his usual group. We started talking, and I asked him if he usually attended protests. He replied that he had never gone to the anti-Bibi demonstrations outside the Balfour Residence before – in fact, in his opinion, "Bibi has been the best leader Israel ever had" – but now things had changed. He continued: "I always voted for Bibi, but this time, now, he has gone too far. He never told us that this was going to happen." I recognised the reasoning from taxi drivers in Tel Aviv and people I had met at the Mahane Yehuda market in Jerusalem. Some of the Likud voters I spoke to said they no longer recognised their leader.

From the very beginning, and increasingly after March 2023, more prominent figures affiliated with the right wing took part in the protests. These right-wing representatives can be seen as signalling a kind of "loyalty shift light," since many of them were opponents of Netanyahu even before the launch of the judicial reform programme and had personal disputes with him. The most damaging criticisms came from individuals within the police, security service (Shin Bet), and national intelligence agency (Mossad), as well as from reservists in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Yossi Cohen, a former Mossad director, was a longstanding friend of Netanyahu's and among the closest officials to him.[9] A few days before the Knesset vote on the first overhaul law in July 2023, he published an op-ed in one of Israel's leading newspapers urging the government to halt the overhaul. Cohen argued that even if judicial reform was "right and justified," it was being implemented in a way that "endangers the national security resilience of the State of Israel in the immediate timeframe" (Times of Israel, 2023).

9 Cohen served as national security adviser to the Netanyahu government between 2013 and 2016, and then as the director of Mossad until 2021. Netanyahu has stated that Cohen is the best person to succeed him as prime minister.

Finally, let us consider what many analysts view as the protest movement's main leverage: reservists threatening to cease volunteering for the IDF if the judicial overhaul is not halted. Historically, efforts have been made to keep the IDF separate from political disputes, as this has been seen as essential for Israeli security and the country's survival. While soldiers have previously participated in protests within Israel, the scale and organisation of the current demonstrations are unprecedented. Eyal Naveh, a veteran of Sayeret Matkal—a prestigious special forces unit in the IDF—and a co-founder of Brothers and Sisters in Arms (Ahim Laneshek), addressed the crowd on 23 March 2023 during the Kaplan protests in Tel Aviv. He stated: "We did not commit to serve a king.[10] A people's army exists only in democracies ... We swear to protect the democratic, free, Jewish, equal and liberal state of Israel." The organisation co-founded by Naveh consisted of reserve soldiers and officers from various IDF units, divisions, and corps. At times, over 10,000 reservists declared they would suspend volunteer service if the government proceeded with its judicial reform plan (Kaplan Sommer 2023; Times of Israel, 2023).[11]

## Tactics

The protest movement's use of a wide range of tactics has been clearly visible. Not only have a diverse repertoire of methods been employed, but the activities have also been innovative and carefully planned. The main activity has been Saturday evening demonstrations at recurring sites in both larger and smaller cities across the country. Additionally, multiple "days of disruption" were organised – for example, at Ben Gurion Airport or on key highways. The aim was to disrupt the daily life of Israelis, causing economic and political stress and pressuring the government.

The mass demonstrations culminated in a five-day Jerusalem March in July 2023. Tens of thousands of demonstrators walked over 40km alongside the main road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, carrying the white-and-blue Israeli flag. During the march, they stopped overnight for water and food, camped along the route, and eventually set up a tent city in Jerusalem Park beside the Knesset (Kingsley and Kershner 2023). Among the clear benefits of the mass demonstrations, days of

10 Netanyahu is often called "the King" by his supporters.

11 The Israeli army, sometimes referred to as the "People's Army", is highly dependent on soldiers continuing to volunteer as reservists after the completion of their mandatory military service.

disruption, and marches are the striking images shared across social media and other outlets. These target those not participating in the protests—both opponents and supporters—and make the scale, scope, and intensity of the protests visible. For instance, drone footage over Kaplan has been widely circulated, showing crowds squeezed between skyscrapers in central Tel Aviv, a line of red-coated handmaidens quietly walking through, or medical units in khaki T-shirts from Brothers and Sisters in Arms carrying empty stretchers.

The protest movement has successfully turned Israel's flag and Declaration of Independence symbols into representations of the protests. According to Roee Neuman, one of the protest leaders, reclaiming the flag from the right was never an aim of the protest movement; it simply occurred. As this development gained momentum, organisers of the protests bought flags and distributed them by leaving them along the roadside for people to pick up (Kaplan Sommer 2023). Reflecting on this, protest leader Bressler compares it to the Black Flag movement: "Now we are fighting for the country, because they are attacking the country. So, you raise the flag of the country, one of the symbols of the country, like the anthem and the Declaration of Independence" (Barnils 2023). Furthermore, the flag was visible throughout cities – on houses, in cars, and on bikes – while the national anthem, "HaTikva" (The Hope), was played at the end of each Saturday demonstration. As a protest, Israelis for Democracy displayed two large versions of the Israeli flag and a copy of the Declaration of Independence side by side on the walls of the Old City in Jerusalem in March 2023.

Finally, art and music were also used as tactics. Walking towards Kaplan Street on an early Saturday evening, I could hear and see a man playing the piano through the open window of his apartment building. Another Saturday evening on Rothschild Boulevard, local cartoonists displayed their recent artwork: a pilot holding the Israeli flag with protesters behind him; "No democracy, no high-tech" on a sign carried by a gamer; a handmaiden in red bending down; children and an old man with a stick crossing destroyed police barricades. Another animation depicted Benjamin and Sara Netanyahu fighting over a gold watch, with the protests and flags as silhouettes. Humour – not just about the Netanyahus but also about the absurdity of the judicial reform packages, including the efforts to suppress the protests – had spread across various social media platforms. For example, in the protest game BibiRun, the player is Prime Minister Netanyahu and must trample on different protesters, including activists from Bonot

Alternativa, along with young and old protesters holding the Israeli flag or posters. "In my opinion, a game like this is a better way to encourage people to go out and demonstrate than starting another political debate on Facebook comments. This is our activism," said Shaked Lotan, one of the game's developers (Keren 2023). Another humorous example is the Japanese-inspired yet fictional "Kaplan Dating Simulator" developed by Theo Dolev and Akim Dolinsky – a video game where you progress to the next level by dating different characters, "and all of a sudden it makes you think, 'Wow, it really is crazy here,'" as one of the developers explains (Keren 2023).

## Resilience

The protest movement comprised an organising committee with a few key members, several headquarters, and numerous smaller groups. The core committee and its members were responsible for acting as spokespersons for the protests, focusing on fundraising, and supporting a structure for the active groups to maximise their effectiveness (Borschel-Dan 2023). The leadership issued repeated direct communications about the need for resilience and the movement's goals: the protests will not end overnight, and the struggle will continue. When the Jerusalem Post lists Shikma Bressler, Eynat Guez, and Eyal Naveh among the 50 most influential Jews in 2023, Bressler posts on X: "You cannot stop when you have started to walk" (Bressler 2023a). A similar, but longer, message was delivered by Bressler in a New Year's tweet on X, stating that the struggle would persist and that there would be no stopping (Bressler 2023b). Roee Neuman's New Year's tweet also addressed the way forward: "Today was a historical day. Thus, it will remain in history. But we leave it behind and move on to the next day. That is how it is in war: there is no time to breathe." (Neuman 2023).

Additionally, the aim identified for the protest movement was a complete halt to and the abolition of the judicial reform package. A firm stance has been taken against President Isaac Herzog's attempt to facilitate a compromise between the government and opposition parties. (Bressler, 2023b). There was no backing for any compromise: that is not the purpose of the nationwide protests. Furthermore, according to Bressler, the movement has already achieved some success – a message she has repeated to the gathered crowds and in interviews: "They thought that they are going to do this legislation, and they will be done with it in not time. And now they need to change … so they are calling back many their issues".

# Conclusion

The factors previously identified as important for successful mobilisation were evident in the anti-judicial overhaul protests in Israel. The size and scope of the protests were extensive, even if left-leaning and centrist participants formed the majority of the protesters; the loyalty shifts were considerable and originated from inner circles of the right-wing and military/security establishment; the tactics used were varied and complementary; and the movement demonstrated resilience over months of struggle despite reports of increased police violence and repression (Ahituv 2023; Breiner 2023).

However, two final issues must be considered. First, where were the Israeli Palestinians during the protests? They participated to a much lesser extent than Israeli Jews (Hermann and Anabi 2023). When discussing this with Israeli Palestinians in Haifa and northern Israel, I received two straightforward answers: "This is not about us; we have experienced this for a very long time already; this is not new to us," or "We do not want to get involved; that might scare away more centrist and right-wing participants" (Personal conversations, 2023). While the first answer highlights the discrimination faced by Israeli Palestinians and their distrust of the Israeli political system, the second answer warrants further reflection. According to this view, Israeli Palestinians exercised self-restraint to avoid jeopardising the success of the mobilisation. Therefore, it is important to carefully examine the stratification of participants in mass protests, especially within divided societies – that is, who chooses to participate (or not) and what implications this has for protest movements and their cause.

Second, what about the occupation? In mid-August 2023, a petition titled "The Elephant in the Room" was launched to highlight the direct connection between Israel's recent attack on the judiciary and its illegal occupation of millions of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (Jews Fight for Justice, 2023).[12] The petition pointed to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank – the elephant – as being central to the crisis in Israel. Now is the time to recognise the elephant, to force it into the view of the public, the campaign argued. If the occupation is not addressed, Israel will continue to veer towards the extreme. As a sign at the anti-occupation bloc on Kaplan Street stated: "We were silent about

12 The petition primarily targets Jewish and Israeli intellectuals in the diaspora.

occupation and we ended up with dictatorship." However, the protest movement did not openly discuss the occupation. In fact, the occupation was a contested issue from the start of the protests, when a few Palestinian flags were seen amidst a sea of Israeli flags, and the anti-occupation group was attacked by members of Brothers and Sisters in Arms for displaying the Palestinian flag during the protests. Similar tensions also appeared among the leadership, as Moshe Radman Abutbul, one of the protest leaders, was criticised for refusing to use the word "occupation" and for trying to differentiate between the protests in Israel and the situation in the West Bank (Kaplan Sommer 2023). Consequently, the occupation was largely omitted from the protests, a decision heavily criticised by a senior member of the anti-occupation group (Personal conversation 25-02-22).

On 7 October 2023, Hamas launched its deadly attack on Israel. The protests against the judicial reform immediately came to a halt, and within a short period, the IDF was fully mobilised. The protest movements quickly organised relief efforts to aid communities in the Western Negev, utilising existing networks, infrastructure, and technological expertise from the judicial overhaul protests. They provided assistance to evacuees (food, clothing, medicine, and hygiene products) and rescued stranded individuals and pets. They established a tech unit to help locate and identify victims and hostages (Meyer 2023).

Criticism directed at Prime Minister Netanyahu and the government was immediate and covered a broad range of issues, including Netanyahu's grave misjudgement of Hamas; the government's focus on the judicial overhaul – which divided the country; the increased tension in the Occupied Territories triggered by religious Zionist parties in the government (Levizky and Benziman 2024); the failure of the military and security establishment to foresee the Hamas attack; the shortcomings (and lack) of coordination and defence by the IDF and other units during the onslaught of 7 October; and, finally, Netanyahu's reluctance – unlike other high-ranking politicians and members of the military and security establishment – to take responsibility for the "Black Sabbath" and to establish a state commission.

During the war in Gaza, protests persisted in Israel, but in a slightly altered format, scope, and reach. The Hostages and Missing Families Forum and the "Bring Them Home Now" campaign led the protests, mainly criticising the government's management of the hostage issue. The Forum aimed to avoid partisan politics and repeatedly emphasised that its struggle was not political

(Reuters and Toi staff, 2024). Recurring demonstrations were organised by the Forum, as well as by groups such as the Arab–Jewish organisation Standing Together, which called for a truce and an immediate end to the war in Gaza.

Increasingly, pre-war protest movements also joined in criticising the government's handling of the war, although not on the same scale or with the same breadth as before its outbreak. A notable indication of this trend was the series of public petitions in April 2025 calling for the return of the hostages from Gaza, even if this required an immediate end to the war. The petitions argued, for instance, that the war served "mainly personal political interests" and "brought deaths upon hostages, IDF soldiers, and innocent civilians". The original petition was made by Israeli Air Force veterans and reservists, soon after several sectors of Israeli society joined with their own petitions; academics, education officials, former MFA officials such as former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, and IDF Spacepersons' Unite reservists (Dayan, Kubovich and Peleg 2025; Times of Israel, 2025).

In addition, Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to dismiss Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar prompted intense public debate and protests in Israel, as the dismissal was widely perceived to stem from a demand for personal loyalty to the prime minister. In the eight-page affidavit that Ronen Bar submitted to the High Court of Justice in April 2025, one section in particular is of utmost relevance to the topic of this chapter. Bar referred to a conversation with the Prime Minister regarding the protest movement, and stated that it was clear to him from this exchange that, in the event of a constitutional crisis, his position would depend on demonstrating personal loyalty to the prime minister, "I would be expected to obey the Prime Minister and not the High Court of Justice" (Bar 2025). Following the ceasefire between Hamas and Israel in October 2025, judicial reforms have again taken centre stage in the government's agenda—and likewise, the protests against them. The persistence of these demonstrations clearly indicates a deeper and ongoing crisis within Israeli society and politics, one that shows no signs of ending.

*Chapter 3*

# The Authoritarian Turn of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

*Anders Persson*

Israel has long been regarded as a liberal democracy and "the only democracy in the Middle East," which are central to Israel's self-image and hasbara (public diplomacy) strategy. This narrative is evident in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speeches (see, for example, Netanyahu 2016). On the Palestinian side, their history of democratic elections previously positioned them as a leading example of Arab democracy, predating the Arab Spring (Shikaki 2006: 116). However, both Israel and the Palestinian territories are now experiencing what scholars term "the authoritarian turn": a shift characterised by democratic decline, increasing autocratization, and ongoing conflict (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Recent democracy reports concur that the Israel-Hamas war has significantly reduced freedom and democracy in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza (Freedom in the World 2024:29; Freedom in the World 2025:7; V-Dem 2024:62-63; V-Dem 2025:62-63; The EIU 2024:6; The EIU 2025). This chapter utilises data from Freedom House, V-Dem, and The Economist Intelligence Unit to analyse the extent, causes, and consequences of growing authoritarianism, and to explore possible future trajectories.[13]

13 The Polity data series has been omitted from this chapter because it does not provide data for Palestine, nor does it offer annual reports or updates for Israel. In its latest Polity5 series from 2018, Israel scored 7/10 and was classified as a democracy (Polity5 2018).

## Measuring democracy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

To accurately evaluate Palestinian democracy, it is crucial to consider both structure and agency that influence any assessment. There is a clear structure-agency dilemma because many variables are directly or indirectly impacted by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, along with the more indirect occupation and blockade of Gaza. It has long been noted in the state-building literature that creating a state with democratic institutions under a decades-long occupation with no apparent end is inherently contradictory, since states are fundamentally about sovereignty, as is occupation (Persson 2017:446). On rare occasions, such as in its 2009 Freedom in the World report, Freedom House (2009:10) acknowledged that "as the occupying power in the Palestinian territories, Israel is largely responsible for the Not Free status of the areas under its control".

The structure-agency problem also applies to Israel, but in a different way. Critics note that Israel's occupation means it cannot be considered fully democratic while millions under its control lack voting rights. Freedom House's 2024 report highlighted how restricted political rights and liberties in disputed territories lowered the freedom index of associated countries, including Israel. US and international rating agencies differ in how they report on Palestine: prior to 2011, Freedom in the World reported jointly on areas under Palestinian and Israeli control, but now splits data between the West Bank and Gaza due to the political split between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. V-Dem also distinguishes between the two, while the EIU combines developments across Palestine. However, all ratings generally overlook whether democracy can be meaningfully measured in both occupied and occupying societies. Despite these limitations, this analysis supports tracking both Israel and the Palestinian areas in democracy indexes, as democratic decline in all three parties—Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza—is a key trend. While some scholars, such as Steiner, argue that Freedom House is biased toward US allies, the data show its reports have been critical of Israel, especially in 2024 and 2025.

## Israel's freedom in the world

Freedom House's flagship program, *Freedom in the World*, has been published since 1973, enabling it to monitor global trends in freedom for over 50 years. It has become the most widely read and cited report of its kind. It has covered Israel

since the programme's inception in 1973. Israel has consistently been regarded as a free country by Freedom House – the only free country in the Middle East, alongside Lebanon before the civil war there began in 1975, and Tunisia from 2015 to 2022, before Kaïs Saïed took power and suspended the parliament. Major conflicts like the Lebanon War of 1982 and the first intifada of 1987 did not negatively impact Israel's rating. In fact, Israel received its highest rating just before the second intifada erupted in 2000, and maintained that rating for over a decade after the second intifada concluded. However, starting in 2011, Freedom House began to warn that Israeli lawmakers were attempting to "advance several controversial bills that appeared to discriminate against the country's Arab minority" (Freedom in the World 2011). The following year, 2012, Israel received a "downward trend arrow" due to the enactment of the anti-BDS Boycott Law, which permits civil lawsuits against Israeli individuals and groups calling for an economic, cultural, or academic boycott of Israel, including its settlements (Freedom in the World 2012:336).

**Table 1: Freedom House's data for Israel, 1973-2025**

| Year | 73 | 74 | 75 | 76 | 77 | 78 | 79 | 80 | 81 | 82 | 83 | 84 | 85 | 86 | 87 | 88 | 89 | 90 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Freedom rating | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Political rights | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Civil rights | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| **Year** | **91** | **92** | **93** | **94** | **95** | **96** | **97** | **98** | **99** | **00** | **01** | **02** | **03** | **04** | **05** | **06** | **07** | **08** |
| Freedom rating | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1,5 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 |
| Political rights | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Civil rights | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| **Year** | **09** | **10** | **11** | **12** | **13** | **14** | **15** | **16** | **17** | **18** | **19** | **20** | **21** | **22** | **23** | **24** | **25** | |
| Freedom rating | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.5 | 2 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.5 | |
| Political rights | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | |
| Civil rights | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | |

Notes: 1=Best, 7=Worst. Please also note that the report for each year covers the data for the previous year. In other words, the 2025 report covers 2024 and earlier.

In the 2013 report, Freedom House warned that new legislation in Israel threatened democracy and due process. Israel's civil liberties rating fell in 2018 due to laws restricting NGOs and their access to international support. In 2019, Israel's political rights rating also declined following the adoption of the Nation-State Law, which was criticised for explicit discrimination against non-Jewish citizens. This period marked Israel's lowest ranking since the 1970s. Concerns worsened in 2020, when Freedom House criticised Prime Minister Netanyahu for actions undermining democratic norms, such as delaying his trial, attempting to limit parliament's functioning, and defying a High Court ruling. These events led some observers to argue that Israeli democracy itself was at risk of being suspended. Israel's recent Freedom House scores show a downward trend. Israel received 80/100 in 2016 and 2017, 79 in 2018, 78 in 2019, and 76 in 2020. It improved slightly to 77 in 2023 (Freedom House 2023a). In 2024, Israel dropped three points to 74, the sharpest decline among free countries that year (Freedom in the World 2024:3). Its score then decreased further to 73 in the 2025 report (Freedom House 2025a).

The Freedom in the World 2020 report noted that Israel's decline in score over the past decade was "an unusually large decline for an established democracy" (Freedom in the World 2020:10). In the 2023 report, Freedom House stated that: "The new government's agenda posed a direct threat to judicial independence and other democratic principles, as well as to the basic rights of Palestinians." (Freedom in the World 2023b:29) These concerns materialised during 2023, both before and after the 7 October attack and the ensuing war in Gaza.

In early 2023, the newly elected right-wing government introduced a major legal reform package, which, if fully enacted, would have severely undermined Israeli democracy. The proposed reforms sparked a large pro-democracy movement, which mobilised in the streets and demonstrated in substantial numbers every Saturday until the 7 October attack occurred. The strength of the pro-democracy demonstrators compelled the government to at least temporarily retreat from some of the most contentious reforms it had proposed (Freedom in the World 2024:18). Following the attack, the Israeli authorities arbitrarily detained thousands of Palestinians, many of whom were placed in administrative detention. Freedom House's 2024 report also observed that Israel was among the very few countries globally that tried children in courts (Freedom in the World 2024:17). Furthermore, the report described the legal regime in the West Bank as

"fundamentally discriminatory" and noted that "legal changes inside Israel itself have chipped away at the democratic principle of equal treatment under the law," particularly for Israel's Arab minority in matters such as national budget allocation, land ownership, education, and economic opportunities. Over 65 laws have been enacted that institutionalise discrimination against non-Jewish Israelis (Freedom in the World 2024:17).

Even if the second intifada contributed to the decline in Israel's civil liberties rating, as Freedom House stated in its 2001 report (Freedom in the World 2001), the reports from Freedom House over the decades clearly show that the main threats to Israel's freedom, political and civil rights, do not stem mainly from wars and terrorism but from illiberal domestic forces, some of which are linked to Israel's ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories.

**Table 2: Freedom House's aggregated rating for Palestinian freedom, 1978-2025**

| **Year** | **78** | **79** | **80** | **81** | **82** | **83** | **84** | **85** | **86** | **87** | **88** | **89** | **90** | **91** | **92** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **WB/GS*** | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 4.5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| **Year** | **96** | **97** | **98** | **99** | **00** | **01** | **02** | **03** | **04** | **05** | **06** | **07** | **08** | **09** | **10** |
| **PAAT*** | 5,5 | 5,5 | 5.5 | 5,5 | 5,5 | 5,5 | 5,5 | 5,5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5 | 5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 6 |
| **Year** | **96** | **97** | **98** | **99** | **00** | **01** | **02** | **03** | **04** | **05** | **06** | **07** | **08** | **09** | **10** |
| **IOT*** | 5,5 | 5,5 | 5.5 | 5,5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| **Year** | **11** | **12** | **13** | **14** | **15** | **16** | **17** | **18** | **19** | **20** | **21** | **22** | **23** | **24** | **25** |
| **WB** | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5.5 | 5,5 | 5,5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| **GAZA** | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6.5 | 6,5 | 6,5 | 6,5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 7 | 7 |

Notes: 1=Best, 7=Worst
WB/GS=West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli military occupation
PAAT=Palestinian Authority-Administered Territories
IOT=Israeli-Occupied Territories
Please also note that the report for each year covers the data for the previous year.

The complex situation of the Palestinian territories is clearly reflected in Freedom House's rating, which has used four different measurement units for Palestinian freedom since it first started assessing the West Bank and Gaza Strip under Israeli military occupation in 1978. Three major trends are evident in the data from 1978 to 1995, when the entire Occupied Palestinian Territory was under direct Israeli military control: the relatively mild Israeli occupation with few restrictions and open borders during the first two decades; the increase in repression following the outbreak of the first intifada in 1987; and the easing of repression with the

onset of the Oslo peace process in the early 90s. It was during the initial years, between 1978 and 1981, that the West Bank and Gaza Strip received their highest ratings.

As shown in the table above, the PA-administered territories maintained the same rating throughout the decade from 1996 to 2006. Even the first Palestinian presidential and legislative elections of 1996, described by Freedom House as 'reasonably free but not entirely fair," did not lead to an improvement in the PA's rating (Freedom in the World 1996-1997:555). In the 1996 presidential election, Yasser Arafat ran virtually unopposed and secured 88 per cent of the vote. The only other contender, a woman named Samiha Khalil, received a surprising 12 per cent (Robinson 1997:197). Khalil was never in a position to challenge Arafat, but her candidacy gave the election, according to Nigel Parsons (2005:191), the formal appearance of being a contest. The outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000 caused the Israeli-administered territories' civil liberties rating to decrease from 5 to 6 due to escalating violence (Freedom in the World 2000-2001:622). The situation improved after Arafat's death in late 2004, when the second intifada ended. The following year, 2005, saw the PA conduct a presidential election, which Freedom House described as "relatively competitive and honest" in its 2006 report (Freedom in the World 2006:841). In the same report, Freedom House upgraded the PA's civil liberties rating from 6 to 5 and its status from Not Free to Partly Free, owing to an improved civil liberties environment following Arafat's death and the Israeli disengagement from Gaza (Freedom in the World 2006:841). This marked the first time the PA was classified as Partly Free by Freedom House. The positive trend continued into 2006, when elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) were held. To many analysts' surprises, Hamas won the elections, which Freedom House described as "relatively free and fair" in its 2007 report (Freedom in the World 2007:943). The PA's political rights rating improved from 5 to 4 due to Hamas's victory, while the civil liberties rating decreased from 5 to 6 owing to increased intra-Palestinian clashes and Israeli military operations, which, according to Freedom House, undermined the rule of law and personal autonomy (Freedom in the World 2007:943). Notably, with the exception of the tiny island state of Comoros, the PA scored the best of all 22 members of the Arab League in the category of political rights and ranked seventh overall after Comoros, Kuwait, Morocco, Mauritania, Lebanon, and Jordan in the 2007 Freedom in the World (Freedom in the World 2007).

Beginning with the 2008 report, Palestinian freedom began its long decline, which continues to this day. That year, the political rights rating for the PA fell from 4 to 5, and its status shifted from Partly Free to Not Free, due to Hamas's takeover of Gaza and the collapse of a unified government. This was followed by widespread human rights abuses in the West Bank and Gaza by both the PA and Hamas (Freedom in the World 2008:826). According to Freedom House, the main reason for the decline in Palestinian political and civil rights has been the failure to hold new elections, primarily presidential and legislative, but also free and fair elections at the municipal level (see, for example, Freedom in the World 2014:784; Freedom in the World 2017 – West Bank Explanatory Note). In 2023, PA President Mahmoud Abbas entered his 18th year in office, even though his mandate expired over a decade ago in 2009.

The PLC, which has not functioned properly since 2007, was formally dissolved by Abbas in 2018 (Freedom in the World 2018b). Municipal elections in the West Bank, originally scheduled for 2016, were held in May 2017. However, major opposition groups Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) did not participate, and no voting took place in Gaza. Fewer than half of the West Bank's municipalities featured competitive races, with many candidates running unopposed, winning automatically (Freedom in the World 2018b). Since 2014, Freedom House has repeatedly described Gaza as a "one-party state" (Freedom in the World 2014:785). In 2024, Gaza's overall freedom score was 8/100 (Freedom House 2024a). It further declined to 2/100 in the 2025 report, making Gaza the most authoritarian place in the entire Middle East and, in fact, one of the most authoritarian places in the world (Freedom House 2025b).

Regarding the West Bank, Freedom House observed in 2017 that the PA "has become more authoritarian, crackdowns on the media and human rights activists who criticise its rule" (Freedom in the World 2017). By 2024, the West Bank's overall freedom score was 22/100 (Freedom House 2024b), significantly lower than neighbouring countries such as Lebanon (42/100), Jordan (33/100), and Iraq (30/100). Similar to Israel, Freedom House reported in 2024 that the 10/7 attack and the conflict in Gaza have adversely affected democracy and freedom across both parts of the Palestinian territories (Freedom in the World 2024:1). The score for the West Bank remained unchanged at 22/100 in the 2025 report (Freedom House 2025c).

# Israel and the West Bank/Gaza Strip in V-Dem's annual reports

V-Dem is the world's largest global dataset on democracy, with over 31 million data points for 202 countries from 1789 to 2024, involving more than 4,000 scholars and country experts (V-Dem 2025:2). It differentiates five principles of democracy: electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative, and egalitarian. Each of these principles has its own index in V-Dem's reports. Additionally, V-Dem's reports feature a "Liberal Democracy Index" that combines the liberal and electoral principles of democracy, each contributing half to the scale, which ranges from 0 to 1, with higher scores indicating greater democratic quality. V-Dem has published annual reports on democracy since 2017. Its data for Israel extend back to 1948.

Looking at Israel's Liberal Democracy Index since the state's founding, it somewhat parallels Freedom House's data. Israel achieved its highest score in 2000 (0.70/1). Most notably, however, Israel's score has fluctuated considerably over the past decade since Netanyahu returned to power. In 2009, it was 0.66/1, while in 2019, it dropped to 0.57/1, a decline of over 10 per cent. This resulted in Israel's downgrade in V-Dem's 2018 report from "liberal democracy" to "electoral democracy". What was remarkable about the 2018 report was that Tunisia (44/178) was simultaneously promoted to become a "liberal democracy" for the first time, thereby replacing Israel as the only liberal democracy in the Middle East at that time. All other Middle Eastern countries lagged far behind, with Lebanon a distant third, followed by Iraq and Kuwait (V-Dem 2018:72).

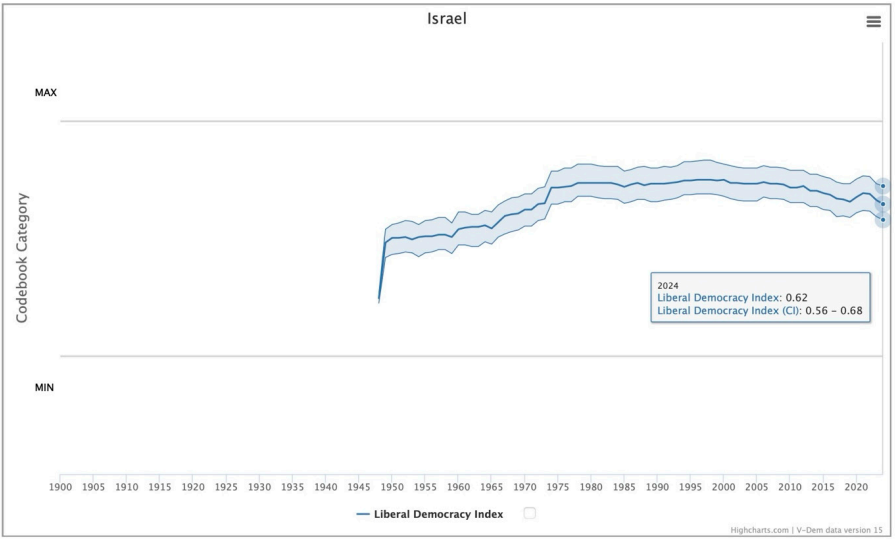


**Figure 1: V-Dem's country graph for Israel's Liberal Democracy Index 1948-2025**
Source: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

In V-Dem's 2019 report, Tunisia was downgraded to an "Electoral Democracy Plus (ED+)" because the new government in Tunis was "not fully independent from the military and thus potentially vulnerable to interference" (V-Dem 2019:25). Israel, meanwhile, was classified as a "Liberal Democracy Minus" (LD) without explicit explanation (V-Dem 2019:52). When I interviewed Professor Staffan I. Lindberg, Director of the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, about Israel's rating, he replied that it had not actually improved; rather, slight changes in the data and methodology of the latest dataset placed Israel just above the threshold for being a "Liberal Democracy Minus" (Lindberg, interview 2019). The minus sign for Israel's rating indicates that it was at the borderline between liberal and electoral democracy. In V-Dem's 2024 report, Israel once again lost its status as a "liberal democracy" and is now ranked as an "electoral democracy," scoring 0.63/1. V-Dem (2024:14) noted that "Israel's Knesset passed a bill in 2023 stripping the Supreme Court of the power to invalidate laws, thus undermining checks on executive power. Indicators that are in substantive decline also include freedom from torture." In V-Dem's 2025 report, Israel's score declined from 0.63/1 to 0.62/1, marking the lowest score for over 50 years since the early 1970s (V-Dem 2025:62).

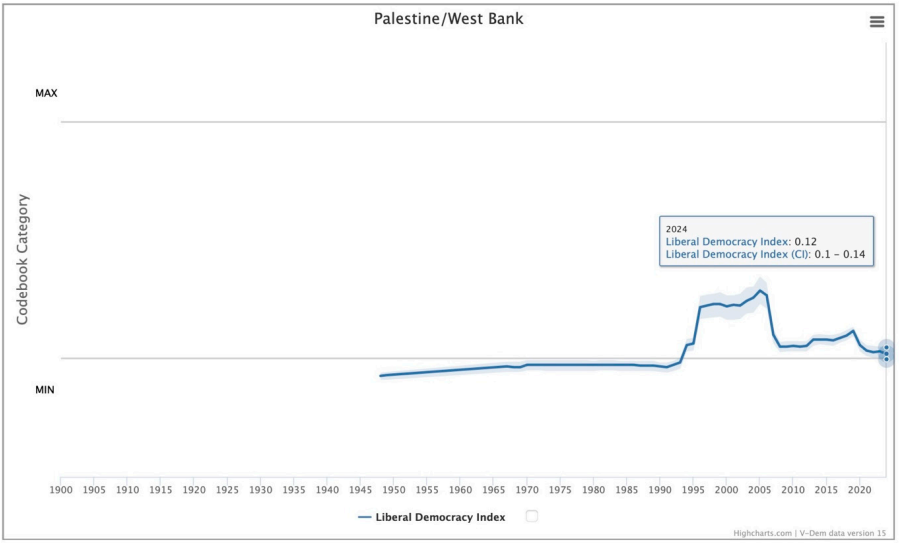


**Figure 2: V-Dem's country graph for Palestine/West Bank's Liberal Democracy Index 1948-2025**
Source: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

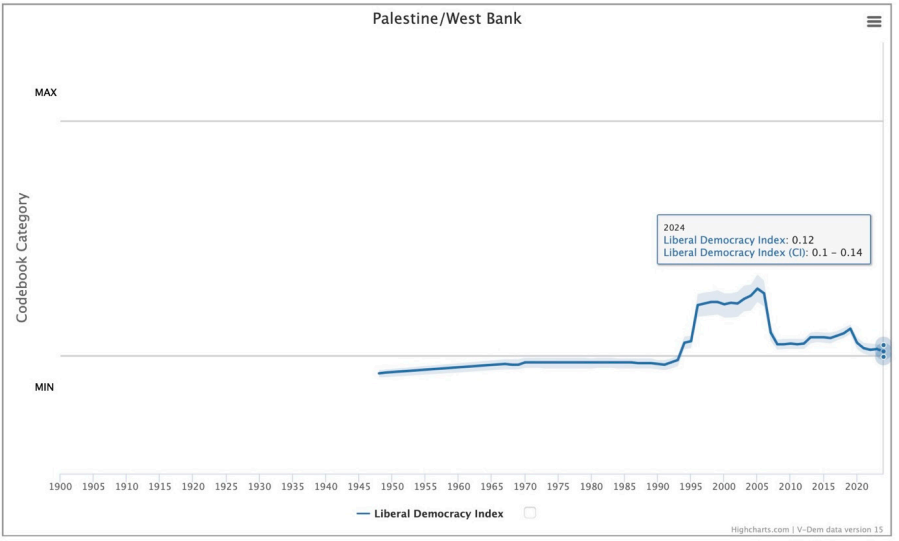


**Figure 3: V-Dem's country graph for Palestine/Gaza's Liberal Democracy Index 1948-2025**
Source: https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

The rise and fall of Palestinian democracy are clearly shown in V-Dem's graph for the West Bank. It increased with the establishment of the PA and the first wave of Palestinian elections in 1996, then decreased after the second wave in 2006. In V-Dem's initial report from 2017, Palestine/West Bank (0.235/1) was ranked 135 out of 174 on the Liberal Democracy Index, while Gaza (0.112/1) was placed 149 out of 174 (V-Dem 2017:45). The following year, 2018, Palestine/West Bank (0.190) was downgraded from "electoral autocracy" to "closed autocracy", finishing 135 out of 178, whereas Palestine/Gaza (0.078/1) was ranked 164 out of 178 on the Index (V-Dem 2018:73). In the 2024 report, Palestine/West Bank (0.14) was reinstated as an "electoral autocracy" but ranked 129 out of 179, while Gaza (0.07) continued to be classified as a "closed autocracy" at 155 out of 179 (V-Dem 2024:63). In the 2025 report, both the West Bank (0.12/1) and Gaza (0.05/1) declined further in V-Dem's rankings (V-Dem 2025:63).

## Israel and Palestine in The Economist Democracy Index

A similar concerning picture emerges from The Economist Democracy Index, which has traditionally ranked Israel higher than the other two indexes. The Economist noted in its 2024 report that the 10/7 attack and the resulting war in Gaza lowered not only Israel's and Palestine's scores but also contributed to violence and instability in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Red Sea. It observed: "The region's descent into wider war and conflict in 2023, following the atrocities committed against Israelis by Hamas Islamist terrorists on October 7th, and Israel's devastating response, drove down the region's score to an all-time low in the Democracy Index" (The EUI 2024:6).

In the 2024 report, Israel was ranked 30th out of 167 and had its scores lowered compared to the previous year (The EUI 2024:9). Israel's scores remained unchanged between the 2024 and 2025 reports from the EUI (2025:80). The EUI categorises Israel as a "flawed democracy," a classification it has held since the index was established in 2007. As shown in the table below, The Economist Democracy Index rates countries across five categories. Israel has consistently performed very well in electoral process and pluralism, and political participation, somewhat well in the functioning of government and political culture, and less well in civil liberties. Notably, Israel's current rating for political participation

(9.44/10) is the third-best in the world for 2025, after Norway and New Zealand — a highly generous rating given the historical and ongoing marginalisation of Israel's Arab population (The EUI 2025:15-16). Furthermore, an interesting aspect of this index's rating for Israel is that its civil liberties score has, with some fluctuations, improved since 2007, and even since 2011, when the Knesset began preparing bills that could restrict these liberties. In the 2025 report, Israel's Civil Liberties score was 5.59/10, significantly lower than that of all EU Member States, including the now non-democratic Hungary (6.76/10) (The EUI 2024:16-17). Additional arguments could be made against the assessments in The Economist Democracy Index's previous reports. For instance, in the 2020 report (covering 2019), Israel improved in the category "Functioning of Government," despite the fact that it did not have a functioning government during 2019, a year marked by two Israeli elections that failed to produce a government.

**Table 3: The Economist Democracy Index's rating for Israel, 2007-2025**

| Year | Global rank/ overall score | Electoral process, pluralism | Functioning of government | Political participation | Political culture | Civil liberties |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2007** | 47/7.28 | 9.17 | 6.64 | 7.78 | 7.50 | 5.29 |
| **2009** | 38/7.48 | 8.75 | 7.50 | 8.33 | 7.50 | 5.29 |
| **2011** | 37/7.48 | 8.75 | 7.50 | 8.33 | 7.50 | 5.29 |
| **2012** | 36/7.53 | 8.75 | 7.50 | 8.33 | 7.50 | 5.59 |
| **2013** | 37/7.53 | 8.75 | 7.50 | 8.33 | 7.50 | 5.59 |
| **2014** | 39/7.53 | 8.75 | 7.50 | 8.33 | 7.50 | 5.59 |
| **2015** | 36/7.63 | 8.75 | 7.14 | 8.89 | 7.50 | 5.88 |
| **2016** | 34/7.77 | 9.17 | 7.14 | 8.89 | 7.50 | 6.18 |
| **2017** | 29/7.85 | 9.17 | 7.50 | 8.89 | 7.50 | 6.18 |
| **2018** | 30/7.79 | 9.17 | 7.50 | 8.89 | 7.50 | 5.88 |
| **2019** | 30/7.79 | 9.17 | 7.50 | 8.89 | 7.50 | 5.88 |
| **2020** | 28/7.86 | 9.17 | 7.86 | 8.89 | 7.50 | 5.88 |
| **2021** | 28/7.84 | 9.17 | 7.50 | 9.44 | 7.50 | 5.59 |
| **2022** | 23/7.97 | 9.58 | 7.50 | 10.00 | 6.88 | 5.88 |
| **2023** | 29/7.93 | 9.58 | 7.86 | 9.44 | 6.88 | 5.88 |
| **2024** | 30/7.80 | 9.58 | 7.50 | 9.44 | 6.88 | 5.59 |
| **2025** | 31/7.80 | 9.58 | 7.50 | 9.44 | 6.88 | 5.59 |

Notes: 10=best, 0=worst. Please note that no updates were provided in 2008 and 2010.

Palestine's significant democratic decline is clearly shown in Table 4 below. From a global rank and overall score of 79/6.01 in 2007, it has now fallen to 112/3.44, marking a major loss in less than twenty years. Most notably, however, is that Palestine was ranked as the most democratic country in the Arab world in both the 2007 and 2009 reports from The Economist, even if it was still classified as a "flawed democracy" in 2007, just like Israel has always been (The EUI 2007:4; The EUI 2009:6). In the 2009 report, Palestine was downgraded from "flawed democracy" to "hybrid regime" due to the intra-Palestinian split and factional infighting (The EUI 2009:11). Following this intra-Palestinian split between Hamas/the PA and geographically between the West Bank and Gaza, it is highly questionable whether The Economist should keep using Palestine for these two very different societies.

In any case, Palestine lost its top position in the regional ranking (excluding Israel) to Lebanon in 2011 (The EUI 2011:5), and in the 2020 report, Palestine was further downgraded from "hybrid regime" to "authoritarian regime" (The EUI 2020:16). The Economist Democracy Index noted in its 2024 report that the "sharp fall in Palestine's index score was the result of an increasingly dysfunctional and undemocratic polity whose deep flaws have been exacerbated by the Israel-Hamas war" (The EUI 2024:62). The report also pointed out that the now 89-year-old president of the PA, Mahmoud Abbas, has used the Gaza war to strengthen his efforts to cling to power by removing 12 of Palestine's 15 regional governors in an attempt to fend off potential challenges to his long rule (The EUI 2024:62).

**Table 4: The Economist Democracy Index's rating for Palestine, 2006-2025**

| Year | Global rank/ overall score | Electoral process, pluralism | Functioning of government | Political participation | Political culture | Civil liberties |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2007** | 79/6.01 | 8.25 | 2.71 | 7.78 | 6.88 | 4.41 |
| **2009** | 85/5.83 | 7.83 | 2.86 | 7.78 | 6.25 | 4.41 |
| **2011** | 93/5.44 | 7.83 | 2.86 | 8.33 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2012** | 99/4.97 | 6.00 | 2.86 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2013** | 103/4.80 | 5.17 | 2.86 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2014** | 103/4.80 | 5.17 | 2.86 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2015** | 106/4.72 | 4.75 | 2.86 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2016** | 110/4.57 | 4.75 | 2.14 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2017** | 110/4.49 | 4.33 | 2.14 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2018** | 108/4.46 | 3.83 | 2.50 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2019** | 109/4.39 | 3.83 | 2.14 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2020** | 117/3.89 | 3.33 | 0.14 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.82 |
| **2021** | 113/3.83 | 3.33 | 0.14 | 7.78 | 4.38 | 3.53 |
| **2022** | 109/3.94 | 3.33 | 0.14 | 8.33 | 4.38 | 3.53 |
| **2023** | 110/3.86 | 2.92 | 0.14 | 8.33 | 4.38 | 3.53 |
| **2024** | 115/3.47 | 1.58 | 0.14 | 8.33 | 3.75 | 3.53 |
| **2025** | 112/3.44 | 1.58 | 0.00 | 8.33 | 3.75 | 3.53 |

Notes: 10=best, 0=worst. Please note that no updates were provided in 2008 and 2010.

# Conclusion

With some fluctuations, all the indexes have pointed to increased autocratization in both Israel and the two sections of the Palestinian territories over the past decade and a half. Regarding Israel, the two main reasons for its democratic decline are various types of anti-democratic and illiberal legislation in the Knesset and the growing authoritarian tendencies of Prime Minister Netanyahu himself. The increasing fear that Israel's liberal democracy is in danger can clearly be seen in data from The Israel Democracy Institute. According to the Israeli Voice Index's April 2025 edition, only 38% of Israelis are optimistic about the future of democratic rule in the country (IDI 2025). It is likely there will be major identity and hasbara (public diplomacy) problems for Israel if it can no longer use epithets such as liberal democracy and "the only democracy in the Middle East". It will also most likely contribute to the split within the Jewish diaspora and among left-

wing, liberal and conservative pro-Israeli and Jewish organisations. It may also alienate other liberal democracies from supporting Israel. Finally, it may lead left-leaning and liberal Israelis to emigrate from Israel.

Regarding the Palestinians, the autocratization of the West Bank and Gaza, combined with Israel's ongoing occupation and blockade, means that Palestinians live under multiple layers of oppression and authoritarianism. Consequently, Gaza today is one of the most authoritarian societies globally, with the West Bank not far behind. A staggering 84% of Palestinians now want President Mahmoud Abbas to resign, according to the latest poll from the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, making the PA president one of the most unpopular leaders worldwide (PCPSR 2024).

Reflecting the structure-agency dilemma, Palestine remains a unique case for democracy studies due to its status as a territory or state with limited agency under continuous occupation, which precludes the possibility of genuine democracy as long as the occupation persists. As many observers have noted, Palestinians cannot vote away the occupation nor vote in the state (Israel) that controls their lives (see, for example, Persson 2020:176; Tartir & Seidel 2019). However, despite these constraints, the primary driver of Palestine's rapid autocratization over the past fifteen years has been the intra-Palestinian split and the failure to hold new elections. Consequently, both the PA and Hamas have entrenched themselves in the West Bank and Gaza respectively, consolidating their power bases while mutual oppressions have increased, to the dismay of the Palestinian people.

For many years, it was thought that a form of authoritarian stability existed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—that Hamas in Gaza and the PA in the West Bank maintained both stability and peace through their authoritarian rule. Had Abbas, for example, been more democratic and listened more to his population, the West Bank would likely have been more confrontational towards Israel over the past decade. This illusion was shattered on October 7, and it is now increasingly evident that the authoritarian turn in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly Hamas's long rule in Gaza, indirectly and directly contributed to the 10/7 attack and the subsequent war in Gaza.

*Chapter 4*

# Israeli Jews and Palestinians: Resemblance and Enmity

*Liora Sion*

In 2009, the Swiss artist Olivier Suter launched his project titled "Enemies," aiming to illustrate how people define the "other." Suter observed a recurring pattern in many conflicts where individuals tend to develop feelings of hatred and create stereotypes about a perceived "other," often attributing differences, especially ethnic ones, to their opponents. He believes that by showing most people involved in deadly conflicts share a striking similarity, they would have no valid reason for their hostility. Suter presented a picture of an Israeli girl from Jerusalem who appears almost identical to a Palestinian boy from Beit Hanina. The message was clear: Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Arabs, look alike. Since we look alike, there is no justifiable reason for conflict. The project also aims to demonstrate that by hating the other, we are, in effect, hating ourselves, as we are all the same. Suter asked, "Can two people who look so similar that they could be mistaken for identical twins really be enemies?"

This chapter argues that the growing resemblance between Palestinians and Jews in Israel has paradoxically led to increased ethnocentric sentiments and moral panic among Israeli Jews. This phenomenon, known as "the narcissism of minor differences" (Freud, cited in Blok, 1998), stems from two concurrent developments: Israel's cultural shift toward becoming more Middle Eastern in character, and the emergence of a Palestinian middle class that increasingly adopts Israeli lifestyles, resulting in greater intermingling between both communities. These cases illustrate the increasing physical resemblance between Jewish men (particularly of Mizrahi descent) and Palestinian men, compounded by the expanding Palestinian middle class adopting more Westernised Israeli lifestyles and increasing social and professional interactions in mixed cities and peripheral

areas. These settings, where Palestinians and Jews coexist and collaborate, sometimes foster intimate relationships between Jewish women and Palestinian men (Sion 2023), creating border zones (Rosaldo 1989) where reproduction of inequality and formation of a low-status "ethno-class" (Khazzoom 2005) occur.

The central thesis challenges the conventional understanding of intergroup conflict, proposing that heightened anxiety arises not from differences with an unfamiliar "other," but from increasing similarities that threaten established social and psychological boundaries. While Žižek (2006) argues that actual enmity prevents recognising the other's humanity—asserting that "an enemy is someone whose story you have not heard"—this analysis suggests a more complex dynamic. Paradoxically, it is precisely the recognition of similarity, rather than radical difference, that provokes the most intense defensive reactions. The proximity that, in theory, should foster understanding instead triggers profound boundary anxiety, as shared characteristics expose the constructed nature of group identities. This phenomenon manifests most acutely in Israeli Jewish society's response to the gradual erosion of previously rigid cultural, spatial, and social markers that once definitively separated Jewish and Palestinian identities. As these boundaries become increasingly permeable and artificial, the society responds with intensified ethnocentric reactions—a collective psychological mechanism aimed at reinforcing group distinctions that now appear fundamentally unstable. The anxiety stems not from the alien or unknown, but from the unsettling realisation that the very categories of difference are more fluid and arbitrary than the dominant narrative has long maintained.

## Theoretical framework: Resemblance and violent rejection

The conventional understanding of enemies, as explained by scholars like Grossman (1995, 2004) and Malešević (2022), suggests that distancing is essential in conflict—mainly through dehumanising opponents by either demonising or objectifying them (Sion 2017). This view implies that individuals who are similar cannot truly be enemies. However, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai offers a contrasting perspective that directly informs this chapter's theoretical framework. In his "hypothesis of treachery" (1996, 1998), Appadurai argues that the most

intense violence in ethnic conflicts often stems from intimacy, which frequently portrays twisted relationships between actors who know, or believe they know, one another. This uncertainty revolves around whether individuals genuinely are what they claim or appear to be. As Appadurai states, "At heart, this sense of betrayal is about mistaken identity... the most brutal episodes of contemporary ethnic violence are shot through with the language of the impostor, the secret agent, and the counterfeit person" (Appadurai 1998). Viewing Israeli-Palestinian relations through this theoretical lens helps us understand why Palestinians who increasingly resemble Israeli Jews in appearance, lifestyle, and consumer habits may paradoxically provoke more anxiety than those who remain clearly "other." Even when a Palestinian looks and acts "Israeli," this perceived similarity can be seen as deceptive—a body that conceals "truer, deeper, more horrible forms of identity" (Appadurai 1998).

In the following sections, this chapter will analyse resemblance and anxiety in the Israeli-Palestinian case by applying boundary work theory. The analysis begins by outlining the Israeli social hierarchy that positions European-origin Jews (Ashkenazi) at the top, followed by North African and Asian Jews (Mizrahi), with Palestinian citizens of Israel at the bottom. The paper then explores the growing resemblance between these communities by focusing on two key phenomena: the emerging Palestinian middle class and the cultural similarities between Mizrahi and Palestinian men. Subsequently, it examines how the state attempts to police and discipline these encounters through various institutional mechanisms and social practices. This analysis ultimately demonstrates how increasing similarity, rather than difference, can generate profound social anxiety that manifests in attempts to reinforce boundaries, often through violence or exclusionary practices. The Israeli-Palestinian case thus provides a compelling example of how intergroup dynamics can be profoundly shaped by the paradox of resemblance—where the most threatening "other" is not the distant stranger but the familiar neighbour whose growing similarity challenges established categories of identity and belonging.

# Social boundaries

Boundaries have long been a central focus in the study of ethno-national communities. According to Durkheim's perspective (1965), communities are characterised not only by their external boundaries but also by their internal divisions. States have often formalised or selectively promoted nationalism, establishing specific categories to determine who is included and who is marginalised (Wimmer 2008). Boundary scholars differentiate between clear and blurred boundaries (Zolberg and Woon 1999; Alba 2005). Clear boundaries are widely recognised and institutionalised, playing a crucial role in shaping opportunities and social distance between individuals on different sides of these well-defined divisions. Consequently, "The distinction involved is unambiguous, so that individuals know at all times which side of the boundary they are on" (Alba 2005).

Blurred boundaries attract less recognition, have fewer institutionalised elements, and are less directly connected to disparities in life chances and social distance among different groups. In situations with blurred boundaries, individuals might be seen as being "simultaneously members of the groups on both sides of the boundary or that sometimes they appear to be members of one and at other times members of the other" (Alba 2005). While boundaries can indeed brighten, blur, expand, or contract, individuals can also cross boundaries, moving from one category to another "without any real change" in the boundary itself (Alba 2005). Positional moves involve boundary-crossing and repositioning within a hierarchical system of ethnic categories. They demonstrate that those who move and those who stay reveal that there is no "in-between" and that the social world is structured along hierarchical lines (Wimmer 2008). Through boundary crossing, individuals are "judged to have acquired the characteristics that meet the criteria for membership in a different category" (Loveman and Muniz 2007: 917). When boundaries are crossed, a change in categorical membership results from a change in an individual's personal profile. Conversely, boundary shifting indicates that re-classification occurs because the criteria for categorical membership change.

In Israel, Jews and Palestinians seldom cross boundaries (Sion 2014, 2024, 2025). Instead, they frequently blur existing boundaries, especially Mizrahi and Palestinian men, as we will see in the following sections. The creation of social boundaries functions on both material and symbolic levels. Materially, boundaries are expressed through physical structures, geographical segregation, economic

disparities, and institutional arrangements. Symbolically, they are reflected through language, cultural practices, religious observances, and collective narratives that reinforce group distinctions (Lamont and Molnár, 2002).

These material and symbolic aspects often reinforce each other, producing resilient social divisions that are difficult to change. In the Israeli context, the wall and separation barrier between Israeli and Palestinian territories exemplifies a physical form of boundary creation. Simultaneously, cultural differences in language, religious practices, and historical narratives serve as symbolic markers that uphold group distinctions (Rabinowitz 2001). However, these seemingly distinct boundaries often become less clear in everyday interactions, especially in shared spaces such as workplaces, shops, and public institutions. Understanding boundary formation and enforcement requires attention to power relations. Those with greater political, economic, and cultural influence usually have the power to shape boundaries in ways that maintain their advantageous position (Bourdieu 1984). The state plays a crucial role in this process through policies of inclusion and exclusion that determine citizenship rights, access to resources, and official recognition of group identities.

In Israel, government policies concerning citizenship, military service, settlement building, and language rights function as tools that create and uphold boundaries between Jewish and Palestinian communities (Yiftachel 2006). However, these official boundaries are constantly negotiated and contested through daily practices that challenge strict categorisations. While ethno-national boundaries may seem most evident in certain contexts, individuals simultaneously navigate multiple social boundaries related to gender, class, religion, and other aspects of identity. These overlapping boundaries generate intricate patterns of inclusion and exclusion that cannot be simplified to a single dimension (Crenshaw 1991). The experiences of individuals at these intersections often expose contradictions and tensions within seemingly unified social categories. For Mizrahi Jews (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent) and Palestinians in Israel, class, gender, religious observance, and geographical location interact with ethno-national identity, resulting in diverse experiences of boundary negotiation. Mizrahi men, in particular, occupy a complex position where cultural similarities with Palestinian communities sometimes promote boundary erosion, while their Jewish identity also maintains certain boundary distinctions (Shenhav 2006).

The theoretical understanding of boundaries manifests practically through everyday "boundary work" carried out by individuals and groups as they navigate social interactions. This work involves strategies of differentiation, demonstrations of cultural competence, code-switching between cultural contexts, and selectively emphasising or downplaying identity markers depending on the situation (Wimmer 2013). In the following sections, we will explore how Mizrahi and Palestinian men engage in this boundary work, strategically utilising cultural resources, language skills, and embodied practices to navigate the complex social landscape of contemporary Israel. Their experiences shed light on how, even in contexts of profound social division, boundaries serve as sites of negotiation rather than fixed demarcations.

## Ethnic hierarchy in Israel

Israel exhibits significant divisions within its society, mainly along ethno-national lines that create a clear separation between the Jewish and Palestinian communities. The distribution of state power and the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict have played a key role in shaping these ethno-national boundaries within the Israeli population, thereby influencing the criteria for membership and participation. Within this context, two main group classifications emerge: the Ashkenazim, Jews of Western descent who enjoy privileged status, and the Mizrahim, often called Easterners, representing Jews who migrated from North Africa and the Middle East. Persistent socioeconomic gaps exist between these ethnic groups. Ashkenazim have attained higher levels of education and earnings, while their Mizrachi counterparts have yet to catch up (Haberfeld and Cohen 2007; Lewin-Epstein and Cohen 2019; Khazzoom 2005). The Mizrahim are not only subordinate to the Ashkenazi group across various aspects of social stratification, but also occupy a middle position between Ashkenazi Jews and the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Because their Arab past threatened to affect the cohesion of the homogeneous Israeli nation and to blur the boundary between Jews and Arabs (Shenhav 2002), the Mizrachi were subjected to a process of de-Arabisation. As Ben Gurion put it, "We do not want the Israelis to be Arabs. It is our duty to fight against the spirit of the Levant that ruins individuals and societies" (Shohat 1988: 6). As a result, the Mizrachi have not formed a peripheral, but rather a semi-peripheral group in

Israeli society, positioned between the Ashkenazi Jews at the top and the Palestinians, both citizens and non-citizens, at the bottom (Peled 2008). A Palestinian citizen of Israel, who make up 17% of the population, find themselves at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. They occupy the lowest tier of the social hierarchy, facing social exclusion driven by powerful social and symbolic divides. A substantial body of literature has shed light on the mechanics of Israel's ethnic hierarchy, illustrating how it fosters geographical segregation for Palestinians, leading to the creation of demographically homogeneous areas predominantly inhabited by Israeli Jews (Yiftachel 2022).

Direct and indirect discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel is deeply embedded in the legal system and government practices. Their average level of higher education is only one-third of the Jewish rate (Sion 2014; Yiftachel 2022). Israel sustains the sense of inferiority among Palestinians, reinforcing an ethnic hierarchy that considers Jews as superior and Palestinians in Israel as inferior. The slow efforts to Judaise the public sphere—including territorial, cultural, political, and social areas—lead to increased discrimination against Palestinians (Ghanem and Khatib 2017). Geographic segregation supports both spatial and psychological divides between Palestinians and Jews. A report published in 2007 found that 75% of Jews refuse to live next to Palestinians, and 55% believe that Jews and Palestinians should have separate entertainment venues (ACRI 2007). 90 % of the Palestinian population lives in Palestinian localities, with most of the remainder living in Palestinian neighbourhoods within predominantly Jewish towns and cities. Most Jews live in Jewish towns, with only 22% residing in mixed localities (Yiftachel 2022).

Nevertheless, despite discrimination, there are similarities between the nations. For example, shared culture, food, music preferences, and common customs (see, for example, Mendel and Ranta 2016; Ranta and Mendel 2014; Sion 2024; Yosef 2022). Moreover, there is a growing Palestinian middle class, which makes up about a third of the Arab-Palestinian population of Israel. In recent decades, the Israeli government has aimed for the full integration of the Arab-Palestinian minority and to enable it to reach its full economic potential (Sadeh 2015). This aligns with the neoliberal worldview of Israeli right-wing governments, which sees modernisation of the minority as a way to boost the national economy and promote "economic peace" (Haidar and Bar-Haim 2022). This expanding middle class challenges the ethnic hierarchy and threatens existing boundaries.

# Resemblance and confusion

## Mizrahi and Palestinian similarities

Jews from Arabic-speaking countries are regarded both as part of the national community because of their Jewish religion and as "others" due to their Arab culture (Shenhav 2006; Shohat 1999). The cultural ties that link them to the Arab world include shared language and customs (Goldberg and Bram 2007; Gribetz 2014; Leon 2008), as well as physical resemblance. Consequently, they risk blurring the boundary between Jews and Palestinians by demonstrating that "imaginary" distinctions between "us and them" are continuously blurred, confused, and challenged (Sion 2024). A Mizrahi man remarked: "I feel like I need to apologise for my appearance... The stronger you emphasise your Mizrahi identity, in speech, in appearance, the more hurdles there are… I see the looks... There's always this feeling that your appearance is a problem" (Pavzner 2015).

Mizrahim can be categorised into "heavy Mizrahim," compared to "lite Mizrahim"—those Mizrahim who "pass" as non-Mizrahim or whose appearance does not conform to the Mizrahi stereotype in Israel (Hotam and Shoshana 2021). Due to the Arab origins of the "heavy Mizrahim," they are stigmatised as "arsim." Ars, which means pimp in Arabic, is a pejorative term for Mizrahim, who are perceived as "violent" and "barbarians." This derogatory label has contributed to the boundary work between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim (Hotam and Shoshana 2021). Another similarity relates to religion. Religion has been utilised as a tool to define the Jews' hegemonic position. Arab Jews, who resembled Arabs and spoke Arabic, were de-Arabised upon arriving in Israel and socially "ethnicised" as Jews based on religion. However, practising religion as a cultural tradition rooted in customs is quite similar to Mizrahis and Muslims, who tend to be more traditional than Ashkenazi Jews (Karkabi and Mendel 2021).

The physical and cultural similarities between Mizrahi and Palestinian men, particularly during periods of heightened social tension, create a complex and dangerous landscape of mistaken identity and potential violence. In an environment where ethnic profiling and rapid threat assessment can lead to fatal misunderstandings, some Mizrahi men have developed subtle strategies of self-identification and protection. As a defensive mechanism, many Mizrahi men now rely on visible markers of Jewish identity to differentiate themselves in potentially volatile situations. These markers include wearing a kippah (skullcap), displaying

religious pendants like “chai” or Star of David necklaces, and carrying religious texts such as a Psalms book. Emphasising visible signs of religious observance, these items have transformed into a kind of social signalling system — what could be termed the “uniforms” of Israel's civilian population — designed to communicate religious and cultural belonging in spaces where visual distinction can mean the difference between safety and danger.

The precariousness of this situation was starkly illustrated in a recent incident in 2015, where a Jewish man was fatally shot by police while holding a knife. His friend's bewildered response — “I can't believe they thought he was a terrorist because he was wearing a kippah on his head” — highlights the razor-thin margins of perception and misperception. On another occasion in 2024, a man was severely injured after a minister drove unlawfully and crashed his car. An activist commented on the occasion:

> If [he], the Mizrahi, hadn't had a Star of David necklace, there's a good chance his family would be sitting shiva [mourning his death] for him today. In other words, we've reached a situation where a non-Jewish Arab would be shot simply for being a potential target, and a Jewish-Arab, Mizrahi, will now be required to walk around with an identifying marker, perhaps a blinking yellow badge, to protect himself from his dark complexion (Sluzker Amran 2024).

This phenomenon uncovers deeper societal tensions: the necessity for individuals to continually negotiate and perform their identity, the risk of tragic misunderstandings in high-pressure settings, and the intricate ways in which visual indicators of belonging are constructed and interpreted. The requirement to visibly “prove” one's identity reflects broader insecurities and the ongoing difficulties of multicultural coexistence in regions marked by historical and ongoing conflicts.

## The growing Palestinian middle class

The Arab-Palestinian middle class has grown to constitute about one-third of the Arab-Palestinian population in Israel. This significant demographic change has notably impacted modern relations between Arab and Jewish communities, particularly through increased integration in higher education, the labour market, and housing. Despite its importance, this trend has been largely neglected by

current research, creating a considerable gap in both empirical data and theoretical understanding (Haidar and Bar-Haim 2022). The adoption of neoliberal policies following Israel's 1985 stabilisation plan marked a major turning point for the Israeli economy. These policies, chiefly driven by the state and notably by Benjamin Netanyahu during his government, led to privatisation, liberalisation, and globalisation. These economic reforms eased restrictions on the economic activities of the Arab-Palestinian minority, facilitated property ownership, enabled those with higher education to access the professional labour market, and encouraged business growth both domestically and internationally. These changes benefited marginalised groups within Israeli society and played a crucial role in the growth and development of the middle classes in these communities.

Higher education has become increasingly important in the development of the new Arab middle class, acting as a gateway to better-paying and prestigious jobs in the Israeli market. This expansion in education was supported by higher participation in the labour market, enabling more families to fund their children's studies. It also arose as a response to the lack of government development in Arab localities, prompting the pursuit of alternative livelihoods and fostering social mobility. The accumulation of capital by families and communities contributed to the growth of Arab entrepreneurship in industry, especially small-scale industry. The number of small and medium-sized businesses increased across all economic sectors, with some reflecting the emerging small middle class and others laying the groundwork for further expansion.

Following the publication of "The Future Vision Documents of Palestinian Arabs in Israel" in late 2006, successive Israeli governments have adopted what may seem contradictory but is actually a complementary two-pronged policy approach. On one hand, they have launched programmes aimed at integrating the Arab sector into the Israeli economy, replacing the idea of "equality" with "integration and sharing." This aligns with the neoliberal worldview of Israeli right-wing governments, which see modernising the minority as a way to boost the national economy while promoting the concept of "economic peace" concerning Palestinian territories. This policy was intensified under Benjamin Netanyahu after he returned to the premiership in 2009. His strategy combined extreme political exclusion with deep integration of the educated Palestinian workforce into the Israeli labour market. The Israeli government has maintained a vested interest in ensuring the full economic integration of the Arab-Palestinian minority

to help them realise their economic potential, with a particular focus on women's employment and the establishment of small businesses as foundations for increased job opportunities.

The patterns of integration among the Palestinian middle class are increasingly shaping modern relations between Palestinian and Jewish populations in Israel. This middle class has been migrating to Jewish towns and cities, pursuing higher education, and working alongside their middle-class Jewish peers, thus transforming Israel's social landscape. This process of urbanisation and shifting living habits weakens the homogeneity of Jewish settlements and challenges institutional policies that have long promoted spatial separation between Arabs and Jews, implementing the principle of "Judaising the space." Consequently, it has become more difficult to distinguish between Palestinians and Jews living in the same areas who adopt similar styles of dress and consumer habits.

Palestinians seeking employment in the Israeli job market often find they must present themselves as "good Arabs" (Sion 2014) – individuals perceived as loyal to the Jewish state, or at least not openly challenging it. They are expected to adopt Hebrew (preferably without an Arabic accent), wear Western clothing, and appear secular or non-Muslim. However, at the same time, they are expected to "know their place" and not aspire to pass as Jews or demand full national or civil rights. Major changes in education and employment patterns among the new Palestinian middle class have led to significant lifestyle shifts, especially in family life and consumer culture. Since the mid-1970s, there has been an increase in the age of marriage, a sharp rise in divorce rates, and a growing proportion of single people. Additionally, fertility rates and family sizes have declined considerably. These demographic changes have transformed family life, with the nuclear family now centring on children's education rather than the extended family.

The new Arab-Palestinian middle class has generally embraced Western consumption and leisure patterns, as shown by increased spending on housing, transportation, and communication, with a relative decrease in expenditure on basic needs like food. Members of this middle class have also adopted Western dress styles, while there is a simultaneous trend towards traditional dress, especially head coverings among Muslim Arab women in higher education (Haidar and Bar-Haim 2022). According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, over 50% of Israel's Arab population have a good to excellent command of Hebrew, both in speaking and in reading and writing. About 30% read and write Hebrew

at a basic level or not at all; 24% speak Hebrew at a minimal level or do not speak it at all. Young Arabs tend to have better Hebrew skills than adults, mainly because of their exposure to media content (Dubiner 2021). Even baby naming customs contribute to this process of blurring boundaries. Although Muhammad remains the most popular baby name among Muslims (Mako 2023), the Palestinian middle class increasingly prefers names with Israeli or universal sounds that facilitate integration.

By assimilating into Israeli culture and adopting practices similar to Jews, Palestinians demonstrate that cultural boundaries are not fixed or natural. As an Israeli journalist observed, "Where have all the Arabs who don't look like Arabs disappeared to? They haven't disappeared. They live beneath our noses. We choose not to notice them. There's no such thing as 'looking like an Arab.' It's a category we invented. Everyone looks like everyone else... What I want to say is that we all look like Arabs. Even the Ashkenazim, who mistakenly think they look like Ashkenazim... It's time to come to terms with it and embrace it" (Shore 2015).

Despite these changes, most of this middle class still live in areas where infrastructure standards, environmental conditions, and public behaviour patterns — such as noisy celebrations, brawls, and driving habits — do not match their aspirations for a middle-class quality of life and pleasant surroundings. This creates a fundamental tension between their economic and professional mobility and the limited changes in their socio-cultural and physical environments. This tension between economic integration and socio-cultural limitations characterises the contemporary experience of the Arab-Palestinian middle class in Israel, highlighting both the progress achieved and the ongoing challenges faced by this expanding demographic group.

## Interfaith marriages in Israel

In Israel, interfaith marriage remains uncommon. A 2014 poll found that 75% of Israeli Jews view intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews (especially Muslims) as "national treason" (Fuchs 2014). The ethno-sexual boundary maintained by the state is reinforced by Halacha, Jewish religious law, which states that Jews cannot abandon the collective. According to this tradition, a Jew remains Jewish even after converting to another faith, and Jewish identity is inherited through

the maternal line. Converting away from Judaism is regarded as taboo, with converts labelled meshumad – literally, "the destroyed one." The strong opposition to interfaith marriage in Israel reflects deeper anxieties about national identity, demographic stability, and cultural preservation. Unlike many Western societies where interfaith marriages have become increasingly normalised, Israel's unique status as both a Jewish state and a diverse multi-religious society creates particular tensions surrounding intimate relationships that cross religious boundaries. These tensions are not merely private issues but are deeply politicised through state policies, religious institutions, and public discourse.

Demographic expert Della Pergola (2017) confirms that mixed couples remain exceptionally uncommon in Israel. The Pew Research Centre (2016) reports that merely 2% of married or partnered Jews have a spouse or partner belonging to a non-Jewish faith or who is religiously unaffiliated. Marriages between men from the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) and Jewish-Israeli women are even more exceptional, further complicated by legislation that prohibits granting residency or citizenship status to OPT residents married to Israeli citizens. According to a UN High Commission on Refugees report, many such couples ultimately separate, divorce, or emigrate from Israel (Macintyre 2010). Suppose intermarriage serves as a critical indicator of societal structure and reveals social boundaries, as numerous scholars suggest (e.g., Rodriguez-Garcia 2006). In that case, its scarcity in Israel speaks volumes about Jewish-Palestinian relations within the country. However, the significance of this phenomenon lies not in its statistical prevalence but in its profound social and political implications. What society relegates to the margins often holds symbolic centrality in cultural discourse.

Interestingly, while the actual frequency of interfaith marriages has remained relatively stable over time (Della Pergola 2017), their demographic profile and public visibility have changed considerably. As Palestinians integrate into the middle class as doctors, pharmacists, and other professionals, they increasingly meet and form relationships with Jewish women. Therefore, although the number of mixed marriages has not risen significantly, their social visibility and demographic makeup have shifted markedly. The past decade has seen increased media coverage of middle-class mixed couples, especially those from artistic, media, and entertainment sectors. Modern portrayals of these interfaith unions are increasingly framed around stories of romantic love and personal choice rather

than as breaches of communal boundaries. This shift in representation does not necessarily signify greater social acceptance but instead reflects competing narratives about national identity and social limits in Israeli society. Earlier portrayals often focused on themes of betrayal, cultural contamination, or exploitation, whereas current representations, particularly of educated professionals or public figures, tend to adopt individualistic narratives centred on authentic love and personal autonomy (Sion 2023).

## State discipline

As the resemblance and mutual assimilation increase, so too do the fear and hatred. The similarities between Jewish and Palestinian men in Israel present a potential challenge to the distinction between Jews and Arabs by demonstrating that the conceptual divisions between "us and them" are consistently blurred, interconnected, and questioned. By assimilating into Israeli culture and mimicking Jews, Arab men show that the epistemic privileges of Jews are not based in nature (Sion 2024). The blurring of boundaries triggers moral panic within hegemonic Israeli society, driven by fears that a cherished way of life is under threat. Literature on moral panic indicates that the core sources of panic often stem from shifts in the social, economic, or moral order of society. These include threats to existing hierarchies, status competition, the influence of social change on established ways of life, and the collapse of previously maintained structures of control (Garland 2008).

In recent years, even before the election of the most right-wing and racist government in Israel in 2023, recurring and evolving instances of blatant racism, hatred, and violence have been occurring in the Israeli public sphere. Racism has become a widespread social phenomenon among various groups, especially among Mizrahim—the same group often mistaken for Palestinians. The Israeli state seeks to oversee, police, patrol, regulate, and restrict interactions between Palestinians and Jews by establishing legal, social, symbolic, and physical barriers. As previously noted, the Jewish and Palestinian communities are mainly separated by language, residence, religion, economic background, and social status. This spatial and mental segregation is supported by law, particularly regarding crossing ethnosexual boundaries; that is, relationships between Jewish women and Muslim

men. However, rapid changes have prompted new efforts to “flash out Arabs” in public spaces and to enforce further separation between the ethno-national groups, aiming to reinforce the boundaries between Jews and Palestinians.

## "Flashing out Arabs"

The gap between the outward appearance of Palestinian men and the hidden reality of their perceived threat to the national and social order is seen as so significant that revealing their true Arab identity requires a high level of cunning and deception. Anti-assimilation groups like the ultra-Orthodox NGOs Yad L'Achim (hand to brothers) and Lehava (flame), which are funded by the state (Blau and Grunberg 2011; Kashti 2018), see it as their duty to restore the ethno-national borders. Although these organisations are run by Ashkenazi Orthodox men, many of their activists are Mizrahi men from marginal areas, for whom defending the ethnic boundary between Jews and Palestinians is central to their identity (Engelberg 2017). At night, Lehava’s young Mizrahi activists patrol the streets of Jerusalem, randomly attacking Palestinian passersby and threatening Palestinian men seen with Jewish (often Mizrahi) women. However, since it is difficult for them to identify who is Jewish and who is Palestinian, they frequently engage strangers in casual conversations on the street to try and spot Palestinians by their Arab accent (Shtern 2016). Sometimes, the efforts to sustain the Zionist binary division between Jews and Palestinians are less obvious. For example, Palestinian citizens who obtained or renewed their driving licences found that the Ministry of Transport omitted the Hebrew birthdate section from their licences. "Those receiving new licences now fear that this document is being used as a tool to 'mark' them as Arabs" (Arshid, 2021).

## Segregation in public spaces

Segregation in Israeli society manifests through complex and widespread mechanisms that systematically separate Jewish and Palestinian populations across multiple social domains. Research has documented extensive institutional practices that restrict interaction and integration across key social spaces, including hospitals (Efrati 2018), amusement parks (Hod 2013), swimming pools and gyms (Brown 2016), and university dormitories (Berger 2021). These

separations are not random or accidental but represent deliberate strategies of spatial and social control aimed at maintaining strict ethnic boundaries.

The hospitality industry exemplifies this segregation, with hotels proactively alerting Jewish guests when Palestinian families are booked in the same establishment (Abramovitch 2015). Such practices turn neutral spaces like hotels into zones of ethnic distinction, where the presence of Palestinian guests is seen as a potential threat or source of discomfort for Jewish patrons. This method extends beyond individual prejudice, exposing a systemic effort to maintain social separation and hinder meaningful intercultural interactions. Workplace integration faces similarly substantial hurdles. Parents have actively sought to remove Palestinian caregivers from daycare centres (Turjeman 2023), transforming professional environments into battlegrounds of ethnic exclusion. These actions illustrate how discrimination operates not just through institutional policies but also via direct community intervention, fostering hostile environments that systematically exclude Palestinian professionals from various sectors.

Member of Knesset Aida Touma-Suleiman has powerfully critiqued these exclusionary practices, exposing the sophisticated mechanisms used to rationalise Palestinian workforce marginalisation. She highlights how language requirements, bureaucratic obstacles, and cultural resistance have been strategically employed to maintain ethnic boundaries in employment. Her testimony reveals that despite rhetoric about diversity and inclusion, many government offices remain virtually devoid of Arab representation, even while experiencing critical workforce shortages:

> For years, they tried to excuse why they don't employ Arab women, citing language as the barrier. They enrolled everyone in Hebrew courses. But what's so dangerous about hiring an Arab teacher to teach math to Jewish students? The young children might realise that Arabs can also teach math. Where is the inclusivity? They talk about a severe shortage of caregivers in daycares, while there is a surplus of daycare caregivers in the Arab population. There are government offices in this country that still don't have a single Arab employee, all while discussing employment diversity.

These segregation practices reveal a complex system of social engineering designed to uphold perceived boundaries between Jewish and Palestinian populations. They embody more than mere discrimination; they are sophisticated mechanisms

of social control that restrict meaningful interaction, perpetuate systemic inequality, and reinforce existing power structures. By creating physical and institutional spaces that minimise contact and maximise separation, these practices ensure that opportunities for cultural understanding and mutual recognition are deliberately obscured.

## Epilogue: 7 October

The war that erupted on 7 October 2023, along with the pain, shock, and fury that swept through Israeli society, fundamentally changed Jewish-Palestinian relations within Israel. More than 20 Palestinian citizens of Israel, mostly Bedouins, were murdered by Hamas terrorists, with others kidnapped or still considered missing. Seven more, including six children living in largely unprotected Bedouin communities, were killed by rocket barrages on the same morning. Despite being victims of the same attack that devastated Jewish communities, Arab citizens quickly faced a second front of hostility. Incidents of incitement and racism from political leaders, public officials, and law enforcement increased dramatically. The Minister of National Security called Arab judges "enemies from within," while the Police Commissioner publicly urged Arab citizens to board buses to Gaza. Municipal leaders across the country announced the closure of construction sites specifically to prevent Arab workers—citizens and legal residents of Israel—from entering their areas, effectively signalling that the mere presence of Arabs or Palestinians in public spaces was seen as a justifiable security threat (ACRI 2024).

From 7 October onwards, Arab citizens faced increased fear: anxiety about the war itself, coupled with dread of social, public, and institutional persecution. Many developed genuine concerns about arbitrary arrest, investigation, or physical harm, leaving them virtually powerless against severe violations of their fundamental rights, especially freedom of expression and protest. This vulnerability heightened when, roughly one week after the fighting started, the State Prosecutor's Office significantly changed the rules regarding freedom of expression for Arabs on social media. The Israeli Police were exempted from their previous requirement to obtain prosecutorial approval before starting investigations and arrests on suspicion of incitement to terrorism or identification

with terrorist organisations. Authorities were instructed to locate, investigate, arrest, and prosecute "anyone who publishes praise and support for the atrocities, even if it is a single publication, so long as it is severe and directly related to the current period." In an unprecedented move concerning speech-related offences, the Prosecutor's Office directed the Police to request pretrial detention until the conclusion of legal proceedings (ACRI 2024).

This removal of substantive protections for those suspected of speech offences led to a widespread police campaign that resulted in hundreds of arrests of Arab citizens and residents based on social media posts. The "Team to Combat Incitement," established before the war to oversee online communications, was responsible for enforcement. At the same time, organised right-wing groups systematically "hunted" posts by Arabs across various platforms, filed police complaints against the authors, and encouraged the public to do the same. According to data presented in Knesset committee meetings, hundreds of individuals were arrested and investigated, with over 150 cases directly linked to social media activity. For context, in the five-year period from 2018 to 2022 inclusive, the Police opened 283 investigation files under the same section of the Counter-Terrorism Law—97% targeting Arabs and around 85% specifically against Arab residents of Israel—resulting in 88 indictments, 70 of which were filed against Arab Israeli residents (ACRI 2024).

Many of these arrests were carried out with unnecessary violence and humiliation, with the Police deliberately framing even ambiguous social media posts as "support for a terrorist organisation," despite many publications not constituting actual offences under proper legal interpretation. Early in the conflict, authorities publicised arrests and suspects' photographs in degrading ways that violated established directives concerning the rights of detainees. Notably, similar enforcement actions regarding hate speech and incitement were virtually nonexistent against the Jewish population, despite widespread expressions of hatred and calls for violence against Arabs across social platforms.

The public discourse that arose after 7 October fostered fertile ground for this persecution, characterised by an "us or them" mentality that delegitimised any expression of empathy for Palestinian suffering, as well as Arab citizens' sense of national belonging to the Palestinian collective. This identity existed before the war and will continue afterwards. This rhetoric made it nearly impossible to acknowledge the complex emotions experienced by Arab citizens: a simultaneous

whirlwind of fear, pain, and mourning for everything happening across Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank—feelings that are not conflicting but rather intertwined, stemming from their overlapping circles of belonging: national, human, and civic. Although most of them do not identify with Hamas's ideological discourse, at the same time, they do not fully embrace Israel's narrative regarding the events of 7 October. Arab citizens are not interested in confrontation with the state, but they also do not stand behind its ideological foundation. Therefore, there is a genuine concern among Arab citizens about damage to the fragile fabric of coexistence, and about the erosion of their civil status and harm to their livelihoods. The events of 7 October and the subsequent war have once again placed Arab society in a defensive position, where they need to demonstrate not only loyalty to the state but also practical disassociation from the atrocities committed by the Hamas movement (Hazran 2024).

## Conclusion

Israel faces a profound existential dilemma as it struggles to maintain its identity as a Jewish state while also upholding democratic principles. This tension highlights the inherent contradictions within its political and social structure. This complex challenge is closely linked to the long-standing, seemingly intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which continues to challenge the core principles of Israeli democracy and national identity, exposing the complicated negotiations between ethnic nationalism, religious ideology, and democratic values. The ongoing struggle plays out across multiple areas—legislative, judicial, and societal—where the competing demands of preserving a Jewish majority and upholding democratic norms generate constant friction, questioning what it truly means to be a democratic state with a particular ethnic and religious character.

This chapter argues that the growing similarity between Palestinians and Jews in Israel has paradoxically led to a rise in ethnocentric attitudes and moral anxieties among the rival groups. This tension may have contributed to the circumstances surrounding the Hamas attacks on 7 October. The increasing resemblance results from several simultaneous developments: the emergence of a Palestinian middle class adopting Israeli lifestyles, Israel's cultural shift towards more Middle Eastern traits, and heightened social and professional exchanges between individuals from

both communities. As the once clear boundaries between Jews and Palestinians become more indistinct— with Palestinians integrating into middle-class Israeli society and Mizrahi Jews adopting more prominent Middle Eastern cultural identities— a deep sense of moral panic has arisen within the dominant segment of Israeli society. This anxiety is most evident in situations where distinguishing between the two groups becomes difficult or impossible without explicit identification.

This convergence fundamentally challenges the Zionist binary division that has traditionally relied on creating two distinct, easily identifiable ethno-national identities. The decline of visibly recognisable differences weakens the social homogeneity that was crucial to Israel's nation-building and state development. When Arabs and Jews become visually and culturally indistinguishable—when those seen as "good" and "bad" cannot be easily separated—the body itself becomes a contested space for perceived deception, betrayal, and false unity. Recent incidents of mistaken identity violence—where Jews attacked Jews believing them to be Palestinians, and Palestinians attacked Palestinians believing them to be Jews—illustrate the most extreme form of this boundary anxiety. These cases show how the failure to reliably distinguish between groups generates a crisis of identification that worsens insecurity and promotes defensive ethnocentrism.

The ongoing conflict in Gaza has further exposed uncomfortable similarities between the opposing factions, as both sides grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and legitimacy within a shared geographic space. As physical, cultural, and social markers continue to overlap, both communities face an existential dilemma: whether to reinforce artificial boundaries through increased ethnocentrism or to recognise their growing similarities as a potential basis for coexistence. It remains uncertain whether both sides will ultimately be able to use these similarities to foster a more peaceful, integrated society, or whether greater resemblance will continue to trigger defensive separation and conflict.

*Chapter 5*

# Transition From Peace Process to "Shrinking the Conflict"

*Lior Lehrs*

In the early 1990s, there was a sense that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was amid a unique window of opportunity for a breakthrough, set against the backdrop of the Oslo Accords and the Middle East peace process. In the early 2000s, the process collapsed, and the parties returned to violent confrontation, yet simultaneous diplomatic efforts were made to return to the negotiating table and reach a permanent status agreement, which was not achieved. In the decade before 7 October 2023, the discussion of the possibility of peacemaking in the conflict receded from both sides' domestic agendas and from the international agenda. During this period, there have been no peace talks between the parties, and the conflict has shifted from one cycle of violence to another, with the reality on the ground becoming increasingly complex, making any attempt to break the deadlock more challenging. The Hamas attack and the subsequent war in Gaza appear to be a pivotal moment in the history of the conflict and could profoundly change its landscape.

The first part of this chapter discusses the transformative process that the conflict has undergone in the past two decades, from 2003 to 2023 (prior to 7 October), shifting from the "peace process" framework to the concept of "shrinking the conflict." The second part highlights the main trends and processes that have occurred in the conflict zone, on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides and within the international community, throughout the decade-long stalemate in the peace process preceding 7 October 7, 2023. The third part examines more recent developments in the aftermath of the Gaza war, offering an analysis of the main components and issues in the diplomatic efforts and discussions concerning post-war plans for the conflict's future. It ends with conclusions.

# Two approaches in the Israeli–Palestinian diplomatic arena

An analysis of developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena over the past two decades indicates a shift from the framework of an Israeli-Palestinian peace process to the concept of "shrinking the conflict." The first stage begins with international efforts to address the severe crisis of the Second Intifada (which erupted in September 2000) and to revive the peace process after its collapse. A key initiative was the "Road Map for Peace," formulated by the Middle East Quartet (the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations) and published in April 2003. It outlined a gradual plan to end violence and resume permanent status negotiations (US Department of State, 2003). Although the plan was accepted by both sides (with reservations) and endorsed by the UN Security Council (Resolution 1515), it gradually faded away. It was shelved due to Israel's plan of unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip.

Another significant milestone in this phase was the Annapolis Process, launched by the Annapolis Conference in November 2007, which revitalised the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on the core final status issues. This process involves talks between the two leaders – Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) – as well as discussions amongst twelve negotiation teams that address various issues in the negotiations, led by Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and chief Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qurei (Abu Ala) (Migdalovitz, 2007; Avishai, 2011). Even after negotiations ended without reaching an agreement and Benjamin Netanyahu's return to power in early 2009, efforts within the peace process continued. Initially, under the initiative of George Mitchell, President Obama's envoy to the Middle East peace process, who facilitated indirect talks between the parties, the negotiations failed to produce a breakthrough, leading Mitchell to resign in 2011 (Mitchell and Sachar 2017).

Another effort, the final one of this stage, was the mediation initiative by US Secretary of State John Kerry, which led the parties to agree to resume talks on a permanent status agreement in July 2013. Kerry conducted proximity talks with the parties, aiming to reach a framework agreement within nine months. However, the initiative failed, and the talks collapsed in the summer of 2014 (Birnbaum and Tibon 2014). Since then, no negotiations have taken place between the sides regarding an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement (as of

November 2025). Throughout this period, between the 2003 Road Map and the 2013 Kerry Initiative, there were varying trends, ups and downs, and disputes over the intentions of the actors involved in the process (Eriksson 2025). Nonetheless, the overarching framework guiding efforts and discourse at this stage—by both international and domestic actors—focused on a conflict-resolution process aimed at securing a permanent-status agreement based on the two-state solution.

Starting from 2014, following the collapse of Kerry's initiative, a transition to the second stage can be identified. At this stage, there was a dominant perception among international actors that further efforts to push for a peace agreement were futile. Instead, efforts shifted towards the goal of "shrinking the conflict," at least until conditions ripen for reinitiating the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The conceptual framework of "shrinking the conflict" gained increasing attention in Israeli discourse. This concept, which was coined by the writer and public figure Micha Goodman, who worked to disseminate it and persuade decision-makers, and an Israeli public movement bearing the name "Shrinking the Conflict Initiative," were established with the aim of advancing Goodman's vision (Kingsley 2021). The concept refers to a policy approach that seeks to move beyond the binary of either resolving the conflict or preserving the status quo. It promotes—according to its advocates—gradual, pragmatic steps to "improve Palestinians' living conditions" and reduce Israel's civil control over their lives while maintaining Israeli security control. This approach reflects a form of the theoretical term conflict management, which aims to contain and limit a conflict without addressing its core political and structural dimensions (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2007). The approach has been criticised by Israelis, Palestinians, and international figures for normalising the occupation and failing to offer a genuine pathway to a solution (Einav 2022).

During this stage, various policy steps were discussed and promoted, focusing on short-term measures to strengthen the Palestinian economy and enhance the daily lives of Palestinians. Some actors – including the U.S. administration – have referred to these efforts as confidence-building measures, while others, including Netanyahu, have labelled them "economic peace" (Mitrani and Press-Barnathan 2015). This approach is based on the assumption that such steps could improve the general atmosphere and potentially lay the foundation for future peace-making. Netanyahu has promoted this approach since taking office in 2009, and these measures have also gained strong support from Israel's security

establishment. Netanyahu's Finance Minister, Moshe Kahlon (2015-2020), served as a key conduit to the Palestinian Authority (PA) for advancing these economic and civilian initiatives, working with his Palestinian counterpart, Shukri Bishara, and the PA's Civil Affairs Minister, Hussein Al-Sheikh (Landau 2018). The Bennett-Lapid government (2021-2022) also adopted this stance, particularly under Defence Minister Benny Gantz, who incorporated support for the idea into his party's political agenda. Even the current Netanyahu government (in power since December 2022) decided, before 7 October 2023, to implement several civil and economic measures aimed at "stabilising the civil situation in the Palestinian arena" and preventing the collapse of the PA (Harkov 2023). These measures were supported by the security apparatus but faced criticism from the more extreme factions within the government.

Another element of this stage involved preventive diplomacy efforts aimed at avoiding escalation and outbreaks of violence. Such efforts were evident in the relationship between Israel and the Hamas government in Gaza. They were mainly led by Egypt and Qatar, with support from the United Nations, and focused on preventing cycles of violence or war between the parties and stabilising the situation in Gaza (ICG 2018). This includes Netanyahu's agreements with Qatar, which allowed monthly Qatari funds to flow into Hamas-controlled Gaza, especially after 2018 (Mazzetti and Bergman 2023). At the same time, preventive diplomacy efforts were also carried out in East Jerusalem, particularly amid tensions around the holy sites, especially the contested Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount compound. Jordan has been at the forefront of these efforts, owing to its role as the custodian of the Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem. The United States has also been involved in such interactions; for example, John Kerry led de-escalation initiatives in this context in 2014 and 2015, resulting in agreements among Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians aimed at calming tensions in Jerusalem (Reiter 2017).

## Diplomatic stalemate

Over the past decade, up to 7 October 2023, amidst the ongoing stalemate in the peace process, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not remained static. Instead, it has evolved, becoming more complex and intractable. Several trends and developments can be identified.

In Israel, there has been a notable shift to the right in society and politics. On the left side of the political spectrum, left-wing parties such as Labour and Meretz, which once led the Oslo process, have weakened considerably. While in 1992, Labour and Meretz together held 56 seats in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), which is almost half of the 120 Knesset members, today Labour has only four seats, and Meretz did not enter the Knesset at all. Their supporters have shifted their votes to centrist parties such as Kadima, Yesh Atid, and Kachol Lavan (Yakter and Tessler 2023).

On the right side of the political spectrum, it can be observed that the parties have moved further towards the extreme right. The Likud Party, which has been the central ruling party for the past two decades, has become much more extreme than it was a decade ago; the ultra-Orthodox parties have shifted further to the right; and the line of the Religious Zionism parties has reached the far end of the right-wing spectrum. A clear illustration is the nomination of Itamar Ben-Gvir to serve as a minister of national security in the current government. Ben-Gvir has been an extremist right-wing activist, linked throughout his life to the banned Kach movement (established by Rabbi Mier Kahane and outlawed in 1994), and he has been convicted of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organisation. The Israeli consensus as a whole, including the Likud, has vilified Ben-Gvir, considering him and his movement illegitimate and dangerous. However, eventually, with Netanyahu's backing, he entered the Knesset and later became a minister (Margalit 2023).

Throughout this period, there has been a notable decline in the Israeli public's support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While in 2010, 71% of the Israeli public backed this model, by 2020, only 44% did. Surveys conducted in 2023 (before 7 October) showed a further decrease in support, dropping it below 40%. A key insight from Israeli Jewish public opinion surveys on this issue is the intergenerational gap. Within the 18-34 age group, only 20% support the two-state solution, whereas among those aged 55 and older, 47% express support for it (PSR and IPCRM 2023; Rahman and Scheindlin 2023). Moreover, in the last decade, there was hardly any substantive public or media discourse in Israel on peacemaking with the Palestinians, and the issue has largely fallen off the agenda. Even leaders of the centre-left camp hardly address the topic, and in the numerous election campaigns in recent years, the subject of reaching an agreement with the Palestinians has been absent. This has led to a situation in

which the younger generation is largely unfamiliar with the issue, and the idea has become irrelevant to them. The political discourse surrounding the Palestinian issue has predominantly revolved around tactical considerations within the domain of security measures. In parallel to this, the Israeli policy, over this period, has effectively been a policy of "creeping annexation," even without public declarations on formal annexation. It consists of the expansion of settlements, legitimising outposts, the destruction of Palestinian-owned structures in Area C, and efforts to prevent the possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

On the Palestinian side, the PA has faced a growing legitimacy crisis that has worsened in recent years, with public opinion polls consistently showing a lack of support for the PA and its leadership. There has been no democratic election since the 2005 presidential election and the 2006 parliamentary election. President Abu Mazen (90 years old) is currently in his 21st year in office, and according to a PSR poll from September 2024, 84% of the Palestinian public is calling for his resignation (PSR 2024). The PA is facing a severe economic and fiscal crisis, along with emerging signs of declining security across various regions. Hamas and Islamic Jihad are attempting to exploit the PA's vulnerabilities to strengthen their own influence.

Similar to trends in the Israeli public sphere, there has also been a decline in public support for the two-state solution on the Palestinian side, falling from 57% in 2010 to less than 40% in 2022. Surveys further indicate that the Palestinian public is losing trust and hope in the possibility of peace with Israel (PSR and IPCRM 2023; Rahman and Scheindlin 2023). Furthermore, during these years, the internal division between the Fatah-led PA in the West Bank and the Hamas government in Gaza persisted, and the conflict between the two sides deepened, with all attempts at reconciliation having failed (MEI 2017). Against this backdrop, there was no agreement between the parties on holding new elections or on the return of PA control to Gaza, effectively leaving the Palestinian people under two separate leaderships for many years. This also constituted another significant obstacle to advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Palestinian parliament has not been functional since Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007, and the political arena has been effectively in a state of total stagnation, with the younger Palestinian generation lacking a political space to express its aspirations. Moreover, the Palestinian arena has been tense in recent years due to the uncertainty surrounding the post-departure scenario after Abu Mazen, with

concerns that this could lead to internal strife among various factions within Fatah, and potentially even clashes between security organisations.

International interest and engagement in the conflict have also waned, characterised by the lack of a clear international strategy for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking (Lehrs et al., 2022). There was a sense among the international community that pursuing another failed peace initiative would be pointless, given the previous failures and the current political situation on both sides. The world did not perceive political readiness for a breakthrough on either side, and other issues and arenas drew greater international attention during these years – both in the region (Iran, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan) and globally (China, COVID-19, the rise of populism, and, finally, the war in Ukraine).

During the Obama administration, following the collapse of the Kerry initiative in 2014, there was reluctance to engage further or create another front with Netanyahu, amid the ongoing clash over the Iran nuclear deal. During the Trump era, tensions arose between the US and other international actors, primarily the EU, due to the policies pursued by the administration regarding Jerusalem, the settlements, and the two-state solution. The international community viewed the Trump policy toward the conflict as a violation of international norms and a rupture of consistent international policy. The Biden administration, while returning to the traditional American stance, has not prompted a substantial peace initiative. Until 7 October 2023, it focused on taking small steps to prevent escalation and improve the situation on the ground.

It seems that, even in parts of the Arab world, the Palestinian issue has been sidelined in favour of more urgent priorities. This shift in focus was evident in the normalisation agreements signed in 2020 between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco (the Abraham Accords). These agreements, in essence, contradict the principles of the Arab Peace Initiative (2002), which stated that Arab countries should normalise relations with Israel only after resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Additionally, the international mechanism established to promote the Israeli-Palestinian peace process – The Middle East Quartet - has become an ineffective body over the years. This situation was worsened after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which made the Quartet framework entirely irrelevant.

While the peace process remains frozen and deepens, and diplomatic disconnection between the parties widens, the situation on the ground has not

remained static, and the conflict persists and intensifies. Throughout this period, there has been ongoing expansion of Israeli settlements, and from 2012 to 2022, the population of Israeli settlers in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, had grown from 520,000 to 700,000 (OHCHR 2023). Against this backdrop, there is a growing claim that the situation on the ground has become irreversible, and a two-state solution seems increasingly unattainable. Additionally, during this time, the conflict has cycled through periods of escalation and violence, including violent clashes between Israel and Gaza, notably in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021, as well as violent incidents in East Jerusalem, particularly around the Temple Mount/Al-Haram al-Sharif compound, in 2014, 2015, and 2017, among others. Over the past 2-3 years leading up to 7 October 2023, there has been a notable increase in fatalities in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in various arenas of the conflict, pointing to growing conditions of instability and potential for extreme turmoil (Wennesland 2023).

## Reassessing the path forward

The Hamas-led attack, followed by the war in Gaza, marks a pivotal moment in the history of the conflict. It brought back the conflict into focus and reignited debate over its future and the diplomatic steps needed. At first glance, the events worsened, on the one hand, the lack of trust and dehumanisation among the parties, which strengthened resistance to negotiations and peace initiatives. On the other hand, they showed that maintaining a policy of ignoring the conflict, or simply managing the status quo, was unsustainable. This section examines the key issues and policy directions concerning the post-war context, alongside potential strategies and steps for a new peace process.

### Post-war Gaza

A key issue is defining a model for post-war Gaza that covers various aspects and levels. One aspect involves the reconstruction and rebuilding of Gaza, including homes and infrastructure, and the establishment of the foundations for long-term recovery. This includes repairing road networks, schools, and hospitals, restoring vital services such as electricity and water, and tackling environmental issues.

Additionally, it raises questions about which international actors will fund and lead these reconstruction efforts.

Another aspect is security, including the development of a new security regime in Gaza. It aimed to ensure, as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, "that 7 October can never happen again" (Blinken 2024). Security arrangements would need to address, among other things, the demilitarisation of Gaza and the disarmament of Hamas and other armed groups, the prevention of smuggling and rearmament, special border arrangements in collaboration with Israel and Egypt, and tasks related to policing and internal security. International proposals envisioned an international force deployed alongside a Palestinian local force. Under the Trump plan, an International Stabilisation Force (ISF) was agreed to deploy in the Gaza Strip and to support Palestinian police forces that have undergone screening and vetting (The White House 2025). However, even after the Trump plan was agreed upon, many questions remain about the force, including its mandate and authority, whether it will operate as a peacekeeping or peace-enforcement force, which states will contribute, and what role the United Nations will play. Potential contributors set varying conditions for participation, and Israel opposed the involvement of certain countries, notably Turkey. Additional questions were raised regarding the disarmament and decommissioning process, the relationship between the force and the Palestinian Authority, and the mission's timeline and duration. There was also uncertainty about how the local population would perceive the force and how Hamas members would respond to its presence.

Another vital aspect is civilian governance and administration in the Gaza Strip. There is broad international consensus on the return of the PA to Gaza, a principle reflected in Security Council resolution 2720. The Palestinian Authority has also expressed willingness and commitment to this goal. However, Netanyahu has voiced opposition, arguing that there is no distinction between Hamas and the PA, and he aims to discredit any efforts in this direction. Nonetheless, the Israeli security establishment holds a different view, recognising the possibility of the PA's return under certain conditions. In any case, it is generally agreed that the PA's return will require a gradual process, based on reforms within the PA, as discussed in a separate section. In the Trump plan, it was stated that a technocratic, apolitical Palestinian committee would be established to manage Gaza and provide services to the population, with oversight and supervision by a

new international transitional body, the "Board of Peace." Many questions remain open regarding the composition of the Board, the Palestinian committee, its relationship with the Palestinian Authority, and the division of responsibilities between the two entities. According to the plan, the Board would operate as a transitional mechanism until reforms in the Palestinian Authority are completed (The White House 2025).

## International engagement

The Gaza war marked a significant surge in international involvement in the conflict. This was evident across various forums, including debates at the UN Security Council, high-level diplomatic gatherings, visits by foreign leaders to the Middle East, and shuttle diplomacy conducted by senior American officials—reminiscent of efforts seen after the 1973 War with Henry Kissinger and after the 1991 Gulf War with James Baker. International engagement was expressed through immediate responses to short-term issues such as the release of Israeli captives held by Hamas, the facilitation of humanitarian aid to Gaza, and discussions on a ceasefire. It also encompassed post-war planning and long-term diplomatic initiatives aimed at transforming the situation. These included the Biden administration's effort to connect a post-war arrangement in Gaza with a broader regional normalisation framework, the Arab League's adoption of the Egyptian plan for Gaza in March 2025, and the French-Saudi initiative that led to the New York Declaration in September 2025.

Ultimately, international efforts led by the Trump administration, supported by key players such as Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey, produced Trump's twenty-point plan, which paved the way for the Gaza ceasefire in October 2025. The Civil-Military Coordination Centre (CMCC), created by the U.S. Central Command in Kiryat Gat, Israel, in October 2025, involving various international representatives to oversee the implementation of the agreement, exemplifies the peak of external involvement in the conflict. Nonetheless, it remains too early to determine whether this indicates a lasting change, whether international actors will commit to a sustained role, or what form their involvement might take in the years ahead.

Several components essential for future international involvement in the conflict can be highlighted. First, establishing an effective international group to facilitate

a coherent mediation and peacemaking process, improve coordination among relevant members, and ensure sustained international engagement over time would be advantageous. The Quartet, formed in the early 2000s, is now largely irrelevant and did not involve regional actors. During efforts to secure a ceasefire, a mechanism was developed that included the United States, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey. This mechanism successfully achieved a ceasefire. However, subsequent mediation efforts are likely to require a different process, with varied goals and issues on the agenda, moving beyond ceasefire arrangements to conflict resolution. Therefore, it is worth considering a different composition for such a group. Within this framework, there could be scope to include additional regional actors such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as European stakeholders, whether the European Union or individual states. Qatar's participation in such a group is likely to provoke disputes.

Second, there is a need for a peacemaking strategy that links immediate steps and actions to a broader, long-term vision for the conflict's future. This element was missing from many efforts over the years. This strategy should be based on "issues linkage" (Druckman and Wagner 2021) among its main components, including demands and incentives from the parties at every stage, a binding timeline and sequence, and international commitment to supervise and accompany the process. In the twenty-point plan, there is a connection between the first stage, which focused on the return of the hostages and a ceasefire, and elements of the second stage. However, the components of the second stage remained partly vague and, more importantly, lacked a clear link to a broader framework for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the connection to the West Bank and East Jerusalem. There is also room to draft a new Security Council resolution that updates Resolution 242 of 1967 and provides a renewed basis for the process and a shared commitment to a common vision.

## Regional normalisation

One lesson from past failed peace efforts is the lack of involvement of regional players who could play a decisive role, serve as game changers, and offer incentives and guarantees to the parties. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative has already proposed a plan for linking progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track to advancing regional normalisation between Israel and the Arab world. However, it remains unimplemented and has not had a tangible impact. The 2020 Abraham Accords

advanced normalisation processes between Israel and several Arab countries, but without linkage to progress on the Palestinian issue.

Therefore, throughout 2023, the Biden administration aimed to promote an initiative linking the US-Saudi security agreement with Israeli-Saudi normalisation and Israel's steps towards the Palestinians. 7 October changed the landscape, yet the US and Saudi Arabia continued their discussions on this idea. After the events, Saudi Arabia emphasised that any normalisation measure requires tangible progress towards a two-state solution (Ravid 2024). These efforts did not succeed under the Biden administration. It is important to note that talks between the US and Saudi Arabia covered various bilateral issues, mainly Saudi Arabia's interest in a civilian nuclear programme and American defence assurances. The Biden administration stated that additional Arab states are willing to join the normalisation process with Israel, but this depends on advancing the two-state solution. This is also connected to the first aspect of post-war Gaza and the potential for Arab countries' contributions to economic aid, reconstruction, or the deployment of international forces in Gaza—all contingent on revitalising the peace process.

After Trump returned to the White House in 2025, it seems that efforts to promote such a normalisation agreement persisted, and Trump has spoken more than once about the possibility of Saudi participation in the Abraham Accords. Simultaneously, advancing this track, especially during the war, appears highly complex given the current composition of the Israeli coalition. Saudi officials also stated they found it difficult to envisage such progress under the current Netanyahu government (Jerusalem Post, 2025). However, it remains too early to judge, and the end of the war, together with Netanyahu's potential desire to secure a diplomatic victory before the 2025 elections, may push developments in that direction. It is also notable that while the Biden plan emphasised Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates' involvement in the arrangements for Gaza the day after, the Trump plan assigned greater roles to Qatar and Turkey. Some actors in Israel criticised this approach because of the ties and support that Qatar and Turkey maintain with Hamas. In any event, it is clear that in any future peacemaking process, Egypt and Jordan must play a leading role as key actors closely connected to the various components of the conflict and maintaining relations with both sides. Both countries possess resources to be leveraged, and both have played significant roles in past efforts to prevent escalation.

## Political horizon and the two-state vision

A central element of any future long-term discussion undoubtedly revolves around the question of a political horizon and the vision of two states. It seems that recent tragic events, at least in the short term, have dealt a severe blow to this resolution, with surveys indicating a decline in confidence on both sides in this formula and in the peace process overall. However, the events have also galvanised international diplomatic efforts towards the two-state solution, with increasing readiness among international actors to take concrete steps towards this goal. During 2024 and 2025, a new wave of states recognised Palestine, including Ireland, Norway, Spain, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Canada, Australia, and France. Additionally, 142 states supported the New York Declaration in the UN vote, which was intended to outline a framework for implementing the two-state solution (UNGA, 2025).

However, the Netanyahu government has openly opposed a two-state solution. Other prominent Israeli political figures are hesitant to support this idea at present, with many emphasising that pushing for such a solution now would be perceived as rewarding Hamas's attack. Conversely, international actors, including the Biden administration, France, and Saudi Arabia, have underlined that only a credible political pathway can establish a new regional order capable of facilitating meaningful change and preventing further cycles of violence. They argue that the creation of a Palestinian state should proceed gradually and carefully, with a strong focus on demilitarisation. Connecting Gaza's future to the broader framework of a two-state solution, along with steps regarding the West Bank, would bolster internal Palestinian legitimacy, as it would not be viewed as a narrow, post-war arrangement but rather as a significant step towards establishing a viable two-state outcome. The Trump administration, at the start of its second term (as of November 2025), has been cautious about openly supporting a two-state solution and has even opposed recent recognitions of Palestine by various states. Simultaneously, the administration's twenty-point Plan states that it aims to create "a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood, which we recognise as the aspiration of the Palestinian people" (The White House, 2025).

## The Palestinian Authority and the internal Palestinian conflict

Another crucial aspect of any long-term process involves reforms within the PA, a concept emphasised by the Biden administration as the "revitalisation of the PA." In recent years, the PA has significantly weakened, losing internal legitimacy, international credibility, and effective control over various areas. To lead a process that enables the PA's return to Gaza and strengthens its power in the West Bank, substantial steps are needed to restore the PA as a legitimate and operational entity. Within the framework of a "revitalised PA," there are many interpretations, and various reform types are discussed. Reforms are necessary, among other things, in democratisation, decentralisation of power, and preparations for future elections. Additionally, reforms are required to improve governance, institutional effectiveness, financial transparency, and the fight against corruption. Simultaneously, steps are needed to enhance security effectiveness in the West Bank, alongside preparations for the transfer of forces into Gaza (for the first time since being ousted by Hamas in 2007).

The question of reforms was discussed in ongoing talks between the Biden administration, Arab states, European countries, and the PA. These discussions led to several measures. In March 2024, a new Palestinian government was appointed, with economist Mohammad Mustafa chosen as prime minister. Additionally, President Abbas appointed Hussein al-Sheikh as deputy chair of the PLO Executive Committee and issued a constitutional decree stating that, if he leaves office, al-Sheikh would serve as acting president for ninety days until elections are held (Brown 2025). Furthermore, Israel and the US demand the end of PA payments to Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, based on their period of imprisonment, claiming it promotes terrorism.

In early 2025, Abbas signed a decree reforming the payment system, marking progress towards addressing international concerns on this matter (Magid, 2025). Against this backdrop, a debate is intensifying over the integration of opposition leaders to Abu Mazen within the Fatah movement, as part of the change in PA leadership. In this context, Marwan Barghouti is mentioned, a popular Fatah leader who is incarcerated in an Israeli jail for involvement in terrorism. Surveys indicate that Barghouti is the candidate garnering the widest support for the Palestinian presidential elections. Another relevant figure is Mohammed Dahlan, currently an adviser to the UAE president, who, amid the war, has been mentioned in the media as a potential player in post-war Gaza plans. In October

2025, Abu Mazen announced that he would allow Nasser al-Qudwa, a leading Fatah opposition figure, to return to the movement and to Ramallah after years in exile. This step was framed as part of an effort to promote internal reconciliation within Fatah. Additionally, it came amid pressure from several Arab states, alongside proposals to include al-Qudwa in future governance arrangements for Gaza (Perry and Sawafta 2025).

Another key issue in this context concerns the relations between Hamas and Fatah/PA following the war. The question is whether the events will lead to renewed discussions between the parties about a possible agreement. Former Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad advocated for Hamas to join the PLO (Fayyad 2023). The US, Israel, and other Western actors oppose any possibility of including Hamas in a post-war model. Furthermore, it can be observed that tensions between the two Palestinian factions increased during the war and expressed themselves through verbal clashes following the formation of the new Palestinian government, as well as reports of Hamas arrests of PA personnel in Gaza (Zboun 2024; Abdel-Baqui, AbdulKarim and Faucon 2024). Abbas stated in September 2025 that Hamas will have "no role in a postwar governance of Gaza" (France 24, 2025).

From the early stages of the war, Egypt proposed establishing an interim Palestinian technocratic government as a transitional step toward eventual elections (AP, 2023). A detailed proposal presented in March 2025 suggested forming a 15-member committee of Palestinian technocrats from Gaza, unaffiliated with any Palestinian political faction, to govern the Gaza Strip during the transitional period. During this period, the PA would gradually take on administrative and governance responsibilities. Trump's twenty-point plan also referred to the establishment of a Palestinian technocratic committee that would work together with the Board of Peace as a transitional governance "until such time as the Palestinian Authority has completed its reform programme" (The White House, 2025).

## Netanyahu government and internal Israeli crisis

The current Israeli government (November 2025) is the most right-wing in the country's history, with senior ministerial roles filled by figures from the far right. Polls have indicated that most of the Israeli public opposed the government as early as 2023, partly due to its efforts to push for a judicial overhaul. After the

events of 7 October, there was widespread support within Israel for engaging in the war against Hamas, but at the same time, backing for the Netanyahu government diminished, and calls for new elections emerged, also reflected in large-scale protests. During the war, it appears that Netanyahu is avoiding discussions about post-war plans, including the idea of integrating the PA into Gaza, mainly out of concern for the future of his government due to the potential withdrawal of extreme right-wing factions from the coalition.

Netanyahu's stance on the Gaza war has caused increasing tension with the Biden administration, which grew harsher as the conflict in Gaza persisted. Hardline factions within Netanyahu's coalition also discussed the possibility of re-establishing settlements in Gaza, although Netanyahu himself publicly opposed this idea. Opposition leaders and security officials criticised Netanyahu's reluctance to consider post-war solutions. Throughout the war, especially in 2025, a clear divide appeared between most Israelis, who called for an agreement to free the hostages and end the war (Dayan 2025), and Netanyahu and his government, who opposed such measures. Mass protests erupted across Israel, with demonstrators accusing Netanyahu of obstructing deals and prolonging the war for political gains. Ultimately, intense pressure from Trump resulted in an agreement that brought the war to an end.

The future of any political or diplomatic development concerning the Israeli–Palestinian conflict will inherently be affected by changes in Israel's domestic politics. Israel is slated to hold elections in 2026, and the outcomes are likely to shape Israeli policies and priorities. From the standpoint of Israeli public opinion, it can be seen that in the short term, support for peace talks and a two-state solution has declined, accompanied by significant distrust towards the Palestinians and their intentions. Nevertheless, it remains too early to determine long-term effects, which will also depend on evolving circumstances. Conversely, most of the public recognised at the same time the failure of the conflict management policies and moved away from the concept of "shrinking the conflict" (the initiative that supported it was dissolved and its agenda changed). It seems that public opinion can be pragmatic when Israeli leadership works with regional and international actors, when global efforts address security concerns seriously, and when there are incentives for normalisation and regional integration.

# Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that the topic of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking has fallen off the agenda in the decade preceding 7 October 2023, both among the parties and in the international arena, leading to a sense of despair and a focus on efforts to prevent escalation and "shrink" the conflict. The events of 7 October 2023, and the subsequent Gaza war, has shifted the landscape and prompted a reassessment of the conflict's future, leading to diplomatic efforts to address key issues, including post-war Gaza, international involvement in the conflict, regional normalisation, the two-state vision, PA reforms, and changes in Israeli policy.

Alongside the key issues and policy directions I outlined, it is crucial to emphasise another significant component that demands substantial attention: the need to confront the problem of dehumanisation and the profound lack of trust and empathy among the parties, which has fallen to a dramatically low level. In addition to all diplomatic strategies, action in this area is also necessary, with a collective commitment from all actors to work towards change. This means that any new peacemaking process must incorporate elements of mutual recognition and efforts to combat extremist incitement and the denial of the other side's right to exist. In September 1993, just days before the signing of the Oslo Accords, Israel and the PLO signed mutual recognition documents, a significant and historic step, yet one that was limited. Building on this foundation, there needs to be a broader initiative of "revitalized" mutual recognition between the two peoples, along with acknowledgement of both sides' right to self-determination and to live in peace and security. This could include measures such as establishing an anti-incitement committee (as agreed in the 1998 Wye River Memorandum) and elements of peace education (as outlined in the "culture of peace" committee in the 2008 Annapolis process). The covert negotiation process led by Netanyahu with Hamas, based on "conflict management" and without mutual recognition, revealed the damage inherent in such an approach, which merely prolongs the conflict without bringing meaningful change. Initiatives in this area could also involve actions to promote people-to-people interactions on both sides, as well as support for strengthening relationships and cooperation among civil society groups and sectors on both communities.

The chapter also demonstrates how developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are intertwined with internal tensions and conflicts on both sides, as well as with societal and political crises in which both societies are embroiled. Internal fractures and the lack of legitimacy for leadership pose an additional obstacle to advancing conflict resolution. However, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not exist in a vacuum; it is also linked to regional and international arenas of struggle and competition. The linkages can be observed, for example, between the war in Gaza between Israel and Hamas and clashes between Hezbollah (in Lebanon) and Israel, as well as attacks by Houthis (in Yemen) on Red Sea ships and on Israel. These events are connected to regional wider tension between Iran and its proxies, versus Israel and moderate Sunni Arab states. Furthermore, the conflict extends into the ongoing global struggles between the superpowers. In this context, it is crucial to recognise that any attempt to change the dynamics in the conflict is influenced by developments and processes in other interlinked conflicts. Persistent regional and international tensions will continue to influence initiatives in this field.

To conclude, despite the prevailing sense of despair, some propose a comparison to the 1973 Israeli-Arab War, which constituted a dangerous regional escalation but led to a peace process between Israel and Egypt, eventually resulting in a peace treaty between the countries. This aligns with the "ripeness theory" in the conflict resolution literature, which argues that a combination of a "mutual hurting stalemate" perception and a "way out" perception can lead to a transition from conflict to conflict resolution (Zartman 2000). With this note, we can conclude with a poem by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai: "Two hopes away from the battle, I had a vision of peace/ My weary head must keep walking, my legs dreaming apace/ The scorched man said, I am the bush that burned and that was consumed: Come hither/ leave your shoes on your feet. This is the place".

*Chapter 6*

# Peace: Still a Sideshow

*Jacob Eriksson*

The mass protests across Israel in 2023 were driven primarily by domestic political issues rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Unlike previous major events often associated with wars or peace negotiations, these demonstrations were centred on the right-wing government's proposed reforms to the Supreme Court and its relationship with the Knesset. This sparked discussions about Israeli democracy, checks and balances, and national identity. While some claim that occupation and Israeli democracy are linked, the main focus of the discourse was not on Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, the occupation, or peace efforts. Instead, these protests were about Israel's internal political structure.

The Hamas terror attack on 7 October 2023 compelled Israel to confront the Palestinian issue directly, showing its persistence beyond domestic matters. The attack, which killed around 1,200 Israelis and resulted in 253 hostages taken to Gaza, disrupted Prime Minister Netanyahu's strategy of managing Hamas through incentives. While the attack ended the judicial protests and briefly unified Israel, dissent soon resumed, particularly concerning wartime leadership. Despite an internationally brokered ceasefire in October 2025, leading to hostages and prisoners being released, significant unresolved issues remain, such as Hamas disarmament and Palestinian statehood. This chapter explores how recent protest movements intersect with the broader conflict, Israel's pursuit of peace, and the consequences of the Gaza war.

This chapter applies Zartman's theory of ripeness to analyse the conflict-resolution opportunities and challenges within the Israeli-Palestinian context. Zartman's concepts—Mutually Hurting Stalemates (MHS) and Mutually Enticing Opportunities (MEO)—help identify when conditions are suitable for negotiations. MHS occurs when both parties recognise that ongoing conflict is

futile, while MEOs present appealing prospects for peace. These moments are perceptual and rely on third parties, but they do not guarantee that negotiations will necessarily follow.

The capacity of international actors to influence Israeli decision-making is vital at this historic juncture. This chapter examines how US allies, Abraham Accords partners, and potential allies such as Saudi Arabia can sway Israel's calculations, especially as the peace process faces new challenges. Cease-fires brokered by the Trump administration in January and October 2025 have not led to lasting peace. Progress has mainly resulted from US pressure, not a mutually hurting stalemate, and incentives for normalisation from Gulf states remain insufficient to address Israeli security concerns. Israeli actions in Gaza, with over 65,000 Palestinian deaths, have further complicated prospects for broader regional acceptance.

## Peaceful protests, not protests for peace

The Israeli judicial protests of 2023 were mainly motivated by internal institutional concerns rather than a desire for peace with the Palestinians. This movement united centrists and leftists in opposition to reforms that threatened the balance of power between the Supreme Court and the executive in a country lacking a constitution or a bicameral parliament. Protesters reclaimed national symbols, such as the Israeli flag, to assert patriotic legitimacy. The demonstrations underscored fundamental questions of Israeli identity, clearly distinct from debates over the occupation or Palestinian relations and were influenced by traditional left-right divides.

Prioritising cohesion, the protest movement largely avoided focusing on Palestinian issues or the occupation. Efforts from the left to introduce debates about Israeli conduct in the occupied territories challenged the movement's unity. The centre and centre-left majority aimed to keep the agenda centred on judicial reform, fearing that broadening the scope would fracture the coalition and enable pro-government actors to undermine the movement's legitimacy. Many protestors opposed judicial reform but were reluctant to confront the fundamental compromises necessary concerning the occupation. As one radical protestor noted, internal power struggles among elites remain contained within a Zionist framework that accepts the occupation (Reiff 2023). Commentators such as Yossi Mekelberg (Chatham House) suggested that the protesters could evolve into

agents for both democracy and peace—if they moved beyond Israeli-centric debates. However, demanding a direct link between occupation and Israeli democracy could risk weakening the movement. Historically, the persistent strength of in-group/out-group dynamics has restricted the peace process, a pattern reflected in Israeli narratives that question the existence of a Palestinian partner for peace (Del Sarto 2017). There is little evidence that this entrenched division has changed.

Although the judicial protests did not explicitly mention the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, their outcome has significant implications for this relationship. For right-wing nationalists, the Supreme Court halts activities such as settlement expansion and the promotion of Jewish identity over minority rights. Judicial reform could weaken even the limited legal restrictions on these actions, decreasing the chances of territorial compromise. While intended to protect rights equally, the Supreme Court is viewed by many Arab-Israelis and Palestinians as legitimising Israeli policies rather than defending minority rights—explaining why these groups have not taken part in the protests (Munayyer 2023).

After 7 October, the protest movement's focus shifted, unveiling new alliances with judicial protests opposing Netanyahu's leadership. Early war protests mainly addressed hostage welfare, but by December 2023, anti-government demonstrations reemerged, criticising war management and calling for new elections. Protesters again waved the Israeli flag and expressed frustration with Netanyahu's perceived prioritising of personal interests over national welfare, particularly regarding hostages (Sharon 2023; Sella 2024). The prolonged war allowed Netanyahu to delay scrutiny of the failures on 7 October and influence his legal proceedings. In April 2025, security leaders expressed support for ending the conflict in exchange for the hostages, citing responsible leadership priorities (Graham-Harrison 2025). Moves to dismiss top legal officials in March 2025 triggered renewed mass mobilisation, highlighting the intertwined struggles among Netanyahu, the judiciary, and the security establishment (Danan 2025; Lonsdorf and Estrin 2025).

Once again, it is important to distinguish between the different issues at stake. Similar to earlier protests, these primarily focused on domestic politics, democracy, the rule of law, and how the two, arguably conflicting, war aims were prioritised. Although the public and the security establishment questioned the duration of the war and raised concerns about the diminishing returns of

continued fighting, the war itself initially received widespread public support and was deemed necessary. Calls to end the war mainly centred on the return of the hostages, not necessarily stemming from disagreement with the war in principle or worries about the costs borne by innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza. While some protesters expressed solidarity with Palestinian victims and objected to the starvation of Gaza through restrictions on humanitarian aid, this was not the primary focus (Graham-Harrison 2025b; Lonsdorf and Estrin 2025; Dayan 2025b; Summers 2025).

It is also vital to distinguish between a ceasefire and a sustainable peace. Endings to war do not automatically imply negotiations for peace with either Hamas or the wider Palestinian community. The collective trauma of 7 October, the deadliest day for Jews since the Holocaust, has further complicated the idea of peace with Palestinians and the longstanding principle of land for peace and security—once a core concept—for many Israelis. Although Netanyahu is unpopular among many Israelis, his rejection of an independent, demilitarised Palestinian state is widely shared (Svetlova 2024). Surveys by Israeli Channel 12 during early January 2025 ceasefire showed that, while 70% of respondents supported progressing to the next phase—restoring all live hostages in exchange for a complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza—a similar number also supported removing Palestinians from that area (Times of Israel, 2025). Other polls in summer 2025 indicated that about three-quarters of Jewish Israeli respondents either partially or fully agreed with their government's claim that "there are no innocents in Gaza," and that a comparable proportion were "not so troubled" or "not troubled" by reports of Palestinian suffering (Graham-Harrison 2025b). These results seem to show a preference for military solutions and ethnic cleansing over seeking negotiated peace.

Even if these views are driven by trauma and fear rather than political ideology, they still align with the most extreme members of Netanyahu's government who reject any concessions to the Palestinians and aggressively promote ongoing conflict. Upon returning to power after a short opposition period, Netanyahu embraced the far-right of the Israeli political spectrum, forming a coalition that included Otzma Yehudit ("Jewish Power"). Rooted in Rabbi Meir Kahane's Kach party, which was banned by the Israeli state and classified as a terrorist organisation, their inclusion in government marked the mainstreaming of Kahanist extremism and racism.

The party's controversial leader, Itamar Ben Gvir, has previously been convicted of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organisation, among other charges (Margalit 2023). Just weeks before Rabin's assassination, Ben Gvir famously removed the hood ornament from Rabin's car and told an interviewer, "Just as we got to his car, we'll get to him too" (Ben-Dor 2022). Bezalel Smotrich, head of the Religious Zionism party and finance minister in Netanyahu's government, has repeated the old assertion that there's "no such thing as Palestinians because there's no such thing as the Palestinian people" (Times of Israel, 2023). Following the murder of two Israeli settlers by a Palestinian gunman in Huwara in the West Bank, Smotrich called for the village to be "wiped out". Though he later apologised, he described his comments as a "slip of the tongue", explaining that "his word choice was wrong, but the intention was very clear" (Magid 2023). When the intent itself is a war crime, that does not bode well for peace. Both Smotrich and Ben-Gvir continue to normalise more extreme views on issues such as the annexation of the West Bank and unchecked illegal settlement expansion.

The Hamas attack has further legitimised the actions long supported by Smotrich and Ben Gvir, with mainstream Israeli politicians making public statements deemed as plausible genocide appeals by the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Both have been strong advocates of ongoing war and have repeatedly threatened to leave the government if it does not fully destroy Hamas. Although Ben-Gvir and his party briefly exited the government over the January 2025 ceasefire agreement, they rejoined after Israel resumed hostilities. Both Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, along with most ministers from their respective parties, voted against the October 2025 ceasefire deal (Neev and Stein 2025). In line with Smotrich's "Decisive Plan" to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict published in 2017, he and Ben-Gvir endorse the forced transfer of the Palestinian population from Gaza to other Arab countries, a stance supported by the Intelligence Ministry, a government policy research group, and Misgav, a right-wing think tank (Abraham 2023; Noy 2023). Both have also called for the Jewish resettlement of Gaza (Associated Press, 2024; Reuters, 2024). While Jewish resettlement of Gaza is not government policy at present, a Voluntary Emigration Bureau was established to facilitate Gazans' relocation to third countries following Trump's initial proposal to take over Gaza, as discussed further in the next section (Karni, Lister and Ebrahim 2025). Netanyahu has consistently refused to outline a clear, realistic plan for Gaza's political future and has instead embraced Trump's idea of US control of Gaza as "a revolutionary and creative vision" (Gritten 2025).

Even if new elections yield a more moderate Israeli government, significant concessions to the Palestinians remain difficult to envisage, given the complete lack of Israeli trust in them and their institutions. Although the Israeli security establishment tends to acknowledge the importance of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) role in security cooperation, the emergence of independent Palestinian militant groups like Lion's Den in Nablus has demonstrated the extent of its lack of authority in parts of the West Bank (Dekel 2022). In the eyes of many Israelis, it is an entity that financially rewards the families of terrorists and incites Palestinians to violence against Jews. Reform of the PA has long been an Israeli and US demand, increasingly supported by Arab diplomats (Magid 2023b; McKernan 2024), and is a key component of the October 2025 ceasefire plan, which effectively links progress on Palestinian priorities to Israeli terms. Smotrich and others on the right, meanwhile, persist in wanting to dismantle the PA to eliminate any prospect of a Palestinian state, though, as with earlier phases, Netanyahu is likely to appease them with assurances that conditionality means this will not come to pass.

From the Israeli perspective, a painful stalemate has not materialised. Netanyahu had long resisted increasing public pressure to end the war and appeared content to continue doing so mainly for political reasons, such as delaying ceasefire negotiations (Berman 2025). The eventual October 2025 ceasefire presented a tempting opportunity for Israel to secure the release of its hostages, but it should not be seen as a sign of Israel's desire for peace negotiations or concessions to the Palestinians to end the conflict entirely. The analysis will now focus on the roles of external actors, such as the US and the Arab world, whose interests combined to persuade President Trump to pressure Netanyahu into reaching a deal.

## The critical yet limited role of third parties

If the ceasefire was an enticing opportunity for Netanyahu, it was not solely motivated by attraction but heavily influenced by the push factor of President Trump's anger. While reports circulated about Trump being upset at images on the news showing starving Palestinian children, it was a different set of Israeli actions that created a sense of urgency. On 9 September 2025, Israeli forces carried out airstrikes against Hamas negotiators in Doha, Qatar, violating both

customary diplomatic laws and international laws banning the use of armed force (Kutty 2025). This unlawfulness, however, was less significant than the damage to US strategic interests and the existing Gulf security architecture: Qatar has a longstanding security relationship with the US, and such a blatant attack on an ally harmed its image as a security guarantor. Furthermore, there was a personal element to the relationship at stake after Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, the Emir of Qatar, gifted Trump an airplane to use as Air Force One. Following this pivotal moment, the Trump administration applied considerable pressure on Netanyahu (Burns and Nerozzi 2025), and regional states urged Hamas to accept a ceasefire, highlighting the importance of third parties, as Zartman emphasised. As this section contends, this marked a notable departure from previous patterns both before and during the Gaza war. Although Trump seems energised by the prospect of extending the Abraham Accords to include regional powers like Saudi Arabia, describing the ceasefire as "the start of a grand concord" and "the historic dawn of a new Middle East", this overlooks the fundamental differences in interests preventing such a development.

Given the unprecedented nature of the 7 October attack and the human toll of the war in Gaza, it is easy to forget that, prior to this, 2022 was the deadliest year for Israelis and Palestinians in over a decade. Israeli forces killed 152 Palestinians—33 of them children—while Palestinians killed 10 Israelis in the occupied West Bank and 17 in terror attacks within Israel itself (Fabian 2022; UNOHCHR, 2022; UNOHCHR, 2023). Israeli forces killed 49 Palestinians in attacks on the Gaza Strip, including 17 children (Rickett and Fayyad, 2022). Meanwhile, violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians has increased every year since 2016, with some attacks occurring with the active support or acquiescence of uniformed Israeli forces (UNOHCHR, 2022). In July 2023, Israel conducted a prolonged military operation in the Jenin refugee camp, the largest such action in the West Bank since the second intifada, which resulted in the death of 1 Israeli soldier and 12 Palestinians, wounded over 140 Palestinians, and displaced more than 4,000 (Irfan 2023).

Amid escalating violence, Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian, Jordanian, and US officials met in Aqaba in February 2023 and in Sharm el-Sheikh the following month to try to ease tensions. In a joint communique from the latter meeting, Israel agreed to suspend unilateral measures for 3-6 months, specifically refraining from discussing new settlements or authorising outposts. The statement also

explicitly recognised PA responsibility for security in Area A and pledged to work together on these security obligations. The Egyptian foreign ministry stated that dialogue and cooperation could "facilitate the creation of a climate suitable for the resumption of the peace process" (Al-Jazeera, 2023). However admirable those aims might have been, even before the Gaza war, they bordered on delusion. These measures may have helped maintain relative quiet for Ramadan and Passover in 2023, but they produced no lasting change in the underlying relationships that fuel violence. At best, such meetings served as exercises in conflict management rather than genuine conflict resolution. Veteran peace activist Gershon Baskin spoke to officials on both sides who believed there was no real intention to implement the Sharm communique (Baskin 2023). A third meeting in Sharm el-Sheikh was reportedly planned to continue discussions on security issues, but failed to materialise (The Cradle, 2023). This was followed shortly by the Israeli incursion into Jenin less than two months later, offering some indication of the limited value of such meetings. Communiques like Sharm el-Sheikh evoke a language reminiscent of a bygone era, harking back to John Kerry's 2014 initiative and beyond, without recognising that the conflict has since worsened substantially. Certain types of international engagement have actively contributed to this deterioration, such as the first Trump administration's poorly conceived and poorly executed "Peace to Prosperity" initiative. This, along with their broader set of one-sided pro-Israeli policies, effectively bowed to the Israeli right wing and validated multiple unhelpful notions regarding Jerusalem and the West Bank (Eriksson 2018).

Although the exact wording varies, every US President affirms that the bonds between Israel and the US are "unbreakable" (The White House, 2009, 2016) and are rooted in shared democratic values. However, the undemocratic nature of the Israeli government's judicial reforms challenged and tested this relationship, temporarily creating a significant rift. President Joe Biden maintained a distance from Netanyahu, notably by refusing to invite him to the White House, denying far-right Israeli ministers meetings with US officials, openly describing the current Israeli government as the most extreme he has seen in his long political career, and expressing concern over how the proposed reforms could affect Israeli democracy (Caspit 2023; Sanchez 2023). Israeli officials did not respond well to such critiques, essentially telling the Biden administration to mind its own business and cease interfering in Israeli politics. Ben-Gvir explicitly stated, "We're not another star on the American flag" (Silkoff 2023). This came after over a decade

of Netanyahu's politicisation of the relationship, which jeopardised the bipartisan support the US provides for Israel. Netanyahu actively undermined President Obama's Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and then supported the Republican Party and President Trump. An increasing number of US Democrats have become highly critical of Israeli settlement expansion and violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank (Estrin 2023). In line with shifting US attitudes towards Israel, sympathy for the Palestinians is growing among Democrats and younger adults eager to see the creation of a Palestinian state, along with increasingly unfavourable views of the Israeli government over the war in Gaza and a willingness to put pressure on Israel to force concessions (Saad 2021; van Green et al, 2025).

While the war in Gaza caused further discord and widened the gulf between Biden and Netanyahu, the Biden administration still failed to leverage the substantial influence the US holds over Israel to protect Palestinian rights or broker a ceasefire in Gaza. As expected, the Biden administration firmly defended Israel's right to self-defence and dismissed the notion presented to the International Court of Justice by South Africa that Israel was committing genocide. Over time, early warnings not to be blinded by rage and to avoid repeating US mistakes after 9/11 turned into blunt acknowledgement of Israel's indiscriminate bombing of Gazan civilians, with claims that this was "hurting Israel more than helping Israel" (Associated Press, 2024c). Despite Biden's characterisation of Israeli attacks as indiscriminate and evidence of Israel obstructing humanitarian aid, the US State Department maintained that Israel was complying with International Humanitarian Law (US Department of State, 2024; Ravid 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2024). The limits of US influence became clear when, unable to override Israeli objections, it was compelled to deliver humanitarian aid into Gaza by air and deployed its military to construct a temporary port in Gaza for this purpose- a project that ultimately failed spectacularly (BBC, 2024). Biden later endorsed a speech by Chuck Schumer, the leading Senate Democrat, calling for new elections in Israel and describing Netanyahu as an obstacle to peace (Karni 2024). In response to rising violence by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank, Biden also signed an executive order imposing sanctions on several individuals and organisations involved (Cohen 2024; Simon 2025). Much like President Barack Obama in 2016, frustration with Netanyahu and his government led the US to abstain in the UN Security Council on Resolution 2728, which called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Whether fairly or not, the ceasefire that eventually emerged in January 2025 was largely attributed to the incoming second Trump administration. However, this was not so much a product of diplomatic skill or vision as a gesture from Netanyahu to Trump, one illiberal leader to another, considering Trump repeatedly pledged to end the war during his campaign. The Biden administration had effectively done all the hard work but was still unable to secure the deal as Trump did. Following that public relations success, President Trump and his administration enabled rather than restrained the worst instincts of the Israeli government. Upon taking office, he rescinded the sanctions Biden had imposed on violent Israeli settlers, thereby removing any sense of accountability and reinforcing impunity for such actions and actors.

In early February 2025, Trump announced that the US was going to "take over" Gaza and "own it," remove and resettle the Palestinians living there, and rebuild the Strip to create a "Riviera of the Middle East" that would attract new residents from across the world. The Palestinians would have no right of return but would not want to return, Trump argued, as they would be offered a more attractive alternative. This idea was condemned by many European and Arab leaders as a blatant violation of international humanitarian law and a call for ethnic cleansing (Gritten 2025). Although not necessarily realistic, particularly given Trump's short attention span and the complete lack of detail about how this would actually be implemented, the Gaza announcement nonetheless illustrated Trump's instincts and the continuity between his first and second administrations. Trump showed limited interest in the ongoing dynamics in Gaza, with his team failing to enforce the terms of the January ceasefire agreement and enabling Israeli avoidance and disruption of negotiations on a second phase, presumably because this would have endangered Netanyahu's government (Miller 2025; Berman 2025).

Attempts by US envoys to secure the release of their nationals held by Hamas seemingly independently of existing processes also confused and complicated proceedings (Magid 2025). Rather than restrict or condition arms sales on any political commitments, the Trump administration bypassed congressional reviews to approve additional arms sales to Israel (Associated Press, 2025). Even with the October 2025 agreement, these precedents do not inspire confidence in the ability to progress to later phases of the plan or that the Trump administration will employ leverage over Israel to secure serious concessions towards the Palestinians.

In terms of enticing opportunities, a great deal of excitement has been generated around the potential expansion of the Abraham Accords, which saw Israel enter into normalisation agreements with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to pursue shared economic and security interests, such as cooperation against the perceived threat from Iran. Among the benefits for the Arab signatories were the purchase of advanced Israeli surveillance technologies and the conclusion of arms deals with the US (Del Sarto and Lawrie, 2020). The sales pitch to the Palestinians and those in the region still passionate about their cause was that the deal staved off Israeli annexation, albeit for a limited time, and that these new relationships with Israel would give them added influence useful in any future peace negotiations. Neither of these points seems overly meaningful in the current context. Gulf reactions to the proposed judicial reform were largely muted (Podeh and Shapira, 2023), perhaps unsurprising as the finer points of democratic institutional practice are not traditionally their concern. Bahraini and Emirati diplomats were initially happy to meet Ben-Gvir and Smotrich despite their views. However, Israeli actions towards Palestinians, even before the Gaza war, soured relations and generated multiple critical diplomatic statements (Goren 2023). A leading Emirati analyst speaking at the Herzliya Conference in May 2023 described the right-wing nature of the pre-war Israeli government as an embarrassment to the UAE and the other signatories (Shamir 2023), and the Accords were already said to be increasingly unpopular with the wider public (Alghashian 2023). This sense of buyer's remorse has only increased due to the war in Gaza. Although Emirati-Israeli diplomatic relations have been maintained, the Emirati public mood soured significantly as the Palestinian civilian death toll rose (Nereim 2024).

Before 7 October, reports increased about the possibility of an Israeli-Saudi Arabian normalisation agreement, arguably the highlight of Israel's regional diplomatic achievements. Such a tripartite deal could theoretically create a framework for a broader peace settlement with the Palestinians. However, in reality, the costs of normalisation have always made it hard to imagine. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) sought substantial benefits from the US, including a defence treaty with security guarantees akin to NATO's Article 5 commitments, arms such as F-35 fighter jets, and civilian nuclear technology (Crowley et al, 2023). Any such treaty would need approval by a two-thirds majority in the Senate, making it difficult to pass. Democrats would likely also demand significant Israeli concessions to the Palestinians. Former Saudi

intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal and others have stressed that the Kingdom's stance has been clear and remains unchanged, especially after public outrage over Israeli actions in Gaza: normalisation will only occur after a Palestinian state is established (Arab News, 2024; Arab Centre, 2025). The strength of Saudi public opinion regarding Israeli actions in Gaza makes this a very sensitive issue, even for a generally popular ruler.

Like other Arab governments, the Saudis clearly rejected Trump's proposed US takeover of Gaza and the associated displacement of Palestinians. At a summit in Cairo in March 2025, the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE presented an alternative vision for the future. This included a phased reconstruction plan, the formation of a technocratic governing committee for Gaza excluding Hamas and supervised by the PA, and the training of new Palestinian security personnel for Gaza by Egypt and Jordan. A two-state solution would then be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians, followed by Arab normalisation with Israel after its implementation (Hamzawy, 2025). Although Israel, supported by the Trump administration, rejected this plan, it served as the foundation for the second phase of the October 2025 cease-fire initiative.

Although securing agreement in principle for such a plan is undoubtedly a positive step, the concessions it would require from Israel seem unlikely in the current context. No matter how appealing it may appear to others, the promise of normalisation and peace with regional powers like Saudi Arabia is not sufficiently compelling to persuade this or even a more moderate Israeli government to accept the creation of a Palestinian state. Security assurances are just that: promises which Israel argues will not be honoured. If asked to choose between keeping the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and peace with the Arab world, most Israelis would likely prefer territory, whether for nationalist, religious, or security reasons. Changing this preference would require external intervention to either create a painful stalemate or offer a more attractive opportunity, but this currently seems a distant prospect.

# Conclusion

The Hamas attack on 7 October and the subsequent Israeli war in Gaza are both major war crimes and tragedies in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The trauma and suffering caused by human loss on both sides will be felt for decades, creating additional obstacles in an already protracted conflict. Over the past decade, Palestinians have been marginalised in Israeli political discourse, dismissed as an inconvenience most Israelis can happily ignore. This was evident in the protest movement against the government's judicial reforms, where focusing attention on the undemocratic aspects of the occupation risked dividing the movement and diverting attention from the immediate task. Although Palestinians are now back in the forefront of Israeli minds, the violent manner in which this shift occurred does not bode well for peace.

The old, perhaps unhelpful status quo has been broken, but it remains unclear what will take its place. Despite the widespread unpopularity of Netanyahu over the ongoing judicial reforms, the security failure of 7 October, and the handling of the war, his broader policies towards Palestinians remain largely unchanged and popular. The renewed ceasefire and plans for internationally-led governance in Gaza should be seen as limited steps, separate from any broader peace agreement. Neither sufficient incentives nor severe consequences seem to be in sight. The prospect of Israeli-Saudi normalisation, viewed as a crucial step towards Arab-Israeli peace, could theoretically promote a framework for renewed negotiations with the Palestinians, but it won't be enough to satisfy those in Israel who refuse to withdraw from the West Bank. Even if external pressure were to emerge, coercion can only go so far; any agreement must be owned and implemented by Israelis and Palestinians themselves, a goal that seems further away than ever.

*Chapter 7*

# Agonistic Conflict Dynamics and Contested Pasts

*Lisa Strömbom*

This chapter analyses the current marginalisation of peace efforts in Israel/Palestine and the actors who are pursuing peace activism against all odds in that setting. In the aftermath of the failed Oslo process, which ultimately collapsed in the early 2000s, it has been increasingly difficult to work for peace in Israel/Palestine. This has partly been a result of elite negotiations stuck in a deadlock and of decreasing public interest in achieving peace. Another explanation for the decrease of peace activism and shrinking of peace organisations active in Israel as well as Palestine has been the fact that the Palestinian Authority (PA), as well as the Israeli government and nationalist organisations, have been engaged in delegitimation campaigns targeting NGOs and individuals engaged in dialogues with the other party in conflict. The Hamas attack against Israeli civilians in southern Israel on 7 October 2023, and the subsequent devastating war in Gaza have further polarised societies, and those who promote peace under these volatile conditions are increasingly ostracised. In other words, peace activism in Israel/Palestine is today a marginalised phenomenon (Ben-Eliezer, 2023) and those who engage with it are often met with suspicion and antipathy (Aggestam and Strömbom, 2013; Strömbom and Kapshuk, 2022; Zorob and Paluszek, 2024).

2023 was a challenging year for cross-community activists in Israel and Palestine. First, the mass demonstrations against the government's attempted judicial "reforms" created central contention in Israel (see Schierenbeck in this volume). Despite the democratic credo of the protest movement, it left the issue of Israeli-Palestinian relations, as well as democracy issues about the occupation, off the agenda. This led to criticism from peace and anti-occupation movements, who

criticised the protests for mainly concerning democracy for Israel's Jews. In contrast, crucial questions regarding occupation and Palestinian rights were obscured. Second, after the Hamas attack and the subsequent war in Gaza, the already antagonistic relations between Israeli and Palestinian elites have exacerbated, and communication and trust between the two communities have spiralled downward. The recent war notwithstanding, a few organisations are still active in the margins, trying to push an agenda of continuous dialogue and sharing of views between groups and individuals with different experiences of conflict (Strömbom, 2019; Ben-Eliezer, 2023).

This chapter zooms in on the activities of these groups. Despite shrinking space for peace advocacy, these groups, often grassroots activists (Ben-Eliezer, 2023) of various kinds, continue to work to increase contact between Israelis and Palestinians through dialogic strategies. Of specific interest here is that they do not pursue their work according to mainstream liberal peace approaches, which tend to aim for consensus, but promote a pluralist view of the conflict and its roots. Several organisations, such as Standing Together and Combatants for Peace, mobilised rapidly after October 7 to curb the heightened antagonism stemming from the war. Despite shrinking space for peace advocacy, several organisations continue their work to increase contact between Israelis and Palestinians through dialogic strategies under challenging circumstances.

Many of these do not align with mainstream liberal peace approaches. Instead, they are often characterised as promoting reflexive, post-liberal strategies (Ben-Eliezer, 2023). These can, in turn, come in many shapes. In this chapter, they are understood through the lens of agonistic peace (Strömbom, 2020). That, in turn, entails an approach to peace that involves contestation over different views and strategies, allowing for a broad and politicised understanding of what peace could be and how it could be achieved. In the following, I present a brief overview of agonistic peace scholarship and how it envisions change in societies characterised by stark polarisation and antagonism. Then I move to two examples of recent agonistic peace practices in Israel and Palestine, one about alternative tourism and the other about dialogue initiatives conducted by grassroots organisations. The conclusion offers insights into inhibiting and facilitating conditions for this type of work in highly polarised societies.

# Agonistic peace

Since its inception in the 1950s, the field of conflict resolution has emphasised the role of dialogue to overcome irreconcilable differences. However, since the 1990s, there has been a notable increase in critical peace research, as highlighted by scholars such as Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013). This body of work has challenged the prevailing neoliberal perspectives that have come to dominate much of the field's practical approaches. Instead, it has advocated for greater attention to locally driven initiatives and a nuanced examination of power dynamics. Mainstream conflict resolution (Fisher and Ury 1991) and peacebuilding approaches (Paris 2004) have often stressed that conflicts are neither good nor bad, but can be both constructive and destructive, depending on how they are handled. Oftentimes, the remedy to conflicts has been sought in the creation of post-conflict strategies striving for consensus and univocal agreements on understandings of the past (Aggestam, Cristiano and Strömbom 2015). This inclination has been especially prevalent in the literature on reconciliation, which outlines strategies for transitional justice in the aftermath of violent conflict (Strömbom and Bramsen 2022). There should be no doubt about the good intentions of this literature and its practices, which aim to harmonise and unify memories to move beyond violent conflict. However, it is still a fact that these efforts tend to obscure differences and erase boundaries between groups, which may instead give rise to quite violent dynamics, leaving room for spoiler groups to capitalise on the fears evoked by the "new" memories and trigger new eruptions of violence.

Agonistic peace theory suggests a reversed strategy, in which memories and identities are understood as crucial for conflict resolution, but in which contesting understandings of conflict and multiple memories should be allowed to co-exist, thereby lowering the risk of backlash driven by fear. This argument challenges the consensual approach to conflict resolution and transitional justice mechanisms, taking its point of departure in the literature on agonistic peace (Shinko 2008). The body of scholarship affiliated with this concept challenges the liberal predisposition in the conflict resolution literature. In line with Chantal Mouffe's writings (2005, 2013), the approach presupposes that contestation is not only inevitable but also crucial for progressive societies. Since consensus is neither possible nor desirable, transitional justice cannot nor should it be initiated to *end*

conflict. Instead, these arrangements should strive to subsume antagonistic, violent relations with enemies into a relationship of respect among adversaries, while always keeping conflict, plurality and dissensus at the core of that relationship (Mouffe 2013; Peterson 2013; Aggestam, Cristiano and Strömbom 2015).

The general relational dynamic in societies engaged in protracted conflict tends to be one of animosity between contending groups, with enemy images becoming entrenched over time. It is seldom enough to address the political issues of the present to overcome such antagonistic relationships between conflicting parties. It is also necessary to create space for elaboration on collective identities and memories of conflict. This includes challenging the fixed boundaries between groups that have been established over time. How then can such relatively abstract ideals about contestation echo in societies involved in protracted conflicts? One answer to that question can be found in the literature on liberal peacebuilding practices, where efforts to find unifying narratives of truth that everyone involved in the conflict can agree on are pursued to overcome conflict. This approach often has a flip side: creating a fragile truth, a least-common-denominator approach in which you can agree on dates and objective facts, while stripping from the story the thickness and emotional fabric that have made the conflict meaningful to the parties (Nagy 2002). In these unified narratives, difference is often understood as an evil to be eradicated in order to find commonalities and shared consciousness. Thus, emotionally laden symbols and memories, which are the most deeply cherished by the conflict parties, are overshadowed and erased as the familiar story on which everyone could agree is prioritised to achieve the overarching goal of leaving the conflict behind in a spirit of consensus and harmony.

## Agonistic memory politics in Israel/Palestine

The approach forwarded here promotes an agonistic politics of memory (Mälksoo 2015; Cento Bull and Lauge Hansen 2016; Strömbom 2019; Strömbom 2026). According to this view, contrasts between narratives and continuous contestation of worldviews are seen as productive and conducive to long-term societal change and renewal. To transform deep-seated conflictual relations, antagonistic narratives that demonise the other group and portray it as an inevitable

perpetrator should be replaced by agonistic ones, in which plural identities and experiences of conflict co-exist. The ideational basis of an agonistic memory politics should allow for multiple, contrasting narratives. In that view, groups should be able to express their own unique narratives. However, they should be discussed and juxtaposed with other experiences and narratives of conflict in open, agonistic dialogue. The difference should then not be eradicated but incorporated, discussed, and argued about in an open dialogue; however, always under the fundamental premise that the parties in that agonistic dialogue agree not to resort to violence. This approach hence favours pluralism, dissensus and contestation. Thus, parties do not have to reach agreement on the past, but should respect, or at least tolerate, that there are different views of the past and the present than their own narrative.

The idea of an agonistic politics of memory thus defies the logic of traditional reconciliation efforts. The crucial task is instead to repoliticise memory (Mälksoo 2015: 230) in a way that channels antagonistic memories into pluralistic encounters of contestation, thereby minimising the risk of their expression in antagonistic and potentially violent terms (Mouffe 2013: 23).Agonistic memory politics hence aim to problematise destructive relationships, exclusionary practices, marginalisation, and relations of domination, and to probe how these could be overthrown, resisted, or altered (cf. Shinko 2008: 476). Instead, the transformation of societal conflicts (Kriesberg 2006; Lehti 2018) is emphasised, and a move from destructive, violent, and antagonistic conflict to constructive, non-violent, agonistic contestation is sought. Agonistic memory does not exist in a vacuum; it needs to be formulated and articulated by relevant memory agents (Strömbom 2017) to have any prospect of resonating in society. This form of memory activism (Gutman 2017; Gutman and Wüstenberg 2023; Strömbom, 2026) may, under certain circumstances, offer an agonistic alternative to antagonistic memories and relations. Thus, conflict can and should prevail yet be conducted in a constructive and non-violent manner. The section below discusses and analyses two instances of agonistic memory politics in Israel/Palestine that incorporate grassroots memory activism to promote an agonistic politics of memory. The first concerns alternative narrative tourism, and the second example is taken from civil society dialogue initiatives.

In contrast to liberal peace building, more critical approaches to peace, such as agonistic ones, tend to focus as much, or even more, on local rather than elite peace

efforts. These rest on bottom-up practices that facilitate the advancement of peace by diverse domestic actors, with their rights, experiences, and local cultures taken into account. Postliberal grassroots peace organisations for peace and co-existence in Israel and Palestine are often organised in the form of NGOs or social movements, and most of them are independent and mainly funded through membership fees and private donations. They are not built on the idea of mass mobilisation, like Israel's peace movements of the 1980s and 1990s. They instead prioritise acting as small organisations, attempting to influence the public through personal encounters or digital media (Ben-Eliezer 2023). These alternative peace initiatives engage in a range of practices, including monitoring, advocacy, humanitarian and legal support, storytelling and cross-boundary dialogue. They also tend to operate at the local micro-level rather than in macro-political settings. The examples of memory activism carried out through dual narrative tourism and dialogue groups discussed below share a focus on cross-boundary storytelling that highlights struggles over the collective memory of conflict.

## Dual narrative tours

One concrete practice that conveys how very disparate memories of the conflict are upheld in both Israeli and Palestinian societies is evident in the way both societies, historically and currently, engage in tourism, which primarily disseminates unitary national narratives. In Israel, these narratives are nurtured, for example, in the Ministry of Tourism's education for tour guides, which teaches tour guides to educate their groups about the Zionist narrative, mainly focusing on Jewish history and Jewish claims to the land. Similarly, Palestinian guides emphasise Palestinian national narratives in their tourism, focusing very much on Muslim or Christian history and on Palestinian suffering under occupation (Assmann 2018). These narratives tend to be mutually exclusive, and each portrays a history which, in turn, ignores the existence and/or legitimation claims of the other's historical narrative altogether. Historically, little to no tourism practices have existed where the two narratives have been able to meet or co-exist (Sasson *et al.*, 2014).

In contrast to this type of mainstream tourism, new practices have arisen over the years, described as "alternative tourism" (Lanfant and Graburn 1992). One example of this, featuring cross-boundary dialogue, is the so-called "dual narrative" tours, which have become more common, especially in disputed areas (Aviv 2011).

There are many ways to describe the characteristics of alternative tourism, but many authors concur that it is a social practice that breaks with the homogeneity of mass tourism (Isaac 2010). The common denominator of the practices discussed below is that they are part of alternative tourism, which seeks to "overturn an inequitable, unjust and unsustainable tourism" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008) in pursuit of a new social order. This is especially visible in the dynamics of dual narrative tours, where Israeli and Palestinian tour guides consciously have chosen to work together to bring tourists, sometimes educated personnel from the health and education sector, as well as school pupils, among others, to visit contested spaces whilst listening to disparately different narratives of those.

Tour guides, whether they present traditional or alternative narratives of history, can be understood as memory agents, actively promoting a particular way of remembering the past and communicating it to an audience (Gutman 2017; Strömbom 2026). Narratives of the past can shape the identities of those who engage with them. This dynamic highlights how memory agents may influence collective identification (Connolly 1991; Dyrberg 1997). The persistence and influence of commemorative narratives rely on the ability of their "social bearers"—the memory agents—to effectively communicate and uphold them (Ram 2009: 367).

The perspectives of memory agents inherently shape understanding of history; they are never neutral or voiceless. These narratives reveal how narrators perceive themselves—both in relation to others and within specific contexts (Patterson and Monroe 1998: 316). Although storytelling may originate from individuals, the formation of narratives around collective or national identity is never a solitary act. For such narratives to have tangible effects, they must resonate with and be accepted by an audience. Consequently, the possibilities for collective action and identity are contingent upon how these narratives are received (Ringmar 1996: 79). The memory activism carried out by your guides and in agonistic dialogue forums can hence be understood as a potential platform for transforming conflict memory and, by extension, relationships between collectives in the present.

The analysis presented here is based on my studies of a range of alternative tourism enterprises and on my participation in a wide variety of tours in Israel and Palestine in recent years. In conjunction with that, I have interviewed many tour guides who see themselves as conveying alternative narratives to the tourists they meet. Examples of tour enterprises studied include Tiyul-Rihla, an initiative that

offers educational tours for various groups, sometimes including schoolchildren as part of their regular curriculum. This is a bi-national educational initiative that creates opportunities for Palestinians and Israelis to explore contentious historical, cultural, and identity issues (Tiyul-Rihla.org 2023). Another interesting organisation is the Middle East branch of MEJDI Tours, whose founding idea is to bring Israeli and Palestinian guides together and have each guide tell his or her own narrative of a specific site, which becomes juxtaposed with the other's (mejditours.com, 2023). Abraham Tours is a more commercial tour enterprise, driven by a range of hostels, that also offers dual-narrative tours of contested places (among other, more conventional tours offered to the hostels' guests). Another example of these dual-narrative initiatives is Emek Shaveh, an alternative archaeology group whose tours convey critical narratives of contested places such as Silwan and the City of David in East Jerusalem (Greenberg 2014; emekshaveh.org, 2025). I have also spoken with Israeli and Palestinian guides who work independently, sometimes hired by the above tour companies and/or offering private guiding trips.

Many dual-narrative tours encourage perspective-taking, inviting a context-dependent view of the conflict. They open up to perpetrators' as well as victims' perspectives, place strong emphasis on historical context, and underline reflexivity and dialogue, while refusing to create unitary narratives. In this way, many of them adhere to an agonistic view of memory. In the dual-narrative tours, the guides take participants to sites of importance to both collectives but tell very different stories about them. For example, tours are held in Jaffa/Yafo, the Palestinian part of Tel Aviv (which is also the home of many Jewish Israelis today), where the Palestinian guides tell stories about how Palestinian families lived in Jaffa before the 1948 war and were forced to leave after having been expelled from their homes during the 1948 war. In turn, the Israeli guides talk about the ports of Yafo being the first site that the former victims from the Nazi camps during the Holocaust saw when they came with boats to Palestine after having been freed from Auschwitz and other camps in 1945. Most of the guides are careful to point out that they do not wish to smooth the experience by telling the audience polished stories. There is, hence, a deliberate effort to let memories and stories clash in a way that may be hard for listeners to reconcile.

Thus, the audience is presented with starkly diverse histories, legitimation claims, and victim narratives - leaving the listener with a complex and perhaps uneasy

picture of the past in that specific space. In a sense, even though there are many different dynamics at play in these tours, there are grains of agonistic encounters and memory dynamics here as memories are allowed to co-exist and neither overshadow nor fit too smoothly with each other. However, several of the tour guides express frustration about often "preaching to the already converted". By this, they mean that very few mainstream Israelis or Palestinians would take those tours; instead, they tend to cater to internationals or local peace activists who already believe in the merits of bringing the two stories together. One exception in this regard is when Tiyul-Rihla hires guides to offer tours for Israeli and Palestinian schoolchildren as part of their regular curriculum. Here, the school children obviously do not get to choose whether to participate. However, in the current climate, many teachers would not participate in such activities either by choice or because they might be punished by parents or school leadership for exposing children to overly sympathetic views of 'the other' in conflict.

These tours have a truly agonistic potential. However, their content has very few chances of travelling to most Israelis and Palestinians who hold mainstream views, which often implies keeping the other group in conflict, as well as their understandings of the past and present at bay. Given the current war, it has not been easy to continue some of the tour activities. The increase in violence has diminished travel to the region, and current volatility has made it harder to move across the border between Israel and the West Bank. However, some organisations, such as Green Olive tours, are still conducting several of their Jerusalem and Tel Aviv/Jaffa tours, and Emekh Shaveh is continuing its education activities in and around Jerusalem. In current conditions, these activities are marginalised, and it remains to be seen whether operations in the West Bank can resume at a later date. In the meantime, several of the organisations organise webinars, solidarity talks, virtual tours and the like, to continue to propagate for agonistic engagement across conflict lines despite the deep antagonistic rifts that currently separate Israeli and Palestinian realities.

## Memory dialogues

Other current peace practices in Israel and Palestine, which contain elements of agonism, are various types of memory dialogues. One of these initiatives is "encounters" conducted by the organisation Combatants for Peace (CfP). It specifically engages former militant Palestinians and soldiers who used to serve in

the Israeli army who have now chosen a path of peace activism (Cfporg 202f). The organisation, The Parents Circle – Families Forum (PCFF), has a similar dialogic approach, gathering Israeli and Palestinian families who share the experience of having lost close family members in conflict. In CfPs dialogue projects, two speakers, one Israeli and one Palestinian, talk about their past experiences together, in dialogue, in front of an audience, for example, youth groups in Israeli pre-army training or Israeli or Palestinian high-school students. The dialogue meetings discussed here feature one former combatant from each side sharing their personal stories of conflict before an audience. Afterwards, open discussions with the participants are held. Here, the idea is to convey the message that the conflict is experienced differently depending on which party you belong to. Another important aspect is to show the humanity of the other side. In Israel and Palestine today, Israelis residing within the green line and Palestinians from the occupied areas rarely meet in civilian encounters. Hence, these dialogues offer potential for engaging with individuals on the other side in a relaxed setting, where members of the audience can ask questions and share different opinions/understandings.

Another type of dialogue initiative is conducted by the organisation "Roots" on the West Bank, striving to create dialogue and meeting spaces between Israeli West Bank settlers and Palestinian West Bank residents. On the surface, this group adheres to agonistic views of memory and conflict as they strive for a "social and political reality that is founded on dignity, trust, and a mutual recognition and respect for both peoples' historic belonging to the entire Land" (friendsofroots.net 2025). However, after interviewing dialogue leaders in the group and participating in dialogue sessions on a farm near the settlement of Gush Etzion and the surrounding Palestinian villages, which gather locals from nearby settlements and villages, the practice of dialogue reveals dynamics that are quite problematic in terms of agonism. Even though the participants have come to sit together in a dialogue circle and share experiences of their lives, there seems to be problematic power dynamics at play, and my impression is that genuine listening to the other side is scarce.

The dialogue sessions seem troubled by language confusion, so it is hard to discern whether there are any genuine exchanges of views between participants living in starkly different realities in the West Bank. Also, in one of the interviews with an Israeli settler and dialogue leader, that person pointed out that the local

Palestinians have a lot to learn from the Israelis and that the Palestinian participants, in fact, are at a lower stage of development than the Israelis. The dialogue leaders, especially the Israeli ones, seem quite unaware of, or at least untroubled by, the stark power asymmetry between the groups. In contrast, the Palestinian leaders are careful to point out that Roots might spur easier relations at the micro-level but has little potential to change anything at the macro-level. Even though the CfP and Roots describe their respective activism in agonistic terms, they come across as quite different. The encounters led by CfP seem to have a genuine aim to expose their audience to different views and experiences. A Palestinian CfP-member expressed that he likes it most when people get angry with and disagree with his stories - that he believes it is in these meetings and frictional encounters that change might be fostered. Since CfP often engages youth groups from schools, there is no self-selection among participants, increasing the likelihood of genuine disagreement in the discussions following the dialogue and thereby enhancing the activity's agonistic features.

Roots, in turn, is a highly controversial initiative in the West Bank where antagonisms and violence between Palestinians and settlers take place daily. Dialogue leaders from both sides say that Roots' dialogue activities contribute to micro-level change in relations between villages and settlements on the West Bank, in that they have the potential to lower tension and violence in everyday life; however, they contribute very little to the overall power relations on the West Bank. Furthermore, Roots engage only a minuscule part of West Bank dwellers, most of whom view Roots with suspicion or even antipathy. Here, participants' self-selection likely reduces the likelihood of disagreement and contestation. Added to that, the fact that language confusion obscures dialogue, together with limited resources for training facilitators and stark power asymmetries, seems to reduce the likelihood of genuine agonistic dynamics in the setting.

The dynamics of the dialogue activities just described have remained the same for several years, but have been at least initially shaken by the devastating developments from 7 October onwards. Several peace activists on both sides have, for various reasons, suspended their activities, and due to the volatile situation, some regular activities are currently paused. Despite these antagonistic dynamics, some organisations continue to work hard to iterate their mutual dedication to justice and nonviolence amidst the backdrop of war. Combatants for Peace, for example, has since October held a series of seminars and workshops for activists

on how to continue their struggle, and just two weeks after the Hamas attacks, they hosted an online ceremony titled "Holding on to Humanity and Hope" where Israeli and Palestinian activists shared their experiences of recent events. Due to heightened violence in the West Bank, extreme violence in Gaza, as well as tensions between Israeli and Palestinian communities within Israel, only time will tell when and to what extent it will be possible for the organisations to go back to the way they worked prior to this war. However, according to many activists, their wish is to continue their dialogue work and even increase their efforts in light of recent extreme developments.

## Practising agonism amidst shrinking spaces for grassroots activism

Agonistic memory politics, as argued here, come with many promises. It allows for the co-existence of differences, which might be less threatening to the involved groups, since they do not have to abandon deeply held views of their own collective. It provides productive disagreement, allowing for transformed relations in which adversaries can continue to hold different views and arguments while playing them out nonviolently. However, it would be oversimplistic to overlook the difficulties and pitfalls with this approach. Sometimes, due to personal dynamics or a lack of prior coordination, there is an imbalance in the communication of narratives in tours and dialogues, with one given more room than the other, which can lead the audience to perceive the narratives as less balanced than initially intended. The fact that Palestinian guides and speakers are more restricted in mobility further weakens their ability to reach the right places. Also, the fact that the average Palestinian possesses fewer material resources gives him or her a disadvantage when it comes to "affording" idealism and alternatives.

In contrast, Israelis who tend to have the upper hand in conflict can use their privileges to conduct alternative tours on Palestinian land and have more time to promote their narratives and perhaps promote a critical stance toward Israeli occupation (Strömbom 2019). It should be noted, though, that the Israeli activists are often painfully aware of the problem of uneven power distribution embedded in such relations and try to even out asymmetries in other ways, such as balancing how each side views the other's narrative (Ben-Eliezer 2023). The PCFF's project,

"the parallel narrative experience," embodies that ambition. They claim that "Through this project, we do not seek to cancel or approve any specific narrative, but rather to create a journey through the personal and national history of each side, through meaningful dialogue, respect and understanding that each personal and national narrative holds a truth in it" (theparentscircle.org, 2023).

It should hence be noted that it is incredibly challenging to achieve agonistic dynamics in settings of highly asymmetrical conflicts, where the more substantial party has very little to gain from including weaker parties in dialogue and collective narratives. Thus, it is important to examine how micro-practices, such as dual-narrative tours and cross-boundary dialogue initiatives, relate to broader society. The risk is that the asymmetry from the conflict "spills over" into the dynamics of alternative tourism and memory dialogues, precluding agonistic potential.

Even more problematic is the fact that they reach only a very select few, as the societal asymmetry and overarching antagonism prevent the travelling of agonistic micro-dynamics to the broader society. It is also evident how both micro- and macro practices of agonism are vulnerable to delegitimation efforts since the actors who are willing to go into dialogue about conflicting narratives of the past are often portrayed as traitors and as selling out their own collective as they approach the other in conflict in a different way than what has previously been the norm. Hence, prior to the war in Gaza, representatives of Combatants for Peace told me that they were decreasingly invited to talk at Israeli pre-army training sessions. These talks were often offered instead to members of Roots, as they do not convey a perspective that questions the power asymmetry of Israeli occupation (as the CfP does). Also, members of CfP and other such organisations tell me personal stories of abandonment by family members and questioning by colleagues since their activities are seen as so controversial or even taboo in the current antagonistic climate. Questioning mainstream relational logics in the context of antagonistic conflicts and introducing an agonistic logic comes at a high personal cost.

Moreover, the fact that Palestinians on average possess fewer material resources puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to "affording" to be idealistic and alternative. In contrast, Israelis who tend to have the upper hand in conflict can use their privileges to conduct alternative tours and have more time to promote their narratives and perhaps promote a critical stance toward Israeli occupation (Strömbom, 2019).

# Conclusion

However, given the extreme violence that is currently plaguing the region, it would be overly simplistic to overlook the difficulties and pitfalls of this approach. The recent violent developments have given rise to new discourses of existential threats on both sides, where the Palestinian trauma of the Nakba from 1948 is reenacted and used to describe current experiences of Palestinians in Gaza. In Israel, we see similar developments, where the Hamas attacks against civilians in many cases have been described as pogroms in Holocaust-like analogies. This resurfacing of historical traumatic events tends to heighten security concerns regarding one's own community and can, conversely, lead to increased fear and distrust toward the other party in the conflict. In the short term, these antagonistic tendencies curb attempts to create agonistic interactions where understanding of the other's experience is sought. This may, in turn, add to already problematic power dynamics where Palestinian guides and speakers have become even more restricted in terms of mobility, which gives them a weaker position in terms of being able to travel to take part in activism.

Thus, it stands clear that agonistic memory activism is no quick-fix or easy solution to the predicament of how to transform relations and identities in ongoing or aftermaths of violent conflicts. However, it is a radical alternative to the failure of liberal peace politics and its inherent consensus ideal, and, as such, it holds deep transformative potential, even though it might be very demanding to carry out in practice. Moreover, several memory agents active in these types of initiatives emphasise the important infrastructural role of these organisations. In the highly polarised societal climate we see today, it is complicated, and sometimes intimidating, to break with mainstream views. Hence, these organisations function as safe spaces and places to gain energy and support for individuals who might otherwise feel very isolated in pursuing an agonistic approach. In an antagonistic conflict setting, it might be challenging to see any change of agonistic memory politics in the short term. However, the fact that these organisations exist and continue to support agonistic efforts has short-term benefits for activists, as it provides them with a sense of support and a sort of safety net. That, in turn, may give them enough motivation to continue working toward transformation, which may lead to a change in the long run.

*Chapter 8*

# Domestic Turmoil and Foreign Policy Uncertainty

*Amnon Aran*

Since January 2023, Israel has witnessed an unprecedented wave of sustained, non-violent protests involving hundreds of thousands of activists from various sectors of society. The civil opposition to the government of Benjamin Netanyahu, formed in December 2022, was triggered by a proposed judicial overhaul announced by Justice Minister Yariv Levin on 4 January 2023. Since then, Israel has been embroiled in one of its most serious internal crises, which the outbreak of war has significantly exacerbated. On 7 October 2023, Hamas terrorists attacked Israeli towns, villages, and kibbutzim, killing 1200 people and kidnapping 251 Israeli and foreign nationals to the Gaza Strip (Klar-Chalamish 2024).

Since October 2023, Israel has been involved in a war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, resulting in devastating effects on Palestinian civilians. By November 2025, data from the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health in Gaza reports over 68,000 Palestinian deaths. In the West Bank, more than 950 Palestinians have lost their lives, and over 8,000 have been injured. Additionally, at least 1.7 million of Gaza's 2.1 million residents have been displaced (UN, 2024a; World Health Organization, 2025). Israel has also been in conflict with Iran and its allies—Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen—prompted by their support of Hamas during the war. However, on 9 October 2025, Israel and Hamas signed the 20-point peace deal proposed by US President Donald Trump.

The following chapter examines the interaction between domestic upheaval and Israel's protracted war. The first section discusses the rise of the most right-wing government in Israel's history, led by Netanyahu, after the November 2022

legislative elections, the launch of the judicial overhaul, and the domestic reaction it provoked. The second section uncovers the links between the domestic unrest and Israeli foreign policy prior to 7 October 2023. The final part focuses on the 7 October conflict, with reference to three foreign policy areas: the Palestinians, the Gulf, and relations with the United States (US).

## The triumph of Israel's radical right

On 1 November 2022, Israelis went to the polls for the fifth time in three and a half years, since a legal process concerning corruption allegations against Prime Minister Netanyahu began in 2019. Netanyahu's party, Likud, emerged as the largest party with 32 of the 120 seats in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, followed by Yesh Atid, the centre-left largest opposition party, led by Yair Lapid, which secured 24 seats. However, the most dramatic result of the November 2022 elections strongly reflected what Ami Pedahzur described in his study, "The Triumph of the Israeli right" (Pedahzur 2012). In his work, Pedahzur examined how the radical Israeli right moved from the fringes of Israeli politics and society to the mainstream. Vindicating Pedahzur's thesis, the newly formed triumvirate of three radical-right nationalist-religious parties—Jewish Power, Religious Zionism, and the anti-LBGTQI Noam—won 14 seats (National Election Committee, 2022). The result positioned the Jewish Power-Religious Zionism-Noam (JRN) political coalition to potentially become Likud's leading partner.

The JRN's political leaders, who embodied the key elements of the Israeli radical right identified by Pedahzur (2012)—nativism, authoritarianism, and populism—assumed important ministerial positions. Itamar Ben-Gvir, leader of Jewish Power, was appointed Minister of National Security. The portfolio, tailored for Ben-Gvir, granted him authority over the Israeli police and the Border Police operating in the West Bank. A lawyer by profession, Ben-Gvir lives in the Israeli settlement of Kiryat Arba. Since the age of 14, he has been a member of the Kach movement, an extreme right-wing anti-Arab party with overt racist characteristics, founded in the early 1970s by the US-born Rabbi Meir Kahane. In the 1988 elections for the 12th Knesset, Kach was disqualified from contesting under Israeli law banning parties that incite. Against the background of the 1993 Israel-PLO Oslo Accords, Ben-Gvir became a Newborn Jew. In 1994, he was

branded a member of the outlawed terrorist organisation Kach and its breakaway group, Kahane Chai, which barred him from being conscripted into the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). Subsequently, Ben-Gvir was convicted of several felonies, including incitement to racism and supporting a terrorist organisation (Lefkovits 2007; Margalit 2023; YNET 2023; Parks 1994).

Another key member of the JRN is Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of Religious Zionism, who was appointed Minister of Finance, a member of the political-security cabinet, and received a portfolio in the Ministry of Defence. The portfolio grants Smotrich formal responsibility for civilian affairs, including the administration of the West Bank, and encompasses the planning commission unit that oversees West Bank settlement construction and home demolitions. Smotrich resides in the Jewish settlement of Kdumim. He was educated in some of the major Yeshivot (Jewish religious schools) of the Jewish Settler movement. In August 2005, Smotrich was arrested by the Israeli General Security Service and detained for three weeks after participating in protests against the unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, but was released without charges. In 2006, he co-founded the Israeli non-governmental organisation (NGO) Regavim, which takes legal action against Arab constructions without permits in the West Bank and within the recognised pre-1967 Israeli territory. Smotrich has also described himself as a "proud homophobe" (Pillegi 2015; Gilholy 2022; YNET 2023).

Apart from the Likud and the JRN triumvirate, the Netanyahu government included an ultra-Orthodox bloc comprising Shas, Jewish Torah, and Agudat Yisrael. This radical right clerical-nationalist government has, from the outset, pushed forward a judicial overhaul aimed at dramatically shifting power from the judiciary to the executive branch. To this end, using its parliamentary majority, which shifted between 4 and 8 seats, the government passed into law in July 2023 the first planned change of the overhaul—a so-called "reasonableness" bill (Azulai 2023). This removed the Supreme Court's (and lower courts') power to invalidate government decisions deemed "extremely unreasonable". However, in January 2024, the Israeli Supreme Court struck it down (BBC, 2024).

As of April 2025, the government has continued to pursue several other reforms (see Schierenbeck's chapter in this volume), which would involve amending various Israeli Basic Laws. In the absence of a codified and entrenched written constitution—Basic Laws establish the rules of government and outline fundamental rights (Elran and Deitch 2023; BBC 2023). Therefore, if the judicial

overhaul were to pass, the government could take actions that the Israeli Supreme Court might have previously opposed. For example, expanding Israel's control over the West Bank at the expense of Palestinians, increasing economic incentives and military service exemptions for ultra-Orthodox Jews, and altering minority rights and the religious-secular balance in Israel (Saar 2023).

The domestic backlash against the government since Minister of Justice Yariv Levin launched the judicial overhaul has been unprecedented. During the first 40 weeks of the judicial overhaul alone, tens of thousands, and often hundreds of thousands, of Israelis have taken to the streets. The protesters and the movement's leaders, such as Shikma Bressler and Moshe Radman, are mostly ordinary citizens. However, they have been joined by some 20,000 experts and top officials, former chief justices, and prominent legal figures and business leaders. The protesters use non-violent tactics to challenge the judicial overhaul. One is civil resistance, including mass protests, roadblocks, labour strikes, and the targeted use of social media to link the corruption charges against Netanyahu to democratic backsliding (participant observation July-August 2023, Tel Aviv). Another method involves exerting targeted political pressure on MKs from the governing Likud party to oppose the overhaul in parliament. A third tactic involves thousands of active IDF reserve soldiers—serving in the air force, elite fighting units, and cyber units—announcing that they will not report for duty if the government continues the judicial overhaul (Shotter 2023; Shultziner 2023).

This unprecedented opposition movement is not merely a reaction to the judicial overhaul. It also stems from deeply rooted political, social, economic, and cultural divides. Israel's secular-religious divide is central to this debate, as protesters have repeatedly accused the government of breaching the social contract with its citizens, attempting to turn Israel into a "Halachic" (theocratic) state, and pursuing an anti-feminist agenda (Shotter 2023; Uziel 2023). Furthermore, they have accused the ultra-Orthodox bloc within the government of using the judicial overhaul to safeguard its economic interests and political influence. This accusation has struck a chord within the anti-government camp, particularly concerning the privileges granted to ultra-orthodox Jews—such as exemptions from military service and state support for males pursuing lengthy religious studies—thereby remaining outside the labour market (Rubin and Hendrix 2023).

# The radical right and implications for Israeli foreign policy

What might be the links between the rise of Israel's radical right, the judicial overhaul, and Israeli foreign policy before the 7 October war? The first aspect to consider is how the domestic-external nexus was reflected in Israeli policy towards the Palestinians. Israel's main foreign policy decision-makers during the period before the war, namely Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Eli Cohen, adhere to what Aran (2020) describes as Israel's foreign policy of entrenchment. This approach, which Israel has upheld since 2009, relies on shaping Israel's regional foreign policy around its iron wall of military strength rather than diplomacy, and on making peace with the Arab world in exchange for peace, not territory. The Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank since 1967 would only be granted limited autonomy.

The influence of the entrenchment approach is linked to the positions of the JRN, which, as the senior coalition partner, has substantial influence on Israel's policy towards the Palestinians. Therefore, its political outlook, which was clearly outlined in the "Decisive Victory Plan" drafted by Bezalel Smotrich (2017), affects the government's foreign policy. The plan is based on the belief in the moral superiority of the Zionist project, the idea that Arab and Palestinian national aspirations within Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories can and should be eliminated, and outright rejection of the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also dismisses the notion of "managing" the conflict. Instead, it promotes achieving a "decisive victory" through annexing the West Bank and increasing the Jewish settler population there. According to Smotrich, these actions will eradicate Palestinian national ambitions for statehood and weaken their resistance to Israeli dominance. Palestinians who accept Israeli annexation peacefully would be granted some degree of autonomy to manage their internal affairs and receive limited state support but would remain citizens without full rights for the foreseeable future. The plan states that Palestinians opposing annexation and refusing to renounce their national aspirations will be "encouraged" to emigrate. Additionally, Smotrich warns that Palestinians who violently oppose an Israeli annexation of the West Bank and further settlement expansion could be arrested or killed by the IDF.

To what extent have the foreign policy outlooks related to entrenchment and the plan been reflected in Israel's attitudes towards the Palestinians before the war? In some respects, their influence has not been apparent. For example, in July 2023, the government reaffirmed its support for the Palestinian Authority (PA) after the security cabinet approved measures to prevent the PA's collapse (Times of Israel Staff, 2023a). Additionally, as reported by the International Monetary Fund, during 2022-23, the Israeli government maintained and even expanded "the door-to-door trade programme and increased the number of permits for Palestinians from both the West Bank and Gaza Strip to work in Israel" (IMF, 2023). The aim of this measure is to provide an economic incentive for Palestinians to prevent the deterioration of the security situation, which aligns with the broader "conflict management" approach that Israel has adopted since 2009 (see also Lehrs chapter). Finally, the current government has not revoked the Oslo Peace Accords between Israel and the PLO, despite the JRN and Prime Minister Netanyahu's long-standing opposition to them. At the same time, the influence of the JRN on Israeli policies towards the Palestinians has been apparent.

Since the formation of the government, Israel's Palestinian policy has increasingly focused on reasserting Israeli sovereignty—publicly and performatively—over contested sites. Consequently, and contrary to ministerial tradition, Itamar Ben-Gvir has visited the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif several times since January 2023, provoking condemnations from Palestinians, Arabs, and the international community. Crassly, he declared that "we are in charge of Jerusalem and the whole of the Land of Israel" (Haaretz, 2023; Jofre, 2023). The symbolic and performative reaffirmation of sovereignty has been paired with a revised Israeli policy, driven by JRN, towards areas in the West Bank under complete Israeli control. These areas, classified by the 1995 Oslo accord as Area C, are highly significant. According to the leading Human Rights organisation, B'Tselem, it covers 60% of the West Bank, where around 325,000 Jewish settlers and an estimated 180,000 to 300,000 Palestinians live. Furthermore, Area C would be crucial for any future Palestinian state, as it holds great potential for agricultural, urban, and economic development (B'Tselem 2023). Israeli attitudes towards Area C have fluctuated over the years and include viewing it as vital for security, a bargaining chip in negotiations, and a site for settlement expansion. While previous Israeli governments recognised this range of approaches, the JRN has adopted a singular pro-settlement ideology towards Area C. As Michael Feige explains, this involves re-enacting Biblical history by

reviving Jewish presence in the Land of Israel and viewing time as cyclical; the settlement in Judea and Samaria is seen as part of a divine prophecy and Jewish historical destiny (Feige, 2009).

Accordingly, the JRN aims to create conditions that make Israel's control of Area C irreversible, laying the groundwork for future annexation and permanently eliminating the possibility of a two-state solution. As reported by the Institute for National Security Studies (2023) and other experts (Sfard 2023), the Israeli government has been significantly increasing settlement activity. It has also legalised illegal and unauthorised settlement outposts, expanded "agricultural farms" and grazing areas for settlers across Area C. In this context, there is a coordinated effort to displace Palestinian farmers and agricultural activities from Area C. The process led by the JRN strongly challenges Israel's longstanding claim that the West Bank is a "disputed" territory — which Israel states it holds temporarily until a permanent agreement on its future is reached — rather than an occupied area, thus supporting the emergence of a one-state reality. This essentially involves Israeli de facto sovereignty over the pre-1967 borders and the West Bank, which undermines the character of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

## Peace and conflict in the Gulf

We now examine Israeli foreign policy towards the Gulf before the 7 October 2023 war. The Abraham Accords, brokered by the first Trump administration in 2020, marked a new chapter of peace involving Israel, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (US Department of State, 2023). Diplomatic relations improved significantly as Israel and the Gulf states opened embassies and established direct flights. Israelis were granted visa exemptions for the UAE and could apply electronically for visas to Morocco and Bahrain. Additionally, the IDF publicly staged manoeuvres with the UAE military, amidst visits by Israel's top political-security officials to the Gulf within eighteen months of the agreements, to discuss security cooperation (Zalayat and Guzansky 2023:1). Trade links between Israel and the Gulf states expanded rapidly and became more substantial; Israel and the UAE signed a free trade agreement in May 2021, while Israel and Bahrain completed their first successful round of negotiations for a free trade deal in early November 2022 (Israeli Ministry of Economy and Industry 2022; Israeli Ministry of Economy and Industry 2022a).

Under the Biden administration, which embraced the Abraham Accords, the US, Israel, Bahrain, Morocco, and the UAE established the Negev Forum in March 2022, with Egypt also participating. It was agreed at the event, attended by the foreign ministers of the six states, to convene the forum annually and create working groups in health, regional security, education and tolerance, water and food security, energy, and tourism. It was also announced that Israeli companies would be permitted to use Saudi Arabia airspace (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IMFA) 2023; Ben Shabbat and Aharonson 2023). Importantly, these developments occurred irrespective of the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, including episodes of violence between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 and August 2022, and ongoing violence in the West Bank. However, the formation of Netanyahu's hard-line right-wing government in December 2022 had a "cooling effect" on the Abraham Accords. Consequently, a visit by Prime Minister Netanyahu to the UAE, scheduled for January 2023, was postponed until further notice following Itamar Ben-Gvir's first ascent to the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif (Time of Israel 2023). Subsequently, the second ministerial meeting of the Negev forum, planned for July 2023, was cancelled by Morocco in response to Israeli announcements of settlement expansion in the West Bank (Magid 2023). Meanwhile, trade talks between Israel and Bahrain have stalled (Zalayat and Guzansky 2023: 2), and as of November 2025, a free trade agreement has yet to be signed.

Alongside the cooling of the Abraham Accords, a new peace opportunity has emerged in the Gulf, which was perhaps unexpected given the formation of Israel's hard-line government. As confirmed by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, Israel and Saudi Arabia have been negotiating a potential peace deal under US mediation. Bin Salman described the process as involving "good negotiations" and stated that "every day we are getting closer' to peace with Israel. 'The Palestinian issue,' added Bin Salman, 'is significant for us … We need to solve that part" (Fox News 2023). However, Israeli-Saudi normalisation has faced two enduring obstacles: the staunch opposition within the Netanyahu government of the JRN and parts of Likud to any concessions towards the Palestinians, and the eruption of the 7 October war, which we examine below.

Israeli foreign policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran stands in stark contrast to its approach to the Arab-Gulf states and has shown signs of escalating conflict. Iran has supported Hezbollah and Hamas in their confrontations with Israel by

providing funding, supplying weapons, and offering training, all while developing its nuclear programme, which Iran claims is for civilian purposes. Conversely, Israel and several international actors accuse Iran of pursuing its nuclear programme for military purposes and seeking to produce a nuclear bomb. Since Netanyahu returned to power for a second term in 2009, he has repeatedly stated that preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon is Israel's highest priority and that it will do "whatever it takes" (Aran and Fleischmann 2018; Netanyahu 2023).

There was a conventional wisdom that the extent to which this threat is credible depended upon Israel maintaining its regional deterrence, which has been a central pillar of Israeli foreign policy since the founding of the state (Rid 2012). In this regard, the ongoing domestic protests in Israel amid the judicial overhaul have had a detrimental effect on Israeli foreign policy. Announcements by several groups of reservists serving in critical units stated that the IDF would launch an attack on Iran—such as pilots and cyber warfare units—and that they would refuse to report for duty if the government proceeds with the judicial overhaul, which is eroding Israeli deterrence and restricting its options vis-à-vis Iran. This was acknowledged unequivocally when Israel's Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, called on 25 March 2023 to pause the judicial overhaul. In a televised statement, Mr Gallant emphasised that the fissures the judicial system has created within the IDF are "the source of Israel's strength eroding", which constitutes 'a clear, immediate and tangible threat to the security of the state". Significantly, the intelligence branch of the IDF confirmed Gallant's warning in its own public statement (Limor 2023; Spiegel and Lis 2023), which was reinforced in September 2023 by the then IDF Chief of Staff, Herzi Halevi (Lis 2023). Thus, the domestic changes unleashed by the November 2022 Israeli elections—the formation of government, the judicial overhaul, and the protest movement—shifted the policy towards the Palestinians towards the settler's agenda, cooled the Abraham Accords and weakened Israeli regional deterrence. Nevertheless, during the 7 October war, Prime Minister Netanyahu was able to realise his long-term ambition of attacking Iran's nuclear facilities and other elements of its nuclear programme, which is the topic we turn to next.

# Israel's protracted war

The domestic and regional developments influencing Israeli foreign policy converged on 7 October 2023, when Hamas launched attacks against several Kibbutzim, towns, and villages across south-east Israel. Within hours, Hamas terrorists killed approximately 1200 people, including the elderly, men, children, and women, many of whom were brutally raped as Hamas weaponised sexual violence and mutilated women (New York Times, 2023). Additionally, Hamas kidnapped 251 Israeli and foreign civilians to the Gaza Strip. The immense toll taken by the 7 October attacks, which represent the worst security failure in Israeli history, was also the largest killing of Jews in a single day since the Holocaust.

## Domestic debates, new and old

As of November 2025, the debates sparked by the judicial overhaul continue, especially concerning the conscription of Ultra-Orthodox men into the IDF. The threat of reservists refusing to report for duty, one of the most contentious measures taken by the civic opposition to the judicial overhaul, did not materialise. In fact, most of the 220,000 Israeli reservists called to duty since 7 October responded in very high numbers (Haiman 2023). Amid IDF losses, the discussion on the conscription of Ultra-Orthodox males was brought into sharp focus when, in April 2025, the Israeli Chief of Staff, Eyal Zamir, acknowledged that the IDF "does not have all the soldiers it requires to complete its missions in Gaza" (YNET, 2025).

Alongside the heated debate surrounding the conscription of Ultra-Orthodox males, which the 7 October War has worsened, new campaigns have emerged. One is the tragic issue concerning the fate of the 251 hostages kidnapped by Hamas. Families of the hostages launched a two-pronged campaign to secure the release of their loved ones. One approach involved high-profile demonstrations at international forums, such as the UN, and meetings with world leaders, including US presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump, to highlight the hostages' plight and demand their immediate release (CBS, 2023; Reuters, 2023; White House, 2025). The second method involved public demonstrations in Israel, urging the government to end the war in Gaza and secure the hostages' immediate release. Many of the hostages' families believe that the stated aims of the Israeli war

cabinet—releasing the Israeli hostages and dismantling Hamas' military capabilities and governance in Gaza—are mutually exclusive. They have demanded the prioritisation of the hostages' release over the destruction of Hamas' military and governmental structures.

Prime Minister Netanyahu and the JRN consistently rejected this demand. They argued that the only way to free the hostages was by applying "military pressure" on Hamas alongside diplomatic negotiations mediated by the US and Egypt/Qatar — representing Israel and Hamas respectively. Conversely, by June 2024, the then Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and the centrist members of the government's War Cabinet, Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot, the then are leaders of the centrist Ha-Machane Ha-Mamlachti party, challenged the Prime Minister's approach. The disagreement came to a head when Gantz and Eisenkot resigned from the War Cabinet they had joined at the start of the war, protesting the handling of the hostage issue; later, Netanyahu sacked Defence Minister Gallant, replacing him with Israel Katz (Economist 2024; Guardian 2024). The political divisions over the hostage issue also reflected broader public debate. Groups like forum Ha-Gevura (the Heroism Forum) campaigned for "using military force to release the hostages' until Israel achieves a 'total victory over Hamas" (Forum Ha-Gevura, 2025). In contrast, the "Bring Them Home Now" campaign advocated a more diverse approach, including public demonstrations in Israel and abroad, as well as legal suits against Hamas. Crucially, this forum demanded an end to the war in Gaza if necessary to free the hostages (BringThemHomeNow, 2025). Amidst this heated debate, by April 2025, a total of 196 of over 251 hostages had been released or rescued by the IDF. Fifty-nine — of whom only twenty-four are alive — remained in captivity (INSS, 2025). The assertive intervention of the Trump administration and the diplomatic efforts of the President's key envoys, Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, produced a breakthrough. By involving Qatar and Turkey to exert pressure on Hamas, a 20-point plan was issued by President Trump, which facilitated the release of all living Israeli hostages, and as of November 2025, all but three of the remaining deceased hostages have yet to be returned by Hamas (YNET, 2025a).

Another issue stemming from the 7 October attacks and the subsequent war concerns the resettlement of the Gaza Strip, which the JRN advocates in line with the Decisive Victory Plan. Its leaders, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich, saw the devastating Israeli war in Gaza as an opportunity to revive the Jewish settlements dismantled

during Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Although Prime Minister Netanyahu announced that Jewish settlement in Gaza was "unrealistic," the JRN organised the "Victory Conference" on 28 January 2024, which also attracted about ten ministers from Likud, Prime Minister Netanyahu's party. During his speech under a banner proclaiming the "return(ing) to the Gaza district and north Samaria," Ben-Gvir, called to "encourage Palestinian emigration from Gaza," while Smotrich expressed his desire to restore the former Jewish settlements in the Gaza area of Gush Katif (Azulai and Cohen, 2024). Although the JRN remains a minority within Israeli politics regarding their ambition to reinstate Jewish settlements in Gaza, the issue's return to public debate—after being sidelined following the 2005 unilateral withdrawal—is significant; it briefly aligned with President Donald Trump's idea to "encourage Palestinians to emigrate from the Gaza Strip" (BBC, 2025). However, amid strong Arab opposition and as part of President Trump's 20-point peace plan, the plan to encourage Palestinian emigration from Gaza appears to have been abandoned, halting the JRN's resettlement ambitions early.

The JRN's goal of expanding settlements is also evident in the ongoing Israeli policies concerning Area C in the West Bank since 7 October 2023, which have significantly impacted the region. Since November 2022, 28 new settlements have been established, whereas previous governments avoided creating new settlements (Speigel and Sheizaf 2025). Additionally, according to separate reports, settler vigilante attacks on Palestinians and forced displacements—particularly in Mount Hebron and the Jordan Valley—continue. The Kerem Navot charity, monitoring these expansions, reports that since 7 October 2023, around 60 Palestinian herd communities have been displaced. Overall, 14% of the West Bank has been seized by "agricultural farms"—70% of these takeovers occurring under the current government (Spiegel and Sheizaf, 2025).

Concurrently, illegal outposts are established amidst tighter security restrictions imposed on Palestinians, including more burdensome limits on freedom of movement and widespread revocations of work permits. Furthermore, approximately 8,000 weapons have been distributed to settlers in the West Bank since the beginning of the War in Gaza (Peace Now, 2024; United Nations, 2024; UN-HABITAT, 2025). Hence, the JRN has exploited the security and political climate created by the war to irreversibly seize as much available land as possible in Area C (Spiegel and Sheizaf 2025).

## The regional sphere

The 7 October attacks were followed by Hezbollah launching military strikes along the entire Israeli-Lebanese border on 8 October, creating a second front. Since then, the Hezbollah-Israel conflict has evolved through three phases. Border skirmishes between the IDF and Hezbollah became routine from October 2023 to July 2024, prompting the evacuation of around 80,000 Israeli residents south of the border (Rubin 2023). The second phase involved a full-scale war, including Israeli ground operations in South Lebanon and the assassination of Hezbollah's top leadership, including its General Secretary for over 30 years, Hassan Nasrallah. Additionally, over one million Lebanese have evacuated (BBC, 2025a). The third phase began in November 2024 after a fragile ceasefire brokered by the US and France and monitored by them. The ceasefire agreement required the Lebanese Army to deploy approximately ten thousand troops within the area between the Israeli border and the Litani River, replacing Hezbollah's forces. In return, Israel would gradually withdraw its forces from South Lebanon (BBC, 2025a). However, as the ceasefire progressed, Israel claimed that the Lebanese army had been ineffective in replacing Hezbollah's forces. Consequently, in coordination with the newly elected Trump administration, the IDF maintained residual forces at five points along the Israel-Lebanon border (Confino 2025), which, as of November 2025, remain in place. Meanwhile, Israel has conducted targeted strikes in Lebanon against what it asserts are Hezbollah's violations of the ceasefire terms, in its efforts to rebuild and rearm (Newsweek, 2025).

The heavy blows inflicted by Israel on Hezbollah had unintended and dramatic consequences in Syria, which has been involved in a civil war since the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011. Throughout much of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah supported Bashar al-Assad's regime by fighting alongside Syrian government forces in their effort to suppress opposition. Al-Assad's other key supporter, Russia, shifted the military balance when, in 2015, it intervened in the civil war to back al-Assad. However, by November 2024, the devastating Israeli strikes on Hezbollah and Russia's involvement in its war against Ukraine meant that neither could have saved al-Assad's regime when a military assault led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) organisation and its leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, stormed Damascus (Bowen 2024). After ruling Syria for approximately 54 years, the al-Assad regime fell on 8 December 2024.

Since the start of the 7 October war, Iran, the Houthis in Yemen, and pro-Iranian Iraqi militias have opened two additional fronts against Israel, bringing the total to four. The Iran-backed Houthis launched land-to-land and cruise missiles from Yemen across the Red Sea towards Israel, most of which were intercepted by Israeli and US air defence systems, alongside drones being deployed from Iraq. The risk of Iran-backed attacks expanding into a full regional war increased when Iran directly targeted Israel following Israeli strikes on an Iranian diplomatic compound in Damascus and the assassination of Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in April and July 2024, respectively. In response, Iran launched hundreds of drones, ballistic, and cruise missiles in April and October 2024, which were intercepted by Israel's anti-missile defence systems, supported by a coalition of states including France, Jordan, the United Kingdom, and the US. Israeli airstrikes subsequently destroyed Iran's air defence systems, missile and drone production sites, and launch facilities (BBC, 2024a). The conflict reached a peak in what became known as the 12-day war between Israel and Iran, during which the Israeli Air Force destroyed various elements of Iran's nuclear programme. Additionally, the US bombed Iran's nuclear facilities at Fordo, Isfahan, and Natanz (BBC 2025c). While the full extent of the attacks cannot be confirmed, they significantly hampered Iran's nuclear military capabilities.

## A strategic balance sheet

From Israel's perspective, the war prompted by Hamas attacks has resulted in three main strategic outcomes. One is the heavy toll that Israel's response to the Hamas assaults has taken on the Gaza Strip. Despite this overwhelming toll, Israel has not yet achieved its publicly stated goal for Gaza, which primarily involves dismantling Hamas's military and administrative capabilities. However, it seems to be on course to realise its second war aim: securing the release of all hostages and ensuring that Gaza no longer poses a threat to Israel. Meanwhile, the Israeli leadership faces unprecedented diplomatic pressure, most notably from arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court for Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Gallant, for crimes against humanity and war crimes (International Criminal Court, 2024).

We now turn to examine the regional sphere. Its effective military response to Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran's attacks has dealt a severe blow to what is known as the "Axis of Resistance" or, in Israeli terms, the "Axis of Terror". A coalition of

states and NSAs, which Iran assembled to encircle Israel and restrict its operational capability in the region, has been significantly fragmented. Hamas' structured units have been dismantled; Hezbollah forces are markedly depleted; and the removal of the al-Assad regime, along with Israeli strikes on Iran, have greatly limited the Axis's ability to operate. Most notably, Iran's own nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities have been severely impacted during the 12-day conflict. As a result, Israel has succeeded in thwarting Iran's strategy since the early 2000s of utilising an alliance of states and NSAs to encircle Israel politically and militarily.

Another strategic aspect concerns the link between the 7 October war and Israel's peace accords with Arab nations. As of April 2025, these agreements remain intact. Bahrain and the UAE condemned the 7 October Hamas attacks and later tried to broker a ceasefire, especially the UAE, which held the "Arab" seat on the Security Council until 31 December 2023. Additionally, at no time did the Gulf states side with the radical camp, which includes countries like Algeria, Iran, Lebanon, and Syria. Nor have they criticised Israel at the level of countries such as Libya and Turkey. Nevertheless, the Bahraini lower chamber proposed a motion to suspend economic relations with Israel, which was later withdrawn (Ulrichsen 2023). As noted earlier, some Arab states, such as Jordan, participated in the coalition defending Israel against Iranian missile attacks (BBC, 2024b). Meanwhile, the resilience of the Abraham Accords during the Israel-Hamas conflict does not mean they are without challenges. The ongoing Israeli military operations in Gaza and the significant humanitarian suffering for Palestinians there present a major obstacle to expanding the Abraham Accords to include Saudi Arabia. Likewise, the war stirs domestic opposition in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and the UAE against broadening and deepening their peace agreements with Israel. The future of the Abraham Accords largely depends on whether the second phase of President Trump's 20-point plan proceeds. If it does, there is potential for a considerable expansion of the Abraham Peace accords to include Saudi Arabia and perhaps other Muslim and Arab-majority countries both within and beyond the Middle East.

## Israel and the US: An enduring strategic partnership

Among Israel's foreign policy relationships, the most significant is with the US, which, since signing the first Memorandum of Understanding with Israel in 1975, has provided extensive diplomatic, economic, military, and political support. Shortly after the formation of the 2022 Netanyahu government, US Secretary of

State Anthony Blinken stated that the US would "gauge" the Israeli government by its policies and procedures rather than by personalities (Magid 2022). However, from Blinken's announcement to the outbreak of the 7 October War, it may have seemed that US-Israel ties were weakening. For example, President Joe Biden publicly stated that "some of the members of Israel's government are among the most extreme he has seen" (Zakaria 2023) and called on Prime Minister Netanyahu to halt the judicial overhaul (Lazaroff 2023). Furthermore, until the eruption of the Israel-Hamas war, President Biden had only met Prime Minister Netanyahu briefly during the September 2023 annual UN meeting (White House 2023). The visible public rift was worsened by US condemnations of Israeli steps towards settlement expansion (US Department of State 2023a). The ascent of National Security Minister Ben-Gvir to the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif, which was described as "provocative" and "inflammatory," prompted calls from the US to uphold the status quo in Jerusalem (Times of Israel 2023c).

While these public disputes should not be underestimated, the core principles of the US-Israeli strategic partnership have remained intact and may even have been strengthened in recent years. For instance, since 2022, Israel and the UAE have been part of a broader I2U2 grouping with the US and India, focusing on joint investments and initiatives across various sectors (Congressional Research Service, 2023: 17). Furthermore, since September 2021, Israel has been moved from the purview of the US European Command to US Central Command (CENTCOM). As a result, Israel has participated in military exercises with the US and other signatories to the Abraham Accords, as well as with CENTCOM partners, including Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Egypt, and Pakistan (Congressional Research Service, 2023: 20). Meanwhile, President Biden reaffirmed the US's longstanding commitment not to allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon. Notably, to date, none of the legislative, economic, political, or military support that the US has provided to Israel since the mid-1970s has been withdrawn.

The full strength of the Israel-US partnership was clearly demonstrated at the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas 2023 war. In his televised response, President Biden acknowledged how the attacks "brought to the surface painful memories and the scars left by a millennia of antisemitism and genocide of the Jewish people". The president concluded his brief address with a stark warning to "any country, any organisation, anyone thinking of taking advantage of this situation" not to (White House, 2023a). Moreover, since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, the support the

US has given Israel has remained steadfast. Joe Biden is the first US president to visit Israel during a time of war, and the US military has deployed significant forces—including the Gerald Ford aircraft carrier strike group—to the eastern Mediterranean (Lagrone 2023). Additional deployments have been sent to the Red Sea—in defence against Houthi attacks on Israel and to safeguard navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Straits—in addition to the US providing Israel with ongoing military supplies, diplomatic protection at the UN, and defence against Iranian attacks. US-Israeli cooperation was notably strengthened following President Trump's election, who supported Israel in achieving its war aims in Gaza and launched Operation Midnight Hammer during the 12-day Israel-Iran conflict. In this operation, which was "orchestrated by the president, on 21 June at 6:45 p.m., which is Sunday, 22 June at 2:15 a.m. in Iran, U.S. B-2 Spirit bombers operating from Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri, dropped 14 GBU-57 bombs onto Fordow and a second nuclear facility" (US Department of War, 2025). The setback to Iran's nuclear programme was significant.

What were the administrations seeking to achieve? The Biden administration's decision to support Israel with military, economic, and political aid aimed to achieve three main objectives. The primary goal was to deter Iran and its proxy, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, from launching a comprehensive attack on Israel in support of Hamas, which could turn the Israel-Hamas conflict into a regional war. The second goal was to bolster US influence over the Israeli war cabinet. Through military and strategic assistance, the US has gained significant input into Israeli decision-making, especially during the early stages of the conflict. Additionally, the Biden administration aimed to prevent Israel from reoccupying Gaza and to ensure humanitarian aid could continually enter the area during the conflict (The White House, 2023b). A third objective of US backing for Israel under Biden emerged from the administration's broader strategic outlook, which was notably different from that of Barack Obama's previous Democratic administration. Under Obama, the US failed to respond to Russia's annexation of Crimea and Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against his own people. This has been blamed (Hall 2023) for unintentionally encouraging Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Despite disagreements over what has been termed "the day after" the Gaza war, the Biden administration successfully achieved its three goals. It attempted to link the war's end to efforts establishing a Palestinian state and a peace accord between Saudi Arabia and Israel. From the US perspective, Prime Minister Netanyahu's rejection of this plan was a source of frustration.

US support for Israel has continued under the second Trump administration, although some differences are evident compared to the Biden administration. One involves lifting restrictions on Israeli military force in the Gaza Strip and adopting a firm stance that Hamas must release all Israeli hostages. The other relates to separating US support for Israel from Russia's war against Ukraine, which the Trump administration seeks to end. The third concerns what began as President Trump's coercive diplomacy towards Iran. As a result, the US has started negotiations with Iran over its nuclear deal, while keeping the option of military action open if talks fail (Daftari 2025). US-Israeli cooperation reached its peak in Operation Midnight Hammer.

## Conclusion

Since the launch of the judicial overhaul in January 2023, Israel's domestic politics and foreign policy have been shaped by the rise of the radical right and a prolonged war. The long-term consequences of this turbulent period remain uncertain. The war in Gaza has demonstrated the limitations of Israel's foreign policy when relying solely on military force. It has nearly achieved its war aim of releasing all but three of the deceased hostages at the time of writing, but Israel has not yet fulfilled its stated goal of stripping Hamas of its military and governance capabilities in the Gaza Strip. Furthermore, Israel has faced significant diplomatic backlash as a result of its military operations in Gaza, which caused extensive material destruction and a humanitarian catastrophe. It is doubtful that the goal of freeing the hostages would have been reached without the decisive and forceful intervention by the Trump administration. At the same time, Israel's foreign policy towards the Palestinians during the ongoing occupation of the West Bank is damaging its international legitimacy, imposing substantial military and financial costs, and challenging its identity as a democratic and Jewish state.

Conversely, Israel's effective use of military force against Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis—indirectly contributing to the fall of the Assad regime—has significantly reduced the threat from Iran and its allies. Meanwhile, the Abraham Accords and the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan have remained in place and the strategic partnership with the US has demonstrated great resilience. Whether the 20-point Trump peace plan is realised will determine how Israel's future foreign policy evolves and if the triumph of the radical right will be temporary or permanent.

*Chapter 9*

# Conclusion

*Karin Aggestam*

This book has examined the political contestation over Israel's state identity and the trends of democratic backsliding, and how it relates to the protracted Israel-Palestine conflict. Overall, the findings show that the developments in Israel since the start of the judicial overhaul in early 2023, and the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, cannot be fully understood as separate domestic and regional crises. Instead, they demonstrate that the intertwined political and domestic struggles over democracy, identity, and peace are inseparable from the protracted conflict and recent escalation of regional violence.

Moreover, the book illustrates that core concepts, such as "Jewish state", "democracy," "security," "occupation," "peace process"—are all politically contested. In Israel, a debate over the definition and scope of democracy has developed alongside efforts to reshape institutional checks and balances. Moreover, authoritarian consolidation in the Palestinian-controlled areas in both the West Bank and Gaza has intensified due to internal fragmentation and divisions during the Israeli occupation and blockade. The prospect of peace has diminished, and the focus on conflict management has replaced more serious engagement with conflict transformation. Yet, networks of mobilisation, memory activism, and civil society collaboration continue to articulate alternative peaceful visions that resist both autocratic trends and democratic setbacks.

# Democratic backsliding and the boundaries of the political community

Democratic backsliding in Israel is intimately tied to issues of state identity and the definition of the political community. The protests against the judicial overhaul, analysed by Isabell Schierenbeck (chapter 2) and Amnon Aran (chapter 8), show both the capacity and the limitations of popular mobilisation. On one hand, the protests displayed a wide range of participation, organisational strength, and innovative tactics. They united centrist and left-leaning groups, professional associations, reservists, and technological communities, and continued for many months despite repression and police violence.

However, the protest movement was also marked by two significant absences that directly relate to the issue of state identity. First, Palestinian citizens of Israel participated only marginally. As Palestinians in Haifa and northern Israel emphasised, many saw the crisis around the judiciary as something Jewish Israelis were only now experiencing, whereas Palestinians had long endured structural discrimination and institutional exclusion. The sense that "this is not about us" signalled a deep mistrust in the inclusiveness of Israeli democracy and highlighted how longstanding hierarchies of citizenship influenced the interpretation of the current crisis. Second, the protests largely avoided addressing the occupation. The petition "The Elephant in the Room," launched in August 2023, explicitly argued that the attack on judicial independence could not be separated from Israel's control over millions of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Yet such arguments remained marginal within the mainstream protest discourse, and activists attempting to link the struggle over the judiciary to the occupation were sometimes confronted or silenced by other protesters. The occupation appeared as a disruptive issue that risked fragmenting the coalition and alienating centrist and right-leaning participants.

These silences and omissions are analytically significant. They point to what might be called a bounded conception of democracy, where the defence of liberal institutions is framed primarily in relation to Jewish citizens, while the ongoing denial of basic political rights to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the structural marginalisation of Palestinian citizens within Israel, remains largely bracketed. As Anders Persson also shows in chapter 3, measures of democratic quality reflect this tension: democratic indices have indicated a decline

in Israel over the past decade and a half, driven by illiberal legislation and the increasing concentration of power in the hands of the Prime Minister, while Gaza and the West Bank are ranked among authoritarian entities globally. The empirical evidence supports a theoretical claim: democratic backsliding is not only about institutional structures or elite conduct but is deeply rooted in the fundamental definition of who constitutes the demos.

The book also illustrates how occupation, intra-Palestinian division, and authoritarian rule have created a highly constrained political environment. Palestinians live under multiple layers of control: Hamas in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority in parts of the West Bank, and overarching Israeli dominance and military occupation. Moreover, the lack of elections and the consolidation of power by Hamas and Fatah have fostered widespread public disillusionment (PCPSR 2024). At the same time, the structural realities of occupation mean that even an internally democratic Palestinian government could not fully exercise self-determination. The Palestinians cannot "vote away" the occupation, nor can they cast votes in the state that ultimately governs their lives (Persson 2020; Tartir and Seidel 2019). This "double bind" highlights how prolonged conflict and asymmetry prevent the realisation of democratic accountability, even as internal Palestinian actors exploit these limitations to strengthen their own power.

Throughout the chapters, a common theme emerges: democratic backsliding should not be viewed solely as a linear transition from democracy to authoritarianism, but as a complex, uneven process in which formal institutions, identity boundaries, and conflict narratives interact. In Israel, the weakening of liberal norms is not an anomaly but a manifestation of a deeper identity crisis about whether a state can be both Jewish and democratic, especially under conditions of a permanent Israeli military occupation.

## Identity anxieties and ethnocentrism

The book advances knowledge of how state identity and intergroup relations are being reshaped in the current context. In chapter 4, Liora Sion argues that the increase in ethnocentric attitudes among both Jews and Palestinians is not merely a reaction to difference, but paradoxically also to growing similarity. Processes of social and cultural convergence—such as the expansion of a Palestinian middle

class within Israel, the adoption of Israeli lifestyles by Palestinians, and the assertion of Middle Eastern identity among Mizrahi Jews—have blurred formerly sharp boundaries. Everyday interactions in shared urban spaces, workplaces, and educational institutions further diminish the visibility of categorical distinctions.

This convergence engenders its own form of anxiety. For political projects based on clear distinctions between "us" and "them," the disappearance of visible difference undermines the coherence of identity narratives. As the chapter demonstrates, this anxiety appears in increasing suspicion, moral panic, and a heightened politics of bodily identification, sometimes leading to acts of mistaken identity violence. The body itself becomes a site of contested recognition: who can be trusted, who is "really" a Jew or a Palestinian, and who might be concealing their identity. Such dynamics contribute to broader processes of othering, securitisation, and boundary enforcement, aligning with the tensions regarding the display of Palestinian flags, the policing of slogans, and the boundaries of shared protest spaces.

The aftermath of 7 October intensifies these dynamics. Historical traumas, most notably the Nakba and the Holocaust, are mobilised anew to interpret contemporary events. Palestinians invoke the memory of 1948 to describe displacement and physical destruction in Gaza, while many Jewish Israelis interpret Hamas's attacks through the lens of pogroms in Jewish history. These memory practices heighten existential fears and reinforce antagonistic narratives. The result is not only a reinforcement of ethnocentric attitudes but also a shrinking of the imaginative space in which compromise, coexistence, or shared political frameworks can be envisaged. In this sense, identity anxieties drive both democratic backsliding and the persistence of conflict.

At the same time, the book emphasises that identity is not a fixed given but an ongoing site of politics and contestation. Agonistic memory activism, as discussed by Lisa Strömbom in chapter 7, offers an alternative form of engagement where conflicting narratives are brought into dialogue without aiming to resolve or harmonise them. These initiatives, although small and often challenged, oppose the logic of antagonistic identity by creating protected spaces for critical reflection, encounter, and solidarity. They demonstrate that identity can be reconfigured through practices of listening, mutual recognition, and shared vulnerability, even under conditions of asymmetry and violence.

## Protracted conflict and elusive peace

A second major theme of the book concerns the effects of the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict in which peace remains structurally elusive. The chapters analyse how, over the decade preceding 7 October 2023, formal peacemaking largely receded from the agenda. Lior Lehrs shows in chapter 5 that negotiations over final-status issues were replaced by a focus on preventing escalation and "shrinking" the conflict through technocratic or security-oriented measures. International actors shifted from ambitious frameworks aimed at resolution to more modest initiatives centred on conflict management, coordination mechanisms, and economic incentives. After 7 October 2023, diplomatic discussions intensified around issues such as post-war governance of Gaza, regional normalisation, and security guarantees, but these debates often remained disconnected from a broader political vision. Proposals for renewed negotiations and the reactivation of the two-state paradigm have emerged, yet they face an environment marked by extreme mistrust, deepened traumas, and a further erosion of belief in the feasibility of compromise. This erosion is not merely psychological, but rooted in tangible experiences of excessive violence, displacement, insecurity, and hatred on all sides. As such, peace remains politically obstructed. However, the elements necessary for meaningful conflict transformation are not new. It is not a lack of knowledge, but a lack of incentives and political resolve. As Jacob Eriksson underlines in chapter 6, political elites on both sides have benefited, in different ways and to varying extents, from the persistence of the conflict. Authoritarian practices, securitised governance, and the maintenance of the status quo have often served their interests better than the uncertainties and risks linked to genuine conflict transformation.

The result is a form of "managed intractability," where conflict is neither fully resolved nor allowed to escalate completely out of control, except during moments of dramatic rupture like the one we witnessed since 7 October 2023. When initiatives are launched, they are easily overwhelmed by events on the ground or undermined by domestic contestation. Jacob Eriksson's discussion of ripeness theory is instructive here: mutual hurting stalemates and perceived pathways to resolution are necessary but not sufficient conditions for progress towards resolution. They must be accompanied by leadership, legitimacy, and a

willingness to confront narratives of identity and victimhood. Currently, these conditions are largely missing.

International and regional factors also sustain protracted conflicts as Amnon Aran shows in chapter 8. The conflict is embedded in wider confrontations involving Iran and its regional allies, Sunni Arab states, and global powers. The war in Gaza became entwined with conflicts involving Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and a broader rivalry between Iran's allies and its opponents. Aran underlines how Israel's success in foreign policy—such as countering some threats and keeping formal ties with Egypt, Jordan, and the Abraham Accords states—coexists with increasing diplomatic isolation due to its warfare in Gaza and its ongoing occupation of the West Bank. This duality reveals the limits of a strategy that relies on military power and regional deterrence while leaving the core conflict with the Palestinians unresolved. The regional context can mitigate or exacerbate conflict dynamics but cannot substitute for a political solution.

## The interplay of domestic crisis and regional/international politics

A key contribution of the book highlights how domestic and regional dynamics are mutually reinforcing. Israel's democratic decline and its foreign policy are connected not just as parallel processes but as intertwined areas of action. The internal struggle over judicial reform occurred alongside international criticism of Israeli settlement expansion, occupation policies, and warfare in Gaza. The weakening of judicial review, the politicisation of key institutions, and the concentration of power within the executive branch intersect with decisions on war, peace, and occupation. The affidavit by Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar, which reveals expectations of personal loyalty to the prime minister even in hypothetical constitutional crises, exemplifies, as Schierenbeck underlines, how the logic of personalist rule and loyalty politics permeates the security establishment.

The aftermath of 7 October sharpened these trends. The protests that had mobilised against the judicial overhaul shifted towards criticising the government's warmaking and negotiations on releasing the hostages still in

captivity in Gaza. New groups, such as the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, emerged as influential civic forces, deliberately framing their struggle as "not political" while still challenging government policy and priorities. Public petitions by military reservists, academics, and former officials demanding an end to the war to secure the release of hostages further blurred the distinction between security and democracy. Domestic contestation over who is responsible for the 7 October failure, how the war in Gaza has been waged, and what political arrangements might follow have become intertwined with debates about the nature of the state and the distribution of power within it.

## Agonistic alternatives and the limits of the liberal peace

The book also highlights important spaces of resistance and alternative practices. Agonistic memory activism, cross-community initiatives, and civil society collaborations offer glimpses of different forms of engagement. These efforts do not promise quick solutions; indeed, they are clear about their limitations. They operate under conditions of intense pressure, limited mobility, and societal polarisation. Their participants are often marginalised or stigmatised, and the impact of their work may be more apparent at the micro-level of individual transformation than at the level of national politics.

Yet, these initiatives matter. They challenge the hegemony of antagonistic narratives and build infrastructures—however fragile—for sustaining critical reflection, empathy, and solidarity. In doing so, they also implicitly critique the weaknesses of liberal peace frameworks that aim to depoliticise conflict through technocratic solutions and consensus-driven models. Agonistic approaches, as underlined by Strömbom, acknowledge that conflicts over memory, identity, and justice cannot simply be resolved through agreements among elites, but require sustained engagement with deep disagreements and power asymmetries.

From the standpoint of democratic theory, such efforts can be seen as laboratories for more inclusive and reflective forms of citizenship. They challenge the bounded and hierarchical idea of the demos that underpins Israeli exclusionary democracy. The fact that they offer "safe spaces" and support for activists is not marginal but central. In highly polarised and securitised contexts, the ability to maintain even

small islands of agonistic engagement may be a necessary condition for any future change in the wider political landscape (Aggestam and Strömbom 2013).

## State identity, democratic futures, and the prospect for peace

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is both in flux and protracted. The judicial overhaul, the 7 October attacks, and the subsequent war in Gaza have shattered illusions of stability and revealed the vulnerabilities of existing arrangements. At the same time, they have not yet resulted in a new or peaceful order. Instead, autocratic tendencies, ethnocentric identity politics, and securitised modes of governance seem to be gaining momentum.

This concluding chapter has argued that these developments must be understood through the dual lenses of state identity and protracted conflict. The unresolved tension between being a Jewish state and a democratic state—amid occupation and demographic complexity—has shifted from a latent contradiction to a severe political crisis. The decline of judicial independence, efforts to weaken institutional checks, and growing demands for personal loyalty from security officials all indicate a move towards more illiberal and autocratic forms of governance in Israel. This shift is further supported by security doctrines and narratives that depict permanent exception, rather than normalised legality, as the proper mode of rule. Peace in such circumstances is not merely a matter of restarting negotiations or reviving old frameworks. It would require a reimagining of political community, democratising state structures, and transforming memory practices. This involves addressing not only questions of territory and sovereignty but also those of belonging, recognition, and accountability. It implies extending democratic norms beyond the boundaries of a single ethno-national group and acknowledging the political subjectivity of those who have long been excluded.

The overarching aim of this book is to offer empirical insights and analyses to enhance the understanding of why peace remains so elusive and why democracy has proved so fragile in this context. But it also highlights the actors, practices, and discourses that might, over time, open up alternative futures. These

alternatives may appear distant, precarious and even naive, but that does not diminish their importance. This is not merely a task for political elites or international mediators, but for a wide range of actors, including social movements, civil society organisations, educators, and activists. The structural challenges remain daunting, but by exposing the connections between state identity, democratic backsliding, and protracted conflict, this book sheds light on what is at risk and what needs to change if peace is ever to be realised.

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# Israel – Democratic Backsliding and Elusive Peace

This book examines the mass protest movement that emerged in Israel in response to the government's proposed judicial overhaul in 2023, situating these demonstrations within the broader structural tensions shaping the country's political trajectory. It also addresses the challenges confronting Israel's security and political order, with particular attention to the repercussions of the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, the subsequent war in Gaza, and emerging policy frameworks, including recent diplomatic initiatives, such as the Trump 20-point plan.

Bringing together scholars in the field, the book offers original analyses organised around three intersecting themes: contestation over Israel's national identity, patterns of democratic backsliding, and the enduring impact of the protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict, which renders peace elusive.

The book is a timely and relevant resource for scholars, students and informed readers seeking a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics shaping Israeli politics today.

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