Netanyahu's Attack on Democracy Left Israel Unprepared

The prime minister brought about a situation in which all the options are bad.

By Anne Applebaum

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This summer I spent several days in Israel talking with people who were afraid for their country's future. They were not, at that moment, focused on terrorism, Gaza, or

Hamas. They feared something different: the emergence of an undemocratic Israel, a de facto autocracy. In January, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his justice minister had announced a package of judicial "reforms" that, taken together, would have given their coalition government the power to alter Israeli legal institutions to their own political benefit. Their motives were mixed. Netanyahu, who is on trial for corruption, was eager to stay out of jail. Some of his coalition partners wanted courts to stop hampering their plans to create new Israeli settlements on the West Bank, others to maintain military exemptions for Orthodox religious communities. All of them were interested in doing whatever it would take to stay in power, without the hindrance of an independent judiciary.

In response, Israelis created a mass movement capable of organizing long marches and enormous weekly protests, every Saturday night, in cities and towns across the country. Unlike similar protest movements in other countries, this one did not peter out. Thanks to the financial and logistical support of the Israeli tech industry, the most dynamic economic sector in the country, as well as to organized teams of people coming from academia and the army reserves, the protests kept going for many months and successfully blocked some of the proposed legal changes. I was trying to understand why these Israeli protests had succeeded, and so I met tech-industry executives, army reservists, students, and one famous particle physicist, all of whom had participated in organizing and sustaining the demonstrations.

After the surprise Hamas attack on southern Israel earlier this month, I listened again to the tapes of those conversations. In almost every one of them, there was a warning note that I didn't pay enough attention to at the time. When I asked people why they had sacrificed their time to join a protest movement, they told me it was because they feared Israel could become not just undemocratic but unrecognizable, unwelcoming to them and their families. But they also talked about a deeper fear: that Israel could cease to exist at all. The deep, angry divides in Israeli politics—divides that are religious and cultural, but that were also deliberately created by Netanyahu and his extremist allies for their political and personal benefit—weren't just a problem for some liberal or secular Israelis. The people I met believed the polarization of Israel was an *existential* risk for everybody.

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This is certainly what Michal Tsur was trying to tell me. Tsur is a co-founder and the president of Kaltura, a video cloud platform. She is also one of many entrepreneurs who donated time and money to help organize the protest campaign. Back in January, when Netanyahu's justice minister first proposed changes to the powers of the Supreme Court, to the system of appointing judges, and to rules obliging government ministers to listen to legal advice, Tsur and her colleagues began talking about their industry and the open, networked, mobile society it needs to thrive. They believed Netanyahu's judicial changes would crush that society, persuading many talented people to plan their futures elsewhere. Tsur told me that she had felt for a long time that Israel was on a slippery slope, that people had not understood how vulnerable the country's institutions could become. Israel doesn't have a written constitution. Its political system works according to informal norms as well as formal law, and Netanyahu has spent years attacking these norms. "It feels as if the country is at real risk," Tsur told me. "Looking at Israel, if these trends do not turn, I either think Israel won't exist in 20 or 30 years, or else it will definitely not exist in its current form." She worried that the kinds of people whose time and energy are necessary for Israel's self-defense would not work on behalf of a religious or nationalist dictatorship. Israel's citizens' army functions, she told me, because it can "get really smart people to serve." Without democracy, she feared that "people will not serve. People will leave."

She was not exaggerating: "We will not serve" was one of the threats made by Brothers in Arms, the Israeli reservists who also came together to fight Netanyahu's assault on the Israeli judiciary. Ron Scherf, one of the group's founders—also a veteran of one of Israel's most elite special-forces units—told me that he and his fellow veterans had started the group because "the

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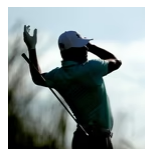
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government is breaking the basic contract, the unwritten contract between itself and the soldiers." If someone is going to risk his life, he told me, they need to feel a deep connection to the country, that it is *their* country. Netanyahu was trying to cut that connection, to change what it meant for some people to be Israeli. Scherf couldn't accept that, and so he and his fellow veterans staged protests in front of the homes of ministers, put banners on bridges and cliffs, even planted Israeli flags in front of the homes of far-right government officials to remind them where their loyalties should lie. Students and academics joined them, and the protests had a snowball effect, convincing others that change was possible. Shikma Bressler, a particle physicist who became one of the most prominent and outspoken leaders of the protest movement, told me that one important impact of the protests was to convince many protesters that they were not alone: "We really had felt that they controlled the conversation," she said, referring to Netanyahu's government. "You could not say a word without literally being attacked all over the place. And all of a sudden, we understood that, you know, the majority of the people in this country want something different."

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The government, and Netanyahu himself, reacted to this challenge in the way that all autocratic populists react to any challenge: They accused their opponents of disloyalty. They refused to listen. The prime minister and his supporters slowed down the judicial overhaul, passing one element and tabling the rest, but persisted in polarizing the country, even when they were warned that doing so was dangerous. The links that some members of the protest movement had to the military seemed to fuel the government's suspicions of the people who were most responsible for national security. Earlier this year, the head of Shin Bet, the Israeli domestic intelligence service, warned that Israeli settlers who were attacking West Bank Palestinians posed a security threat to the country. One member of parliament from Netanyahu's Likud party responded using language that will sound familiar to Americans: "The ideology of the left has reached the top echelons of the Shin Bet. The deep state has infiltrated the leadership of the Shin Bet and the IDF"—the Israel Defense Forces.

And that rhetoric was typical: In order to pass his judicial program, Netanyahu and his government attacked the judges, the courts, the independent media, the civil service, the universities, and eventually even the protesting army reservists and the military leaders who warned that the division of the country was creating a grave security risk. They attacked the people who were protesting with thousands of national flags, at times calling them "traitors." This long, drawn-out public battle damaged Israel's sense of national unity, that mystical but essential element of national security. It created distrust inside the system. It also gave the government an excuse to make the protection of West Bank settlers a military priority, to sideline the Palestinian authority, and to ignore anyone who objected. It may even have been one of the reasons Hamas dared to launch its attack. As Jesse Ferris of the Israel Democracy Institute told me, "The single-minded focus on the judicial overhaul created deep and visible divisions within Israeli society that projected weakness, which tempted aggression." Last week, the Israeli education minister, Yoav Kisch of Likud, seemed to acknowledge publicly that this division, although it was fostered and promoted by his government, was a mistake. "We were busy with nonsense. We'd forgotten where we live," he told an Israeli website.

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In one sense, the protesters' fears proved unjustified: After October 7, Israel's divided society instantly unified. Netanyahu had not yet succeeded in changing the nature of the country; Israel is still able to inspire the loyalty of its citizens and of the reservists, who went back to their units. Someone described the current moment to me not just as full mobilization but as "150 percent mobilization," because even those who were not called up are asking if they can join. One opposition party's leader, Benny Gantz, agreed to take part in an emergency war cabinet, partly to contribute his experience—he is a retired general and former defense minister—and also to help bridge the divide.

But anger at the Netanyahu government remains—80 percent of Israelis say they want Netanyahu to take responsibility for the attack—especially because the intelligence and security failure on October 7 has since been compounded by a failure of the state to cope with the aftermath. Some members of Brothers in Arms, now expanded to Brothers and Sisters in Arms, who are too old to fight or otherwise ineligible have spent the days since the attack volunteering in the Israeli border communities most badly affected, helping to feed and evacuate people. Within hours, they had set up computer systems to keep track of who was missing, sourced supplies for civilians, and gone to places that had been bombarded to pull out survivors. In Israel, the instinct to protest for democracy on the one hand, and the desire to volunteer in order to make up for the state's failures on the other, are both coming from the same source: anger at a political class that shunned expertise, thrived on polarization, and threw suspicion on all kinds of state institutions and then neglected them.

There is a lesson here for Americans: We need to look hard at what happened in Israel, and start asking which security risks are posed by the scorn that American far-right politicians and propagandists now pour on the American military, the FBI, and of course the federal government as a whole. They have already weakened public trust and, if Donald Trump becomes president again, they may deliberately set out to

weaken the institutions themselves: Preparation to <u>replace civil servants</u> has already begun. The impact of their campaign to undermine Americans' faith in American democracy has already been felt, and its security implications are already evident. To take just one example, online disinformation campaigns of the sort the Russians ran in the 2016 election work best on polarized societies, where levels of distrust are especially high.

The lesson for Israel is similar, only in the past tense: An autocratic populist party, in alignment with extremists, created the present crisis. Netanyahu's political choices, including the decision to divide the country, as well as the decision to pretend regional peace could be achieved without the Palestinians, have created a world in which Israel has only bad options. Any response that allows Hamas to keep ruling Gaza could encourage more terrorist violence in the future; at the same time, a horrific ground war in Gaza will kill many Israelis and many more Palestinians, probably creating more anger, feeding more grievance, and maybe inspiring more terrorism in the future too.

We are too far from a solution right now to even imagine what that might look like. I can only offer this imprecise thought: Someday, Israelis and Palestinians have to find some way to live next to each other, both relatively prosperous and relatively free, in states that they feel at home in. A unified Israel will find it very difficult to ever reach that solution. A divided Israel never will.

Anne Applebaum is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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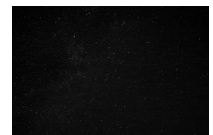
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