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To cite this article: Amichai Magen (2023): Israel's Summer of Discontent, Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/23739770.2023.2254580](https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2023.2254580)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2023.2254580>



Published online: 13 Sep 2023.



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# Israel's Summer of Discontent

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## Political Insomnia

A recently published essay in *The Times of Israel* opens with the following statement: "It is 3 a.m. in Jerusalem. These days, that is not an unusual time for me to be awake. Like many Israelis, I have become a political insomniac. The disruption of sleep is a small reflection of the dread so many of us feel for the long-term viability of the Jewish state."<sup>1</sup> The author, Yossi Klein Halevi, is hardly alone in expressing existential anxiety about the (non)future of the country, and the political insomnia afflicting conservative-religious Jerusalemites pales in comparison with that experienced by liberal-secular Tel Avivians. Between January and March 2023 alone, the percentage of Israelis who believed the likelihood of civil war in the country to be "very high" rose from 31–41 percent.<sup>2</sup> By mid-July, no fewer than 67 percent of respondents in another national survey expressed the view that Israel was on the precipice of civil war.<sup>3</sup>

What on earth is going on here? How could an OECD country with a seventy-five-year tradition of uninterrupted democracy, a hard-earned reputation for national resilience, a GDP per capita higher than Canada's, and a ranking of fourth in the 2023 World Happiness Index perceive itself to be on the verge of national suicide?

On one level, there is nothing surprising about Israel's present moment of ungluing. Since its modern rebirth as a sovereign state in 1948, it has always been an exceptionally diverse, fissure-saturated immigrant society with few formal constitutional guardrails and a helter-skelter political culture. But for three-quarters of a century, it was *a* society with *a* political culture. With its big-tent, low electoral-threshold, radical proportional representation parliamentary system, Israel managed to thrive while successfully contending with domestic and exogenous shocks and

accommodating sharp contrasts—Jewish-nationalists and Arab Communists and Islamists; Ashkenazi Labor Zionists and Sephardic ultra-Orthodox—within an amoeba-like ethos of Jewish and democratic statehood.

Historically, three sets of factors combined to keep the wheels on the Egged<sup>4</sup> bus:

The first of these—the most difficult to quantify but arguably the most crucial—has to do with political culture. Israel, like the United States and unlike European countries, was founded upon a modern redemptive idea—one of national salvation imbued with universal significance and realized through pioneering state-building. In Israel's case, that idea was embodied in, and institutionalized by, what might be described as a “sacrificing-serving elite”—a political, military, economic, and cultural elite that understood itself to be the custodian of a unique national project and was prepared to sacrifice itself, sometimes literally, in defense of the *moleдет* [birthland].

“The central conservative truth,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan once observed, “is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society.” It was primarily good political culture rather than constitutional design or institutional brilliance that allowed Israel to flourish as a society.

Another distinct feature at the core of Israeli political culture was a peculiar type of statism. While Germans and Italians learned that the modern state could go badly wrong, Zionists drew the opposite conclusion from the searing experiences of the mid-twentieth century. Independent sovereignty rescued the Jewish people from homelessness and powerlessness, and so “the state” was us; it was miraculous, required our constant protection and nurturing, and could (almost by definition) never turn against us. The mistrust of governmental power at the heart of modern liberal and conservative thought—and therefore the insistence upon limited government and formal checks and balances—was always alien to most Israelis.

The second factor that helped Israel remain cohesive for the past seventy-five years was the overwhelming need for domestic unity in the face of ever-present external dangers. These threats—first Arab and later Iranian-led—imposed upon Israeli elites a measure of seriousness and responsibility that helped shape and maintain the sacrificing-serving ethos, spurred Israeli technological innovation, and prevented centrifugal forces from spiraling out of control.

Indeed, for about a century (roughly from 1920–2020), Israel's adversaries constituted what I would call “Goldilocks enemies”—the security equivalent of the cosmological idea that a habitable zone is maintained around a star where it is not too hot or too cold for liquid water to exist. On the one hand, Israel's adversaries were numerous and frightening enough to spur the country to social cohesiveness and technological excellence. On the other hand, they were never

sufficiently unified or powerful to overwhelm the Jewish State. Another useful way to think about this is to consider whether modern Israel could have been created and sustained were it unlucky enough to have been the immediate geographical neighbor of a strong, antagonistic entity such as Turkey or Iran. The tragic fate of the Kurds suggests that it could not. It took the exceptional conditions of post-Ottoman fragmentation in the Levant, limited Arab governing competence, and Zionist grit to produce the zone within which nascent Israel could survive. Goldilocks enemies not only allowed Israel to survive, but paradoxically compelled it to thrive domestically and internationally.

Last but not least, between 1948 and, say, 2015, Israel hit history's jackpot time and time again. The Jewish State was literally born with and into the postwar Liberal International Order (LIO). It bet on the right regime type (democracy) and on the right geopolitical camp (the West) to win the Cold War. It then excelled in the post-1989 world order. The sudden collapse of the Soviet bloc produced a huge demographic and economic boon for Israel, with over one million immigrants from the post-Soviet space settling here in the 1990s alone.<sup>5</sup> *Pax Americana* strengthened US allies, affirmed the capitalist-democratic model as "the only game in town," and opened vast new opportunities for Israeli foreign trade and for the country to attract venture capital into its burgeoning high-tech sector.

By mid-2023, these sets of factors—that had historically helped undergird Israeli cohesiveness and performance—have substantially eroded. The sacrificing-serving national ethos is dissipating; how extensively and irrevocably we will only know for sure in the next war. Arab external security risks have diminished, but the Iran/Hezbollah axis threat has grown. Astonishingly, that threat no longer appears to be sufficient to guarantee minimal Israeli internal cohesion. The country's elites have fractured into antagonistic "tribes" with incompatible and perhaps irreconcilable visions for the country's future. Moreover, the values and institutions of the LIO have lost much of their previous dominance. The tenets of political liberalism in particular—including the avoidance of identity-politics and populism, and respect for the rule of law and minority rights—have weakened in leading democracies, including the US and the European Union. Liberal erosion has not bypassed Israel. In fact, the power of illiberal (and in some cases explicitly anti-liberal) political forces in Israel has substantially increased over the past year in particular.

What until recently were barely observable cracks in the foundations are now major fissures threatening to bring the house down. Indeed, the current Israeli moment is unprecedented in that Israelis (or more accurately Jewish Israelis) no longer trust their national leadership or view each other as fellow compatriots. For many—perhaps for the first time, a majority—a certain loose, messy togetherness has somehow evaporated over the past months, replaced by the grief, disappointment, anger, and disorientation associated with self-inflicted descents into disorder.

For some individuals, the family feud appears to have been too much to handle mentally or emotionally. In exceptional cases, we see Jewish Israelis from one “tribe” expressing the most vulgar, antisemitic hatred toward members of another. At one recent protest, Isaac Zarka, a prominent Likud activist of *Mizrabi* extraction, for example, yelled at opponents of the government: “You Ashkenazi scum burn in hell. I’m proud about the six million that burned, proud!”<sup>6</sup>

Mercifully, for now at least, this type and level of vitriol is rare, though its toxic effects are amplified by social media. Moreover, in thirty weeks of mass protests across Israel involving hundreds of thousands of people, no one has been killed or even seriously injured. Similarly, protests in Israel, unlike those in Europe and elsewhere, almost never entail looting, car-burning, or other property damage.

Still, under these conditions, Israelis have begun to contemplate previously unthinkable formulae for managing their differences. The two-state solution now being discussed in Tel Aviv is not about dividing the narrow strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean among Arabs and Jews, but rather about a Jewish divorce in which open, pluralistic, high-tech Israel disengages from nationalist-Orthodox Judea. The idea of such a separation—until very recently the stuff of wild satire—has morphed into a (relatively minor) social movement complete with logo, map, and five-stage disengagement plan. Less radical proposals for dividing Israel (a country the size of New Jersey) involve a federation of somewhere between three and thirty cantons.

At the mildest, most accommodating corner of the Overton window of national existence, analysts warn of disintegration and catastrophe unless some new unifying blueprint of “Israeliness” is found—a renegotiated social contract that manages to rebuild a broadly cohesive center. What that new centrism might resemble—Israelis speak variably of an “Israel 3.0,” a “third republic,” or a “new *mamlachtiyut*”<sup>7</sup> to describe essentially the same yearning for centrism—is arguably the most important question for the country’s future. It is certainly the most constructive public debate to watch for in the coming years.

### **Where Did All This Come From?**

The origins of the current schism are a matter of intense partisan debate in Israel. Some, mainly on the left, point to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995, as the critical moment in the road toward national dissension. They contend that Israeli society never recovered from that event. Those searching for root causes sometimes harken back to the early decisions made by founding father David Ben-Gurion to exempt the ultra-Orthodox [*Haredim*] from military service and permit separate school systems for different ethnic and religious communities in Israel (Christian Arabs, Muslim Arabs,

Druze, and religious and secular Jews). Those “original sins,” they argue, put Israel on the path to eventual disintegration. We are reaping in 2023 what Ben-Gurion sowed shortly after the state’s formation in 1948.

Some look back much further in time, seeing the current Israeli moment as a modern reenactment of ancient Jewish political stupidity. On two separate occasions, Jewish tradition tells us, sovereignty was lost and the national home destroyed not due to foreign aggression but because of Jewish fratricide, by what the Talmud calls *sinat hinam* [baseless hatred]—that unfathomable Jewish instinct for internal bickering, the failure to unite even in the face of existential danger, and eventual self-destruction (think The People’s Front of Judea in mortal combat with The Judean People’s Front in *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*).

Others, primarily on the right, blame the rift on the government’s forced removal, in the summer of 2005, of some eight thousand settlers from their homes, greenhouses, synagogues, and cemeteries in the Gaza Strip. The failure of the Israeli Supreme Court to protect the fundamental rights of a minority of fiercely loyal but right-wing religious citizens, they argue, explains the loss of trust in Israel’s old liberal elites—in other words, 2023 is payback for 2005. Still others place the turning point a decade later, in 2015, when Benjamin Netanyahu—harried by looming criminal charges and carried on the rising tide of Orbáno-Trumpism—pivoted his electoral strategy decisively away from broad, centrist, moderate coalitions to narrow, nationalist-religious, extremist ones.

The toxic polarization threatening to unravel Israel possesses distinctive local characteristics, but it is of course hardly peerless, even among fellow high-income countries. A 2022 survey of the state of democracy around the world found, *inter alia*, that in forty countries, political polarization increased substantially from 2011–21, with processes of polarization and autocratization often creating vicious cycles.<sup>8</sup> Turning to a broader, more comparative frame of reference, the following are some observations drawn from the current Israeli crisis.

### **It’s the Demography, Stupid!**

Scholars of populism and polarization can generally be divided into materialist and identitarian camps. On the one hand, there are those, such as Martin Wolf, who point to economic inequality and insecurity as primary drivers of popular discontent and anti-liberal “rebellion.” On the other hand, observers like Ivan Krastev and Yuval Noah Harari find the economic argument unpersuasive and point to “deeper” identity-based concerns—replacement by immigration, human redundancy at the hands of machines, societal nihilism precipitated by demographic decline—as primary drivers of fear and fragmentation. Both camps,

however, agree that the rage-hungry algorithms of social media serve to amplify erstwhile fringe lunacies and exacerbate societal rifts.

Israel seems to provide more fodder for the identitarian camp than the materialist one, but with some important differences from Europe and the US.<sup>9</sup> Three points are pertinent here:

First, Israel is the only OECD country that is growing as the result of its birth rate rather than immigration. It has a 2023 fertility rate of 2.95 births per woman, and unlike China, Russia, Japan, or Bulgaria, Israelis do not fear demographic collapse—far from it.

Second, Israel illustrates how demographic projections can change dramatically with significant political consequences. The common wisdom among Israeli demographers in the mid-1980s was that by the year 2000, Israel (within its 1967 borders) would be a majority Arab country, because there was a gap of no fewer than six births between Arab and Jewish women. That did not happen. Over the past four decades, Arab and Jewish birthrates aligned primarily as the result of a precipitous drop in Arab-Israeli fertility, as women in Arab communities gained access to secondary/higher education and entered the modern labor market. The relative share of Arabs in the overall Israeli population is expected to remain steady (at 21 percent) until 2040 and then shrink slightly (to 19 percent) by 2065.<sup>10</sup> What many predicted to be the destabilizing “demographic bomb” in Israel (i.e., Arab–Jewish tensions, and possible civil war within 1967 lines, as the result of a growing Arab share of the population) did not materialize.

Finally, a profound demographic change is occurring in Israel—one that nowadays is arguably the most powerful underlying source of anxiety for liberal Israelis—namely, the rapidly growing share of the ultra-Orthodox in the overall demographic mix. From 11 percent in 2015, the *Haredim* are projected to become 32 percent of the overall population by 2065. This means that for the first time in Israel’s history, Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews would form a bare majority of the Israeli population, while the rest (an eclectic mélange of secular, traditional, and nationalist-religious) would be a minority.

It is this demographic anxiety—a domestic, intra-Jewish one—that underlies the deepest fear among secular-liberal Israelis today, bringing into the streets 3–5 percent of the total population of the country in weekly protests. It is this same demographic anxiety that makes roughly a third of Israelis report that they are even considering leaving the country. Whether rightly or wrongly (and the dramatic shift in Arab-Israeli demography demonstrates that demographic projections are not ironclad), secular-liberal Israelis are sensing that a religious-conservative tsunami is heading toward them, that it will obliterate their way of

life, and, quite possibly, bring the state itself to ruin. Many in this camp view Netanyahu's 2023 coalition of extremists and messianists as a terrifying portent of how Israel will look in 2043.

## **Mind the State**

Scholars of political polarization tend to focus on regime-level factors of analysis, particularly the quality of democracy and the rule of law. Yet in studying these phenomena, we must be careful not to neglect the third core pillar of modern liberal democracy: the state.

From the outside, Israel appears to be a strong and effective state. The 2022 *US News & World Report*, for example, ranked it as the tenth most powerful state in the world, with Israel's military placed fourth, preceded only by the US, China, and Russia.<sup>11</sup> Israel's Covid-19 response was also lauded internationally as among the most effective in the world, suggesting high state capacity. However, this is increasingly a façade. Possessing a benign view of the state and assuming it couldn't go wrong, Israelis have allowed three shadow-states to emerge within their polity: an ultra-Orthodox Jewish one, Bedouin-Arab areas of lawlessness and violence in the country's rural regions, and a nationalist West Bank settler movement operating in a twilight zone of ambiguous Israeli authority over the Palestinians. In each case, what started as fringe communities metastasized into full-blown areas of limited statehood—areas in which central authorities are either unwilling or unable to ensure a monopoly over the use of force and provide essential public goods, notably law and order. The speed and violence with which organized criminal organizations in Israel's Arab sector have been able to spread across the country should be of particular alarm to those of us committed to a cohesive Israel governed by the rule of law. The growth of what are now well-armed, crime-enriched, technologically sophisticated Arab militias poses a clear and present danger to Israeli national security. What began as protection rackets and car-theft rings are rapidly evolving into politicized mafia organizations just at a time when Israeli law-enforcement agencies appear increasingly incapable of ensuring public safety for Israeli Arabs. Under conditions of toxic polarization, it is not necessarily the political regime but core functions of the state that may become deeply compromised, and with greater speed than we might imagine.

## **Give Me Your Fighter Pilots, Your High-Tech Entrepreneurs, Your Medical Professionals Yearning to Breathe Free ...**

In the coming years, social scientists interested in protest movements are likely to study Israel's 2023 mass demonstrations with great interest—not least for their



volume, non-violence, persistence, utilization of patriotic symbols, and sheer creativity. It is appropriate to end here by highlighting one feature that does not necessitate the premature evaluation of effectiveness, but which is both distinctive and potentially useful to social movements seeking to counter processes of auto-cratization in Europe, the US, and elsewhere.

To the extent that the protests have managed to minimize, dilute, or delay Netanyahu's plan for regime change through legislation, they have done so to a considerable degree as a result of the pressure exerted by a numerically small but influential set of elites willing to take early, decisive action to protect democracy. In Israel, that has meant that reservist fighter pilots (and others serving in elite military units) refrained from reporting for military service in response to the government's move to curtail judicial power. Similarly, Israeli high-tech entrepreneurs have threatened to relocate their activities abroad should Netanyahu proceed on his current course. Physicians in Israel's notoriously understaffed medical establishment are following suit. The organizing logic of these groups —attacked as privileged liberal traitors by Netanyahu's acolytes—is that Israelis will neither fight nor innovate for a non-democracy. It is simply too early to tell whether these efforts will “succeed” or, indeed, what success means in this context. Early, decisive insistence on the preservation of democracy by small but materially or symbolically influential groups (and these will differ from one country to another) may, however, prove crucial to the preservation of democratic order when under assault and to the discovery of a new, cohesive centrism in the future.

The summer of 2023 will be remembered as Israel's summer of discontent—a time of fear and fragmentation unparalleled in the Jewish State's modern history. It will also be remembered with particular bitterness, self-recrimination, and collective disappointment for the simple reason that its wounds were not only profound but entirely self-inflicted. Whatever follows—a step back from the brink, war born of the loss of Israeli deterrence, descent into an outright constitutional crisis, or some other known-unknown—Israel will never be quite the same come the autumn.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi, “The wounded Jewish psyche and the divided Israeli soul,” *The Times of Israel*, July 28, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/the-wounded-jewish-psyche-and-the-divided-israeli-soul/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Tamar Hermann and Or Anabi, “National Mood Unrestful,” Israel Democracy Institute, April 3, 2023, <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/48985>.
- <sup>3</sup> See Yaron Avraham, “Most of the Public Fears a Civil War; Gantz Once Again Takes the Lead over Netanyahu: Ulpan Shishi Poll” [Hebrew], *N12*, July 15, 2023, [https://www.mako.co.il/news-politics/2023\\_q3/Article-aa016860f945981026.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/news-politics/2023_q3/Article-aa016860f945981026.htm).

- <sup>4</sup> Egged (or, in full, the Egged Public Transportation Company) is the oldest, and still largest, public transportation operator in Israel.
- <sup>5</sup> That is some 22 percent of the total population of the country, which stood at 4.66 million in 1990.
- <sup>6</sup> Naxela NAXELA, "Itzik Zarka ym6c3t6pkorD7hJ," YouTube, July 6, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8GwHixIYd4>.
- <sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the meaning of the word, see Nir Kedar, "Ben-Gurion's Mamlakhtit: Etymological and Theoretical Roots," *Israel Studies*, VII:3 (2002); and Asaf Romirovsky, "The Hebrew Word Bibi Must Learn to Resolve Israel's Political Crisis," *Tablet*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/hebrew-word-bibi-must-learn>.
- <sup>8</sup> Vanessa A. Boese, Martin Lundstedt, Kelly Morrison, Yuko Sato, and Staffan I. Lindberg, "State of the world 2021: autocratization changing its nature?" *Democratization*, XXIX:6 (2022), 983–101, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13510347.2022.2069751>.
- <sup>9</sup> However, with high levels of inequality and runaway real estate prices in Tel Aviv, an economics-based argument could reasonably be made.
- <sup>10</sup> "Projections of Israel Population until 2065," Central Bureau of Statistics, May 21, 2017, <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/mediarelease/Pages/2017/Projections-of-Israel-Population-until-2065.aspx>.
- <sup>11</sup> "Israel-rankings, news | U.S. news best countries," *U.S. News and World Report*, December 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/israel>.