

OPINION

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Netanyahu Is Shattering Israeli Society

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Jack Guez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Israel today is a boiler with way, way too much steam building up inside, and the bolts are about to fly off in all directions.

Lethal attacks by Palestinian youths against Israelis are coinciding with an expansion of Israeli settlements and the torching of Palestinian villages by settlers, as well as with a popular uprising against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's judicial power grab. Together they are threatening a breakdown in governance the likes of which we've never seen before in Israel.

It is a measure of how serious the situation has become that [several former chiefs](#) of the Mossad — some of the most respected public servants in the country — have denounced Netanyahu's judicial putsch, most recently [Danny Yatom](#). He told Israel Channel 13 News on Saturday

night, [according to Haaretz](#), that if Netanyahu continues with his plans to effectively eliminate the independence of Israel's high court, fighter pilots and special forces operatives will be able to legitimately disobey the orders that come from the government.

They “signed an agreement with a democratic country,” said Yatom. “But the moment that, God forbid, the country becomes a dictatorship” and they receive “an order from an illegitimate government, then I believe it would be legitimate to disobey it.”

This is not idle speculation. In the past few days, [some 250 officers](#) from the Military Intelligence's Special Operations Division have signed a public letter stating that “they would stop showing up for duty” should the government proceed with its autocratic judicial overhaul, [The Times of Israel reported](#). They added their voices to “groups of pilots, tankists, submariners, sailors and other special forces who have penned similar letters.”

Israel has never experienced a Palestinian intifada, a Jewish settler intifada and an Israeli citizen judicial intifada all at once. But that's begun to unfold since Netanyahu's far-right government took office.

On Sunday, a Palestinian gunman killed two Israeli Jews near Nablus to avenge the deaths of [11 Palestinians](#) at the hands of the Israeli forces in Nablus a few days earlier. Settlers then [set fire to and vandalized](#) at least 200 buildings in four Palestinian villages in the area where the shooting happened. And that was after some [160,000](#) Israelis came out in the streets of Tel Aviv on Saturday night to oppose Netanyahu's judicial takeover, in the wake of Netanyahu [telling](#) his cabinet ministers, “I want to give you a fist to strike them” — the protesters.



A protest in Tel Aviv on Saturday. Ilan Rosenberg/Reuters

Violence between settlers and Palestinians is not new. But when it coincides with the most ultranationalist, ultra-Orthodox government in Israel's history — that is now driven by messianic religious zealots, whose goal is to annex the whole West Bank and who now control key police, finance and military portfolios — the traditional sober Israeli ministers who would normally draw a line against such actions have been replaced by those who want to erase lines altogether.

The new factor, though, that could really tear apart Israel's democracy is Netanyahu's scheme to essentially end the independence of the Israeli Supreme Court in the name of "judicial reform." Ignoring [polls](#) that show a [majority](#) of the public opposes the judicial takeover — and despite appeals by the Israeli and American presidents to postpone changes until there can be a national dialogue on the subject — Netanyahu and his extremist allies are moving to just shove it through the Knesset in the next few weeks.

The maneuver's breakneck speed is actually exposing what a total fraud Netanyahu is when he sweetly insists to foreign leaders and journalists that

he simply wants to pass a few innocent technical fixes to bring the Supreme Court in Israel more in line with that of the U.S. or Canada or France.

Really? Ask yourself this question: What Israeli leader would risk a civil war at home, a breach with Jewish democrats across the world, a break with America and significant damage to Israel's high-tech miracle — and now open talk by Israeli troops that they will not die to protect a dictatorship. What Israeli leader would risk all of that for just a few technical judicial fixes?

Netanyahu would risk all that only for something very big, very important and very personal. And that is a judicial “reform” that he hopes would end his trial on breach of trust, bribery and fraud charges, which could land him in prison. The judicial “reform” would also give his right-wing coalition the unfettered power to build any settlements in any place, to seize any Palestinian land and to pour tax dollars into Orthodox religious schools where young people have only to study the Torah, not math, science or literature — let alone serve in the army.

In other words, none of this judicial “reform” is on the level. It is a power play that Netanyahu wants so that with a flick of his wrist — a simple one-seat majority vote in the Knesset — he can overturn anything the Supreme Court orders.

That is why the protest movement against this judicial coup continues to gain strength. Israel is not Hungary, where the leader can just cram autocracy down people's throats. On Saturday night, a massive crowd gathered in central Tel Aviv to hear, among others, Ehud Barak, the former prime minister and army chief of staff. Barak could not have been more clear about what an existential moment this is for Israel.

In the next few weeks, if Netanyahu's coalition passes these “new laws of dictatorship,” Barak said, they will be “canceled by the Supreme Court” as illegal. When that happens and the government then takes steps to annul some Supreme Court rulings, the four key “gatekeepers” of Israeli security — the chief of staff of the armed forces and the heads of the Mossad, the Shin Bet and the police — will have to decide from whom to take orders. “This will create an extremely severe constitutional crisis,” said Barak.

“If the threshold is crossed,” he added, “and the laws of the dictatorship are

set in motion, the responsibility will pass to us, the citizens of the country. We will have to follow the tradition set by Gandhi, 80 years ago in India, and of Martin Luther King, 60 years ago in the U.S., to follow the path of nonviolent civil disobedience. ... This is the right, even the duty, of citizens when their government acts in ways which break the rules of the game and stand contrary to the country's own fundamental norms and value system.”

Finally, something else I have never seen before: a scary reality check from one of Israel's hottest start-ups.

On Monday, Assaf Rappaport, the chief executive and a co-founder of Wiz, a cloud security start-up, announced that Wiz had just raised \$300 million in a Series D funding round at a \$10 billion valuation. Ordinarily, that would also have been very good news for Israel, but Rappaport said his company can't ignore what else is happening in the country.

“We share in the grief of the families who lost their loved ones in the last day and are concerned about the rapid security deterioration on both sides. Unfortunately,” he said, “in light of the judicial coup, the money we raised will not enter Israel. ... We have heard from worried investors and entrepreneurs who are discreetly transferring their money out of the country, as well as employees who are concerned about their future in Israel.

“Wiz has been successful thanks to the exceptional ecosystem that exists in Israel, but we are now facing an existential threat. We believe that it is crucial for the government to prioritize the safety and security of citizens, and to halt any legislative moves that could aggravate the current situation.”

Hey, Friedman, all you seem to write about these days is Ukraine and Israel. Don't you have anything else to say?

It's not an accident. I believe that if Ukraine were to fall to Vladimir Putin and Israel were to become a phony democracy like Hungary, the whole world would tip the wrong way.

Israel is the only real democracy with an independent judiciary in the Middle East. Ukraine is defending the European Union, a giant engine of the rule of law, free markets, human rights and democratic norms, even if not every E.U. country has fully embraced all of them. If democracy is

undermined in the E.U. and Israel, democracy everywhere will be more endangered.