



Destruction of the 'Third Temple': Israel on the brink of civil war

Description

As tens of thousands of Israelis rallied in protests against their government's judicial reform plan, the Israeli army conducted a major security operation in Nablus on 22 February, resulting in the death of 11 civilians and injuries to more than 100 others.

The ongoing demonstrations against the controversial bill are becoming increasingly violent, with angry slogans and protester actions leading to the recent killing of a demonstrator by the Israeli police in the city of Beersheba in southern occupied Palestine.

One defining moment of the protests occurred last week – during the first vote on the draft judicial reforms – when protesters were able to storm the Knesset parliament building before being removed by security forces.

Undermining the region's 'only democracy'

The judicial reform plan is one of the most significant initiatives of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's sixth government. It aims to limit the powers of judges, which currently exceed those of Knesset deputies, and to allow for exceptional intervention by Knesset members in the appointment of judges.

Netanyahu's opponents argue that the reform plans led by Justice Minister Yariv Levin are a brazen attempt to "politicize and undermine the judiciary" in order to protect the prime minister from prosecution on longstanding charges of "corruption and breach of trust."

According to Chief Justice Esther Hayut, the proposed reforms will:

"Deprive the court of the option to override laws that disproportionately violate human rights, including the right to life, property, freedom of movement, as well as the basic right of human dignity and its derivatives – the right to equality, freedom of speech and more."

Former Chief Justice Aharon Barak has expressed similar concerns, calling the bill "the beginning of the end of the Third Temple" – an apocalyptic expression and fear denoting the beginning of Israel's

demise.

In his book, *Third Temple*, Israeli reporter and writer Ari Shavit analyzes how in the state's eighth decade, the Israelis have become their own enemies: "With security challenges one can cope ... but the disintegration of identity cannot be overcome."

Israel's impending 'civil war'

In the corridors of Israeli power, the term "treason" is being bandied around more frequently, in parallel with National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir's call for police to deal "more firmly" with domestic protesters.

Following Israeli President Isaac Herzog's warning that Netanyahu's plan could push the country to "the brink of constitutional and social collapse," the term "civil war" is being routinely used by the Hebrew press, with *Haaretz* analyst Anshel Pfeffer opining that "civil war is no longer unthinkable."

"Over the last few days, I've found myself in conversations I never imagined I'd ever have ... But the topic is deadly serious: the various ways a civil war might suddenly break out, and who would win," muses Pfeffer, asking ominously "will (Israel's) law enforcement, security agencies, and the military take sides?"

Israeli affairs researcher Ismail Mohammed tells *The Cradle* that the notion of a civil war in Israel is no longer just a pipe dream hoped for by the occupation state's adversaries. Yedidia Stern, head of the Jewish People Policy Institute founded by the Jewish Agency, had said that Israel is closer to civil war than at any time since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Both are events in which Israel teetered on the brink of civil war.

The battle for judicial reform in Israel is not just a simple conflict, but rather reflects deeper issues that touch on the identity of the state and its social composition. The goal of some political groups, such as the coalition of Ben Gvir and right-wing Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, is to change Israel from a secular liberal state to a state based on religious law: to regulate religious observances and the daily conduct of Jews – or in Hebrew terminology, a form of "Halakha."

This is also evident in the statement made by Haredi Ashkenazi lawmaker Yitzhak Pindrus, who, on the 74th anniversary of the Nakba, expressed a desire to "blow up" the building of the Supreme Court, which governs secular civil laws that are contrary to religious teachings.

The polarization isn't only between secular and religious Jews. The ugly old division between eastern and western Jews is also rearing its head. Ben Gvir, for instance, has repeatedly called for reducing the power of the "Ashkenazi" over the state, demanding the inclusion of "Sephardic" Mizrahi Jews in Israel's institutions.

A recent statement by Otzma Yehudit MK Zvika Vogel on the Hebrew Kan 11 website reflects this significant shift from mere political differences to an existential clash between two different Israels. Vogel called for the arrest of opposition politicians Yair Lapid, Benny Gantz, Yair Golan, and Moshe Ya'alon for fanning civil war, describing them as "the most dangerous people at the present time in Israel."

As Israeli affairs analyst Anwar Saleh explains to *The Cradle*: “The issue is much more serious than a demand for equality and citizenship. Netanyahu’s extremist coalition holds convictions that affect the very foundations of the state, such as a return to the elementary question of ‘who is a Jew?’”

“This political demographic considers that secular Jews – who constitute more than 44 percent of Israelis – are ‘false Jews,’ and that the current government, which is controlled by the religious right, who make up 20 percent of the population, represent the true spirit of Judaism,” Saleh continues. “This debate happening today – 74 years after the state of Israel was created – affects the very basis on which the Jewish Agency launched its immigration program to draw Jews to Palestine.”

Divestment amid uncertainty

It is noteworthy that over 50 investment companies have moved their business from Israel to other countries since the start of the protests. This mass flight includes 37 technology firms.

The development prompted Israeli Minister of Science and Technology Ofir Okunis to hold a private meeting with foreign ambassadors in Tel Aviv, during which he urged them to take a stand on the matter.

In response, the tech firms released a statement refusing to repatriate \$2.2 billion in earnings from their foreign operations back to Israel. The owners of these companies have also expressed concern about a drop in the country’s credit rating because politicians are now appointing judges, which they see as an unfavorable environment for business. This has prompted a number of investors to transfer funds in Israel abroad.

‘Moses’ staff’

Even if Netanyahu today wielded the powerful “staff of Moses,” he would not be able to beat down the powerful domestic schisms tearing Israel apart. However, the one tool at the prime minister’s disposal is to divert Israeli attention elsewhere – though this will eventually re-ignite conflict within. In essence, whether now or later, his country will face its civil conflict.

Despite its many differences, Israeli society is united in the perception – fanned by their politicians and media – that it is under existential threat from the outside. Observers speculate that Netanyahu’s only hope to quell internal conflict now is to manufacture a hot external threat.

The occupied West Bank is seen as the least politically sensitive and most flexible option for action, according to political analyst Ayman al-Rifati. He explains to *The Cradle* that, unlike in the past, Gaza today is the theater in which Israel seeks to maintain calm in order to avoid military escalation during the coming Ramadan season.

The increasing sophistication of missiles held in Gaza’s resistance arsenals also poses too high a risk, with unknown and uncontrollable consequences that Israel may have to bear. The West Bank, conversely, is relatively unweaponized, with small arms concentrated in much fewer hands.

And despite a steady stream of threats from Tel Aviv, there are no indications of Israel starting a war with either Iran or Hezbollah, although the option of carrying out targeted security operations that elicit a reaction from these opponents remains active.

The recent attack by Jewish settlers on the town of Huwara, in the West Bank city of Nablus – is a by-product of Netanyahu's efforts to mobilize Israeli sentiments toward launching a comprehensive confrontation with West Bank Palestinians. One of the key objectives of this clash is to draw attention away from Israel's internal collapse.

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