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Nationalism, Populism, and Institutional Decline: The Parallel Paths of Trump and Netanyahu

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NETA OREN, MAY 1 2025

For years, Israel's alliance with the United States was seen as based on the mutual value of democracy. The pact between Trump and Netanyahu, however, now reflects a different set of priorities- nationalism and populism. Furthermore, both leaders employ similar tactics to weaken oversight and expand their power. Examining the parallels between Israel under Netanyahu and Trump's second term not only offers insight into the process of democratic backsliding but also provides a glimpse into its potential threats to people's rights, freedoms, and well-being. Trump's administration and Netanyahu's government share a strong nationalist ideology. While J.D. Vance condemns the "silencing" of ultra-far-right parties in Europe and Elon Musk seeks to amplify their influence, such concerns are irrelevant in Israel, where these parties are already part of the ruling coalition—the most nationalist government in the country's history. This government includes members from extreme ultranationalist parties that, until 2023, were considered outside the Israeli mainstream. Among them is National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, a far-right politician with unprecedented authority over Israel's police force (a single national entity). Ben Gvir has been convicted seven times for offenses, including incitement to racism against Arabs and support for the banned Jewish terrorist organization Kach.

Trump's administration and Netanyahu's government also hold a populist view that differentiates between "the people" and "the elite," arguing that politics should be an expression of the will of the people. Netanyahu justifies his attacks on democratic gatekeepers with the populist claim that his government, which won 48% of the vote in the 2022 election, represents "the people" and should therefore not be constrained by "unelected" institutions, such as the courts or the attorney general. These institutions are often labeled by Netanyahu and his coalition as "the elite" or the "deep state." A recent example can be found in a social media post by Netanyahu, in which he declared: "In America and in Israel, when a strong right-wing leader wins an election, the leftist Deep State weaponizes the justice system to thwart the people's will." Similarly, his Justice Minister, Yariv Levin, complained about judges who "want to decide what's reasonable and what's not, instead of the people chosen by the nation." This rhetoric closely mirrors statements from figures in Trump's orbit. Elon Musk, for example, claimed, "Federal judges who repeatedly abuse their authority to obstruct the will of the people via their elected representatives should be impeached." Likewise, Stephen Miller *claimed that the president* "is the only official in the entire government that is elected by the entire nation," and that "The whole will of democracy is imbued into the elected president". Like in the case of Netanyahu, Trump's 2024 vote share was under 50 percent, and his margin of victory was small by historical standards.

Accordingly, Netanyahu's government and Trump's administration seek to dismantle oversight mechanisms that limit their power and to attack minority groups they label as "enemies of the people." Bills, laws and administrative actions in Israel and the United States have threatened the independence of the judiciary and the media, as well as the activities of civil society groups and NGOs, academic and artistic freedom, minority rights, and election procedures. Rather than cataloging the many anti-liberal legislative and administrative actions, I will focus on two broader and particularly troubling trends.

The first is the erosion of democratic norms. As Levitsky and Ziblatt demonstrate, democracies rely not only on formal laws but also on widely respected unwritten norms. Netanyahu's willingness to disregard these norms and exploit legal loopholes is unprecedented in the history of Israel. One example is the rapid advancement of illiberal

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legislation, often pushed through without thorough debate on its implications. Each of the five amendments to Israel's Basic Laws passed in 2023 completed the entire legislative process within an unusually short time frame, ranging from just two weeks to one month. In addition, Netanyahu's coalition advanced some of its illiberal measures as "committee bills," sidestepping established norms, including the central role traditionally played by the Knesset's legal counsel in initiating and overseeing such legislation on behalf of the committees.

Another example is Justice Minister Yariv Levin's refusal to let the Judicial Selection Committee vote on new Supreme Court appointments following the retirement of three liberal-leaning justices. This inaction increased the share of conservative justices, who may be less inclined to challenge government policies. Netanyahu and Levin also rejected the legitimacy of newly appointed Supreme Court President Yitzhak Amit. In an unprecedented move, the Prime Minister, the Justice Minister, and the Knesset Speaker boycotted his swearing-in ceremony, and Levin made clear that he would not cooperate with Amit throughout Netanyahu's term.

Perhaps the most dangerous violation of democratic norms is the government's willingness to defy the Supreme Court. On multiple occasions, Netanyahu refused to commit to complying with potential court rulings, and several members of his government have openly called for ignoring judicial decisions. In a court filing, Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar stated that Prime Minister Netanyahu explicitly told him he should follow Netanyahu's directives rather than those of the Supreme Court in the event of a constitutional crisis.

Trump broke democratic norms already in his first term, and this trend accelerated during his second. He used executive power for retribution against individuals and organizations he perceived as adversaries, issuing executive orders targeting law firms and directing the Justice Department to investigate political opponents, undermining the constitutional principle that law enforcement decisions should be made independently of the White House. He also invoked rarely used emergency powers, such as the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), to impose sweeping tariffs on nearly all imports, and the 1798 Alien Enemies Act to deport Venezuelan migrants without due process. No previous president had used IEEPA to impose tariffs in the nearly 50 years since its enactment, and the Alien Enemies Act had been invoked only three times in U.S. history—each during major wars. Like Netanyahu, Trump also pushes legal boundaries and defies judicial authority. His administration has withheld funds despite court orders requiring their distribution, excluded The Associated Press from the White House press pool in defiance of a court ruling granting access, and ignored a judge's directive to reroute planes carrying Venezuelan immigrants who were being transferred to a notorious prison in El Salvador.

The second dangerous trend of democratic backsliding in Israel and the United States is what Muller calls the "colonization of the state"—the appointment of loyalists to key public positions, primarily based on their allegiance to the leader, often at the expense of skilled professionals. A striking example is the Israeli police. National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir reportedly questioned officers under consideration for promotion about their loyalty, advancing those deemed "loyal"—even if they were unqualified or had previously been disqualified. Meanwhile, he demoted Brigadier General Yoav Telem, who had overseen Netanyahu's corruption cases, leading to Telem's resignation. Ben-Gvir's evaluation of police officers' 'loyalty' was largely based on their handling of anti-government protests. He consistently promoted individuals known for their aggressive treatment of demonstrators. Some of these appointees were under ethical or criminal investigation—circumstances that would typically disqualify them from such positions. For example, Ben-Gvir promoted Police Superintendent Meir Suissa, who had been indicted for negligent conduct after throwing a stun grenade into a crowd during an anti-government protest in Tel Aviv in March 2023, injuring a woman. In January 2024, the Supreme Court issued a temporary injunction barring Ben-Gvir from issuing operational directives to the police regarding protest management and the use of force. The decision followed the Court's determination that he had violated a 2023 ruling prohibiting him from exercising such authority.

Another example is the Shin Bet. Netanyahu recently attempted to fire the Shin Bet chief, Ronen Bar, the first time in Israeli history that a government has dismissed the head of the domestic security agency. In an affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court, Bar alleged that Netanyahu's push to dismiss him came shortly after Bar launched an investigation into suspected illicit connections between senior Netanyahu aides and Qatar. Bar also stated that he had repeatedly refused Netanyahu's requests to sign an opinion, drafted by the prime minister or his aides, that would have blocked Netanyahu's corruption trial, citing what Bar characterized as unfounded national security

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claims. According to Bar Netanyahu's desire to terminate Bar's services stems from "an expectation of personal loyalty on my part toward the prime minister." Bar states that "The prime minister's expectation of personal loyalty, when it contradicts the public interest, is fundamentally illegitimate."

Like Netanyahu, Trump also demands personal loyalty from individuals in key public positions. During his first term, he fired FBI Director James B. Comey after Comey refused to publicly clear him of any ties to Russia and resisted pressure to drop an FBI investigation into Michael T. Flynn, the former national security adviser. In his second term, Trump appointed loyalists, often lacking experience in managing large institutions or traditional policy backgrounds, to critical roles, while dismissing staff members who were perceived as insufficiently loyal. For example, although Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is a military veteran, he had no prior experience in government or in running a big organization like the Department of Defense. He was chosen primarily for his loyalty to the president. Trump also dismissed six National Security Council staffers and the top two officials at the National Security Agency after far-right activist Laura Loomer urged him to remove them for what she claimed was a lack of loyalty.

Some people may overlook the significance of the above trends. Others tolerate them as long as they feel unaffected or believe the leadership serves their interests. However, as Israel's experience shows, democratic erosion not only weakens a nation's foundations but also undermines its overall functioning, ultimately harming everyone.

Undermining gatekeepers increases the risk of misallocation of state resources. Filling key state agencies with loyalists who lack the necessary expertise weakens these institutions, reducing their effectiveness. In Israel, during the tenure of Ben-Gvir as National Security Minister and Miri Regev, a close ally of Prime Minister Netanyahu, as Transportation Minister, the country experienced a significant increase in criminal activity and traffic accidents. Homicide rates spiked in 2023 and 2024, particularly within the Arab community. Car thefts increased by over 21 percent in 2024, while land trespassing offenses rose by 12 percent. That same year, road fatalities reached their highest level in 18 years. The early months of Trump's second term were also marked by widespread disruptions across various areas of government activity, including chaos at the Pentagon, turmoil in the stock market, the largest measles outbreak since the disease was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000, and long lines outside Social Security offices nationwide.

The risk becomes even greater in times of crisis. Two months into Trump's second term, Susan Rice wrote, "Imagine war with Iran. A deadly foreign terrorist attack on U.S. soil. A bird flu pandemic with high mortality rates. China blockading or attacking Taiwan. Russia invading a North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally. China winning the A.I. race for super-intelligence and putting our economy and security at risk. Each of those contingencies is more than just conceivable." She then wondered how the United States would handle these challenges when unqualified loyalists hold key positions. Here, Israel offers a cautionary tale. It shows that in this situation, during emergencies, civilian agencies may collapse, leaving citizens to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, the government may exploit the situation to erode civil rights further and tighten its control.

Many Israeli state agencies failed to manage both the immediate and long-term catastrophic consequences of the Hamas October 7, 2023, attack. On that day, Thousands of Palestinians launched a coordinated assault on a music festival, military bases, small towns, and more than twenty kibbutzim. Approximately 1,200 Israeli civilians and soldiers were killed, and over 200 people were taken hostage. For hours, residents along Israel's southern border hid in their homes as the attackers took control of the area—killing, raping, looting, and setting homes ablaze. From their hiding places, terrified civilians sent desperate messages to loved ones, asking the same urgent questions over and over: Where is the army? Where are the police? Where are the first responders? Wounded individuals died from their injuries while pleading for help that never came. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the country, Israelis watched in shock as live television broadcasts aired whispered pleas from residents of besieged kibbutzim—sobbing, begging anchors for help as the violence unfolded.

Prior to the attack, Netanyahu dismissed warnings from his top security officials, whom he viewed as disloyal, regarding the potential damage his polarizing and illiberal policies could inflict on Israel's deterrence capabilities. The Military Intelligence Directorate issued four letters cautioning that Israel's adversaries saw a strategic opportunity to shift regional power dynamics in their favor, interpreting the deep and unprecedented internal divisions sparked by

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Netanyahu's legislative agenda as a sign of Israeli weakness. Despite growing concerns over the IDF's operational readiness, particularly in light of widespread protests by reservists, Netanyahu declined a security briefing requested by the IDF Chief of Staff.

The army was not the only agency that malfunctioned during the October 7 attack. State Comptroller and Ombudsman documented how, during the attack, a severe shortage of armored ambulances hindered the evacuation of wounded victims, leaving many to bleed to death while crying out for help. Even those who reached hospitals faced substandard care. The State Comptroller also reported that state agencies remained dysfunctional for weeks after the attack, further compounding the crisis. Indeed, for years, Netanyahu's governments neglected communities in southern Israel and reduced funding for public social services, including hospitals and mental health care. At the same time, the government allocated resources to sectors represented by the coalition's sectarian parties, such as settlers and ultra-Orthodox Jews.

While the Israeli government failed to adequately address public needs following the October 7 attack and the ensuing war, it exploited the emergency situation—and the public's fatigue and tendency to rally around the flag—to introduce bills and administrative measures that further undermined civil liberties, including freedom of speech, the right to protest, and the independence of the judiciary and the media. In this sense, Israel's experience not only provides a prototype for democratic backsliding but also serves as a stark warning of the dangers people face when democracy rapidly crumbles.

About the author:

Dr. Neta Oren is affiliated faculty at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University. Her research focuses on public opinion, conflict resolution, political psychology, and the Israeli-Arab conflict. She is the author of *Israel Under Netanyahu: Populism and Democratic Decline* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2025), *Israel's National Identity: The Changing Ethos of Conflict* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019) and co-author of *The Autism Matrix: The Social Origins of the Autism Epidemic* (Polity Press, 2010). She has published articles in journals such as the *Journal of Peace Research*, *Political Psychology*, and *The Middle East Journal*. She received her Ph.D. from Tel Aviv University.