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ISRAEL'S DOMESTIC "PERFECT STORM"

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On Sunday, August 17, 2025, Israel experienced possibly the largest protest in its 77-year history. An estimated half a million Israelis demonstrated in Tel Aviv, and altogether another half a million attended rallies in various locations throughout the country.¹ Accounting for the difference in population size between Israel and the U.S., the number of Israelis protesting that Sunday was equivalent to some 34 million Americans taking to the streets on a single night.

The August 17 protesters called for an end to the fighting in Gaza and the release of all Israeli hostages held by Hamas since October 7, 2023. But that protest was the culmination of two and a half years of growing internal polarization spurred by a number of different but related issues that came together to create a "perfect storm." These different issues originated from the same event: the confirmation by Israel's Knesset on December 29, 2022, of a new government generally considered the most right-wing in the country's history. Indeed, Israel's new governing coalition included two parties that were deemed too extreme to be invited to join even previous right-wing coalitions.

This Brief will describe and explain the issues that by mid-2025 had converged to produce the "perfect storm":

- the effort launched by the Israeli government in early 2023 to change the distribution of power among Israel's governing institutions by strengthening the executive and legislative branches at the expense of the judiciary;
- the catastrophic strategic surprise of Hamas's horrific attack on October 7, 2023, against Israel's civilian communities and military bases located in proximity to the Gaza Strip, and the ensuing sharp disagreement in Israel about the responsibility for the surprise attack and for the slow response of Israel's defense forces to it;
- the tension if not contradiction between the different objectives of Israel's military response to the attack—viz., launching the war against Hamas in Gaza—and the tough internal debate about Israel's priorities among these different objectives;
- and, finally, the rupture in Israeli society regarding the need for the burden of Israel's defense to be shared among different parts of its society, especially the escalating debate—mostly between secular and national-religious Israelis on the one hand and ultra-Orthodox Jews on the other—over the growing demand that all citizens of Israel should be required to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) or in an equivalent national service.

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The final section of the Brief will argue that in the coming months, this “perfect storm” will likely escalate further, and that the costs associated with the contributing issues will consequently also increase.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

The first set of issues constituting the “perfect storm” were a number of proposals offered by Israel’s new government in January 2023 to change the distribution of power among the country’s governing institutions by strengthening the legislative and executive branches at the expense of its judiciary. One proposal was to curtail the ability of Israel’s judiciary to strike down any law that it saw as contradicting one of Israel’s Basic Laws² (that together make up the closest Israel has to a constitution) or to rule that an executive branch action is “unreasonable.” By also giving the Knesset a greater role in nominating judges, the proposed changes were expected to reduce the odds that so-called ‘activist’ judges, seen as overly eager to distort the ‘will of the people’ by reining in the country’s legislature, would be appointed.

Critics saw these changes as threatening Israel’s democracy, or at least as transforming it into an illiberal democracy similar to Hungary and Poland. Supporters countered that their purpose was to strip an unelected (and, in Israel’s case, largely self-nominated and hence self-perpetuating) elite of the entitlements that it had usurped during previous decades. Reforming the process of nominating judges and limiting their terms of service, especially those of Supreme Court judges, was also presented as an opportunity to diversify Israel’s predominantly Ashkenazi, secular, and leftist courts. By ensuring that the courts would reflect the society’s diversity, it was argued, the judiciary’s standing would be elevated rather than diminished.

The proposals ignited strong public opposition, leading hundreds of thousands of Israelis to take to the streets one Saturday evening after another during the first nine months of 2023. Tens of thousands of IDF reservists joined the protests, some of them warning that they would refuse to serve if the reforms were carried out.

The government put their proposals on hold, however, following Hamas’s October 7, 2023, attack. But when efforts to legislate several of these changes were revived by the Ministry of Justice and the Knesset Judiciary Committee in early 2025, some of them were defeated—the most important among them being an attempt to radically change the composition of the committee nominating judges, thereby significantly strengthening the relative weight of politicians in the process. Another reform sought to end the tradition of selecting the President of the Supreme Court according to seniority. On January 26, 2025,

Judge Itzhak Amit, the Court's most senior jurist and widely regarded as among its most liberal, was sworn in as president. Yet Amit's promotion could not hide the polarization associated with the event, as the minister of justice, Yariv Levin, boycotted the ceremony and announced the termination of a long-standing tradition of bi-weekly meetings between the minister and the President of the Supreme Court.³

DEFENDING DEMOCRACY'S GATEKEEPERS

Israelis returned to the streets in increasing numbers in early 2025 to protest other steps taken by the Israeli government that were seen as weakening the 'gatekeepers' of Israel's democracy. The most consequential of these was the effort to institutionally weaken and possibly remove Gali Baharav-Miara, the government's legal advisor, who also serves as the country's attorney general. As she frequently warned Prime Minister Netanyahu and other ministers that the legislation they proposed contradicted one or more of the country's Basic Laws and, on appeal, would most likely be rejected by the Supreme Court, these ministers increasingly saw her as insufficiently supportive of their agenda. As a result, some now demanded that the two functions she serves be separated—and that she should be removed from both. And on June 6, 2025, the Cabinet voted unanimously to launch a process that, if completed, would lead to her firing.⁴

Another related development seen as an attack on the 'gatekeepers' was Prime Minister Netanyahu's March 16, 2025, decision to fire the head of Israel's General Security Services (GSS—also known as the Israel Security Agency, or Shin Bet), Ronen Barr. The tension between the two had been brewing over many months, beginning with mutual accusations as to who was more responsible for the stunning October 7 strategic surprise. Differences over the conduct of negotiations to release the Israeli hostages taken by Hamas on October 7 only exacerbated these tensions.

Barr's firing led Israeli civil society organizations—notably the Movement for the Quality of Governance—to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court. Legal Advisor Baharav-Miara then announced that she would not defend the government against the appeal and declared that by firing Barr, Netanyahu not only violated due process but also placed himself in a "conflict of interest" zone.⁵ As Barr's firing was announced just after the GSS launched two investigations of misconduct by individuals serving in the prime minister's office,⁶ his

termination raised suspicion that Netanyahu had just fired the person heading the institution investigating him.

While Barr did step down from his position on June 15, the appeal against his firing continues to be litigated, as he argued that the Supreme Court's decision with respect to his case would remain significant in order to ensure that future directors of the GSS would not fear being arbitrarily fired by their political superiors. Together, the two cases—of Baharav-Miara and Barr—seemed to have combined to raise Israelis' fear that their government was attempting to weaken their democracy's gatekeepers in order to ensure its political survival.

THE GAZA WAR

Despite the initial 'rally 'round the flag' effect of the October 7 attack, the polarization of Israel's society increased significantly after its subsequent invasion of Gaza. The most immediate cause of that hyperpolarization was the strategic surprise suffered by Israel on October 7 and the debate that began almost immediately over the causes of, and responsibility for, the surprise attack. One side of this debate largely comprised the consumers of Israeli intelligence. Led by Prime Minister Netanyahu, this camp blamed the institutions responsible for providing warning of impending attacks for their failure to do so.⁷ That these institutions failed before and on October 7 to warn the country of a massive pending attack is indisputable.

The increasing polarization regarding this issue is reflected in the growth and spread of an extreme version of this narrative. By July 2025, Netanyahu went so far as to accuse the security services of also failing to provide him with a tactical warning in the early hours of October 7, an allegation critics saw as veering into that of a "deep state" conspiracy.⁸

Senior former members of Israel's defense and intelligence communities reject this narrative, arguing that Israel's political leaders, notably Prime Minister Netanyahu, are at least equally responsible for the surprise attack, because their priorities and policies over more than a decade prior to October 7 had led them to ignore, dismiss, or reject warnings provided by defense and intelligence officials when it was politically convenient to do so.⁹ Two key flawed assumptions upon which Netanyahu's policies rested were that Hamas had been successfully deterred from posing a major threat

to the communities of Israel's South, and that Hamas leaders were content to govern Gaza as a mini-state fueled by Qatari money.¹⁰ As a result, the 'reference threat' against which IDF units exercised and were trained during that period comprised a single—or, at most, a few—breaches of the fence surrounding Gaza. Such a breach was expected to be launched by some tens—not thousands—of Hamas Nukhba fighters.

On March 25, 2023, Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant warned that the aforementioned judicial reform protests signaled a social fragmenting of Israeli society, which Israel's neighbors might view as an opportunity to attack—a warning Netanyahu and his allies dismissed.¹¹ Israel's leaders were then also warned that opposition to the proposed legislative changes would reduce IDF reservists' willingness to serve.¹² These and similar warnings were reported in real time by Israeli media, but were dismissed by Netanyahu and his supporters as "politically motivated."

By mid-2025, these accusations and responses brought a clear majority of Israelis to demand the creation of a national commission of inquiry, a demand based on a long tradition of reckoning established by Israel's Knesset in the aftermath of significant debacles in the country's history.¹³ In all these cases, the reports produced by the commissions led directly or indirectly to the removal of most serving Israeli leaders and defense officials.

Not surprisingly, Netanyahu's refusal to form such a commission is widely viewed as an unjustified personal effort to avoid such a fate. Given that Netanyahu knows that it would be far harder to delay establishing such a commission after the war, his refusal to end the war is seen by many as primarily aimed at delaying the commission's formation as well as dismissing the demand for early elections.¹⁴

A second polarizing effect of the post-October 7 Gaza War was fueled by the inherent tension, if not complete contradiction, between Israel's two war objectives: destroying Hamas and rescuing hostages. Hamas's use of the hostages as human shields constrained the IDF's operations and affected the hostage release negotiations, as Hamas conditioned the release of all Israeli hostages on Israeli consent to ending the war and withdrawing its forces from Gaza—in effect guaranteeing Hamas's survival as a fighting and governing entity. By early 2025, however, public opinion polls consistently showed that a vast majority of Israelis prioritized the release of hostages over a continuation of the war.¹⁵ Many Israelis believe the government that

failed them on October 7 owes the hostages and their families everything possible to gain their release. By not prioritizing the hostages, Israel's political leaders are viewed as violating the unwritten social contract that their citizens will never be left behind.¹⁶

A large minority of Israelis, however, argue that ending the war while leaving Hamas intact would hand the group a victory, leading to a steady flow of new recruits and renewed conflicts, as young Gazans would be enticed by the movement's newly restored glory.¹⁷ Netanyahu insisted repeatedly that he was pursuing both objectives, and that only pressure on Hamas by continuing to execute the war would eventually force it to compromise. Yet by early 2025, many Israelis, led by a significant number of hostage families, rejected this argument, believing that Netanyahu had abandoned the hostages in pursuit of his personal interests and political survival.

Senior Israeli defense officials, including some who have led the ceasefire and hostage release negotiations, gradually became embroiled in this debate as well, further polarizing relations between the prime minister and Israel's defense leaders, with Netanyahu accusing the latter of being "too soft," while some of these leaders implied that Israel's prime minister was doing everything possible to prolong the war.¹⁸ On June 6, 2025, Commanders for Israeli Security, an NGO representing more than 450 former senior defense officials, published a statement arguing that "the continuation of the war is not a security imperative but rather the result of the refusal to admit failure."¹⁹

BURDEN SHARING

The growing polarization of Israelis since the Gaza War began was further exacerbated by yet another debate, this one focusing on the extent to which the burden entailed in protecting the country is shared fairly among its citizens. The most contentious aspect of this issue remains the exemption of ultra-Orthodox Jews from military service, an inequality largely tolerated for decades but less sustainable during wartime.

Two important developments increased the polarizing effect of this issue beginning in mid-2024. After decades of tolerating informal exemptions from ultra-Orthodox service, the Supreme Court ruled that either the IDF must begin to recruit them or the Knesset must formally legislate an exemption. Yet the dependence of all recent Israeli coalition governments on ultra-Orthodox parties that oppose requiring their

young followers to serve, along with the inability of the government to mobilize the requisite majority of Knesset members to support legislation that would formalize the existing exemptions, made it impossible to solve this deepening structural tension.²⁰

The second development that exacerbated this dilemma was the realities of the protracted war that ensued after October 7. For decades, IDF top commanders tolerated the exemption of ultra-Orthodox Jews from military service as it allowed them to avoid the need to address religious limitations on these troops' conduct. But these senior commanders were now compelled to face a more serious challenge: a scarcity of troops in a war that was becoming not only longer but also increasingly manpower-intensive.

This scarcity was now amplified by the IDF's unique force structure. Facing adversaries that enjoyed quantitative superiority, Israel adopted from its inception a Swiss-style reserves system, in which reservists constituted about 70 percent of the IDF's force. This structure meant that a massive call-up of reserves was bound to cripple the country's economy. Accordingly, Israel's national security doctrine stipulated that its wars must be kept short. But the war that ensued after October 7 violated that principle, requiring Israeli reservists to be called up repeatedly for longer periods of service, thereby disrupting both jobs and family life.

The contrast between IDF reservists' cumulative fatigue and loss of income vis-à-vis the ultra-Orthodox, who were exempt from conscription and reserve duties, consequently became harder to justify.²¹ Informal fixes, along with 'fake' legislation drafted in such a way as to allow continuation of the unequal burden sharing, would no longer be tolerated. By July 2025, Israel's governing coalition came a step closer to collapse as ultra-Orthodox parties refused to allow conscription of their followers, while at the same time demanding that they continue to enjoy the benefits and entitlements offered them by the country's social services. When the Chair of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, MK Yuli Edelstein, refused to help legislate a 'fake' conscription law, his Likud colleagues stripped him of the committee chairmanship.²² As this, however, did not resolve the issue, the ultra-Orthodox parties decided to quit the coalition, narrowing its majority.

Another important, if far less noticeable, gap in burden sharing reignited by the Gaza War was that between the country's center and its periphery. The gap was most apparent in the contrast between the Israeli

government's reaction to the breakdown of deterrence in the North, where Israel was challenged by thousands of rockets launched by Lebanon's Hezbollah, and at the center of the country, where Israel became the target of ballistic missiles launched by Yemen's Houthis and later by Iran. When Hezbollah opened rocket fire against Israeli communities along the Lebanon-Israel border to demonstrate its solidarity with Hamas, the Israeli security cabinet chose to focus the country's military assets on Hamas while 'holding' the North, relocating some seventy thousand Israelis away from the northern border area in order to reduce their exposure to Hezbollah fire. For months, these Israelis watched from a distance as their homes and livelihoods were destroyed while the IDF refrained from significant escalation. By contrast, when missiles from Yemen's Houthis and later Iran targeted the center of the country, the government reacted with far greater force and never even considered relocating civilians. This left Israeli residents of the North feeling that their government treated their homes and means of livelihood as expendable, and led leaders of these communities to complain that they were being treated as second-class citizens.²³

THE ROAD AHEAD

Taken together, the issues and developments discussed in this Brief have already produced the "perfect storm": the most serious internal polarization and largest protests in Israel's history. Fueling such extreme polarization are the continued efforts to strengthen the executive and legislative branches of government at the expense of its judiciary, to weaken the gatekeepers of Israel's democracy, to deepen and broaden the Israeli Defense Forces' military operations against Hamas in Gaza, and to continue to avoid recruiting ultra-Orthodox Jews to the IDF and other national services. The regional and international costs to Israel of some of these causes of further polarization—especially those associated with the further prolongation of the Gaza War—will also increase further, possibly even exponentially. In this broader context, a number of extrapolations into the future seem almost inevitable.

First, Israeli casualties are bound to increase with every week of continued fighting, fueling the growing debate as to whether these mounting costs are justified. This is especially the case given the Israeli government's two failures since the war began: first, to translate the goals articulated in the immediate aftermath of October 7 into objectives that are clear, measurable, achievable, and compelling to a majority of Israelis; and second, to

explain why the further deployment of the IDF in the next weeks and months should be expected to produce better results than those produced during the previous twenty-two months of fighting. The second of these failures is especially emotional for the families of the dead and wounded, as well as to families and friends of the hostages, who seek to find meaning in their sacrifices and express horror at the prospects that the IDF's renewed efforts in Gaza will likely place their loved ones in even greater danger.

The war's continuation and possible expansion is also bound to increase Palestinian casualties, by an exponentially larger rate than those of Israelis. And as the war will likely continue to be prosecuted in densely populated areas, most of these higher casualties will be sustained among Palestinian civilians, including women, children, and the elderly. Humanitarian conditions in Gaza may also deteriorate further, generating tension even with the Trump administration, and possibly producing a further decline in U.S. support for Israel on the part of Democrats and Independents, as well as among young Americans generally.²⁴ This will likely occur even among Evangelicals, who until recently constituted the most pro-Israel community in the U.S.

The deteriorating conditions in Gaza are also placing governments in and outside the Middle East under growing pressure to disassociate themselves from Israel and to sanction it in the realms of trade, finances, security, science and technology, sports, culture, and tourism. Such pressures will only increase if a further escalation of Israel's military activities in Gaza brings it closer to violating international laws of war. And as the resulting sanctions will affect the quality of Israelis' lives directly and indirectly, the deterioration of Israel's relations with countries with which it has developed close relations in past decades will sharpen the internal debate and increase the polarization of Israelis with respect to the issues addressed in this Brief.

ENDNOTES

1. Ariela Karmel and Nava Freiberg, "[Hundreds of Thousands Demonstrate in Tel Aviv at End of Nationwide Day of Hostage Protests](#)," *Times of Israel*, August 18, 2025.
2. "[Basic Laws](#)," Knesset.
3. Chen Maanit, "[Israel's Justice Minister Won't Recognize New Top Court President, Stirring a Constitutional Crisis](#)," *Haaretz*, January 26, 2025.
4. Jeremy Sharon, "[Government Fires Attorney General; High Court Immediately Freezes Her Dismissal](#)," *Times of Israel*, August 4, 2025.
5. The possible violation of due process was related to a regulation that stipulates that appointments to very senior government positions must be approved by a special committee headed by a former Supreme Court judge. The committee's responsibility is to review and confirm that the chosen candidate meets not only the minimal professional requirements of the position but also ethical standards. Supported by Baharav-Miara, the appeal argued that in order to ensure that appointments could not be terminated arbitrarily, the same due process that applies to hiring must also apply to firing.
6. A number of these individuals, it was asserted, were contracted by the Government of Qatar to conduct an influence campaign while simultaneously serving as Netanyahu's political advisors.
7. Most important among them is the IDF's Directorate of Military Intelligence, which is entrusted by law with formulating Israel's national threat assessment. But also significant are the Shabak or Shin Bet (General Security Services, or GSS)—Israel's equivalent of the FBI—and the Mossad—Israel's equivalent of the CIA.
8. Nava Freiberg, "[In English-Language Video, Netanyahu Absolves Himself of Any Blame for Oct. 7 Attack](#)," *Times of Israel*, July 15, 2025.
9. Tapes of statements made by former IDF director of military intelligence Major General Aharon Haliva, broadcast on Israeli TV channel N12, August 15, 2025.
10. Ibid.
11. "[Full Text of Gallant's Call to Pause Judicial Overhaul Over Danger to State Security](#)," *The Times of Israel*, March 26, 2023.
12. Ynet, July 21, 2023.
13. The most salient among these panels was the Agranat Commission, created to identify the causes of the October 1973 surprise attack by Egypt; the Kahan Commission, created to investigate Israel's possible role in and responsibility for the massacre that took place in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee

camps of Sabra and Shatila in September 1982; the Orr Commission, created following the eruption of the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000; and, the Winograd Commission, created after the Second Lebanon War. In all these cases, the reports produced by these commissions led directly or indirectly to the removal of most if not all serving senior Israeli defense officials.

14. Patrick Kingsley, Ronen Bergman, and Natan Odenheimer, "[How Netanyahu Prolonged the War in Gaza to Stay in Power](#)," *New York Times*, July 11, 2025.
15. Tamar Hermann, Lior Yohanani, Yaron Kaplan, and Inna Orly Sapozhnikova, "[Majority of Israelis Support a Deal to Release All Hostages and End the War](#)," Israel Democracy Institute, January 15, 2025.
16. The most frequently mentioned example of this ethos was the Entebbe Raid, when Israeli special forces traveled to Uganda's international airport on July 3–4, 1976, to release the hostages taken there by Palestinian (and some West German) terrorists.
17. This was the case when Fatah ranks were filled by new Palestinian recruits in the aftermath of the famed 1968 Battle of Karamah in Jordan. See Abdel Monem Said Aly, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki, [Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East](#) (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2nd ed., 2022), pp. 157, 169, and 174.
18. Sam Sokol, "[Security Chiefs, Negotiators, US All Said Blaming Netanyahu for Tanking Hostage Talks](#)," *Times of Israel*, August 4, 2024.
19. Commanders for Israeli Security (@cisorgil), "[How much more blood must be spilled in Gaza...](#)," X, June 6, 2025 [English translation; original in Hebrew].
20. For the broader context of the rift between the different Israeli tribes—notably secular Israelis vis-à-vis the ultra-Orthodox—see Chen Artzi Srur and Amichai Danino, *Tribal Trap: The Battle for Israel's Soul and How to Win It* (Rishon LeZion: Yediot Books, 2025).
21. See Mora Deitch, Idit Shafran Gittleman, and Abir Gitlin, "[Special Survey: Military Service in the IDF—July 2025](#)," Institute for National Security Studies, July 27, 2025.
22. Amir Tibon, "[Fueled by Partisan Populism, Netanyahu's Demolition Squad Targets the Knesset's Most Important Committee](#)," *Ha'aretz*, July 23, 2025.
23. Orr Tsaidi, "[Heads of northern regional councils are furious: Hanita's fate should be equal to Tel Aviv's fate](#)," C14, August 25, 2024 [English translation; original in Hebrew].
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