The Formative Socio-Political Crisis in Israel: Implications for National Security

edited by

Meir Elran and Kobi Michael

Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) – Tel Aviv University

with contributions from

Shlomo Black, Mora Deitch, Ariel Heimann, Mohammed S. Wattad, Arik Yakuel, Gallia Lindenstrauss, Rebecca Meller, Ofer Shelah, Idit Shafran Gittleman, and Pnina Sharvit Baruch

Six months after the outbreak of the severe socio-political crisis in Israel, a group of experts and researchers from a variety of fields met at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) to discuss the root causes of the crisis, its characteristics, and likely ramifications from a forward-looking, system-wide perspective, with special emphasis on ramifications for national security. Naturally, the questions addressed have no absolute or unequivocal answers, and analysis of the crisis draws from the various interpretations of the respective observers. One important element regarding the roots of the crisis is the very different—and at times polarized—way in which reality is perceived, which necessarily dictates profound disagreements over the significance of what unfolds. This article seeks to paint a picture that reflects both differences of opinion and points of agreement vis-à-vis the means and conditions that might allow Israel to extricate itself, at some point, from the current severe crisis and return to normal functioning. A key springboard here is broad discussion, which may enable identification of common denominators that still exist among the Israeli public and within the country's political and social sectors.

The Roots of the Crisis

Participants in the professional forum generally agreed that the current crisis—which erupted with full force when Israel's coalition launched its judicial overhaul on January 4, 2023, just days after it was sworn in—is fueled by a combination of profound social and political factors and processes that have been active in Israel for many years. Israel is a heterogeneous and divided country, characterized by profound rifts

that are nurtured by the diverse composition of its population. The result is a multicultural society in which the existing common denominators have not succeeded in realizing the attempt, which was launched in the 1950s but now looks forced or artificial, to create a unique and unified Jewish society in Israel, by means of a social "melting pot." The failure of this approach has led, over the course of the generations, to the creation of diverse mosaics of connections and divisions, which ostensibly created a certain degree of pseudo-solidarity that in turn enabled the supposedly reasonable conduct of the establishment.

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Even this very assertion is disputed. There are those who propose the counterargument that Israeli society contains a strong common denominator at its core that was accepted almost naturally over the years by the vast majority of Jewish Israelis. In recent years, however, while the rifts themselves have widened, efforts to give public expression to these rifts and portray them as unbridgeable have become more intense. Therefore, according to this approach, a gulf has opened between the public discourse in academia and the media, and life itself. This is underway at a time when the disputes are fueled and formulated by ideological "extremes," which do not represent a large part of the Israeli public, which finds itself lost in the chaos that surrounds it—on the streets, on the television screen, on social media, and in the Knesset. At the same time, it is also important to differentiate between the rifts that exist within Jewish society and the gulfs between Israel's Jewish and Arab societies.

In any case, Israel is in fact a divided country. Former President Reuven Rivlin asserted already

back in 2015 that "demographic and social processes have reshaped Israeli society over the past few decades: from a society comprising a clear majority (national Zionist) and clear minorities, to a society based on four key sectors or 'tribes': secular Israelis, national-religious Israelis, ultra-Orthodox, and Arabs." Rivlin's proposition on Israeli society might have been overly generous, as the society is in fact divided into many more than four "tribes." Each such "tribe" is divided into many sub-sections, with large cultural and political gaps between them and characterized more by disagreements than by consent. Therefore, Rivlin's assertions that "the vision of a Jewish and democratic state [is] our life's dream and our heart's desire" and that it is incumbent on all of us, "together, out of a deep commitment to find the answers to these questions, out of a readiness to draw together all the tribes of Israel, with a shared vision of Israeli hope," raise serious questions and must be examined more profoundly.

Like the "melting pot" and "tribal campfire" ethos, the story of Israelis uniting round the definition of their country as "Jewish and democratic" seems to be far from the reality among certain parts of the public. Even on this central ideological issue, which is supposed to define the identity and character of the State of Israel, there is dispute over the meaning of the seminal phrase. The dispute centers, inter alia, on the place of Jewish existence in the Land of Israel in contemporary times. Some people ask themselves: How does this imperative correspond with the gap between the centrality of Jewishness and the broad endorsement of universal values and identities? Is Israel in fact Jewish and democratic, as it portrays itself? What is the real meaning of a Jewish state, and what makes Israel a democratic country? And beyond this, do the Arab citizens of Israel, who comprise a sizable portion of the population fit into this ethos?

In recent years Israel has also experienced a severe political crisis, manifested by five election campaigns between 2019 and 2022.

Political crises are not unfamiliar in other Western democracies, especially the United States. The Israeli crisis reflects the weakness of the Israeli political system, given the lack of a founding constitution that serves as a binding framework. This greatly undermines the public's faith in political institutions and in the government. The personal and populist nature of politics in Israel has exacerbated public tension, made the divisions in Israeli society even more extreme, and injected them with their current level of high emotional charge. The wave of toxic personality politics that has swept over the country in recent years, against the backdrop of support for or opposition to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that was fueled aggressively by social media, contributed to a sharp increase in hostility between and within the political camps. To a large degree it has overlapped with polarization of social groups and exacerbated hatred between them—to the extent that walls have been erected that prevent dialogue and possible agreement.

Both sides understand that the current crisis is first and foremost a profound identity crisis on many fronts. At its root it is a struggle over power and influence in Israeli society. It reflects an aggressive battle that is being waged—primarily, though not exclusively—between the new elite, which leans to the right, and the old elite, which leans to the center-left. The new elite is gradually gaining political power and now aspires to utilize its electoral strength fully and actively supplant the old elite, which it perceives as Ashkenazi, condescending, and coercive. At the same time, the old elite is losing its political power and is therefore, according to supporters of the coalition, trying to maintain its strength and its control using extra-parliamentary means. In other words, the coalition camp believes that the political minority is trying to use public protest to force its worldview on the government.

The current crisis is even more complex because it is also driven by polarization on issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between the ideological right, whose radical elements are striving for a one-state solution, and the center-left, which is searching for compromise on the basis of separation from the Palestinians. Similarly, the crisis is exacerbated by the profound disagreements between the conservative and religious sectors of Israeli society and the liberal public.

The prolonged political crisis has created a serious challenge for Israel's political leadership. Political circumstances have increased the power of small, extremist parties, which in turn has strengthened their expectations for clear, quick, and sustainable accomplishments. Under these conditions, governance and mutual trust between the rival camps and parties have been undermined still further—which limits political leaders' room to maneuver and contributes to a crisis of leadership. Non-state considerations, sometimes even personal interests, have become a predominant guiding principle, contributing to the evolution of a dysfunctional governing culture, and adding to the public's lack of trust in politics and the establishment.

The Nature of the Crisis

The current crisis erupted when the government launched its initiative to reform the judicial system, by addressing the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches (the political majority) and the judicial branch. From the perspective of critics of the judicial system, at least, criticism has been leveled for many years but has been either ignored or met with opposition by the judicial establishment and the state prosecution, despite an ongoing drop in the public's trust in the judiciary and despite its structural defects.

Yet it has quickly become apparent that the government initiative was a far broader and more profound attempt for a socio-political change. It started with disagreement over a judicial issue, whose details and significance are understood by only a few, and quickly took on the character of a widespread public struggle

over the identity and values, as well as nature and centrality of Israeli democracy. This exposed the full extent of the disputes between those who advocate a liberal, egalitarian democracy, which prioritizes human and minority rights, and those who prefer to empower majority rule and who prioritize the mechanisms of governance and law enforcement, based on conservative religious and nationalistic values. For them, this is the very essence of democracy, which relies on the will of the people, as determined by Knesset elections. Some contend that this is an exaggerated dichotomy that does not represent many in both camps, who prioritize personal security and an effective law enforcement system. According to them, a perspective that pits the values of democracy, liberalism, and equality against nationalism and Judaism is a narrow approach, which by itself has contributed to the current crisis.

There are large portions of the Israeli public, on the right and the left alike, who are not active participants in this tumultuous struggle, and for various reasons, do not consider it to be of interest or importance for them. Prominent among them is the Arab population of Israel, which represents around 20 percent of the overall citizenry, which is presently focused primarily on the ever-swelling tide of crime and violence in its ranks and sees the public protest as belonging exclusively to the Jewish community. To them should be added the ultra-Orthodox community, which makes up around 13 percent of the population. Although the ultra-Orthodox are part of the coalition and, for the most part, have strong reservations about the role of the Supreme Court, they have refrained from taking an active part in (or against) the public protest. Together, these two sectors represent around one third of the Israeli public who see themselves excluded from the socio-political struggle. There are also many others who place themselves on the sidelines, whether because they are apathetic or lack any clear political affiliation with either side. Some believe that they are the silent majority,

frustrated and confused by a struggle in which they find less interest, hoping for peace and quiet and for the rival factions to reach an understanding. Nonetheless, it appears that the scale of active public involvement in the struggle has been very broad, testifying to the strength and importance of the struggle.

It is important to frame the clear differences in behavior of the two rival camps: for the most part, supporters of the coalition leave the stage to the political parties (with the exception of one large demonstration on April 27, 2023, which was attended by an estimated 150,000 people) and to the parliamentary arena; in contrast, in what has become a broad public protest movement, most of the activities of those who oppose the government are taking place in the extra-parliamentary arena, while also seeping into the military, particularly among reservists. This is despite the fact that the ideological unity and political consensus within the rival camps is far from absolute. It also manifests itself in clear differences regarding modus operandi, especially in terms of how extreme the protest should allow itself to become. What is interesting and important to note, in terms of the differences between the camps, is that supporters of the coalition have, for the time being, put their faith mainly in political and coalitionary activity within the parliamentary framework; the protest movement, meanwhile, has developed into a spontaneous extra-parliamentary aggregate of various civil society organizations and committed ad hoc groups. Between these two camps there is an absolute gulf of competing truths. Each side lives, breathes, and believes in a patently polarized narrative, which directly contradicts the other side's narrative and is nourished by—and in turn nourishes—the mainstream and social media, which, to varying degrees, support one side or the other. Therefore, the one side's position is seen by the opposing side as baseless or a deliberate lie, and vice versa. Each achievement for one side is seen as a defeat for the other. This is a purely zero-sum game.

Within this framework, a new balance of power has been created, in which the protest movement (thanks to impressive and effective organization, successful fundraising, and support from the United States) managed to gain momentum, power, and self-confidence and to earn a considerable amount of deterrence vis-à-vis the government and public influence. It has recorded a series of significant successes, primarily the hiatus forced on the government in its efforts to drive through all the elements of the judicial change in one fell swoop. This success does not indicate that the multidimensional struggle between the camps is over. On the contrary. The energies that have been created over the last months have empowered the competing camps that are spreading to areas that are more challenging and more fundamental. In tandem with the great difficulty encountered by President Isaac Herzog in his efforts to reach an agreement over the judicial overhaul, a broader and more challenging agenda is developing, which addresses additional crucial social and political issues, with a dual essence: in the short term, the ability of the government to advance its controversial policies; and, in the long term, the future character of the State of Israel from a political, social, and macroeconomic perspective. Beyond the fierce identity struggle underway, there is also a sharp contest over the character and values of the state. This struggle clearly contains destructive components in spurring talk about separation, federation, and "cantonization." This reflects the desire of the more liberal parts of the Israeli public to forge a new reality, in which liberal values are enshrined in a legally binding constitutional and structural framework. The very existence of separate agendas is interesting and important, but it is also divisive to the extent of being toxic. It reflects the deepening rifts and hatred, the accelerated negation of the normative political system and its mechanisms; it fuels the continuation of the crisis and increases the obstacles to (even partial) public and political consent and a return to "normality."

The President's efforts to foster dialogue are noteworthy, particularly his attempts to create procedural alternatives for a constructive dialogue over the government's judicial agenda, given the infeasibility of negotiations within the normative parliamentary framework. In so doing, he ostensibly attempted to create a chance of reaching an agreement on some of the issues raised by the judicial reform. These were important to both sides of the political divide, but it is doubtful that they had or could resolve the crisis—which would entail the kinds of reconciliation mechanisms that do not currently exist.

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The most prominent ray of hope in this crisis is the fact that despite its severity, the struggle has not yet become violent. This is in part thanks to the protest organizers' restraint, coordination, and ability to control the protesters. In addition, supporters of the government have opted so far to refrain from physical violence. Beyond that, the Police has so far demonstrated relative restraint. As long as the protest does not take on violent characteristics, it demonstrates the strength of Israeli society, in which intimidation, violence, and crime have skyrocketed in recent years, and not just in the Arab community. The potential for organized ideological violence also exists in the Jewish community. Having said that, and as has happened in other democracies, this positive element can change for the worse quickly and unexpectedly, if the crisis becomes more acute in the future.

Implications for National Security

This formative socio-political crisis has many layers of long-term and short-term implications for national security, led by:

a. Israel's being an extremely polarized society has a direct negative influence on solidarity and, therefore, on societal resilience, in which solidarity, identity, and a cohesive national identification are the most important cornerstones; this necessarily influences national security. National resilience allows a society to function in states of emergency and crisis, and to recover quickly from them. A prolonged internal crisis seriously undermines those capacities. This is especially true in the current crisis in Israel, which has weakened the state and its mechanisms and harmed its ability to deal with the current challenges successfully, to extricate itself from the crisis and enjoy systemic recovery and growth. There is a clear sense of danger among the leading groups in society and the economy; some of them are reexamining their willingness to bear the burden and contribute their skills and resources to the state. Concerns have also been expressed that the stronger groups will, in the long term, decide to leave the country. On the other hand, there are those who see these attitudes as hampering solidarity, causing an abandonment of the identity with the state, and even questioning the foundations that unify the Jewish nation.

b. The profound political crisis has seeped into the state institutions and affects their performance. This is the case in government ministries, the IDF, and other security bodies. The military's reserve forces have undergone a major upheaval that has long-term negative ramifications. The issue of widespread reservists' refusal to serve in the IDF has become disturbing. The law on ultra-Orthodox exemption from conscription raised a public outcry, and has negatively impacted motivation to serve among the secular public. The Israel Police has undergone a prolonged crisis, which has weakened its ability to function. Mechanisms and processes designed to advance the annexation of the West Bank are gaining momentum and garnering public opposition in center-left circles. At the same time, there is increased politicization in Israel's institutions, which is impacting the decision making process on critical issues that have long-term implications for national security. Considerations based on the good of the country cede to narrow political and sectorial considerations and pressures.

c. There is also fundamental disagreement between the two camps as to the impact of this formative crisis on Israel's economy. While the government highlights the relative stability of the economy and its relative achievements in an unstable world, the other side focuses on the correlation between the crisis and weakness of the Israeli economy. After years of impressive growth, the current crisis has led to a clear change in direction. In the first quarter of 2023, the Tel Aviv 125 Index fell by around 9 percent, while its counterparts in the United States and Europe saw gains of 6 and 7 percent, respectively. The shekel has also depreciated in the context of the crisis, as the Governor of the Bank of Israel himself noted at the Hurwitz Economic Conference in early June. In the period between the election in November 2022 and the end of May 2023, the shekel dropped by around 5 percent compared to the US dollar, which also depreciated in comparison to the currencies of OECD members. Economists propose that one of the main reasons for the strength of the shekel in recent years was the large foreign investment, especially in Israeli hi-tech, which has the tendency to dry up during the political crisis. This could have far-reaching, long-term ramifications for the "national engine," which fuels the entire economy. The weakening of the shekel also makes imports to Israel more expensive, which in turn contributes to the increased cost of living. The crisis is also preventing Israel from focusing effectively on the vital battle against the high cost of

living and bolstering employment among the weaker sectors of society. This is evident in the lack of economic stimuli in the state budget, which limits the ability of the state to divert resources to vital sectors. Note that the positive economic figures for the first quarter of 2023 are the result of processes that occurred in 2022 and even earlier. The problematic figures, according to economic experts, will emerge in the second and subsequent quarters, unless there is a very tangible change of direction.

d. On the regional front, the ongoing crisis has harmed Israel's status and security, and has a negative influence on the perception of the country's strength. There are signs of possible erosion of Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis its enemies, which are keeping close tabs on local developments. Although during Operation Shield and Arrow in May 2023 the major terrorist organizations, for their own reasons, refrained from challenging Israel, concerns over a multi-front military confrontation remain. There is also concern that the Israeli public's resilience will be undermined in case of a broad conflict. On the political front, there have been setbacks in Israel's relations with moderate Arab states and in the furthering of the Abraham Accords.

e. On the international stage, there has been a clear blow to Israel's standing. The most challenging aspect is to relations with the United States, Israel's chief ally. On the one hand, the United States continues to support Israel on practical matters, especially when it comes to security, but, on the other hand, it has made it clear that its support depends on Israel maintaining its democratic character. Among American Jews too, there is concern, and profound criticism of developments in Israel, accompanied by an increasing tendency to distance themselves from events in the country. This might have serious implications for the Jewish Diaspora's support for Israel.

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Conclusions and Expectations

The unfolding domestic crisis is a singular, disturbing, and destructive event, the likes of which Israel has never known—in terms of its severity, scale, and implications. It is very hard to determine how it will evolve. The assumption is that over the past few months an unstable "balance of terror" has been created between the government and the protest movement, with both camps experiencing and representing conflicting "realities." It is doubtful whether they are interested in or capable of identifying the opportunity to bridge the profound gaps between them. This is true of the very specific issues that make up the government's original proposed overhaul of the judicial system, and even more true when it comes to the profound issues that are at the core of the social schism. The lagging talks at the President's residence were important, in the absence of any other avenue for effective dialogue; they allowed the sides to play for time and created at the time a sense of hope and sanity.

Even if the rival sides manage to reach some kind of compromise over the judicial issues, it is doubtful that this would be enough to end the profound crisis. There are very powerful forces on both sides that would use multiple means to oppose any compromise. In any case, a limited compromise of any kind would not be enough to narrow the fundamental rifts that exist in Israeli society, which are based on a deep sense of suspicion and hostility and on fundamental polarized ideologies over the identity, nature, and behavior of Israel, both domestically and externally. The coalition camp is unlikely to cede its growing political power, based on the fact that it represents a majority in the country; the protest camp—

which is based mainly on the old elites, which are still the strongest sectors in Israeli society in terms of education and finances—is unlikely to agree to a process that would scale back the liberal and democratic character of Israel at the expense of more powerful Jewish nationalism. The gulf between the two camps will only grow wider. In the absence of accepted mechanisms of dialogue and agreement, and in an atmosphere of toxic rhetoric, it does not appear possible to prevent, moderate, or contain the evolution of this profound crisis. The nature of the crisis might change from day to day, and there may be brief or prolonged hiatuses along the way. It is doubtful, however, that it will be possible to return to the limited normalcy that existed in Israel before the crisis erupted. It is also impossible to rule out the possibility that the confrontation between the camps will deteriorate, including sporadic or even widespread violence. The Israel Police would find it hard to maintain public order under these conditions, certainly considering its current dire situation.

In this complex and dangerous situation, various scenarios have been proposed as possible ways of extricating Israel from the impasse it is facing:

a. Some people believe that the crisis will dissolve the moment that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu leaves the public arena, which might pave the way for a national unity government comprising all the large parties. This convoluted scenario, which does not appear to be likely in the short term, might calm the crisis temporarily, but it is doubtful that it would heal the deep rifts in the Israeli society or contribute to long-term normalization.

b. Others expect that a significant military multi-front confrontation will cool the domestic rift, hopefully unify the ranks, and force Israelis to rally round the flag—and possibly end the crisis. This is an unlikely scenario, however, and at best it would afford a brief hiatus; it would not create the kind of bonding needed for long-term healing.

c. There are still others who believe that there is no alternative but to dismantle the apparatus of the state and establish a separate and divided political system (transformation to a federative structure, with the State of Israel and the State of Judea as a metaphor). This scenario, which is highly doubtful, certainly not by a consensus decision, would represent the willful negation and destruction of the defining Zionist vision. In any case, it would lead to the establishment of weak entities that might fight each other for resources and power, in a hostile regional neighborhood.

d. Finally, there are those who call for Israel to introduce a constitution, to set rules for the democratic game, or, at the very least, to ensure that the state's political identity is based on the Declaration of Independence (1948). The chances of accomplishing this under current circumstances are slim, since it would entail agreement between the rival camps over matters of deep principle. The schisms are wider than ever, including during the first years after Israel gained its independence, when it was impossible to formulate a constitution given the profound internal differences.

Given the complexity of the situation, it seems that the most likely scenario is that the crisis will continue at varying degrees of intensity. An ongoing and corrosive process of this kind is a nightmare that might gradually diminish the State of Israel's strength. Only if the general public and the national leadership understand the extent of the cumulative danger to the very existence of the State of Israel as a democratic country will they join forces to take a stand and end the madness—together. Searching for the necessary mechanisms for this highly challenging endeavor must now be at the forefront of the agenda of Israeli society and the political establishment.

Brig. Gen. (ret.) Dr. Meir Elran is a senior research fellow at INSS, where he is head of the research cluster on Israel's internal arena and national security. meiryelran@gmail.com

Prof. Kobi Michael, a senior research fellow at INSS and co-editor of *Strategic Assessment*, is a professor in the International Centre for Policing and Security at the University of South Wales, UK, and a senior research fellow at Neapolis University, Cyprus. kobim@inss.org.il