

# **A Coup d'État in Israel?**

**The Bitter Harvest of Colonialism**

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On Sunday, March 26, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu fired his defense minister in an attempt to consolidate power over the country, precipitating spontaneous mass demonstrations. On March 27, facing the prospect of a general strike, he agreed to delay his effort to push through a judicial reform that will centralize control in his hands. In return for that concession, he gave his extreme-right minister of internal security—the convicted terrorist Itamar Ben-Gvir—permission to establish a militia under his own authority. In other words, having gained control of the government but not yet of the streets, the reigning far-right coalition is buying time to figure out how to suppress popular unrest while intensifying the persecution of Palestinians.

These are just the latest developments in a struggle that has been escalating for months, pitting various sectors of Israeli society against each other. The outcome will impact everyone, but the Palestinians will suffer most of all, no matter which side comes out on top: if the liberal protest movement wins, the prevailing apartheid regime will be perceived as more legitimate, whereas if Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir win, the situation will become even more deadly and dehumanizing for Palestinians. In the following analysis, our correspondent shows how this crisis has emerged out of a conflict between competing elites and their respective colonial models.

For months now, weekly mass demonstrations have taken place in Tel Aviv and other cities, drawing tens of thousands every Saturday. This is one of the biggest social movements in the history of Israel. The protests began after the inauguration of the most far-right government ever to rule this country; they quickly shifted focus to opposing a judicial reform that would consolidate power in the hands of the government at the expense of the court.

Many protesters see this measure as a coup attempt. One of the most worrying sections of the bill of the proposed reform, called the override clause, will undermine the sacred liberal concept of the separation of powers. Among other things, it would limit the Supreme Court’s ability to oppose and repeal laws that the government passes, allow the government to re-enact laws invalidated by the court, and give the government more say in appointing judges. Benjamin Netanyahu’s government has already introduced a law limiting the ways a sitting prime minister can be declared unfit for office. But to understand the social dynamics at play here in full, we need to examine the contradictions within contemporary Zionism and identify the competing approaches to managing a settler colonial society. For more context, we’ll conclude by reviewing the most recent developments in the Palestinian resistance.

*Semantics: Throughout this text, when referring to the geographical region between the Jordanian river and the Mediterranean Sea, we use the word “Palestine.” When referring to the state and aspects of Jewish-Israeli society, we use the word “Israel.”*

## **The Context behind the “Coup”**

The current situation in so-called Israel is a story about an increasingly authoritarian government consolidating power, yes—but there is more to it. The process of centralization that began long ago is coming to fruition, alongside a polarization towards fascism. There are local and global reactionary alliances involved, along with a conflict between competing elites, a prime minister desperate to escape corruption allegations, and a settler colonial society that is preparing to move to the next step of apartheid and ethnic cleansing. Without this bigger picture, we cannot understand the proposed reform itself, nor the “threat to Jewish democracy” that it rep-

resents, nor why so many people from the mainstream of Israeli society have been taking the streets against it while brandishing Israeli flags.

The bill would expose already marginalized communities to the increasing power of the regime. Subordinating the court system to the government will subject many Palestinians, women, members of the LGBTQ community, migrants and asylum seekers, and others to greater risk. At the same time, the Israeli court system has always been an integral part of the apartheid regime. It has legalized one ethnic cleansing campaign after another. Uprooting Bedouin communities in the Naqab (Negev), evicting families and demolishing houses in East Jerusalem, ongoing attempts to evict and ethnically cleanse the Masafer Yatta area in the West Bank—the court has approved all of these, functioning as a rubber stamp for the regime of Jewish supremacy.

Under Israeli democracy, many communities never had any rights in the first place. Now, many in the middle class are afraid that they will lose their privileges as well. As in many colonial societies throughout history, repression does not remain limited to the initial outgroups, but expands to target more and more people.

In response, we are witnessing one of the biggest social movements in Israel in a decade, since at least the tent protests of 2011. This can be understood as a sort of resurrection of liberal Zionism, which appeared to be on its deathbed just a few weeks ago. Israel has a very strong, street-organized, and class-conscious middle class, which has consolidated itself over the past decade through the “social justice” tent movement of 2011, the various protest movements involving independent workers and small business owners during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the anti-Netanyahu Balfour demonstrations of 2020, and the current mass movement against the judicial reform. They have power in the streets, but not in parliament, as they consistently lose elections.

From the outside, it might look as if Netanyahu is not very popular. Indeed, he is a controversial and polarizing figure in Israel. But the images of mass protests show only half the picture.

There are many growing undemocratic and anti-liberal populations in Israel, and we’re not talking about anarchists here. For example, the ultra-Orthodox Haredi community, with its high birth rate, is predicted to comprise two thirds of the country’s population in a few decades. The typical electorate supporting Netanyahu is comprised of Mizrahi/Sephardic working-class people from conservative-leaning peripheral towns—not to mention the fundamentalist fanatics and fascists, pogromists, Kahanists [a far-right organization officially outlawed in Israel as a terrorist group], extreme settlers, and hilltop youth that make up the far-right. The latter are highly organized and capable of perpetrating violence through both institutional and extra-legal means. They hold prominent positions of power, they have the army on their side, they are in charge of the police force, and they are now the third largest party in government. They are making alliances with foreign reactionaries, too.

The chief demand of the protest movement is democracy. For Israelis, since the beginning of Zionism, democracy has always meant *for Jews only*—in other words, ethnocracy. The majority of middle-class Zionists were comfortable with liberal democracy for themselves and apartheid for everyone else. But now that their own privileges are on the line, this is one step too far.

Such a development is not unprecedented. In every step of their development, liberal democracies have always excluded entire populations under their control, selectively determining who gets to be included in the “nation.” The French declaration of human rights denied the humanity of women; the constitution of the United States was written by slave owners. In the name

of spreading freedom and democracy, the United States government had absolutely no problem supporting brutal dictatorships in South America and other parts of the world.

Democracies sometimes expand to include previously excluded demographics, often after an insurrection, and always as part of a project of assimilation and erasure. As the Invisible Committee put it in “To Our Friends,”

Democracy is the truth of all the forms of government. The identity of the governing and the governed is the limit where the flock becomes a collective shepherd and the shepherd dissolves into his flock, where freedom coincides with obedience, the population with the sovereign. The collapsing of governing and governed into each other is government in its pure state, with no more form or limit.

In this view, it is not surprising that various old-fashioned dictatorships in Spain, Greece, and South America had to “transition to democracy” in order to continue ruling with public legitimacy. In Israel, by contrast, years of neoliberalism and ethnocracy have created a situation in which democracy can only contract.

Some communists, anarchists, and radical leftists are participating in the protests against Netanyahu’s attempt to consolidate power, forming anti-apartheid blocs within these massive demonstrations. The idea is to expand the scope of democracy to include everyone, not just Jews, and to bring the issue of the occupation of Palestine to the heart of the struggle. These are good intentions, though they are easily marginalized as a tiny bloc of Palestinian flags inside a massive sea of Israeli flags. The organizers of the mass demonstrations and the vast majority of the participants seem to view these blocs as an annoyance or distraction. Most protestors don’t seem to grasp the connection to the wider themes of the movement, accusing the solidarity activists of hijacking the protests for unrelated and “provocative” issues. Both sides claim to be fighting for democracy—but they are basing their arguments on radically different ideas of what democracy means.

When we contemplate the massive shift towards the far right that has taken place in many parts of the West, we must bear in mind that this has occurred as a consequence of the neoliberal assault on the working class and the failure of the left to provide solutions, both of which have made it possible for fascists to gain momentum. Likewise, in societies that experienced a “socialist past” in which a repressive leftist government attacked working people, this has also driven many people to the right. And when, on top of those things, we add settler-colonialism to the equation—a situation in which the entire population, proletariat and bourgeois alike, benefits from a regime that imposes ethnic supremacy—well, you can imagine that this complicates things even further.

This is the context in which the government is presenting its judicial reform as a populist project in the Israeli class war between the Ashkenazi elite and the Mizrahim. Class is heavily tied to ethnicity and geography in Israel. The original pioneer Zionists, the European settlers that came to Middle East, had a specific vision in mind: a white, liberal, secular colony, a “villa in the jungle.” Seventy-five years later, they are watching their utopia disintegrate, becoming like many other states in the region.

As mentioned, many in Israeli society don’t hold the idea of liberal democracy dear—some for fascist and reactionary reasons, others simply because liberal democracy never had anything to offer them in the first place. Many in peripheral towns still remember that the kidnapping of Jewish Yemenite children, the repression of the sailor’s strike in Haifa, and the crushing of the revolts

of Wadi Salib and the Black Panthers all took place under the regime of the democratic socialist party Mapai (*Mifleget Poalei Eretz Yisrael*, the Workers Party of the Land of Israel). Ethiopian Jews remember police killings and decades of racism and discrimination. And Palestinians... well, it's obvious, but we'll get to that below.

But what's happening here is not simply a grassroots revolt against democracy. One of the chief organizations behind this coup attempt is Kohelet Policy Forum, a far-right research institute and think tank with considerable influence on government policy and financial backing from foreign tycoons. An investigation conducted by Israeli media channel 12 concluded that the forum had a major role in proposing the current reform as well as the Nation-state bill of 2018, and in promoting MK Betzalel Smotrich—the far-right politician who is the leader of the Religious Zionist political list—to the Civil Administration. Describing their ambitions to “secure Israel's future as the nation-state of the Jewish people, to strengthen representative democracy, and to broaden individual liberty and free-market principles in Israel,” Kohelet Policy Forum has promoted various nationalist and neoliberal causes, including the privatization of health and education, the abolition of welfare institutions, opposition to raising the minimum wage, the annexation of the West Bank, the appointment of conservative judges, and the deportation of asylum seekers. During COVID-19, they opposed providing aid to small businesses and increasing the number of hospital beds.

Moshe Kopel, the chairman of this forum, lives in Efrat, a Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Kohelet forum receives tens of millions of shekels annually, mainly from two sources: Jeff Yass, a conservative and right-“libertarian” American billionaire who also donates to the Republican party, and his partner, billionaire Arthur Dantchik. It is nothing new for far-right “research institutes” backed by foreign, neoliberal, and reactionary donors to seek to initiate a coup in order to shape a country's politics according to their own interests.

This is the context in which we should understand right-wing populist discourse to the effect that the leftist hegemony's last remaining stronghold is the judiciary system, which must be superseded by “the people.”

Rhetoric about a leftist deep state controlling the court and the media against the sovereignty of the people will sound familiar to comrades from other parts of the world, who may be surprised that Zionists would import what are usually anti-Semitic talking points. This is less unusual when we consider how white nationalists and other far-right groups have embraced Israel.

Israeli flags are regularly displayed at English Defense League protests in the UK and by supporters of Trump and Bolsonaro in the Americas. They were displayed during the Capitol riot in Washington, DC on January 6, 2021 and the Brazilian Congress riots on January 8, 2023. Zionists maintain ties with Evangelical Christians in the US, just as Netanyahu maintains relations with far-right reactionary parties such as the regimes of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Giorgia Meloni in Italy. Likewise, Israel signed the Abraham Accords with authoritarian dictatorships throughout the region, including Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan. In the words of Noam Chomsky, we are facing a reactionary international in which Israel plays a huge role.

Within Israel, the alliance between reactionary working-class populations and self-seeking billionaires is driving Netanyahu's power grab, while middle-class protesters seek to defend their privileges without taking the oppressed and excluded into consideration.

It wasn't always this way. Previous proletarian movements in Israel made the connection between their own situation and Zionist colonialism and expressed solidarity with Palestinians. In 1959, the Wadi Salib revolt in Haifa demanded an end to military rule over Palestinians, among

other things. In the 1970s, the Black Panthers in Jerusalem made connections with Palestinians, understanding the Mizrahi and Palestinian struggles as interrelated. They went as far as meeting with the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

For many in Israel, the election of 1977 was a turning point, drawing the working class into the clutches of the right wing. That year, the right-wing Likud party won for the first time, breaking the hegemony of the Mapai party.

It might be a good idea to try to resurrect the spirit of the mid-20th century movements, although hardly anything remains of that legacy. Nationalist emotions have proven to be stronger drive; a liberal “identity politics” of shallow representation has replaced an emancipatory, potentially post-colonial vision for the region. Alfredo Bonanno claimed that an intifada starting from the Israeli people might be the ideal solution. Probably so—but currently, we are headed rapidly in the opposite direction.

Zionism is at a crossroads, however. What will come of the recent political awakening remains to be seen.

## **A Field Guide to Ethnic Cleansing**

An effective settler-colonial project of ethnic cleansing is never easy to implement, and Zionists have always disagreed among themselves regarding how best to pursue it. The strategies and tactics of the ongoing *Nakba* [“the disaster,” i.e., the displacement, dispossession, and killing of Palestinians starting from 1948] have changed over time; the regime adapts, but the drive toward ethnic cleansing persists. There have been many attempts at ethnic cleansing since 1948, chiefly via military rule and assimilation.

When you can’t drive people off their land and deport them, sometimes the closest thing to that is to do the opposite: imprison them on their land, turn their villages and towns into ghettos, monitor and restrict their movement, surround them with checkpoints and walls, and prevent mixing between the settlers and the natives at any cost. For the remainder, a project of assimilation is necessary. Thus, many Palestinians became “Israeli Arabs,” stripped of their identity and roots.

The messianic settler movement complicated this approach, because they insisted on settling in the territories occupied in 1967, among the indigenous Palestinians, against the wishes of the government at that time. The ruling parties of Israel opposed the idea of Jewish settlers in the West Bank: if you want to build a prison, it makes no sense for the prison guards to live with the prisoners. This is why Ariel Sharon evicted Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005 in order to turn it into a closed prison and bomb the population from time to time.

And this is where the *other* faction of Zionism enters the picture. To put it in simple terms, the liberal Zionist current takes an approach to the indigenous population that is strictly based in control and assimilation: the cultural erasure of collective identity, especially of material ties to place and to traditional lifestyles, and an open-air prison model for ethnic cleansing. Right-wing Zionism, on the other hand, takes the annihilation approach, seeking to replace the indigenous population. Just like mainstream liberal Zionism, they have developed an arsenal of tactics and strategies via which to pursue that goal, and various factions have emerged grouped around each of these. One of these factions, the messianic Kahanist settlers, is coming to power now because Netanyahu desperately needs them in his coalition in order to form a government. They

have different ideas for population control and ethnic cleansing than David Ben-Gurion and the pioneer Zionists had in mind, and they are much less committed to the framework of liberal democracy.

Very little has been written in academic research about far-right Zionism, as it was considered a fringe phenomenon until quite recently. But things are changing rapidly. In the dialectic between Judaism and democracy, Netanyahu was happy to keep the line blurred, just as Israeli society in general has done so far. But the settlers in Netanyahu's coalition government have precipitated a conflict, strongly prioritizing their notion of Judaism over democracy. The Religious Zionist list, a far-right political group consisting of the Kahanist *Otzma Yehudit* (Jewish Power) party and a few other fundamentalist religious and far-right parties, is now the third biggest party in the new government, and Itamar Ben-Gvir, a veteran Kahanist activist, has become the new minister of internal security, which gives him authority over the police.

This has already affected the policing of the current protest movement. Ben-Gvir instructed the police to use force to suppress any attempt to block roads or “create anarchy.” During one of the “resistance days” in Tel Aviv, police threw stun grenades at protesters and injured some of them—quite a rare occurrence in Tel Aviv. Many alleged that the order to do so came directly from Ben-Gvir. Also, reportedly, the Tel Aviv district police commander was fired after Ben-Gvir got angry with the police for being too soft on demonstrators and not following his order to prevent them from blocking the roads. Ben-Gvir later denied that this was the reason for the firing, but the timing was suspicious.

The basic idea of religious Zionism is that the establishment of the state of Israel represents the beginning of the redemption process—a messianic process happening before our eyes, God's consent to return from exile. The state isn't perfect, as it is liberal and secular, but religious Zionists are willing to use it a tool in pursuit of their goal: a theocratic monarchy under Halakha law. The fate of Palestinians in this future government is clear: temporary residence without rights or else forced transfer.<sup>1</sup>

Far-right religious Zionist currents have taken root in many Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Their militias work in full coordination with the Israel Defense Forces to carry out acts of terror and pogroms against the Palestinian population, such as the latest pogrom in Huwara (described below). Betzalel Smotrich, the leader of their electoral list, has already declared that “Huwara should be erased.” Many people in “mixed” cities are anxiously awaiting the next round of pogroms and the return of lynch mobs, this time with the Kahanists as the new bosses of the police.

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of the various contemporary fundamentalist and ultra-nationalist currents within religious Zionism, readers can consult the following resources. “The Decision Plan,” a manifesto published in 2017 by Betzalel Smotrich, leader of the Religious Zionist political list at the Knesset and the current Minister of Finance, details how the “Israeli-Palestinian conflict” should be solved: complete annexation the West Bank and Gaza Strip and more Jewish settlements. For the Palestinians, he offers two alternatives: they could live as residents without citizenship (for now) or immigrate to other countries (forced transfer). In a speech in Mercaz HaRav yeshiva in Jerusalem in 2019, he declared that the “law of Torah should return to Israel.” Other influential advocates of religious Zionism include the authors of *Torat Hamelekh*, which details the fate of “gentiles” under Jewish law, and Yitzchak Ginsburgh, an influential rabbi, called by many the leader of the hilltop youth movement, who views Smotrich and the Religious Zionists party as too moderate and advocates the reinstatement of Jewish monarchy in the Land of Israel. (Some of his followers want him to be the king.) He also advocates the forceful transfer of Palestinians and the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem in place of Al-Aqsa Mosque—an act that would drag the region into a religious war. For him, the coup is good, as it weakens the judiciary system, but it's not enough: the plan is to abolish it completely, engage in open war with the existing state, and prepare for a theocratic revolution like the one that took place in Iran.



The realization of their vision would unleash the worst hell on earth that this piece of land has seen in centuries. Zionism has created a monster that it is not sure it can handle. Whether the ambitions of this faction are realistic or not is not the main issue. What we're dealing with here is a dedicated counterrevolutionary movement that has attained power by exploiting the contradictions of Israeli society and the political crisis of the past couple years—including the fact that Israel has had five elections in less than four years and that, facing corruption allegations, Netanyahu was desperate to establish a coalition government.

The links between Kohelet Policy Forum and the Religious Zionist politicians within the current government are clear. They see MK Smotrich as their gateway to the government.

So, to sum up: far-right religious fundamentalist currents funded by US conservatives and legitimized by neoliberal ideology are promoting a coup to weaken the judiciary system of a settler colonial entity established by ethnic cleansing. This would give the government a stronger grip on power, enabling it to advance to the next stage of authoritarianism.

It's hard to predict what's ahead, but we haven't seen the worst of it yet. We're headed toward hard times, especially when we consider how climate change will impact this region over the next couple of decades, exacerbating ethnic conflicts and wars over resources. We should prepare for the possibility that future intifadas will be driven by basic needs such as access to drinkable water and food.

Let this be a lesson to everyone. We are paying dearly for the failures of liberal democracy and the left, as well as for the decision to establish a colonial nation-state to try to solve the problems of oppressed people. Already, in 1938, Emma Goldman declared,

“I have for many years opposed Zionism as the dream of capitalist Jewry the world over for a Jewish State with all its trimmings, such as Government, laws, police, militarism and the rest. In other words, a Jewish State machinery to protect the privileges of the few against the many.”

We should have listened back then, when there was still time. Now, we need to brace ourselves. The coming crisis cannot be averted. It is the context in which we will fight the struggles to come.

## **Meanwhile, on the Other Side of the Wall**

So many things had happened in Palestine since last we wrote from this part of the world. As of now, at least 80 Palestinians have been killed since the beginning of 2023. It's hard to keep up with all the raids, massacres, and pogroms. I will focus on the massacre in Nablus as one of many Israeli counter-insurgency techniques against the Lion's Den, which represents a new phase of resistance among the youth of the West Bank, and on the pogrom in Huwara, which was a turning point for many people.

On February 22, IDF soldiers raided the town of Nablus, killing eleven people in the course of an operation intended to target militants from the Lion's Den. This was part of “Wave Breaker,” a counter-insurgency military operation begun in 2022 to crush the new wave of Palestinian militancy. The Lion's Den is the name of a Palestinian guerilla group based in Nablus that represents a new phenomenon in Palestinian militancy. Unaffiliated with the longstanding traditional factions, and therefore beyond the control of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah, Popular Front, or other groups, their decentralized, non-hierarchical, and unpredictable structure has proved to

be a challenge for the IDF. Along with similar groups like Balata Battalion and Jenin Brigade, they represent locally-based cells of resistance that utilize guerilla warfare against nearby military checkpoints and settlements and protect their towns and villages against invasions.

This stems from a wider phenomenon of Palestinian youths who, starting from the knife intifada of 2015, have been gradually taking matters into their own hands, acting independently of the old factions, parties, and organizations. This complicates things for Israel, which has been forced to innovate in its repressive mechanisms as well. In 2022, a “security official” remarked:

“The shooters leave Nablus spontaneously, without a clear organizational structure or hierarchy... There are no orders from top to bottom as we know terrorist infrastructures. They don’t have an organized infrastructure, this challenges us. If we had the option, we would act against them individually, but it is almost impossible.”

This justifies raids, sieges, and collective terror targeting entire populations. In the age of formal organization, it was enough to target specific individuals, but now, anyone is a suspect, which allows for more indiscriminate violence.

On the evening of February 26, dozens of settlers with Molotov cocktails marched toward the villages Huwara and Zaa’tara in the Nablus area of the West Bank. They began setting fire to homes, vehicles, and shops. This took place under the watchful eyes of IDF soldiers, who did nothing to stop the rioters.

It’s a common practice for IDF soldiers to allow settler pogromists to terrorize the local population, only taking action against Palestinians who try to defend themselves. For local Palestinians, there’s hardly a distinction between “military” and “civilian,” as they work together with full coordination and represent the same force.

Over 70 homes were set on fire, with families still inside at least nine of them. They were evacuated as their homes burned to the ground, along with hundreds of cars, shops, ambulances, and livestock. By the end of the pogrom, hundreds had been injured. One Palestinian died: Sameh Al-Aqtash from the village of Zaatra.

It’s unclear how things will play out from here, but we can expect repression to intensify. At the same time, people will continue developing innovative new ways of resisting, adapting to circumstances and moving forward. The effect of the authoritarian power grab on this already dire situation has yet to be seen.

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