

Why the Main Players Behind the Israeli Protest Movement Are Bringing the Confrontation to a Head

The protests roiling Israel represent a struggle over its future. The traditional elite is in an existential fight to maintain power, while the ascendant religious-nationalist majority seeks to redefine the state.

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Any Palestinian following the developments in the Israeli protest movement against "the judicial coup" will require nerves of steel to withstand the hypocrisy on display.

The protests are estimated to be 100,000 people strong, politicians are jumping over tables in the Knesset, and former army Chief of Staff Yair Golan is calling for a state of "civil disobedience."

Only yesterday, Netanyahu [dismissed Defense Minister Yoav Gallant](#) after he voiced opposition to the judicial reforms, and angry protestors took to the streets in Tel Aviv and other cities and shut down highways.

The army has been going through its own crisis ever since military reservists, especially those in the Air Force, joined the protests. If that wasn't enough, large sums of money are being transferred out of Israeli banks for fear of the effects that the judicial reforms might have on the Israeli economy and on the value of the Israeli Shekel. As for gall, that was hardly in short supply in Yuval Noah Harari's op-ed telling Netanyahu to "[stop your coup or we'll stop the country](#)." It's as if Harari has never heard of al-Issawiyya, which continues to be strangled by the Hebrew University where he teaches, or of oppression and occupation, which wasn't reason enough to warrant speaking of halting the state.

The Israeli government is trying to use these judicial reforms to grant itself absolute power through the passing of two central laws.

The first law aims to establish control over the Israeli Judicial Selection Committee, hence appointing judges whose loyalties would lie with specific politicians rather than with the law;

and the second law is the “Override Clause,” which would allow the Knesset to override any decision of the Israeli High Court of Justice that passes by a majority of 61 Knesset members.

In other words, the government would seize complete [control over the state](#) without checks and balances, effectively becoming the sole governing authority in the country given that it also controls the Knesset by virtue of its majority within the parliamentary body.

All of this is taking place without a constitution. This means, for instance, that the government can decide to hold elections once every ten years instead of the standard four-year limit still in effect, and no one can override it; or it could pass laws granting the government total control over the media, or it could put LGBTQ people in jail. But the true crisis will emerge when the Israeli High Court of Justice repeals the judicial reforms and regards them as illegal — that is when the state will enter a constitutional crisis without a solution.

Who will the Israeli security apparatus obey: the government or the judiciary?

This isn’t merely a crisis of the state; it is far more profound, posing the question of what the state *is* in the first place. Former commander of the Israeli Air Force Eliezer Shkedi [said as much](#) in an interview with Channel 12: “I have never come across a situation where the commander of the Air Force, the chief of staff, the head of the Mossad, or the police commissioner has to decide whether he listens to an executive authority or to a court decision,” going on to say that if he were the head of the Air Force he would never disobey a court decision.

The fact that Israeli society has always echoed this hypocrisy is nothing new, and neither is it a novel discovery that “democracy” was never an honest description of a state that defines itself as a “state of the Jews.” But the protests this time are greater than at any previous point, and [35% of Israelis](#) express fears of a “civil war,” a phrase that has made its way into daily use.

It’s precisely this level of hysteria, however, that makes it especially infuriating — because of the power and influence of the participants in the protests, because it’s the first time that the struggle is over the identity of the state, and because the roots of the crisis relate to profound political questions concerning the Zionist project, which are normally considered off-limits.

The possibilities arising from the protests are open to a number of potential outcomes. Most of them turn on an as yet unanswered question: is Netanyahu pushing for these changes to get out of facing corruption charges at the hands of the judiciary, or does he genuinely want to make such a major change to the state’s structure and identity?

In addition to the some 100,000 protestors shutting down roads in Tel Aviv, who are capable of obstructing the movement of the state in several important focal points, three main groups lead the protests and occupy central positions of influence. These groups are likely more influential than any closure of roads.

The reservists

Israeli society is different from many other societies in its degree of militarization. An Israeli soldier remains a soldier even after the end of their official service. This means that the

relationship between a “citizen” and a “soldier” is not a natural one.

The same applies to the state in its entirety.

After the end of formal service, the soldier is released into the reserve army, serving sporadically and often volunteering at specific times throughout the year. While generally unknown to the public, the current crisis has revealed just how much the army relies on its reservists, especially in specific fighting units like the Air Force, which the protests have shown relies on a small number of active duty soldiers and a much larger number of ostensibly “normal” citizens. Many of them routinely lead airstrikes in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.

It appears that there is now an organized effort led by reserve soldiers [in the air force](#) and in [cyber-intelligence units such as Unit 8200](#), which also relies heavily on reservists, to refuse training in protest at the judicial overhaul and to refuse service in the event that it passes. But what makes these protests so powerful is that the members of the ruling coalition government, except Netanyahu, have not served in the army for religious reasons.

Two things make these unprecedented protests from within the ranks of the military particularly notable:

first, the nature of the units engaging in the protest — the Air Force and the military cyber-intelligence units, which attract people from largely well-off and Ashkenazi backgrounds from within the army’s class divide —

and second, that the reservists occupying these positions within the military believe that the weakening of the judiciary will take Israel to the International Criminal Court and weaken its ties to the United States. This would place them under international scrutiny and open up accountability for war crimes that they carried out as members of the Air Force. The Israeli High Court of Justice has historically defended them, even when they bombed Ramallah during the Second Intifada.

These protests are, therefore, influential because of the central importance of the army within Israel, where any weakness in the army is regarded as an existential issue. They are also important because the difference between a soldier and a civilian is complex, meaning that they can’t be disciplined and censored as members of the military since they are also technically civilians. This is what led military analyst Nir Dvori to exclaim on Channel 12 that “in Iran, they know today that even if we decide to launch a strike, that is not possible.”

The high-tech companies

In recent decades, a new economic class has taken shape in Israel working in the high-tech sector, or “hi-tech.” These include large programming companies that have made billions in tandem with the development of the Israeli military industry.

For instance, anyone coming out of Unit 8200 would be able to then create a company, or perhaps sell intelligence and security services, or make a business in private surveillance. Some of the most successful [examples](#) of this are the Waze navigation app, bought by Google for 966 million dollars, and the Mobileye mobility app, bought by Intel for 15.3 billion dollars. Other examples include the rise of digital currencies, surveillance technologies, and other enterprises where shareholders control astronomic amounts of money. It has now

become a common refrain that hi-tech carries the Israeli economy and is what increases the Israeli standard of living.

This sector is participating in the protests on two levels: first, by transferring funds outside of Israel and depositing them in foreign banks, which have reportedly reached hundreds of millions of dollars, and second, by funding and providing logistical support to the protests on the street, while also [recruiting workers](#) in the sector to join the protests. The main fear among this sector of Israeli society is the judicial reforms' impact on the economy and foreign investment. And while these implications remain unknown, that uncertainty, coupled with what the weakening of the judiciary might mean for property rights, makes for a poor investment climate in Israel.

The influential figures

Another notable feature of these protests is the participation of prominent Israeli figures and personalities.

Those who can be seen giving speeches at rallies include former Military Chiefs of Staff, former Chiefs of intelligence, former Prime Ministers, and even a joint letter by all former Air Force Chiefs addressed to Netanyahu. The media is also completely mobilized in favor of the movement and takes part in putting out the word concerning protests, adopting terminology that casts the judicial moves as a “coup” and constantly covering actions. In academia, prominent figures like the former Governor of the Bank of Israel, Jacob Frenkel, have called for halting the judicial overhaul. And none of this is to mention the former High Court judges, the over 400 security figures, the presidents of Israel's universities, or the international repudiation of the reforms most recently shown by former NY Mayor Mike Bloomberg, who warned that the Netanyahu government is “[courting disaster](#).”

What is most notable about these personalities is that they are not calling for preventing these reforms. Instead, they are calling for the judicial reform process to be halted voluntarily by the government — which has been pursuing it at lightning speed — with the objective of taking a step back to fully understand the implications of these reforms for the state. This has been pushed for by Israel's President, Isaac Herzog, who proposed an alternative “people's framework” for the reform process. In essence, this calls for a deeper investigation into a reform that stands to change the nature of the state.

What's different this time

This isn't the first time that Israel has witnessed vigorous protest. Many previous protests [have been larger](#) in terms of size — Tel Aviv's “tent city” protests in 2011 certainly had a larger turnout for the reduction of property prices, focusing on the economy and cost of living, and even the settler protests against the Gaza disengagement in 2005 were larger and far more violent than today's movement. But these protests are different for two reasons: the first and primary reason relates to the players moving the protests, and the second relates to the participating social strata.

This is the first time, for instance, that there has been such a fundamental struggle over the structure and identity of the state, specifically over the limits of “Jewish democracy,” as well as over the relationship of the state to Judaism as a religion, issues of personal freedom, and the kind of state that Jews want. This is very different from the kinds of protests that Israel has witnessed historically, from the “Black Panthers” representing the struggle of Mizrahi

Jews to the social protests of 2011, all of which revolved around improving the social conditions of specific groups. The current protests, in contrast, get to the very heart of the state and its future.

The closest social protest in Israel has ever gotten to this was the settler protests in 2005 after the Gaza disengagement. This is why Netanyahu himself has [likened today's protests](#) to that era. At that time, the question that arose was the same as today's: what is the relationship with the state? Settlers in 2005 saw in the disengagement plan a betrayal by the state of the social contract. The protestors today likewise believe that the government is betraying the social contract by changing the rules of the game.

The difference, therefore, lies in the protestors' identity and relationship to the state.

The settlers were far weaker in the face of the deep state, which is what pushed them to make the strategic decision of gaining control over the state's main loci of power to prevent a repeat of the Gaza disengagement. Today, the elites leading the protests have all the power in their hands and are trying to hold onto that power, from the court judges to the ex-military chiefs to the media. Settlers have a religious and ideological connection to the land at a time when largely secular Ashkenazi Jews, who make up the majority of protestors, believe that personal and constitutional freedoms and the social contract are at the heart of the state. That is why religious settlers refuse to vacate "the Land of Israel" or step down from the state, while many secular Jews have started searching for foreign passports since the judicial overhaul was announced. That is why many of them have refused to serve in the military, especially since the economic and military burden of the state largely falls to them, while religious Jews do not serve in the army for religious reasons.

These groups have a genuine interest in preserving the current structure of the state and preventing the judicial changes that would transform Israel into a "[non-liberal democracy](#)." It would have real implications for the lives of these liberal Israelis, including their relationship with the West, especially America and Western Europe, and all that it entails in terms of the exchange of weapons, aid, and knowledge. It would mean forgoing personal protections in international courts, retreating from the public sphere, and losing freedom of the press. And it would mean the challenging of social freedoms like LGBTQ rights and academic freedom. All this and more would be under attack by the demagoguery of the religious majority, who will no longer have any counterweights to their powers if the judicial reforms are passed. It bears mentioning the response of Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to an interviewer's question about what there is to guarantee that the rights of minorities are not violated. He [answered](#): "me." This, in short, is the essence of the judicial change, placing the rights of Jews in the hands of politicians, not the courts.

The founding generation

Polling has shown that the number of older protestors is significantly higher than young protestors, most of whom are at the "center-left" end of the Israeli political spectrum. This aligns with general trends in Israeli society, where young people are far more likely to hold right-wing views than their elders. In other words, the protestors, primarily made up of the center-left camp and the elderly, are the generation that founded the Zionist state, the same generation that enjoys economic, military, and cultural dominance. This explains the level of influence and social and economic capital backing the protests, and this is what makes the struggle over the state so fierce. Those who hold the power are fighting tooth and nail to hold onto it, while the younger Israel, the new and more religious and more

extremist Israel, is also seeking to prevail. The conflict between the founding Israel and the new Israel has now reached its peak, threatening the state's very nature.

Shkedi, as the former commander of the Air Force, said that the current reservists refusing service would nevertheless return in the event of a war. That's why relying on these protests to dismantle Israel from within is an exaggeration, more wishful thinking than realistic. The moment Israeli society faces an external (or Palestinian) threat, it immediately comes together. But what is important is the implication of these protests for Israel's internal crisis in the long term, first at the level of preparedness and second at the level of cohesion in Israeli society and the military. These have long-term implications for the type of compromise that may be reached in the future.

What is for sure is that the true struggle moving forward, if we are to grant that Israel is a "democracy for Jews," is over the nature of "Jewish democracy," and over the kind of Israel that Jewish Israelis want. Will it be an Israel that manages its oppression rationally or a new Israel that is guided by bloodlust and the desire for vengeance: the Israel of the Second Intifada and the High Court, or the Israel of [Huwwara](#) and [settlers](#)?

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