

OBSERVATIONS ON THE ELECTIONS IN ISRAEL

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I. Anxiety and Fatigue

To say that Israel has experienced intense election cycles in recent years would be a gross understatement. Voters in this country, which will head to the polls again on October 27, have long approached the ballot box with a kind of existential, constitutional, *this-time-the-country-itself-is-on-the-line* mentality. They had learned to do so well before October 7, 2023 – the day Israel suffered its most devastating blow and descended into its most violent and protracted war.

The previous election, held in late 2022, brought to power the most right-wing government in Israel's history, admitting into its ranks populist Jewish nationalists and hardline religious Zionists who had long been considered beyond the pale of respectable politics. The new coalition also announced its infamous plan for a sweeping overhaul of the judiciary, which, since the 1990s – many on the right claim, with more than an iota of truth – had developed into a powerful, unelected, broadly liberal institution that constrained government action and thereby infringed upon the will of the people (or at least the right-leaning portion thereof). The decision to pursue this “judicial reform” – described by opponents as a “judicial coup” – sparked a massive wave of street protests and civil unrest, bringing the country to the brink of a constitutional crisis. This

extraordinarily intense, months-long domestic conflict was halted (or, rather, suspended) only by the appearance of an external enemy on the morning of October 7.

The fateful election of 2022, however, was itself only another turning point in a longer era of political madness. It was precipitated by the premature disintegration of the short-lived "Government of Change" – a fragile and astonishingly diverse (or rather, incoherent) alliance of political forces united by little more than their opposition to Netanyahu – which had taken office in June 2021. To appreciate just how unusual the Government of Change was, suffice it to recall that it brought together two developments that were not only historically unprecedented but also, in a sense, contradictory. For the first time, Israel's prime ministership was held by a kippah-wearing religious Zionist, Naftali Bennett, who was closely identified with the settler movement and had previously served as director-general of the umbrella organization representing Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria (known internationally as the West Bank). At the same time, and no less remarkably, an Arab party – the Islamist *Ra'am*, led by Mansour Abbas – became a full-fledged partner in the governing coalition. Thus, the first Israeli government headed by a homegrown leader of the religious-Zionist settler movement was also the first to include in its ranks a representative not merely of Israel's Arab minority, but of its Islamist constituency.

How did such a schizophrenically innovative political arrangement come to power in the first place? As it happens, this extraordinarily unusual arrangement was itself the product of extraordinarily unusual circumstances. The Government of Change's short tenure marked the end of a prolonged political crisis that had subjected Israel to four successive elections in barely two years. Since late 2018, a stubborn electoral stalemate had left the country's party system in a seemingly intractable deadlock, with neither

Netanyahu and his allies nor his opponents able to command a sufficient parliamentary majority.

Moreover, Israel's most election-ridden period – during which voters headed to the polls five times in four years – has been followed by the first parliamentary term since 1988 to run its full, constitutionally prescribed four years. Ironically, the electoral stability of 2022–2026 represents an intensification, rather than a reversal, of the political turmoil that preceded it. Precisely because the current government, which has ruled the country through some of its most tumultuous and bloody years, is arguably among the most bitterly divisive and least broadly accepted in Israel's history, its members have displayed extraordinary coalition discipline. The fact that large swaths of the public – particularly in the wake of October 7 – regard this government as unfit, if not outright illegitimate, has given its members a powerful incentive to postpone elections and cling to their seats. Thus, a lack of popular support has paradoxically produced electoral stability. Rather than a sign of democratic health, the government's completion of its full term may be a symptom of a legitimacy deficit.

Israel is not the only country in which democracy's constitutional and institutional structures are increasingly becoming the object rather than the framework of electoral competition. The sense of heightened political stakes – the feeling that citizens are voting not on the identity of the state's leaders, but on its fundamental essence or existence – has become a feature of many democratic polities. That blurring the distinction between legal form and political content is democratically unhealthy should be obvious. Popular self-rule is a delicate business, and mass societies' ability to govern themselves requires firm normative and institutional boundaries. In this sense, the tendency – common among populist insurgents and establishment liberals alike – to turn every election cycle into a battle over democracy itself, is deeply undemocratic. In Israel's case, however, this harmful existentialist mentality may be more than a discursive

phenomenon. Surely, here, too, the idea that every election might be the last derives in part from a polarized political culture and a recklessly sensationalist media. But the malaise of late-modern Western democracy is here compounded by Middle Eastern geopolitics, a region that has seen more than its fair share of state collapse.

All this makes one aspect of the current election cycle particularly odd. What international coverage of Israel largely fails to capture is perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the present moment: the intensity and urgency of political debates playing out daily in newspapers and across the media are strangely at odds with the broader mood and texture of public life. The coming elections – fateful as they may be – have barely left a mark on everyday social experience. With less than two weeks to go, the usual signs of an Israeli election season – bumper stickers, enormous highway banners, mass rallies, streets brimming with political chatter – are nowhere to be found. The atmosphere is remarkably, perhaps ominously, un-election-like.

One explanation circulating in Israeli political discussions, though difficult to verify, attributes the subdued atmosphere partly to the campaign calculations of the anti-Netanyahu camp. The assumption is that its educated and politically engaged supporters are already highly mobilized, whereas a more energetic election season might awaken otherwise disengaged voters sociologically inclined toward Netanyahu's *Likud* party – particularly lower-class voters in Israel's geographic periphery, the so-called “left behind.” Such a strategy, if indeed it is being pursued, would add yet another layer of paradox to an already paradoxical political reality: the struggle to save democracy would depend, at least in part, on discouraging popular participation and encouraging civic apathy.

Another, perhaps more substantive explanation refers to a pervasive sense of exhaustion. It may be that, sometime in the past few weeks or months, Israeli society has crossed an

invisible threshold separating anxiety from fatigue, urgency from indifference. What seems strange about this explanation, however, is that over the past several years, politics has become personal and palpable for vast numbers of Israelis in a way that most citizens of Western countries would struggle to understand. Experiences of violent death, physical injury, and psychological trauma have become so widespread that it would hardly be an exaggeration to suggest that the average Israeli either personally knows someone who was killed or injured on October 7 or in the ensuing conflict, or knows someone who does. While it is difficult to assess precisely how such experiences shape society's relationship to politics, there can be little doubt that they do. One might even wonder whether the subdued atmosphere of the current election cycle could actually be a positive sign: an instinctive recoil from the indecency of contemporary politics in the face of collective sorrow and private anguish, as though a slowly recovering social fabric were trying to protect itself from the indignity and toxicity of hyperpolarized public life.

II. For a De-NAZAification of the Israeli Left

One of the few events to have penetrated this atmosphere of quietude was the controversy surrounding the new documentary *NAZA* and its reception at the Venice Film Festival. The film, in the unlikely event that anyone has not yet heard of it, was made by two left-wing Israelis – Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor – and exposes, through interviews with Israeli soldiers and intelligence officers, how Israel employed sophisticated AI-based targeting systems during the Gaza war, contributing to the massive destruction inflicted on the territory. Its most damning and contentious claim is that the mass killing of Palestinian civilians during the war was not

a consequence of military operations, but a deliberate and calculated act.

The film, as might have been expected, was enthusiastically received abroad, while provoking an enormous public backlash at home. It dominated Israeli media discussions for days, remaining in the headlines considerably longer than, say, the foiled terrorist attack on the FlyDubai flight. Much of the public discussion in Israel resembled a kind of moral panic or witch hunt. On several occasions right-wing mobs demonstrated outside the home of one filmmaker's parents, calling for their "treasonous" daughter to be hanged. While these demonstrations appear to have been very small – we are talking about a few dozen activists, not a brownshirt march – there is little doubt that this type of harassment is revolting and carries the risk of actual violence. Always eager to cater to their voters' lowest impulses, members of the governing coalition unleashed a series of inflammatory denunciations against the newly designated enemies of the state, illustrating once again how thoroughly the current Netanyahu coalition has degraded basic standards of composure and responsibility once expected of public officeholders. Even the IDF's chief of staff could not help himself, publicly announcing that he had instructed the military's legal department to examine possible measures against the film's "blood libels." Miki Zohar, the current Minister of Culture and Sports, probably outdid his colleagues by declaring on social media that he would seek to revoke the filmmakers' citizenship, while also calling on Israel's domestic security service, the Shin Bet, to investigate possible connections between them and Hamas. These announcements are, of course, a cynical media performance unlikely to produce much in the way of legal consequences.

But the NAZA frenzy, regrettably, cannot be attributed solely to the populist right. A wave of public outrage swept across much of the Israeli media landscape and extended across nearly the entire political spectrum, with the exception of a few politicians on the far left and the Arab parties. There

is little doubt that the film has infuriated Israel's Jewish citizens, touching a particularly sensitive nerve and provoking a correspondingly unseemly response. The scale of this controversy, and its contrast with the lethargic atmosphere described above, deserves closer consideration.

One of the interesting aspects of the *NAZA* controversy is the way in which it is both incredibly familiar – following well-established patterns in domestic and international reception of Israeli cultural production – and yet somehow feels new and exceptional. Much of Israel's politically motivated creative and intellectual output, particularly its cinema, attracts considerable attention abroad. The world just loves hearing Israelis find ever-new ways of explaining how profoundly wicked their country is, and how extensive its record of horrible crimes. Israeli artists and intellectuals, for their part, are well aware that the international demand for the figure of the anti-Israel Israeli provides an abundant source of moral, and sometimes material, capital (which is not to suggest that they are motivated by cynical career considerations; their conviction in their own righteousness strikes me as entirely genuine). Thus, every few years, a new film comes out, shedding light on this or that aspect of Israel's oppression of Palestinians, questioning the justification for – or exposing the criminality of – this or that war, or simply portraying Israel as hypernationalistic, deranged, and vulgar. Many of these films are excellent, and manage to illuminate the dark and violent realities of war, military occupation, and national conflict. Others seem transparently designed to satisfy the Israel fetish of Western audiences. And these films invariably provoke the same familiar cycle: international acclaim, followed by inflammatory denunciations by right-wing politicians, followed by an outcry over the erosion of artistic freedom from Israel's cultural intelligentsia, whose members sometimes seem to believe that fascism is when a state condemns movies that make it look bad.

The NAZA controversy both repeats and radically intensifies this pattern. This is reflected in the filmmakers' own accounts: in interviews, they have said that although they anticipated a hostile reception in Israel, they were taken aback by its sheer intensity. Their sense of surprise at the hostility Israelis directed toward them is usually offered as yet another illustration of the country's vindictive and intolerant culture. But something about this surprise strikes me as more meaningful and worthy of reflection. For one has to wonder: why didn't they expect a particularly intense backlash? They are surely familiar with the numerous precedents that, over the past decades, have established the pattern described above. Indeed, the most recent iteration of this pattern was the reception of *No Other Land*, the 2025 Oscar-winning documentary co-directed by two of the same filmmakers – which likewise provoked an intensely hostile response in Israel, albeit one less ferocious than the reaction to NAZA (a difference that may reflect the fact that the earlier film depicts events in the West Bank predating October 7, while the later one addresses the far more recent and sensitive Gaza war). More broadly, they are aware of how raw and pervasive the wounds of October 7 still are, and how deeply grief has penetrated the fabric of Israeli society. Having lived in Israel through the past three years themselves, they surely know that the country has been shaken by a dizzying succession of military, political, and social convulsions on a scale never before seen in its war-stricken past. Given both the recurrent pattern of such controversies and the unusually heightened sensitivity of the sociopolitical context, should they not have expected their film to provoke precisely the kind of response it has – namely, a familiar public outrage, only on a far greater scale?

There is a revealing – though unarticulated – concession in that surprise. It betrays a lack of self-reflexivity and social receptivity characteristic not only of these two individuals but of the broader sociological, professional, and ideological

milieu to which they belong. First, it suggests that, at least before this latest controversy, there was a certain gap between the way they described Israeli society and their actual experience as Israeli citizens. They were surprised because they had assumed that the normative and discursive boundaries of Israeli culture were sufficiently flexible to allow them to mount such a provocative attack without paying a particularly heavy price. For years, they have conveyed the message that Israel and its military are ruthless and power-hungry, that the world must pay the closest attention to its systematic abuse of the Palestinians and intervene to bring it to an end. Yet their behavior and experience as members of Israeli society seem to rest on the perhaps unacknowledged assumption that Israel is also an open and pluralistic place, that the limits of permissible dissent are relatively wide, and that Israelis are capable of confronting troubling truths about the immoral and destructive actions of those entrusted with their protection – even in the midst of the most difficult war in the country’s history, under a relentless barrage of international condemnation, and while still struggling to recover from a brutally violent massacre. Just how deep their confidence in this assumption ran became apparent in an interview published by *The Guardian* on Friday, in which they shared the rather stunning fact that they had initially planned to conduct and film their interviews in large public spaces, in broad daylight, thus staging direct encounters between ordinary Israelis and the catastrophic consequences of the IDF’s conduct in Gaza.¹ The reason they gave for abandoning this idea, incidentally, was not fear of the public’s reaction, or concern that such an exercise might touch a few too many raw

¹ Carter Sherman, interview with Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, “Why Is Israel So Afraid of the Film NAZA? We Spoke to Its Directors,” *Stateside with Kai and Carter*, *The Guardian*, September 29, 2026, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3dC9YNPWYUo>.

nerves, but the realization that they needed to conceal the identities of their interviewees to avoid legal sanctions.

It seems, then, that their surprise reveals not only an unacknowledged assumption about the openness of the country they passionately vilify, but also a certain tone-deafness to the mental temperature of their own society. To understand why Israelis were so furious with the NAZA creators – and doing this neither excuses the public hysteria nor justifies the IDF's actions – one has to imagine the vast number of grieving mothers and recently widowed wives whose sons or husbands went to war and never returned, now an almost ubiquitous presence across virtually every corner of Israeli society. One has to imagine a society in which the concept of courage has shifted from a lofty ideal to a painful social praxis: the courage of young men to go into battle and put their lives on the line, as well as the courage of the women these men have left behind, trying to carry on with life – raising children, going to work, cleaning the house – haunted by the unfathomable dread of knowing that their husband, brother, or son is out there right now. One has to consider the courage of these men and women and ask oneself whether one would have had the courage to do something similar. One needs to imagine a society in which such extraordinary courage has become utterly ordinary; in which there is nothing exceptional in losing a loved one or risking one's life.

And then one has to picture a different kind of courage: the courage of taking the stage in a magnificent European auditorium filled with the most celebrated figures of the international film aristocracy; the courage of enduring an extended standing ovation, displaying solemn expressions and pensive nods. It is a kind of courage associated not with self-sacrifice, but with fame. It is the courage to denounce one's country rather than defend it; not the collective, anonymous courage of being one more person exposing oneself to violent death, but the courage of the exceptional individual who stands by his righteous principles and swims against the tide

(well, at least against certain tides; with the tide of enlightened global opinion, he is perfectly happy to swim along).

The reason behind the NAZA controversy is not, as the filmmakers have suggested on numerous occasions, that Israelis simply do not want to know what their army has done in Gaza – that they insist on preserving their comfortable bubble of blissful nationalistic ignorance – as though Israelis’ reluctance to empathize with Palestinian suffering were simply a matter of access to information. Israelis are not in denial about what happened in Gaza, not least because so many of them were physically there. They experienced firsthand the hell of urban warfare, killed and were killed by Hamas militants, witnessed the biblical scale of the destruction to which Gaza had been reduced, and participated in the mass devastation of Palestinian lives. These experiences will haunt those who returned for the rest of their lives, as well as the lives of their families and loved ones. Contrary to what Maggie Gyllenhaal suggested in her comments on NAZA – and, granted, this is precisely the analogy the film seems designed to invite – the relationship between Israelis and the war bears little resemblance to the scenario Jonathan Glazer (one of NAZA’s executive producers) depicts in *The Zone of Interest*.² To imagine that this is how Israelis experienced the war betrays an extraordinary degree of banality and ignorance – indeed, the same banality and ignorance that seem to characterize Glazer’s understanding of the Holocaust.

The controversy, then, did not simply reflect Israelis’ insistence on remaining uninformed. Rather, it stemmed from a clash between opposing moral universes, and between two contradictory conceptions of courage. They were viscerally outraged because the film’s portrayal of the IDF as a ruthlessly clinical war machine, hell-bent on killing as many Palestinians

² Middle East Eye, “Maggie Gyllenhaal Draws Parallel between NAZA and The Zone of Interest,” YouTube Short, August 14, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Q6NW09a6VrA>.

as possible, seemed to negate the courage of those who fought and the dignity of those who lost their lives. This negation is reflected in the decision to epitomize the IDF not in the figure of the foot soldier entering a hellish urban battlefield, but in that of the elite, educated, high-tech intelligence officer operating from the safety of his Tel Aviv office; someone for whom war is a mediated and digitized affair, devoid of exposure to violent death or bodily harm, and who – between shifts or on weekends – finds time to contemplate the morality of his actions. And yes, the actions of this officer are indeed awful, and he absolutely should contemplate them. And filmmakers and journalists should bring them to public attention. But to turn this officer's conduct into an emblem of Israel's war experience is, to my mind, a propagandistic act. It reduces the immense costs and sacrifices Israelis have borne during the Gaza war to a radically simplistic moral image of a high-tech Israeli desk-murderer clicking away the lives of innocent civilians. That such a caricatured, rigid, and dishonest portrayal of the war should be celebrated around the world as an act of courage is, indeed, maddening.

Let me be clear: my point is not to minimize or excuse the toxic response to *NAZA*. Although the filmmakers' expectations of Israeli society betray a degree of detached naïveté, I happen to think that the fact that those expectations proved so badly mistaken is deeply unfortunate – for them and for Israeli democracy. And while I find the politics of *NAZA* superficial – and although I tend to think that left-wing journalist-activists are about as honest and reliable as typical *hasbara* practitioners – I believe that investigating and criticizing the destruction of Gaza is crucial. *NAZA*, moreover, is in a way a very Israeli movie, which belongs to an established Israeli tradition. Israeli artists and writers have been documenting, exploring, satirizing, and opposing their country's history of militarism and violence since the immediate aftermath of the 1948 War of Independence. That this tradition of harsh self-criticism has persisted in an

unbroken chain throughout Israel's history is a remarkable democratic achievement. Paradoxically, this tradition's very existence – let alone its prominence in more than a few corners of the Israeli art world and academia – is perhaps the most powerful refutation of some of its members' insistence on portraying Israel as the archenemy of the good and the just. This is only one reason why the ability of present and future generations of Israel's left-wing intelligentsia to pass damning judgment on their country must be defended. Losing the freedom to do so would be more damaging than any number of fault-finding films. One can only hope that, at some point, the artistic and intellectual output of the Israeli left will return to the standards set by the great Israeli novelists of the past and finally move beyond the narcissistic moral righteousness of their contemporary counterparts.

We have noted earlier that the filmmakers' surprise at the public backlash betrays an implicit acknowledgment that Israel is perhaps not as closed, intolerant, and parochial as the typical left-wing image of the country would suggest. Against this view, one might reasonably argue that the severity of the eventual backlash retrospectively vindicates the tendency to portray Israel in such dark terms. And it must be admitted that the possibility that the present moment represents a turning point in Israel's history, particularly concerning the health of its democracy and the liberal and secular character of its culture, cannot be ruled out. But if this is indeed the case – if the NAZA controversy is part of a larger transformation marking the demise of the democratic phase of the Israeli experiment – then radical leftists of the Abraham and Szor variety ought to be honest enough to acknowledge that their brand of politics has not merely failed to prevent this development, but has probably helped accelerate it. Shockingly enough, Israeli radicals' insistence on alienating their compatriots, demonizing them and their state at home and abroad, and portraying their collective existence as fundamentally sinful and corrupt has not won over many

Israelis to the left-wing camp. On the contrary, it has probably driven some of them further into the isolationist nationalism of the far right. Needless to say, this dynamic has done nothing to improve the situation of Palestinians – who are, and will remain, those who pay the highest and most immediate price for the retreat of a once popular Israeli peace camp into the escapist radicalism of academic conferences and international film festivals. Whatever its cinematic or journalistic merits, judged by the standards of elementary political wisdom, the ideological project *NAZA* embodies – and rest assured that its creators' passion lies in ideology, not art or reportage – has been an abysmal failure.

III. Yes Bibi, No Bibi

There may be another reason for the peculiar fact that, on the eve of what is widely regarded as the most fateful election in Israel's history, the issue that has attracted the greatest public attention is the international reception of a documentary film. This controversy seems to capture one of the structural peculiarities of contemporary Israeli politics – and of the world's relationship to it. That globalization and digital communication have made politics increasingly less local, deepening the interconnectedness of countries and societies, is by now an obvious truism. That Israel has always attracted a disproportionate amount of international attention is hardly news either. But October 7 nevertheless marked something different. Beginning on the very day Hamas launched its barbaric invasion, and in a process that has only intensified since, Israel seems to have become the place where the most basic coordinates of modern politics – the distinctions between the national and the international, the domestic and the foreign – have all but collapsed.

From an Israeli perspective, witnessing the scale, duration, and insanity of the world's preoccupation with this country – the depths of idiocy and recklessness to which discussions of Israel can drag the most celebrated intellectuals, prestigious newspapers, and some representatives of the UN – has been more than just exhausting. It has been epistemologically shocking. It has undermined, to a frankly terrifying degree, one's intuitive trust in the power of reason. After three years of watching, with growing bewilderment, how the more intensely the world obsesses over Israel, the more profoundly it seems to misunderstand it, the NAZA filmmakers' open invitation to the world to have another go at it could hardly fail to be infuriating.

And in many ways, the troubled relationship between the foreign and the domestic is also the story of this month's election. The central divide in contemporary Israeli politics can be understood as a conflict between two competing conceptions of that relationship. The anti-Netanyahu camp encompasses a broad spectrum of parties, ranging from the anti-populist right through die-hard centrists to the remnants of the traditional Zionist left. Its leading political figure is Gadi Eisenkot, a former IDF chief of staff whose centrist party has emerged as Netanyahu's principal electoral challenger. The camp's supporters have long been associated with a more cosmopolitan sensibility: secular, educated, and well-traveled Israelis who live in large cities and often work in universities or high-tech. These are also the people who tend to be most deeply concerned about Israel's deteriorating international standing. Much of their prestige within Israeli society rests on their familiarity with, and connection to, the wider world. They represent the modern, sophisticated, and internationally integrated Israel, and see themselves as particularly well equipped to reverse the country's growing isolation and restore its place among the developed nations.

The Netanyahu bloc, in contrast, represents a more local orientation. Politically, it consists of Netanyahu's *Likud*, the

hardline religious-nationalist right, and the ultra-Orthodox parties. Many *Likud* voters are Mizrahi—that is, Jews whose families originate from North African and Arab countries. Their roots are not European, and they have no intuitive desire to resemble European culture or receive its approval. The countries they or their families came from are places from which entire Jewish populations were driven out within living memory, and they have little interest in maintaining close relations with them, let alone returning for a visit. They tend to be more traditional and religious; their Jewishness is central to their identity; they are less likely to have a second passport; and their sense of belonging to Israel is not conditional upon the political direction their country takes.

But this familiar – and in many ways accurate – division between the locally rooted and the internationally oriented becomes considerably more complicated upon closer examination. For although Netanyahu's opponents are more strongly identified with an international outlook, one of the strongest arguments for removing him from office concerns his devastating impact on the domestic sphere. During his long reign, Israeli society has reached unbearable levels of polarization and division. In the eyes of his opponents, he has not only done nothing to restrain the ever-increasing animosity between different segments of the population, but has amplified it for his benefit. His years in power have been marked by an endless succession of scandals and an increasingly vicious style of politics. Under his leadership, the once-respectable *Likud* party has degenerated into a bizarre hodgepodge of extremists and crackpots. But perhaps most damaging of all is Netanyahu's apparent lack of even the most elementary republican sensibility: his politics is petty, undignified, and vindictive, and the fact that huge segments of the citizenry genuinely believe he wishes them harm does not seem to bother him in the least. The sense that his impact on Israel's body politic has been objectively toxic explains why some of his most determined opponents are themselves firmly

on the right. Under his watch, many have come to feel that political corruption, social disintegration, and institutional incompetence are turning Israel into a failed state. And that was before October 7.

We need not retell here the details of Hamas's invasion, or the unprecedented depth and totality of the calamitous failure of Israel's security systems. Recent debates over who failed to inform whom about which warning at what moment have been so conveniently consistent with the pre-existing political positions of the participants that it is difficult to regard them as serious truth claims. And in any case, they divert attention from the simplicity of the larger picture: such a multidimensional breakdown is the result of long-term structural flaws rather than individual decisions, and its roots clearly extend far beyond Netanyahu into the deepest recesses of Israel's defense establishment. Nevertheless, this epic failure took place while Netanyahu was at the helm, and his refusal to take responsibility for it is an unfathomable disgrace. Netanyahu, who had spent decades cultivating his image as the indispensable guardian of the Jewish homeland – for years his nickname in Israeli politics was literally “Mr. Security” – presided over the moment when Israeli citizens were left exposed and abandoned to the orgiastic brutality of Hamas militants, who abused their victims uninterrupted for hours on end, as if there had never been an Israeli state.

But while the intelligence and military dimensions of the crisis are familiar, the institutional and civilian dimensions are less well known. Hamas's attack in the south, followed by Hezbollah's ignition of the northern front on October 8, shook not only the military and security systems along Israel's borders but also the country's entire network of civilian institutions – hospitals, fire departments, law enforcement, welfare services, transportation systems, and so on. For days, basic state operations were paralyzed, and elementary administrative structures seemed to have ceased functioning. The people who stepped into this institutional vacuum were

primarily the citizens and organizations that had spent the preceding months protesting against Netanyahu's government. Almost overnight, with astonishing speed and efficiency, they transformed themselves into a vast emergency apparatus, organizing evacuations, supplying soldiers with equipment, providing food and shelter to displaced families, and coordinating droves of volunteers and improvised relief centers. The very Israelis who were supposedly less attached to their country, more mobile and cosmopolitan, and overly concerned with the outside world – those whom Netanyahu and his supporters had spent months and years vilifying as insufficiently Zionist, Jewish, or patriotic – suddenly emerged as a bedrock of national solidarity. At times, they used the same organizational methods and networks with which, only days earlier, they had mobilized anti-Netanyahu protesters to build an alternative state infrastructure capable of carrying out tasks the government was unable to perform. Thus, amid unimaginable terror and despair, these rootless individualists became the country's logistical and moral backbone, displaying extraordinary patriotism, civic responsibility, and social cohesion.

In those early days, against the dual backdrop of the spectacular state failure presided over by his right-wing coalition and the heroic, bottom-up solidarity of the opposition, it seemed that Netanyahu's political legacy was dead and buried – that nothing could possibly salvage either his career or his reputation. And in a sense, that assessment remains valid. In one way or another, Mr. Security will forever live in the shadow of Mr. October 7. And yet, here we are. Three years hence, Netanyahu is back in the race. In November 2023, a poll by one of Israel's leading pollsters found that 76 percent of Israelis believed Netanyahu should resign, either immediately or at the war's end. Today, his political bloc and the opposition are running neck and neck. How did this happen?

If one were to ask not only die-hard Netanyahu haters, but also many of those who may have supported him in some of his previous incarnations, the answer would be simple: Netanyahu, they would say, has always retained a stubborn, immovable following, consisting largely of traditional Mizrahi Israelis who vote for him not out of support for his policies, but out of devotion to his person. And while this argument is often framed in the most condescending, if not borderline racist, terms – portraying Netanyahu's supporters as an unthinking mass incapable of independent judgement – it is also difficult to deny outright the possibility that significant parts of the Israeli electorate have developed a political culture of unconditional loyalty. Such loyalty to a leader, to the extent that it exists, is indeed inconsistent with basic democratic principles. But it is also worth noting that it has its perfect mirror image in the leadership pathology of the opposition, which crowns and dethrones its top figures at such a dizzying pace that one can hardly keep track of the roster of forgettable centrists who have been hailed as the great hope of the anti-Netanyahu camp over the past few decades. When it comes to the two blocs' relationships with their leaders, the rigid and clichéd division between bounded attachment and free-floating rootlessness actually seems to work rather well.

And yet – notwithstanding the opposition's insistence on the utter unintelligibility of continued support for Netanyahu – there is another, more substantive explanation for his political career's phoenix-like resurrection. In the lead-up to the election, opposition figures have been filling the airwaves with reminders of October 7, hoping to revive something of the widespread shock and anti-Netanyahu outrage of those early days. While repeated invocations of the catastrophe have energized the already convinced, their effect on the skeptical and undecided has been limited – perhaps counterproductive. For time did not stop on October 7, and the more one emphasizes the depths of despair into which Israel descended that day, the longer appears the distance it has traveled since.

This distance seems greater still when one considers that Israel did not spend the past three years merely undoing the consequences of October 7. Rather, it has undertaken a massive transformation of Middle Eastern geopolitics, turning the regional balance of power on its head. Doing so required not just hunting down the architects and perpetrators of October 7, but launching a multifront campaign against the entire Axis of Resistance. Although Hamas was the Axis member that managed to inflict the greatest damage on Israel, it was in many ways its junior partner. The military capabilities and arsenals of both Iran and Hezbollah were far, far greater, and it is arguably the devastating blows inflicted on these two forces – alongside the fall of the Assad regime – that constitute the more far-reaching strategic developments.

Moreover, throughout the war, Netanyahu often appeared as the figure most determined to pursue the more ambitious and risk-laden course of action. At several decisive junctures, he insisted on pressing forward, while more centrist figures in politics, the media, and the security establishment advocated greater caution and appeared more inclined to let American demands and international pressure shape Israel's military strategy. As the campaign moved from Gaza to Rafah, Lebanon, and eventually Iran, powerful voices at home and abroad repeatedly urged restraint, questioned the wisdom of further escalation, or sought to prevent Israel from taking the next step. These calls were often accompanied by dire, sometimes downright apocalyptic warnings. In the immediate aftermath of October 7, military experts around the world warned that a ground invasion of Gaza could become a catastrophic mistake, sending Israeli soldiers straight into Hamas's trap and entangling the IDF in a bloody quagmire. The Biden administration dispatched senior American military advisers to Israel to urge its leaders to avoid ground invasion. The warnings concerning a full-scale confrontation with Hezbollah were even more terrifying. Predictions of as many as 15,000 Israeli civilian deaths circulated in the media

and were amplified by opposition voices, appearing even in enormous advertisements covering the front pages of major Israeli newspapers. The prospect of a direct military confrontation with Iran raised fears higher still. Again and again, a broad chorus of journalists, politicians, and security experts warned Israelis that Netanyahu's wartime decisions were leading the country to its doom. None of these apocalyptic scenarios materialized. Many IDF soldiers lost their lives in Gaza and Lebanon, but Israel's military superiority in both theaters was overwhelming. Hezbollah and Iran, meanwhile, managed to disrupt civilian life across Israel and inflict considerable damage on its infrastructure, but each of these formidable enemies ultimately killed no more than several dozen Israeli civilians.

In light of all this, Netanyahu can now appear to the Israeli public as the man who presided over the greatest catastrophe in the country's history, but also as the man thanks to whom Israel managed to get back on its feet and achieve a spectacular, against-all-odds type of victory. He can remind Israelis, furthermore, that some of the war's most consequential achievements – the killing of Sinwar, Nasrallah, and Ali Khamenei, the pager operation, and the historically unprecedented Israeli-American assault on the Iranian regime – might never have been achieved had he listened to the centrist opposition or succumbed to the pressures of the international community. And those Israelis who remember the relentless attacks against him at virtually every stage of the war – who perhaps also remember the journalists and experts who filled the public sphere with horrified alarmism about the recklessness of his decisions, but somehow cannot recall any of those same people later accounting for their failed predictions – those Israelis, provided they do not belong to the segment of the citizenry for whom hatred of Netanyahu is a sacred principle, may find it difficult to deny that there is at least some truth to this.

The opposition finds itself in a difficult position. Due to its doctrine of portraying everything Netanyahu does as either a pernicious crime or a colossal mistake, it cannot acknowledge what seems like a straightforward observation: that in some fundamental military and strategic respects – in terms of the ability of its enemies to harm its citizens – Israel is now in a better position not merely than it was on October 7, but than it was on October 6. To acknowledge something so simple would be to concede that Netanyahu deserves some credit – a possibility that many in the opposition simply cannot countenance. Consequently, some have opted for outright denialism. Some of the few election banners currently visible along Israeli highways read: “Gaza. Lebanon. Iran. Total Failure!” One wonders how damaged one’s political intuition must be to think it electorally wise to try to dissuade citizens from believing that their country’s security has improved now that it is no longer surrounded by enormous armies of Islamist terrorists.

The more substantive case against Netanyahu focuses on domestic life and international relations rather than regional geopolitics. For there can be little doubt that the past three years have radically intensified the destructive effects his rule has already had on social relations within Israel, while turning the country into a pariah state. This combination of profound domestic and international damage might very well prove to be the decisive factor that finally brings about his downfall. Thus, in a sense, the coming election will pit against each other two camps embodying peculiar constellations of the foreign and the domestic: an international, modern, liberal, and secular camp that sees itself, with considerable justification, as the last hope of halting Israel’s domestic disintegration; and a camp rooted in a more local and national sense of belonging, whose years in power have fostered extraordinary levels of social division and poisoned relations between government and citizens. Incidentally, this latter camp – the camp of the rooted but domestically destructive – is led by perhaps Israel’s

most international politician: intellectually formidable, fluent in English, and seemingly perfectly at home on the global chessboard. More paradoxical still is the possibility that, over the past three years, it is precisely this confident international orientation that has enabled him to withstand immense pressure from abroad and prioritize Israel's national-security interests.

Netanyahu's almost unimaginable recovery rests, to my mind, on his ability to recognize the importance of a third, intermediary level that stands between the domestic and the global – the level of regional geopolitics. This is the level that the great American political scientist E. E. Schattschneider identified as every government's "outside." For Schattschneider, the outside of government was not the world, the "international community," or the "global village." Rather, it was the neighborhood, the immediate environment: the territorial threshold that creates a point of contact and separation between a body politic's inside and outside. This intermediary dimension, according to Schattschneider, plays a constitutive role in the emergence of government. The essential fact of politics, he wrote, is that "the world consists of a hundred governments in a state of tension," and that "every government is surrounded by many other governments." In this view, the elemental dimension of politics lies in the relations between political communities and their immediate surroundings, and not, as much political philosophy tended to assume, in the internal relations between rulers and the ruled. To understand politics, we ought to see that "the impulse that makes governments comes from the outside," and that this impulse, furthermore, is fundamentally defensive. The founding act of government is to separate an external field of tensions from an internal zone of protection. As

Schattschneider puts it: "government is like an oyster, hard on the outside and soft on the inside."³

From this Schattschneiderian perspective, Netanyahu's leadership over the past three years seems like an exercise in political common sense. He understood what our age of hyperglobalism and hyperindividualism may have forgotten – that the world does not consist of private persons floating around in a borderless universe, but is divided into distinct political units. He may have grasped, furthermore, that there are moments in the life of such a unit when everything depends on the hardness of its outside. The problem, however, is that this is not enough. A leader is responsible not only for the oyster's shell, but also for its soft interior. He is also responsible for how it is perceived by the other oysters in the ocean. The best case for Netanyahu is that he has been remarkably effective in securing the existence of the Israeli oyster at one of its darkest and most existentially threatening moments. The best case against him is that he has made life inside that oyster feel like a nightmare.

³ E. E. Schattschneider, *Two Hundred Million Americans in Search of a Government* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 12–24.