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How the West Should Treat Netanyahu

by Eran Yashiv¹

Israel and the Middle East are heading for chaos, with a protracted, messy, and multi-front war under Prime Minister Netanyahu's "leadership." The West cannot allow itself the luxury of a narcissistic and incompetent populist setting the Middle East on fire. President Biden and other Western leaders should isolate Netanyahu and signal that sustained support will only be possible under a new leader and parliamentary coalition, the sooner the better.

Netanyahu is a demagogue. Like other populists, he excels in extracting resources for himself and allies but is fundamentally disinterested in developing actual policy or managing a crisis. Netanyahu has remained in power through rhetoric and patronage – neither are enough to lead Israel in this moment. At present, Netanyahu is orchestrating [a misdirected military response](#), while conflating a PR spectacle for genuine strategy.

Since October 7th, Netanyahu has been focused on securing his political position and appeasing his extremist party and coalition members. In doing so, he has failed to provide vision, voice compassion to suffering families who have lost loved ones, or support a worried nation as friends and family head to the front. He has met mostly with TV and newspaper editors, and little with families of victims. He has paid more attention to his wardrobe than to his suffering countrymen. Rather than responding to the worst single after death toll for Jews since the Holocaust, Netanyahu remains self-centered.

Netanyahu has not just caused harm by neglect. Instead, the current quagmire is a consequence of a strategic approach to remain in power, no matter what the cost.

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First, Netanyahu systematically promoted Hamas. He employed a misconceived strategy of driving divisions between the West Bank controlled by the Palestinian Authority and Gaza led by the Hamas and effectively permitted the long-term funding of Hamas by Qatar and Iran. As a senior researcher at the [INSS, a leading national security studies think-tank](#), I was an author of long-term solution plans for Gaza that were offered to his government. These were not given consideration, though top military officers (including a former IDF Chief of Staff) endorsed them.

Second, since January 2023, his extremist government pursued a fundamental judicial overhaul, likely to turn Israel into a non-democracy. A majority of Israelis opposed these changes and have taken to the streets in tenacious opposition. The strife and internal conflict in Israel were not lost on its neighbors. [On March 24, I wrote in the Guardian](#) in reference to Iran: "...an unchecked right wing government in Israel, with plenty of irresponsible extremists in the cabinet, is a threat. Especially because it may also seek to blame its economic weakness on external enemies. Add to this, the emerging divisions within Israel, for example citizens refusing military service, may actually weaken it, and may be tempting to exploit." Iran has indeed observed this internal weakening and was buoyed by the unprecedented factions in the Israeli military and in its society. The current Hamas attack is one building block in the Iranian plan.

The US and other Western democracies should change course and treat Netanyahu for who he is: a rogue leader acting against his own country's interests and those of the West. He needs to be replaced now, not waiting for the end of the war, and alluded to Britain's experience in 1940. How and when can this be achieved? Here is a realistic solution.

First, Western leaders should signal that they stand with Israel but not with Netanyahu. Ongoing dialogues with Israel on policy and military matters in response to the Hamas attack should always engage with unity government members and not via direct meetings with Netanyahu. This will signal that decisions require adults in the room.

Second, the US and leaders of the G7 should signal that they support a democratic Israel and that ensuring democracy requires a new Prime Minister and governing coalition. While such change must come from within, it is facilitated by the structure of Israeli politics. Although not well understood outside of Israel, the current coalition could be replaced by a wider coalition: 46 members from Center-Right and Center-Left parties, joined by 18 members of the Ultra-Orthodox parties, who are realizing that Netanyahu will be unable to provide them with the sectorial support they were seeking. This 64 MPs majority suffices. It can be augmented by 5 to 7 break-away members from the Likud party. Outside pressure may well provide the necessary



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incentives. For example, the U.S. administration has regular contact with all parties involved and could act in the role of a facilitating coordinator.

The new coalition will be more attentive to Western leaders. Its leaders have a broader perspective of the geo-political situation while caring about the heart and soul of the nation: the fate of hostages, the safety of those on the front, and the security and future of a democratic State of Israel.

Now is the time to act. If not, Netanyahu and his extremist allies are bound to lead Israel and the whole Middle East into a protracted crisis. He may launch an ill-conceived invasion of Gaza without strategic objectives, without a plan to support an already diminished national defense, and without a plan for what happens in Gaza 'afterwards'. He might even attack Iran, a long running fantasy, so as to divert attention from his colossal failures. If that's not enough, he will be inclined to create investigative bodies that will lay the blame on the military and on the "leftists" and seek to speed up the de-democratization of Israel he has so vigorously pursued. The way forward requires that the US and foreign leaders stop giving Netanyahu a bear hug and instead, give him a cold shoulder.

Netanyahu will go down in history as the biggest destroyer from within of the Jewish nation; one can predict that "to follow a Netanyahu" will be an idiom for a nation committing suicide. He needs to be stopped here and now.