

Problems Abound but Liberal Democracy in Israel Perseveres

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
March 06, 2022

TEL AVIV—To the casual observer abroad, Israel may appear embattled. More than a few Israelis here share the perception. Particularly in the face of Vladimir Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine, however, it is crucial to maintain perspective. The nation-state of the Jewish people remains a beacon of freedom, tolerance, pluralism, prosperity, and self-reliance in a troubled region, the stability of which is crucial to U.S. interests in preserving an increasingly imperiled free and open international order.

Israelis have plenty to be concerned about, starting with their fragile 9-month-old coalition government that survives by the slenderest of margins: 61 lawmakers out of Israel's 120-member Knesset. The government is led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, whose conservative party, Yamina, won a mere seven seats in last spring's election, Israel's fourth since the spring of 2019.

Long considered to the right of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu whom he unseated, Bennett teamed up with Yair Lapid who chairs the centrist party Yesh Atid, which won 17 seats, to cobble together a highly unusual bloc of eight parties. It includes leftist parties and Ra'am, a small Islamist party – the first independent Israeli-Arab party in Israel's history to join a governing coalition. Presently serving as foreign minister, Lapid will, in accordance with the coalition agreement, rotate into the prime minister's position midway through the government's term in September 2023.

The coalition, which is not a national unity government but rather is held together by the determination to keep Netanyahu out of the prime minister's office, is fraught with internal tensions. Not the least source of friction is Bennett's commitment to maintain Israel's ultimate control over the territories he refers to as Judea and Samaria, whereas his left-wing coalition partners and Ra'am support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in as much as possible of what they call the occupied territories or the West Bank. Meanwhile, an array of sharp and consequential disagreements – about, for example, the struggle for power between the courts and the legislature, the organization of the economy and regulatory reform, and the appropriate coronavirus restrictions for schools, that would normally be powered by the opposition – instead plays out within the coalition itself.

The actual opposition is headed by Netanyahu, who served as prime minister from 2009 to 2021 (as well as from 1996 to 1999) and whose Likud, with 30 seats, is by far the Knesset's largest party. Netanyahu is widely viewed, even by his fiercest opponents, as Israel's most talented statesman and wiliest politician. He and his allies revile Bennett for betraying the conservative bloc. But standing trial on charges of corruption (while also confronting a recently appointed state commission of inquiry concerning the secret purchase of German-made submarines), Netanyahu has found his room to maneuver circumscribed.

Meanwhile, Israel continues to wrestle with the integration of two large minority populations. For quite different reasons, many ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arab Israelis approach participation in the daily life of the nation with emotions ranging from ambivalence to resentment and outright hostility. Haredi Jews, who represent about 12% of Israel's 9.3 million citizens, seek to insulate their communities – which typically revolve around state-supported Torah study for men, earning a paycheck for women, and the raising of large families – from the marketplace and secular culture. Arab-Israelis – the vast majority are Sunni Muslim while a small number are Christian – account for approximately 21% of Israel's population. Many are caught between a sense that the creation of the state of Israel usurped their right to national self-determination and the recognition that the Jewish

state provides individual freedom, equality under law, and economic opportunity to a degree not remotely available elsewhere in the region.

To add to its internal stresses and strains, Israel confronts, as it has since the moment David Ben Gurion read aloud the [Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel](#) in Tel Aviv on May 14, 1948, daunting security challenges. Seeking to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Biden administration stands on the brink of recognizing the Islamic Republic of Iran as a nuclear-threshold state even as Tehran seeks regional hegemony and Israel's destruction. Like the old JCPOA, the new Iran deal will provide billions of dollars in sanctions relief, enabling the ayatollahs to accelerate their ballistic missiles program and boost funding of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.

His country's multifarious problems notwithstanding, my friend Yossi Shain contends that after nearly two millennia of exile and diaspora, Israel represents the Jewish people's triumphant return to national sovereignty. In his recent book, "The Israeli Century: How the Zionist Revolution Changed History and Reinvented Judaism," Shain elaborates the "tectonic shift of Jewish history" brought about by Israel's founding. A Knesset member from the Yisrael Beiteinu Party led by Minister of Treasury Avigdor Lieberman, Shain explores the Jewish people's struggle from the Biblical era to the present to harmonize service to God, nationhood, dispersion, sovereignty, and justice. With its cultural vibrancy, economic prosperity, high birth rates, and military power, Israel provides a bustling national home to nearly half of the world's Jewish population and growing. As a result, contends Shain, "Israel has *displaced* the United States as the center of global Jewry and as the long-term definer of the Jewish people's interests and identity" (emphasis in the original).

Despite the headline-capturing conundrums, temptations, and tragic tradeoffs that come with national sovereignty, liberal democracy perseveres here. In early November, the government passed the first state budget in three years. Each of the parties in the Bennett-led government seems to

recognize that it is better off inside the coalition than it would be following new elections. In 2021, the [economy grew](#) by 8.1%, the highest growth rate in two decades. Bennett, Lapid, and Defense Minister Benny Gantz have shown interest in steps to [shrink the conflict](#) between Israel and the Palestinians, which would expand the so-called “economic peace” Netanyahu pursued. They have embraced the Abraham Accords, which opened an array of opportunities for security cooperation, commerce, and tourism with Gulf Arab states. And like the former prime minister, the new prime minister, foreign minister, and defense minister have maintained a hard line on Iran.

Beyond the rancorous political scene, Shain observes, Israelis express strong feelings of home and [a high sense of patriotism](#). Among both the ultra-Orthodox and Arab citizens, Israelization—in Hebrew language proficiency, in participation in the economy, and in political participation—proceeds apace. Israel’s high-tech sector thrives, which is crucial to Jerusalem’s maintenance of the region’s most potent military.

Still, Shain raises [hard questions](#) about the costs to the Jewish people of a nation-state of their own. In the Zionist imagination, the choice of national sovereignty over diaspora existence was accompanied by the aspiration to create a model society. “But the hope that a state, which must always operate under *raison d’etat*, might successfully operate by universal and non-territorial principles was doomed to failure—especially in the jungle that is the Middle East,” he writes. “The Israeli Century, therefore, threatens to terminate the idea of ‘Jewish morality’ as a liberal, universal code of ethics.”

It would be better to say, as Shain does later, that the question is “the right balance between might and morality” – a challenge as old as politics.

Deploping the turn to class warfare by his colleagues on the right, Rabbi Haim Navon recently [stated](#), “I would dare to guess that in a thousand years when historians write about the state of Israel’s first

100 years, they will focus on the miracle of the ingathering of the exiles [the return of Jews to their ancestral homeland] and not on the sad injustices that accompanied it.”

It is also reasonable to guess that a millennium hence, rather than express dismay at Israel’s imperfections, historians will marvel at the Jewish people’s establishment against fearsome odds of a free and democratic nation-state in the Middle East, both the national home of the Jewish people and a country grounded in respect for the rights of all its citizens.

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