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Israel's New "Government of Darkness": the Most Underreported Story in the Middle East



Photograph Source: State Department Photo by Michael Gross – Public Domain

If a prize was to be awarded for the most important yet least reported story in the media in 2022, it might well go to the news outlets that failed to report on the escalating violence between Israelis and Palestinians, which is now combining with the likely impact of the incoming far-right government in Israel.

The explanation for the neglect is domination of the news agenda by the war in Ukraine and, more culpably, fear by part of the media that any criticism of Israel will be attacked as anti-Semitic. This attitude is more common today in Britain than the US, while the reverse used to be the case.

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The latest grim episode in this extremist shift in Israel came this week when prime minister designate Benjamin Netanyahu succeeded in forming a governing coalition in which many senior posts will be filled by religious and ethno-nationalist zealots.

‘A government of darkness’

The membership of Netanyahu’s new cabinet reads like a list of ingredients guaranteed to deepen repression of the Palestinians and divide Israeli society. Openly anti-Arab ministers are given enhanced security powers over Palestinians. Anti-secularists will set the rules for secularist Israelis. Judicial restraints will be curtailed.

“He managed to assemble a government of darkness,” tweeted Avigdor Lieberman, a secular nationalist politician and former ally of Netanyahu on the news of the new coalition agreement.

What makes the ultra-nationalism of the new government so potentially explosive is that it takes office when Israeli-Palestinian relations are becoming more confrontational by the day. Some 150 Palestinians and 31 Israelis have been killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem this year. Israeli police on Friday shot dead an Israeli-Arab who is alleged to have rammed them with his car in central Israel after first opening fire. A day earlier, a Palestinian was mortally wounded when Palestinians exchanged fire with Israeli soldiers who entered Nablus on the West Bank to escort Jewish worshippers to a site known as Joseph’s Tomb in the Palestinian city.

The new Israeli cabinet

Netanyahu, in winning a majority in the general election on 1 November, has normalised the presence of religious and nationalist fanatics at the centre of Israeli government. Itamar Ben Gvir, the leader of the Jewish Power party, is to be security minister – a newly created post placing him in charge of the national police force.

A religious settler from Kiryat Arba close to the West Bank city of Hebron, Ben Gvir was convicted in the past on charges of inciting racism and supporting terror. He is notorious for threatening Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s life just a few weeks before the latter was assassinated in 1995, and for hanging in his home until recently a photograph of Baruch Goldstein, who shot dead 29 Palestinians as they worshipped in Hebron in 1994.

Other ministers in the new Israeli cabinet include Bezalel Smotrich, a West Bank settler leader who believes Israel should annex the occupied territory, and is set to receive widespread authority over West Bank settlement construction. Previously he has supported the segregation of Jews and Arabs in Israeli maternity wards, governing Israel according to the laws of the Torah and for Jewish property developers to refuse to sell land to Arabs.

‘A total mess’

Under new legislation he is to get enhanced powers on the West Bank that were previously held by the Defence Ministry. Another Netanyahu ally, Avi Maoz, who is head of a small religious, anti-LGBTQ faction, is to control parts of the country’s national education system.

Only in the last few weeks have the implications of what is happening in Israel and the occupied territories begun to sink in abroad. In an article titled “What in the World is Happening in Israel?”, Thomas L Friedman, the most influential of American columnist writing on Israel, concludes that the arrival of Netanyahu’s ultrareligious, ultranationalist government is combining with long term political, demographic and social trends to produce chronic instability at every level.

“If you ask me,” he writes, what “is the most likely outcome [of the present situation] – a total mess that will leave Israel no longer being a bedrock of stability for the region and for its American ally, but instead, a cauldron of instability and a source of anxiety for the US government.”

Devious manoeuvring

Netanyahu is playing down such dire predictions, claiming “I didn’t hand over great powers in Judea, Samaria, the West Bank, not at all. In fact, all the decisions will be made by me and the defence minister.” Significantly, this calming declaration was swiftly followed by a row-back admitting that Netanyahu was indeed transferring authority on the West Bank, notably on settlement construction and policing, to his far-right coalition allies.

The confusion about who is in charge confirms Friedman’s thesis that a great and dangerous “mess” is in the making. Netanyahu insists that he can restrain his extremist partners and has done so in the past. But that may actually be his problem as his new cabinet colleagues regard him as wholly untrustworthy and likely to renege shamelessly on pledges and alliances whenever it suits his interests. They will make every effort to show that they exercise real authority under the coalition agreement which explains why it took so long to negotiate.

But it is not only the suspicions of his coalition partners that may make Netanyahu’s devious manoeuvring less effective than in the past. History has moved on for both Israelis and Palestinians. The two-state solution has long been a sham, with half a million Jewish settlers on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. The pretence that this option still has life

in it, so far as it ever did, is simply a convenient piece of hypocrisy enabling the US and European powers to pretend that diplomatic progress is feasible.

Violence and force

The political reality is that for decades the balance of power between Israel and the Palestinians has been so skewed in favour of the former that many Israelis – and non-Israelis – no longer believed compromise to be necessary. Yet, in one crucial respect, perception of Palestinian weakness was deceptive, because the Palestinians today make up slightly more than half the 14 million people living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. Divided geographically between the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and Israel itself they may be, but in practice this separation creates multiple points of possible friction, each of which might detonate into protests and resistance.

Nor are such outbreaks as easy to isolate as they once were as news of them spreads instantly through the internet regardless of walls and barbed wire fences. A protest against the eviction of Palestinians from a house in the Sheikh Jarrah district of East Jerusalem in May 2021 quickly affected the two million Palestinians sealed off in Gaza and a similar number in Israel, where they make up 20 per cent of the population. Fear of these outbreaks erupting again was one factor pushing Israeli voters towards the ultra-right in the general election.

What is becoming clear is that controlling the Palestinians in their separate enclaves is going to take ever-increasing amounts of violence and force to maintain Israeli dominance, however counterproductive this is likely to be.

Further Thoughts

Read anything about [the Syrian cholera outbreak](#) recently? Probably not, because Syria is one of the many simmering wars that have never ended but the rest of the world has forgotten about. Yet economic sanctions still do their deadly work, degrading water and electricity supplies and sewage disposal. This provides ideal conditions for the return of cholera and other epidemic illnesses we associate with pre-modern times.

Since a ceasefire in and around Idlib province, largely rebel held, in 2020 there has been less shooting, but the country is still too dangerous and unstable for people to go home, with the result that Syria still has 6.8 million internally displaced people – the highest such figure proportionate to population in the world.

Beneath the Radar

[*The War We Left Behind*](#) is the best documentary I know about the systematic destruction by the US air force of Iraqi infrastructure in a short period in 1991. The Iraqi economy and

society have never recovered from this attack 31 years later. Note that power stations were hit repeatedly to prevent them being rebuilt post-war, one near Basra being attacked 16 times until it was a heap of ruins.

An iron rule of warfare is that all governments and armies lie about the meticulous care they take in avoiding civilian casualties. Full disclosure: the Frontline documentary is by Andrew and Leslie Cockburn, my brother and sister-in-law.

Cockburn's Picks

I found this interview with Russian dissident Boris Kagarlitsky in Moscow about Russia losing the war convincing. Also interesting is the apolitical attitude of the Russian public until the shambolic partial mobilisation a few months back. This public apathy also explains President Vladimir Putin's ludicrous pretence that his "Special Military Operation" is not a proper war, and his continuing failure to mobilise adequate Russian resources in manpower and military equipment.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of War in the Age of Trump (Verso).

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