

THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

The Israel We Knew Is Gone

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Amit Elkayam for The New York Times

Imagine you woke up after the 2024 U.S. presidential election and found that Donald Trump had been re-elected and chose Rudy Giuliani for attorney general, Michael Flynn for defense secretary, Steve Bannon for commerce secretary, evangelical leader James Dobson for education secretary, Proud Boys former leader Enrique Tarrio for homeland security head and Marjorie Taylor Greene for the White House spokeswoman.

“Impossible,” you would say. Well, think again.

As I’ve noted before, Israeli political trends are often a harbinger of wider trends in Western democracies — [Off Broadway to our Broadway](#). I hoped that the national unity government that came to power in Israel in June 2021 might also be a harbinger of more bipartisanship here. Alas, that government has now collapsed and is being replaced by the most far-far-right coalition in Israel’s history. Lord save us if this is a harbinger of what’s coming our way.

The coalition that Likud leader Bibi Netanyahu is riding back into power is the Israeli equivalent of the nightmare U.S. cabinet I imagined above. Only it is real — a rowdy alliance of ultra-Orthodox leaders and ultranationalist politicians, including some outright racist, anti-Arab Jewish extremists once deemed completely outside the norms and boundaries of Israeli politics. As it is virtually impossible for Netanyahu to build a majority coalition without the support of these extremists, some of them are almost certain to be cabinet ministers in the next Israeli government.

As that previously unthinkable reality takes hold, a fundamental question will roil synagogues in America and across the globe: “Do I support this Israel or not support it?” It will haunt pro-Israel students on college campuses. It will challenge Arab allies of Israel in the Abraham Accords, who just wanted to trade with Israel and never signed up for defending a government there that is anti-Israeli Arab. It will stress those U.S. diplomats who have reflexively defended Israel as a Jewish democracy that shares America’s values, and it will send friends of Israel in Congress fleeing from any reporter asking if America should continue sending billions of dollars in aid to such a religious-extremist-inspired government.

You have not seen this play before, because no Israeli leader has “gone there” before.

Netanyahu has been propelled into power by bedfellows who: see Israeli Arab citizens as a fifth column who can’t be trusted; have vowed to take [political control](#) over judicial appointments; believe that Jewish settlements must be expanded so there is not an inch left anywhere in the West Bank for a Palestinian state; want to enact judicial changes that could freeze Netanyahu’s ongoing corruption trial; and express contempt for Israel’s long and strong embrace of [L.G.B.T.Q. rights](#).

We are talking about people like Itamar Ben-Gvir, who was [convicted](#) by an Israeli court in 2007 of incitement to racism and supporting a Jewish terrorist organization. Netanyahu personally forged an alliance between Ben-Gvir’s Jewish Power party and Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the Religious Zionism party, which turned them (shockingly for many Israelis) into the third-largest party in the country — giving Netanyahu the allies Likud needed to win a parliamentary majority in this week’s election.

Smotrich is known for, among other things, [suggesting](#) that Israeli Jewish mothers should be separated from Arab mothers in the maternity wards of Israeli hospitals. He has long advocated outright Israeli annexation of the West Bank and argued that there is “[no such thing as Jewish terrorism](#)” when it comes to settlers retaliating on their own against Palestinian violence.

Netanyahu has increasingly sought over the years to leverage the energy of this illiberal Israeli constituency to win office, not unlike how Trump uses white nationalism, but Netanyahu never actually brought this radical element — like Ben-Gvir, who claims to have moderated because he has [told his supporters](#) to chant, “Death to terrorists,” instead of, “Death to Arabs” — into his ruling faction or cabinet. As more of Netanyahu’s allies in Likud split with him over his alleged criminal behavior and [lying](#), however, Bibi

had to reach further and further out of the mainstream of Israeli politics to get enough votes to rule and pass a law to abort his own trial and possible jail time.

Netanyahu had fertile political soil to work with, the Yediot Ahronot Israeli newspaper columnist Nahum Barnea explained to me. There has been a dramatic [upsurge](#) in violence — stabbings, shootings, gang warfare and organized crime — by Israeli Arabs against other Israeli Arabs, and Israeli Arab gangs and organized crime against Israeli Jews, particularly in mixed communities. The result is that, “like in America, ‘policing’ has become a huge issue in Israel in recent years,” said Barnea — and even though this upsurge started when Netanyahu was previously prime minister, he and his anti-Arab allies blamed it all on the Arabs and the national unity Israeli government.

One election billboard summed up Netanyahu’s campaign. It was, as Haaretz reporter Amos Harel [reported](#), a “gloomy-looking one with the caption: ‘That’s it. We’ve had enough.’ It depicts outgoing Prime Minister Yair Lapid and his coalition partner, Mansour Abbas of the United Arab List.”

Abbas is the rather amazing Israeli Arab religious party leader who recognizes the State of Israel and the searing importance of the Holocaust, and who was part of the now-fallen unity government.

As Harel put it: “The ‘had enough’ message seems to have sunk in among supporters of Likud, Religious Zionism and the ultra-Orthodox parties. It’s likely that the message also helped Netanyahu win Tuesday’s election.” Among the critical factors, Harel wrote, was “hatred of Arabs and the desire to keep them out of positions of power.”

But Netanyahu was also aided by the fact that while the right and the far right were highly energized by both growing fears of and distrust of Arabs — whether Israeli Arab citizens or Palestinians in the West Bank — their centrist and center-left opponents had no coherent or inspiring countermessage.

As Barnea put it to me: “Israel is not divided down the middle,” with 50 percent being pro-Netanyahu and the other 50 percent with a unified message and strategy opposing him. “No, Israel is divided between the 50 percent who are pro-Netanyahu and the 50 percent who are *pro-blocking Netanyahu*. But that is all they can agree on,” Barnea said. And it showed in this election. And it wasn’t enough.

Why is all of this so dangerous? Moshe Halbertal, the Hebrew University Jewish philosopher, captured it well: For decades members of the Israeli right, a vast majority of whom were “security hawks,” have believed that the Palestinians have never and will never accept a Jewish state next to them and therefore Israel needed to take whatever military means were necessary to protect itself from them.

But Israeli hawkishness toward the Palestinians, explained Halbertal, “is now morphing into something new — a kind of general ultranationalism” that not only rejects any notion of a Palestinian state but also views every Israeli Arab — who make up about 21

percent of Israel's population, [nearly 20 percent of its doctors, about 25 percent of its nurses and almost half its pharmacists](#) — as a potential terrorist.

“What we are seeing is a shift in the hawkish right from a political identity built on focusing on the ‘enemy outside’ — the Palestinians — to the ‘enemy inside’ — Israeli Arabs,” Halbertal said.

Netanyahu's coalition has also attacked the vital independent institutions that underpin Israel's democracy and are responsible for, among other things, protecting minority rights. That is, the lower court system, the media and, most of all, the Supreme Court, which Netanyahu and his allies want brought under the political control of the right, “precisely so they will not protect minority rights” with the vigor and scope that they have, Halbertal said.

At the same time, not only is this election a struggle about the future of Israel, he said, but also “about the future of *Judaism in Israel*. The Torah stands for the equality of all people and the notion that we are all created in God's image. Israelis of all people need to respect minority rights because we, as Jews, know what it is to be a minority” — with and without rights. “This is a deep Jewish ethos,” Halbertal added, “and it is now being challenged from within Israel itself. But, when you have these visceral security threats in the street every day, it becomes much easier for these ugly ideologies to anchor themselves.”

This is going to have a profound effect on U.S.-Israel relations. But don't take my word for it. On Oct. 1, Axios [published](#) a story quoting what sources said Senator Bob Menendez, the New Jersey Democrat who leads the Foreign Relations Committee, told Netanyahu during a trip to Israel in September. In the words of one source, the senator warned that if Netanyahu formed a government after the Nov. 1 elections that included right-wing extremists, it could “seriously erode bipartisan support in Washington.”

That is now about to happen.

I have reported from Israel for this newspaper for nearly 40 years, often traveling around with my dear friend Nahum Barnea, one of the most respected, sober, balanced, careful journalists in the country. To hear him say to me minutes ago on the phone that “we have a different kind of Israel now” tells me we are truly entering a dark tunnel.