

The view within Israel turns bleak

Attitudes toward the "Palestinian problem" range from detached fatigue to the belief that driving Palestinians into submission is God's work.

It was the pictures of Palestinians swimming and sunning at a Gaza beach that rubbed Yehuda Shlezinger, an Israeli journalist, the wrong way. Stylish in rumpled slippers and a faint scuff of beard, Mr. Shlezinger, or unfaked his vision at the "disturbing" pictures while appearing on Israel's Channel 12.

"These people deserve death, a hard death, an agonizing death, and instead we see them enjoying on the beach and having fun," complained Mr. Shlezinger, the religious affairs correspondent for the widely circulated right-wing Israel Hayom newspaper. "We should have seen a lot more revenge there," Mr. Shlezinger unrepentantly added. "A lot more rivers of Gaza's blood."

It would be nice to think that Mr. Shlezinger is a fringe figure or that Israelis would be shocked by his bloody fantasies. But he's not, and many wouldn't be.

Israel has hardened, and the signs of it are in plain sight. Dehumanizing language and promises of annihilation from military and political leaders. Polls that found wide support for the policies that have wreaked devastation and starvation in Gaza. Profoundly Israeli citizens preening proudly in bomb-crushed Palestinian neighborhoods. A crackdown on even mild forms of dissent among Israelis.

The Israeli left — the factions that criticize the occupation of Palestinian lands and favor negotiations and peace instead — is now a withering remnant of a once-vigorous movement. In recent years, the attitudes of many Israelis toward the "Palestinian problem" have ranged largely from detached fatigue to the hard-line belief that driving Palestinians off their land and into submission is God's work.

This bleak ideological landscape emerged slowly and then, on Oct. 7, all at once.

The massacres and kidnappings of Oct. 7, predictably, brought a public thirst for revenge. But in truth, by the time Hamas killers rampaged through the kibbutzim — in a bitter twist, home to some of the boldest peacebushers — many Israelis had long since come to regard Palestinians as a threat best locked away. America's romantic mythology and wishful thinking about Israel encourage a tendency to see Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the main cause of the ruthlessness in Gaza, where Israel has killed more than 2,000 people. The unpopular, scandal-ridden premier has been a constant, ingrained in an oversimplifying story.

But Israel's slaughter in Gaza, the creeping famine, the wholesale destruction of neighborhoods and the polling suggests, is the war the Israeli public wants. A January survey found that 94 percent of Jewish Israelis said the force being used against Gaza was appropriate or insufficient. In February, a poll found that most Jewish Israelis opposed food and medicine getting into Gaza. It was not Mr. Netanyahu alone but also his war cabinet members (including Benny Gantz, often invoked as the moderate alternative to Mr. Netanyahu) who unanimously rejected a Hamas deal to free Israeli hostages and, instead, began an assault on the city of Rafah, overlooking displaced civilians.

It's so much easier to put everything on Netanyahu, because then you feel so good about yourself and Netanyahu is the darkness," said Gad Lavy, an Israeli journalist who has documented Israel's military occupation for decades. "But the darkness is everywhere."

Like most political evolutions, the toughening of Israel is partly caused by generational change — Israeli children whose earliest memories are woven through with suicide bombings have now matured into adulthood. The rightward creep could be long-lasting because of demographics, with modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox Jews (who disproportionately vote with the right) consistently having more babies than their secular compatriots.

Most crucially, many Israelis emerged from the second intifada with a jaundiced view of negotiations and, more broadly, Palestinians, who were depicted as unable to make peace. This logic conveniently erased Israel's own role in sabotaging the



Above ■ A barrier wall in the West Bank is shown on Oct. 24. Below ■ An alley in Ramallah in the West Bank.



peace process through land seizures and settlement expansion. But something broader had taken hold — a quality that Israelis described to me as a numb, dissociated denial around the entire topic of Palestinians.

"The issues of settlements or relations with Palestinians were off the table for years," Tamar Hermann told me. "The status quo was OK for Israelis."

Ms. Hermann, a senior research fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, is one of the country's most respected experts on Israeli public opinion. In recent years, Israeli citizens hardly caught the attention of Israeli Jews. She and her colleagues periodically made lists of issues and asked respondents to rank them in order of importance. It didn't matter how many choices the pollsters presented, she said — resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict came in last in almost all measurements.

"It was totally ignored," she said. The psychological barrier between Israelis and Palestinians was hardened when Israel built the snaking West Bank barrier, which helped to forestall attacks on Israelis toward the end of the second intifada — the five-year Palestinian uprising that erupted in 2000, killing about 1,000 Israelis and roughly three times as many Palestinians. The wall helped keep West Bank suicide bombers from penetrating Israel and piled extra misery on ever-more-constrained Palestinian civilians, many of whom refer to it as the apartheid wall.

Many Israelis, Ms. Hermann told me, are at a loss when asked to identify the border where Israel ends and the West Bank begins. Her research from 2016 found that only a small percentage of Israelis knew for sure that the Green Line was the border delineated by the 1949 Armistice. The question of whether this border should even be depicted on Israeli school maps has been a heated topic of debate within Israel, with a rueful laugh, Ms. Hermann described many of the classroom maps as "from the river to the sea."

Such ignorance is a luxury exclusive to Israelis. Palestinians make it their business to know exactly where the border between Israel and the West Bank lies, which checkpoints are open on a given day, which roads they may and may not use. These are not abstract ideas; they dictate the daily movements of Palestinians, and confusing them could be fatal.

Israel's uneasy detachment turned to rage on Oct. 7.

A handful of songs with lyrics calling for the annihilation of a dehumanized enemy have been

circulated in Israel these past months, including "Launch," a hip-hop glorification of the military praising "from kisses to guns, until Gaza is erased" and suggesting that the West Bank city of Jenin is under the "plague of the firstborn," a reference to the biblical story in which God smites the eldest sons of Egypt. The smash hit "Harbu Darbu," addressed to "you sons of Amalek," promises "another X on the rifle, 'cause every dog will get what's coming to him."

"There is no forgiveness for swarms of rats," another song goes. "They will die in their rat holes." Israeli shops hawk trendy products like a bumper sticker that reads, "Finish them," and a pendant cut into the shape of Israel, with Gaza seamlessly attached.

Israeli protesters have repeatedly taken to the streets in anguish over the hostages held in Gaza and rage at Mr. Netanyahu (who faced intense domestic opposition long before Oct. 7) for failing to save them. But the demonstrations should not be conflated with international calls to protect civilians in Gaza. Many Israelis want a cease-fire to free the hostages, followed by the ouster of Mr. Netanyahu — but the protests do not reflect a groundswell of sympathy for Palestinians or a popular desire to rethink the status quo ante of occupation and the world's deadly peace talks.

If anything, with the world's attention fixed on Gaza, Israel's far-right government has intensified the domination of Palestinians. The single largest Israeli land grab in more than 20 years happened in March, when Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich announced the state seizure of 10 square kilometers of the West Bank. The land takeovers are accompanied by a bloody campaign of terror, with an ever-less-distinguishable mix of soldiers and settlers killing at least 460 Palestinians in the West Bank since Oct. 7, the Palestinian health ministry says.

Meanwhile, inside Israel, the police have handed out guns to civilians and set up de facto militias in the name of self-defense. But questions about whom these newly armed groups are meant to defend, and from whom, have created a creeping unease.

The weapons have gone not only to West Bank settlements or towns adjacent to Palestinian territories and Lebanon but also to communities deep in Israel's interior, particularly places that are home to a mix of Arab and Jewish residents. An analysis published in January by the newspaper Haaretz found that while the national security ministry wouldn't disclose which communities got gun licenses or the criteria

used to decide, Arab communities — even those on Israel's frontier — did not seem to be eligible.

The guns sent a chill through Palestinian citizens of Israel, who have often been involved in defense of the state. Look, Israeli's advocates often say, Arabs live more freely in Israel than anywhere else in the Middle East.

Hassan Jabareen, a prominent Palestinian lawyer who founded Adalah, Israel's main legal center for Arab rights, told me that many Arab citizens of Israel — who constitute one-fifth of the population — live in fear.

Israel's attacks on Gaza have in the past provoked community protests, riots and clashes among Arabs and Jews in Israel. After Oct. 7, though, the message was clear: Stay quiet.

"The police left no doubt that we were enemies of the state," Mr. Jabareen said, "when they started arming the Jewish citizens of Israel and called Jewish citizens to come to the station and take your arms to defend yourself from your Palestinian neighbor."

Diana Buttu, a Palestinian lawyer who lives with her family in the Israeli city of Haifa, told me that these past months have been thick with unease. She has long imagined herself as a living holdover from what is now Israel. A "remnant," she calls her, eld, who for years moved through Israel feeling invisible.

Now the sense of invisibility has melted. Both Ms. Buttu and Mr. Jabareen said that the current atmosphere in Israel had drawn closer and sharpened in their minds the mass displacement known in Arabic as the nakba, or catastrophe, as if the history might yet loop back. Mr. Netanyahu evoked the same era when he referred to Israel's current onslaught as "Israel's second war of independence."

"They didn't see us," Ms. Buttu said. "We were the ghosts, we were just there. And now it's like, 'Wow, they're here.' There is an interest in trying to get rid of Palestinians. We're the rhetorical front lines."

Long before this current storm of violence, Mr. Netanyahu's far-right government had worked to strengthen Jewish supremacy. The 2018 "nation-state law" codified the right to national self-determination as "unique to the Jewish people," removed Arabic as an official language and established "Jewish settlement as a national value" that the government must support. Palestinian members of the Knesset famously shredded copies of the bill in Parliament and yelled, "Apartheid," but it passed all the same.

In 2022, Israel reauthorized its controversial family unification law, largely barring Palestinians who marry Israeli citizens from receiving legal status — or living with their spouses in Israel — if they are from the West Bank or Gaza. The law also applies to people from the "enemy states" of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq (homes to Palestinian refugee communities), as well as Iran.

With legal disadvantages and social pressures mounting, Palestinian citizens of Israel have started to look abroad for support. Mr. Jabareen told me that his organization is preparing an application to the United Nations to request international legal protections for Palestinians inside Israel. In March a Palestinian citizen of Israel was granted asylum in Britain after arguing that returning would very likely expose him to persecution because of his political views and activism for Palestinian

rights and Israel's "apartheid system of racial control of its Jewish citizens over its Palestinian citizens."

Another stark sign of Israel's hardening is the hundreds of Israelis — mostly Arabs, but some Jews, too — who have been arrested, fired or otherwise punished for statements or actions regarded as endangering national security or undermining Israel's war efforts. Even a social media post expressing concern for Palestinians in Gaza is enough to draw police scrutiny.

Nadera Shalhoub-Keurkian, a scholar who lectures at Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Queen Mary University of London, said on a podcast that Zionism should be abolished, that Israel may be lying about the extent of sexual assault that took place on Oct. 7 and that Israelis were "criminals" who "cannot kill and not be afraid so they better be afraid." Israeli police responded in April by jailing Ms. Shalhoub-Keurkian overnight and asking a judge to keep her locked up while they investigated her on suspicion of incitement.

The judge decided to release her but acknowledged that she "may have crossed the line from free expression to incitement."

For nearly two decades — starting with the quelling of the second intifada and ending calamitously on Oct. 7 — Israel was remarkably successful at insulating itself from the violence of the occupation. Rockets fired from Gaza periodically rained down on Israeli cities, but since 2006, Israel's Iron Dome defense system has intercepted most of them. The mathematics of death heavily favored Israel: From 2008 until Oct. 7, more than 6,000 Palestinians were killed in the context of the United Nations call for the cessation of occupation and conflict; during that time, more than 300 Israelis were killed.

Human rights organizations — including Israeli groups — were shorthanded reports explaining why Israel is an apartheid state. That was embarrassing for Israel, but nothing really came of it. The economy flourished. Once-happy Israelis found themselves willing to sign accords with Israel after just a little performative pestering about the Palestinians.

These years gave Israelis a taste of what may be the Jewish state's most elusive dream — a world in which there simply did not exist a Palestinian problem.

Daniel Levy, a former Israeli negotiator who is now president of the U.S. Middle East Project think tank, describes "the level of hubris and arrogance that built up over the years." Those who warned of the immorality or strategic folly of occupying Palestinian territories "were dismissed," he said, "like, 'Just get over it.'"

If U.S. officials understand the state of Israeli politics, it doesn't show. Biden administration officials keep talking about a Palestinian state. But the land earmarked for a state has been steadily carved into illegal Israeli settlements, and Israel itself has seldom stood so unashamedly opposed to Palestinian sovereignty.

There's a reason Mr. Netanyahu keeps reminding everyone that he's spent his career undermining Palestinian statehood: It's a selling point. Mr. Gantz, who is more popular than Mr. Netanyahu and is often mentioned as a likely successor, is a centrist by Israeli standards — but he, too, has pushed back against international calls for a Palestinian state.

Daniel Levy describes the current divide among major Israeli politicians this way: Some believe in "managing the apartheid in a way that gives Palestinians more freedom — that's [David] Lapid and maybe Gantz on some days," while hardliners like Mr. Smotrich and Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir "are really about getting rid of the Palestinians. Eradication. Displacement."

The cartoon and crucifix suffered by Israelis on Oct. 7 should have driven home the futility of sealing themselves off from Palestinians while subjecting them to daily humiliations and violence. As long as Palestinians are trapped under violent military occupation, deprived of basic rights and told that they must accept their lot as inherent to lower beings, Israelis will live under the threat of terrorism, reprisals and terrorism. There is no wall thick enough to suppress a people who have nothing to lose.

Israelis did not, by and large, take that lesson. Now apathy has been replaced by vengeance.

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