

How the far right grabbed power in Israel, and what it means in this time of war

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left, greets National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, the leader of the far-right Otzma Yehudit party, at the Knesset, in Jerusalem, on May 23.

GIL COHEN-MAGEN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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Since Hamas's horrific Oct. 7 attacks, far-right ministers in the Israeli government have been ratcheting up the already high tensions in the region. Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's National Security Minister, has been handing out thousands of firearms to members of volunteer security squads, something

critics fear could amplify the already escalating violence against Palestinians in the West Bank and in Israel itself. Mr. Ben-Gvir, who has previously been convicted for incitement to racism, said last month that the Palestinian Authority and Hamas in the West Bank should be given the same treatment as Hamas in Gaza.

Provocative actions like these from government ministers have been turning up the temperature in Israel and the occupied territories since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu presented the most radical right-wing cabinet in the history of Israel last December. The far-right ministers aren't in the war cabinet, but they continue to hold significant influence over Mr. Netanyahu as the fighting in Gaza threatens to spill over into the West Bank and on Israel's other borders.

How did Israel get here, with the far-right holding such power, at such a sensitive moment?

The secular left has been on the decline for several decades in Israel, but the real turning point was in the summer of 2021. Four consecutive national elections had resulted in almost identical results, and neither Mr. Netanyahu nor the opposition parties managed to form a stable coalition. Then, a group of small parties from the right and the left, including the representatives of the United Arab List, came together and formed a coalition. The cabinet was headed by Naftali Bennett, a right-wing politician whose party won seven parliamentary seats out of 120, constituting 6 per cent of the votes. The single key for the unprecedented coming-together of the sharply different parties was Mr. Netanyahu – or, more accurately, a fierce sense of commitment to remove him from office.

After 12 consecutive years in power, Mr. Netanyahu reluctantly vacated the prime minister's office. However, he did not take on the role of the head of the opposition as is customary in parliamentary democracies. When Mr. Bennett presented his fragile coalition of 60 parliament members, Mr. Netanyahu, despite facing corruption charges, began to pave a path back to premiership. He worked tirelessly to untie the threads of the shaky coalition, paying most of his attention to Mr. Bennett's party members, who held hawkish views. The pressure did not stop even for a moment. Demonstrators stood outside their homes and depicted them on social media as traitors. According to the protesters, Mr. Bennett's party stole the votes of right-wing Israelis and used them to form a "leftist" coalition that included an Arab party.

The campaign was successful. The Bennett government survived only a year before it lost its tiny parliamentary majority. The Israeli public was called to the ballots once more.

In the past, Mr. Netanyahu preferred to form coalitions with the ultra-Orthodox parties and partners to the right and left of his party, the Likud. The fact that the camp facing him was united around the idea of “Anyone but Bibi” (Mr. Netanyahu’s nickname) left him facing a difficult choice: the danger of losing the elections or forming a solid right-wing bloc that included elements he would not have considered co-operating with in the past. In short, Mr. Netanyahu saw no alternative but to unite with the most radical factions of the right, and these factions saw no choice but to rally behind Mr. Netanyahu.

Traditionally in Israel, the Likud and the Labor Party occupied the centre of the political map. Since Israel’s territorial conquests in 1967 war, the Likud, a centre-right party, advanced the annexation of the occupied territories. However, it was Likud leaders Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon who eventually evacuated the Jewish settlements from Sinai, Gaza and the northern West Bank. The Labor, as is it commonly known, is a centre-left party that became increasingly disillusioned with the occupation, but it never removed Jewish settlements. However, its leader, Yitzhak Rabin, signed the Oslo Accords that led to the formation of the Palestinian Authority.

To the right of the Likud, several parties objected to the Likud’s weak commitment to territorial maximalism. Generally speaking, these parties represented segments of Israel’s Religious Zionist population. Along with their religious lifestyle, these Orthodox Jews hold a Zionist world view and are integrated into Israeli society. Members of the group are sometimes referred to as srugim (crocheted) because, unlike other Orthodox Jewish groups, the men cover their heads with colourful knitted kippahs.

Within this camp, there were followers of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, who interpreted the victory in the 1967 war and occupation – or, in his words, the liberation of the territories – as an element within the divine plan for the redemption of the people of Israel. Rabbi Kook’s students and their students established hundreds of settlements, sometimes with the government’s permission and often without it.

Meanwhile, the ultra-Orthodox public remained on the sidelines of this debate. The ultra-Orthodox camp consists of multiple groups that are distinctive due to

their strict adherence to religious observances and traditional clothing. Many of them live in isolated communities. In the early years of the state of Israel, they opposed Zionism and the secular nature of the state. However, they participated in Israeli politics to protect their interests, and they succeeded in doing so. Many of the ultra-Orthodox receive a full exemption from military service. Additionally, the government provides financial support to those who devote themselves to religious studies. As a result, they are only partly integrated into the labour market.

The beginning of the rapprochement between the Religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox began in the 1970s. In 1968, Rabbi Meir Kahane founded and led the Jewish Defense League, a radical movement committed to defending American Jews from antisemitism that orchestrated provocations against Soviet interests in the U.S., in an attempt to bring about the release of Zionist activists from prisons in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Kahane arrived in Israel in 1971. Rabbi Kook's students considered him and his ideas foreign and gave him a cold shoulder. Indeed, Mr. Kahane's political agenda was less about territorial expansion and more about relations between Jews and Arabs in sovereign Israel. After three failed attempts, he won a seat in the Knesset in 1984. During his short tenure as a Knesset member, Mr. Kahane wrote a large number of racist bills. He emphasized his commitment to transforming the state of Israel from a secular democracy to a Jewish theocracy.

Mr. Kahane's provocations led the Knesset to impose restrictions on the participation of racist and anti-democratic parties. In the 1988 election, Mr. Kahane's party Kach (Thus) was disqualified. Researchers who followed Mr. Kahane's voters, who were looking for a new political home, discovered that the ultra-Orthodox, rather than the radical right parties, won their votes.

In February, 1994, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, who was a close associate of Mr. Kahane, murdered 29 Muslims and wounded 125 as they were holding a morning prayer in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Forty days later, with the end of the mourning period, Hamas carried out the first suicide terrorist attacks against civilians in Israel. This began the escalation process, culminating in the Al-Aqsa Intifada that broke out in 2000.

In the 1999 elections, the leader of the centre-left camp, Ehud Barak, won. Mr. Barak wanted to bring the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an end. In the summer

of 2000, president Bill Clinton sponsored peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians at Camp David, but the talks ended without an agreement, and when he returned to Israel, Mr. Barak declared that he had not found a partner willing to end the conflict.

The collapse of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians had a considerable impact on the Israeli public. The prevailing feeling was that any territorial concession was met with murderous terrorist attacks. The message “Kahane was right” resonated, especially with the ultra-Orthodox, who live in closed communities and feed mainly on media that their leaders approve of. The same media emphasized the antisemitic nature of the murderous attacks on Jews during the Intifada. Mr. Kahane’s dichotomous world view – the righteous Jew, the evil Arab – gained traction among growing numbers of ultra-Orthodox.

Another factor for the rise of the far-right in Israel is the rapid growth of ultra-Orthodox communities. In Israel, the fertility rate of ultra-Orthodox women is 6.6 children. This compares with three children for Muslim women, 2.2 for secular Jewish women and 1.8 children for Christian Arab women. Beginning in the 1990s, Israeli governments encouraged rapidly growing communities of ultra-Orthodox Jews to move to settlements in the West Bank, where apartments were relatively cheap.

In 2022, Mr. Netanyahu devised a strategy to create a coalition that would allow him to return to power. For the first time, he embraced Itamar Ben-Gvir, the leader of the far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party and a self-proclaimed follower of Rabbi Kahane. Mr. Netanyahu convinced Mr. Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, who led the hawkish Religious Zionist party, the Jewish Home, to run together, which ensured they both passed the vote threshold needed to get into the Knesset. Together, the parties won 14 seats. Their ultra-Orthodox partners won 16 seats and the Likud 32, forming the government that is in power in Israel today.

The ideological overlap between the parties, and the fact that none had a real possibility of joining an alternative coalition, created a unified cabinet. Along with an unprecedented allocation of budgets to ultra-Orthodox parties and settlers, the government promoted a populist judicial overhaul designed to weaken the Israeli justice system and undermine its independence.

Mr. Netanyahu did not anticipate the strength of the public reaction to his legal reform. The Israeli public who opposed the plan took to the streets en masse week after week and demanded that Mr. Netanyahu change course. However, Justice Minister Yariv Levin and Mr. Netanyahu's coalition partners limited his freedom to manoeuvre.

The debate sharply divided Israeli society. For the first time in history, masses of reservists, among them pilots and senior officers, announced the termination of their volunteering for service, and Mr. Netanyahu's spokespeople denounced them as traitors. Israel's enemies could not have expected a greater gift than this. Reality seemingly confirmed the words of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, who has described Israel as a country with nuclear and air power that rests on a society weaker than a spider's web.

It will take a long time to assess whether the political rift in Israel was a decisive factor in Hamas's decision to attack on Oct. 7. But it is already clear that Mr. Nasrallah was wrong.

The government responded to the disaster slowly. In the first days after the event, the ministers in general, and the ministers of the extreme right in particular, fell silent. Civil society mobilized in an unprecedented way to fill the void left by the government.

Gradually, the ministers came to their senses. However, Mr. Ben-Gvir and Mr. Smotrich went into election campaign mode instead of fulfilling their ministerial duties. Mr. Ben-Gvir said he would bring forward a bill mandating the death penalty for terrorists, infuriating families of hostages in Gaza who felt that the legislation could put their loved ones at risk. Other ministers from his party went even further; Amihai Eliyahu, for instance, ratcheted up tensions by musing that a nuclear bomb could be dropped on Gaza.

Mr. Smotrich, the Minister of Finance, refused to redirect money allocated to support the ultra-Orthodox for the war effort and to help displaced Israelis evacuated from border areas. As the minister in charge of settlements in the West Bank, he continues to support the most extreme settlers, who take advantage of the fact that the media's attention is focused on Gaza to harass Palestinians and take over their lands. These actions by far-right ministers are creating friction with the U.S. and other allies, and will make it much harder to bring stability to Gaza and the West Bank.

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