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## THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM IN THE LIGHT OF POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN ISRAEL

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**Abstract.** The ongoing war in Gaza, the longest and most devastating military confrontation in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict arouses questions on how the Israeli society and its political leadership see the future of relations with the Arab neighbors. During the past decade and a half the question of how to address the conflict with the Palestinians was gradually pushed to the background in the Israeli political life. On the one hand, it was caused by a great disappointment in the failed attempts to establish peace through political means in the previous decade. On the other hand, as the left Zionism historically responsible for the diplomatic process with the Palestinian side, experienced a decline, the right-left dichotomy in Israel's political system has been destroyed. The Palestinian issue was no longer the main divide opposing political forces in Israel. The Palestinian agenda was intercepted by centrist parties and blocs, which, in their struggle for the moderate electorate aligned themselves with the right-wing camp in assessing security threats in the event of territorial and other concessions to Palestinians. In parallel the right-wing camp has been dynamically strengthening its positions in recent decades, largely due to the rise of the ideology of national conservatism, as well as the expansion of the sphere of influence of settler messianism. The ideas of territorial annexation, transfer of the Palestinian population proclaimed by the radical settler parties which were once considered marginal, entered the mainstream of the Israeli politics. The goal of achieving peace with the Palestinian people, and the very idea of political partnership with the Palestinian side were less and less in demand. The majority in Israeli society, especially after the horrific attack by Hamas on October, 7 2023, views the two-state solution as a meaningless utopia.

**Keywords:** the Palestinian problem, the decline of the Left Zionist camp in Israel, Likud, neoconservative Zionism, religious Zionism, settler messianism.

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## ПАЛЕСТИНСКАЯ ПРОБЛЕМА В СВЕТЕ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ И ИДЕОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЙ В ИЗРАИЛЕ

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**Аннотация.** Исследование политических и идеологических трансформаций, происходящих в Израиле на протяжении полутора десятков лет, показывает, что палестинская проблема перестала быть главным фактором в противоборстве политических сил. Левый лагерь терял поддержку электората. Одновременно укреплялись позиции правой идеологии и идеологии религиозного сионизма в его наиболее радикальной версии поселенческого мессианизма. Вместо поисков мира политическими средствами в практической политике и общественно-политическом дискурсе утверждалась ориентация на силовые методы решения палестинской проблемы. Анализ этих процессов обеспечивает основу для оценки будущей политики Израиля по палестинской проблеме.

**Ключевые слова:** палестинская проблема, упадок левосионистского лагеря в Израиле, "Ликуд", неконсервативный сионизм, религиозный сионизм, поселенческий мессианизм.

## INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the processes directly related to Israeli policy regarding the conflict with the Palestinians appears relevant in light of the new, unprecedentedly long and violent military clash between Israel and its Arab neighbours following the HAMAS terrorist attack of 7 October 2023. Over the past decade and a half, there has been a decline in public interest in achieving peace with Israel's neighbours. The electorate's support for left-Zionist parties, which, in historical retrospect, have proven to be the main promoters and organizers of diplomatic contacts with the Palestinian side, has gradually declined. The Palestinian problem ceased to be one of the main indicators of the division among political forces, beginning to erode the right-left dichotomy in Israeli political life. The popularity of the left ideology of compromise and territorial disengagement from the Palestinians has waned, while the nationalist concept of the indivisible Land of Israel, implying full support for the settlement project, has been gaining new supporters. The Religious Zionist parties, previously marginalised, have been revived in the political arena. Following the serious disruptions in the Israeli political system in recent years, small Religious Zionist parties representing the interests of the most radical settler circles have gained influence disproportionate to their level of public support. Having become part of the coalition cabinet, they now administer public policy in accordance with their annexationist aspirations.

The causes and nature of these processes have not been sufficiently addressed in domestic studies. The monograph by the well-known Russian Israel scholar T.A. Karasova, entitled *The Political History of Israel. Likud: Past and Present* is an example of in-depth and detailed analysis of Likud policy, including the Palestinian issue [1]. The features of the Israeli political system at the present stage, including the role of the Palestinian issue in inter-party competition, were examined in a paper by T.A. Karasova and Israeli political scientist V. Khanin [2].

The main body of work concerning contemporary internal political problems in

Israel has been produced by foreign authors. The work of prominent Israeli historian and sociologist B. Kimmerling is particularly important for understanding the historical roots of modern processes in Israel. He demonstrated how, following the success of the 1967 war, some previously marginalised groups – alienated from the establishment – entered the political arena, demanding a more religiously oriented policy toward the territories that had come under Israeli control [3].

The monographs by Israeli researchers A. Shilon [4] and D. Scheindlin [5] were of particular interest for the present study, especially in their examination of the causes of the crisis within the left-Zionist camp and the consequences of its declining influence on government policy regarding the Palestinian issue.

The seminal work by E. Sprinzak – a recognised Israeli expert on political extremism and terrorism – explores the ideology and practice of right-wing Israeli politicians in the 1970s-1980s, providing insight into the origins of contemporary settler messianism [6].

The main tenets of neoconservatism, or national conservatism – including those relating to the Palestinian issue – are presented in an article by one of the leading Israeli proponents of this trend, Y. Hazony [7].

## MARGINALISATION OF THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM IN THE COURSE OF ELECTORAL PROCESSES

For several decades, the Israeli political process was marked by a situation in which the electorate's party preferences were determined not only by attitudes towards internal socio-economic issues, but to a large extent by the adherence to a left or right<sup>1</sup> position on the Palestinian issue. "Israelis vote for the parties that represent their positions on the conflict", wrote an Israeli researcher, M. Goodman [8, p. 7].

<sup>1</sup> The left-right split in Israeli politics is determined by the possibility and extent of concessions to the Palestinian Arabs on territorial and other issues.

However, over the past 15 years, the Palestinian issue has been steadily relegated to the background, both in party-political discourse and in Israelis' electoral priorities. When, in 2019, the Israeli political system entered a period of electoral instability, and citizens had to vote five times within four years<sup>2</sup>, the Palestinian issue finally lost its significance as the main indicator of political division. The main rival to the right-wing Likud bloc headed by B. Netanyahu was no longer the left-wing parties, but the political alliance "Kahol Lavan" ("Blue and White"), established as a result of the merger of several centrist parties. The new alliance's platform on the Palestinian issue did not differ significantly from the positions held by Likud [9]. The disappearance of the Labourites and the emergence of the largest centrist party in Israeli history meant that achieving peace with the Palestinians was no longer the central issue in political battles.

D. Trump's plan for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with a pretentious name "the deal of the century," presented in January 2020, along with the signing of the Abraham Accords<sup>3</sup> with several regional states in 2020–2021, appeared to reduce the urgency of the Palestinian problem, turning it into a deferred item on the national agenda. This was further reinforced by the shift in Israel's security focus towards confronting Iran, whose nuclear ambitions and military-political support for Israel's regional adversaries (Syria, Hezbollah, HAMAS) were regarded as the main threat to the Jewish state's existence. Israeli society operated under the belief that the status quo – periodic military strikes to suppress HAMAS's military capabilities in Gaza, and anti-terrorist actions in the West Bank (a strategy referred to by the Israeli military as "mowing the grass") – could sustain the country's normal existence.

In terms of the political process, ideological struggle faded into the background during these years. The forces opposing the right-wing camp

<sup>2</sup> Israeli parliamentary elections were held in April 2019, September 2019, March 2020, March 2021 and November 2022.

<sup>3</sup> In 2020–2021, Israel, with American mediation, signed agreements on the normalization of relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.

led by Netanyahu capitalised on the corruption, fraud, and breach of public trust charges brought against him in 2020, aiming primarily to remove the "longtime"<sup>4</sup> prime minister from power under the slogan "Anyone but Netanyahu." The government established following the March 2021 elections was a heterogeneous coalition of parties from across the political spectrum, united by one goal: to block Netanyahu's return to power. It was headed by N. Bennett, leader of the right-wing alliance "Yamina" ("To the Right"), representing the interests of the religious Zionist settler sector and a staunch opponent of a Palestinian state. His main partner, Y. Lapid, who joined the coalition on the condition of rotating with Bennett in the position of prime minister, sought to avoid definite statements on the Palestinian issue, though he acknowledged that disengagement from the Palestinians was a necessary step toward peace [10, p. 79]. The ideological diversity of the coalition – which included both left-wing parties Avoda and Meretz, as well as a small Arab party of Islamic orientation – allowed it to sidestep such an explosive issue as the Palestinian problem and ultimately predetermined the rapid collapse of the so-called "government of change."

Following the November 2022 elections, Likud leader Netanyahu was able to form a governing coalition only by including Religious Zionist parties representing the most radical segment of West Bank settlers, along with some ultra-Orthodox parties. The coalition agreement of this cabinet – known as the most extreme right-wing in Israel's history – stated that the Jewish people had the "natural right" to the entire Land of Israel [11], effectively denying any Palestinian claims to the territory. The distribution of ministerial portfolios in this government immediately signalled its intention to seriously tighten policy on the Palestinian issue. The leader of the "Religious Zionists" party, B. Smotrich – known for his categorical rejection of the Palestinian people as a national community and for supporting unrestricted Jewish settlement in Palestinian territories – was appointed Minister of Finance and was also given a specially created

<sup>4</sup> B. Netanyahu has been prime minister since 2009, for 15 years, with a short break.

post in the Ministry of Defence, granting him broad authority over the West Bank. This enabled him to launch large-scale settlement expansion programmes.

The Ministry of National Security was handed over to I. Ben-Gvir, leader of the most radical religious-nationalist party “Otzma Yehudit” (“Jewish Power”), a successor to the ultra-nationalist ideology of Kachanism<sup>5</sup>. Israel’s police and penitentiary system thus came under the control of a man who had been repeatedly prosecuted for incitement to racism and support for terrorist activity.

The judicial reform announced by the Netanyahu government is also directly linked to the Palestinian issue. The right-wing government’s efforts to curtail the Supreme Court’s authority to oversee the legislative and executive branches, as well as its intention to reform the judicial appointment system, are motivated in part by the goal of removing ideological opponents from the judiciary. The reform, as envisioned by Netanyahu’s current allies, is intended to ensure the coalition majority’s control over legal decision-making by appointing like-minded officials to key positions within the legal system.

#### THE DECLINE OF THE LEFT-WING ZIONIST PARTIES

In parallel with the rise and strengthening of right-wing forces, the Avoda and Meretz parties – successors to the historic left Social Zionist movements – have been steadily losing ground. In the November 2022 elections, Avoda barely passed the electoral threshold and won four seats in the Knesset, while Meretz was left out of parliament altogether [source 1]. According to 2024 polls, the Democrats party – reconstituted through the merger of Avoda and Meretz – has consistently received a similar number of votes as the extremist right-wing Otzma Yehudit party, which guarantees 8–10 seats in the Knesset [source 2].

<sup>5</sup> M. Kahane was the founder of the far-right ultra-nationalist party “Kach”. It was banned in Israel in 1988 due to its racist statements and activities.

This political reorientation of the electorate has unfolded against the backdrop of deep, ongoing processes reshaping Israeli identity [3, p. 111, 173]. The division of contemporary Israelis into left and right, or secular and religious, has become increasingly blurred. A total of 55% of Israeli Jews now identify with the so-called “Jewish-Israeli” identity, a blend of attachment to Jewish traditions and a strong sense of ethnic belonging to the Jewish state [12]. The electoral base of the historically secular Labour parties – with their weak affiliation to Jewish religious practices – has continued to shrink, along with the segment of the population that still holds out hope for a negotiated peace in the Palestinian issue.

The collapse of the peace process with the Palestinians in the 1990s and the onset of the Second Intifada in 2001 delivered a devastating blow to the left-wing camp. The Palestinian leadership’s rejection of Israeli peace initiatives in 2000 and again in 2008<sup>6</sup> led many in Israel to conclude that there were no viable negotiating partners on the Palestinian side. The targeting of Israeli territory by rocket fire and tunnel-based attacks by HAMAS after its 2007 takeover of Gaza finally shattered the belief that compromises and concessions could ensure greater security for Israelis. The Oslo process was so widely discredited that even many of its former supporters turned away from its initiators.

As noted by researchers of the left-wing parties, the loss of electoral support is not the only reason for their decline. Equally significant is the ideological transformation: many “left-wing” parties have ceased to be genuinely left [13]. Since the 1980s, Social Zionist parties have shifted their focus from a traditional social-democratic agenda to prioritising peace with the Palestinians through diplomatic means. The Labour Party that historically struggled against class stratification redefined itself around the peace process, thereby alienating culturally and economically disadvantaged segments of the population [5, p. 166].

<sup>6</sup> In 2000, Y. Arafat rejected the terms of a peace agreement proposed by Prime Minister E. Barak; in 2008, the Palestinian Authority led by M. Abbas did not accept the settlement proposals put forward by Prime Minister E. Olmert.

At the same time, early views of both left- and right-wing Zionists shared certain similarities regarding relations with the Arab world. Israeli author A. Shilon notes that even in the early stages of state-building, the security policy of D. Ben-Gurion and his associates was rooted in the “iron wall” doctrine – borrowed from political rivals – which prioritized the role of power in deterrence of enemies as a basic element of Jewish nationalism [4, p. 15]. The standpoint contributed to the central role of security issues in Israeli political culture, a priority shared by both left- and right-wing camps. Voters of both Likud and Labour have long held the view that Israel is engaged in an existential battle with the Arab world, and that defeat would mean the destruction of the state. Consequently, all Israeli governments – regardless of political orientation – have consistently viewed the preservation of Israel’s unquestioned military edge in the Middle East as essential to preventing such an outcome [3, p. 217].

Although the territorial issue – the central problem in the conflict with the Palestinians – historically opposed the Socialist Zionists to the Revisionist Zionists, who did not recognise the UN plan on the partition of Palestine<sup>7</sup>, this dividing line began to blur after the Six-Day War of 1967. Many veterans of the Revisionist strand of Zionism, as well as representatives of the Labour political and the cultural elite, joined the Movement for Greater Israel, established in September 1967. This ideological interest group proclaimed the indivisibility of the Land of Israel – that is, the impossibility of returning the territories captured during the war in exchange for peace with the Arabs [6, p. 39]. The Movement for Greater Israel was more of an intellectual club than a political organisation, but it disseminated ideas of new territorial maximalism to the broader society, which later provided fertile ground for the rise of right-wing radical forces and the settlement movement.

This convergence between left-wing approaches to the settlement issue and right-wing positions was also reflected in the “Oslo Process,”

<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of revisionist Zionism envisaged the extension of Jewish sovereignty to the entire territory of historical Palestine to the east and west of the Jordan River.

which in fact built upon the autonomy plan for the Palestinians adopted earlier by the government of M. Begin<sup>8</sup>. Recently discovered archival documents reveal that, from the very outset of the negotiation process, Y. Rabin’s government shared a unanimous view that the Palestinians would receive only what Israel was willing to concede – and that the future Palestinian state would be “less than a state,” meaning an entity with limited sovereignty [14]. This same vision of the settlement issue was echoed by B. Netanyahu in 2009, when, under pressure from the U.S. administration of B. Obama, he was compelled to formally recognise the formula of “two states for two peoples.”

The left camp grounded its peace process concept in the principle of urgent separation from the Palestinians, with the aim of preventing the emergence of a bi-national state. “We are here, they are there” – this was how E. Barak, the last prime minister from the Avoda party, succinctly summarised the position [1, p. 457]. A similar interpretation of this idea was adopted by the right-wing camp in A. Sharon’s “disengagement plan,” which included the withdrawal of Jewish settlements from Gaza, the dismantling of several small outposts in the northern West Bank, and the construction of a separation barrier – or “security wall,” as it is referred to in Israel. To implement these policies – which were not supported by the Likud party he led – Sharon established the Kadima (“Forward”) party in 2005. This marked a kind of ideological realignment in Israeli politics, as prominent figures from both the Labour Party and Likud joined the new centrist alliance. The emergence of Kadima with the membership of A. Sharon, a right-wing hawk, and Sh. Peres, a left-wing dove, serves as a significant indication of the growing convergence between the left and right camps regarding approaches to the Palestinian issue.

Although the Kadima party survived only two electoral cycles, its creation signalled an erosion of the traditional right-left divide and

<sup>8</sup> The autonomy plan which provided for the establishment of Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza, was part of the Camp David Accords (1978) and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty (1979).

a weakening of ideological polarisation amid intensified competition for “moderate” voters. As noted by T.A. Karasova and V. Khanin, scholars of the Israeli political system, “the parties’ programmes differs less and less from each other, while the achievement of policy goals appeared to be less significant and desirable” [2, p. 125].

### THE RISE OF THE RIGHT-WING NATIONALIST IDEOLOGY

In contrast to the political and ideological decline of the left camp, the right-wing camp has dynamically consolidated its position in recent decades, largely due to the rise of national conservatism and the expanding influence of settler messianism. Traditionally, the old right-wing camp adopted a reactive stance on the conflict, primarily opposing the left’s promotion of the two-state solution.

In the early 1990s, neoconservative Zionism emerged in the Israeli socio-political arena as a kind of response to the critical reassessment of Zionist ideals by the so-called new historians and sociologists. At the core of this ideological framework is a model of the state based on religion and national self-determination of a single ethno-religious group, which stands in direct contrast to the universalist model of a “state for all its citizens” [7, pp. 155-156]. According to this national-conservative logic, Palestinians are not viewed as a competing nation (which, under this theory, should deserve its own state) but rather as one of the many Arab tribes within which they must seek the realisation of their rights. The neoconservative worldview is characterised by its rejection of national and civic aspects of the Palestinian resistance movement, instead defining it as a purely terrorist campaign aimed at destroying Israel. “Palestinianism is violence against Israeli/Jewish indigenes in Israel. It savages the core identity of Jews and Israelis,” that’s how contemporary ideologists of right-wing Zionism characterise Palestinian nationalism [15]. From this standpoint, the idea of territorial compromise ceases to be central, and peace with the Palestinians is no longer a major point on the political agenda.

Neoconservative Zionism has increasingly taken hold, effectively becoming the dominant ideology within the right-wing nationalist camp in Israeli politics. It has made its way to the highest levels of political decision-making – in the Knesset and the government – through the efforts of various non-profit organisations and purposeful education provided by non-governmental institutions. Among the most influential think tanks are “The Kohelet Policy Forum”<sup>9</sup>, established in 2012, and its affiliated Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy. A cornerstone of their ideological credo is right-wing Jewish nationalism, which asserts exclusive Jewish rights to the Land of Israel and actively promotes the settlement enterprise. One of Kohelet’s leaders, M. Koppel, noted that left-wing organisations once dominated Knesset committee meetings as policy advisors. “We brought about a better balance... In a sense, we are the brains of the Israeli right wing,” he claimed [16]. Analysts from these institutions were the driving force behind the development and promotion of the Basic (Constitutional) Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, adopted in 2018. The law’s controversial nature was underscored by the narrow vote margin – 62 in favour, 55 against – highlighting that a significant portion of the political establishment and the public perceived anti-democratic elements in the legislation. Among the law’s key provisions is the now constitutionally enshrined state policy of developing and strengthening Jewish settlements, which are officially recognised as a “national value” [source 3].

### THE LIKUD AND RELIGIOUS ZIONISM: MOVING TOWARDS EACH OTHER

The policy of expanding settlements in the West Bank has been consistently pursued by all of B. Netanyahu’s governments. During just the first half of his premiership, from 2009 to 2014, the number of settlers in the West Bank more than doubled, as did the budgetary allocations to support Jewish settlements

<sup>9</sup> Kohelet is the name of the book of Ecclesiastes in the Tanakh.

[source 4]. The implementation of a so-called creeping legal annexation – i. e., the gradual application of laws passed by the Knesset to West Bank settlements – and the erasure of the Green Line from the collective memory of younger generations<sup>10</sup>, have intensified as part of state policy over the past two decades. In 2017, Likud's Central Committee adopted a resolution calling for unrestricted construction in settlements and the extension of Israeli laws and sovereignty to all settlement areas in Judea and Samaria [17]. While non-binding, this resolution clearly reflected the annexationist trajectory being taken by the Likud.

Until just a couple of decades ago, annexationist discourse was considered unacceptable across most of the political spectrum. Both the left and the right agreed that granting citizenship to the two and a half million Palestinians<sup>11</sup> in the West Bank would threaten Jewish demographic dominance and the very character of the Jewish state; conversely, denying those Palestinians statehood and citizenship would, in the left's view, spell the end of Israeli democracy.

At the 2013 elections, N. Bennett – a young politician who had taken over leadership of the Jewish Home Party and who identified ideologically with Religious Zionism – increased the party's Knesset representation from three to twelve seats, granting the Religious Zionists the status of the fourth-largest parliamentary faction. The leadership of the right-wing religious sector actively worked to shift public consciousness away from preserving the territorial status quo and towards annexing at least 60% of the West Bank. Bennett himself repeatedly voiced his categorical rejection of the possibility of establishing “a Palestinian state within our country” [18]. The idea of territorial annexation – once confined to the ideology of the marginal ultra-right – had entered the mainstream of Israeli politics.

While Bennett and his followers represented a more moderate current within Religious

<sup>10</sup> “Green Line” refers to the armistice lines between Israel and its Arab neighbours established after the 1948–1949 Arab-Israeli War.

<sup>11</sup> Prior to the Gaza War (“The Iron Swords War”), only the West Bank, home to an estimated 2.5–3.0 million Palestinians, was in question for annexation.

Zionism, a younger generation of activists from the settler milieu held significantly more radical views. In 2017, B. Smotrich, who had been elected to the Knesset two years earlier on the Jewish Home Party list, published a policy paper titled *The Decisive Plan*, laying out his vision for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In it, Smotrich advocated abandoning the illusion of compromise or reconciliation with the Palestinians, calling instead for a unilateral annexation of the entire West Bank. Under his proposal, Palestinian Arabs would either renounce their national aspirations and continue living on the land with markedly inferior status, or emigrate. If they chose resistance, he declared, they would be labelled terrorists and the Israeli army “will set about killing those who need to be killed”, including women, children, and entire families [19]. At the time, these statements were largely dismissed by the public as extremist rhetoric. Yet five years later, B. Netanyahu formed a governing coalition with radical Religious Zionists and Neo-Kahanists – namely Smotrich and I. Ben-Gvir, long seen as fringe extremists – and gave them real power. Although Religious Zionists constitute no more than 15% of the population, their political and ideological influence within Israeli society is growing disproportionately.

One probable reason for this is their participation in the coalition government alongside Likud, which has helped to normalize their presence and gain broader acceptance among right-wing voters, even though leaders like Ben-Gvir and Smotrich are still viewed as extremists. Tellingly, following the tragic events of 7 October 2023 and the decline in public trust toward political leaders, including B. Netanyahu, the only serious competitor for the present prime-minister, identified in opinion polls was N. Bennett – a representative of the moderate wing of Religious Zionism – in case he resumes his political career as the head of a new party association<sup>12</sup> [source 2]. Public attitudes toward the settlement project also became more favourable: 40% of Jewish Israelis now believe that settlements contribute to national security [source 5].

<sup>12</sup> In 2022, N. Bennett retired from official Israeli politics.

The horrific HAMAS attack on Israeli territory bordering Gaza – and Israel’s subsequent massive retaliation against the Palestinian enclave – further consolidated the most radical right-wing forces. While official political and military circles have yet to reach a unified stance on Gaza’s post-war future, the radical right wing has already offered a clear and extreme vision. In January 2024, the Conference for the Victory of Israel, held in Jerusalem by right-wing activists, declared the goals of the war to be the conquest of the Gaza Strip, the expulsion of its local population, and the restoration of Jewish settlements there. The event was attended by at least ten ministers from four parties – Likud, Religious Zionism, Jewish Power, and United Torah Judaism – as well as 27 Knesset members, accounting for nearly a quarter of the Israeli parliament [20].

Modern settler messianism, which views every part of the Land of Israel as sacred because it was “bequeathed by God to Abraham,” adds a pragmatic dimension to its religious foundation. Drawing on a contemporary interpretation of Torah texts warning against coexistence with “inhabitants of the land”<sup>13</sup>, its proponents argue that peace can only be achieved through the expulsion of the “alien” population. Just a few decades ago, the idea of forcibly relocating Palestinians was entertained only by narrow ultra-nationalist circles such as the now-defunct Moledet (Homeland) party. Today, that idea is increasingly being embraced within the core of Israel’s national camp.

However, the Likud still includes some supporters of a more balanced stance, such as former Minister of Defence Y. Galant, who was removed from his post in November 2024 and later renounced his Knesset mandate. His position – calling for a cessation of hostilities in Gaza in exchange for the return of Israeli hostages, the gradual transfer of Gaza’s administration to the Palestinian Authority, and the withdrawal of the army from the territory – was unacceptable, above all, to the Prime Minister. B. Netanyahu, in his political calculations, was compelled to

consider the maximalist demands of the cabinet’s ultra-right members; that prompted him to get rid of the troublesome Minister of Defence.

### ISRAEL VICTORY PROJECT

The pressure Netanyahu has come under by forming a coalition with the most radical right-wing parties – who threaten to collapse the government if decisions are made that do not meet their demands – is a major factor influencing overall policy regarding military objectives and the post-war governance of Gaza. Losing the support of even two medium-sized coalition parties would likely result in the fall of the government and lead to early parliamentary elections, which, according to opinion polls<sup>14</sup>, would be lost by the current coalition. This scenario would likely mark the end of the political career of the long-serving Israeli Prime Minister, given the ongoing criminal proceedings against him. However, Netanyahu’s stance on Gaza appears to be shaped not only by political calculations and personal interest, but also by his deeply ideologised views on Israel’s security doctrine.

He shares with his radical coalition partners a firm belief in the unacceptability of any territorial compromise with the Palestinians – such a move, according to this narrative, would result in the establishment of a terrorist state adjacent to Israel [21].

Netanyahu views his historic mission as safeguarding the Jewish state. In his opinion, the reliance on force including in relations with the Palestinians, is the primary way to achieve this goal. The multi-front war currently being fought is presented, in official rhetoric, as another existential challenge to Israel, labelled “The War of Revival” – a narrative invoking the state’s historical resilience and triumph over its enemies. “History doesn’t favor the virtuous, nor who’s morally superior. It favours the strong,” is the credo espoused by the Israeli leader [22]. Consequently, total victory over HAMAS – demanded by his political allies, even at the cost

<sup>13</sup> The book of Numbers (33:55) states: “...If you don’t drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will... give you trouble in the land where you will live.”

<sup>14</sup> According to the poll held on 24 January 2025, the coalition wins 51 seats in the Knesset, the opposition – 59 seats. Available at: <https://news.israelinfo.co.il/128984> (accessed 24.01.2025).

of Israeli hostages' lives – remains the stated goal of the war, though it is becoming increasingly elusive.

The very concept of Israel's "total victory" over the Palestinians represents a relatively recent innovation in approaches to the conflict. The principal ideologists of this paradigm are American right-wing neoconservatives, closely aligned with hawkish circles within the U.S. Jewish community. Drawing a parallel with World War II – when the defeated side was forced to accept unconditional surrender – they argue that the same principle should apply to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The ahistorical nature of this comparison does not deter either the authors or their followers, and the principle of Israel's "total victory" has successfully taken root in Israeli political discourse. In 2017, a cross-party caucus titled For Promoting the Recognition of Israel's Victory was established in the Knesset. It brought together representatives of various political forces – from right-wing radicals such as B. Smotrich, to members of Likud, Yisrael Beiteinu (Our Home – Israel)<sup>15</sup> and even Yesh Atid (There is a Future), a party typically positioned as centre-left. This faction proclaimed as its goal the military victory of Israel over its enemies and the establishment of an "iron wall" against those who oppose Israel and the Zionist idea [23]. This vague formulation implies the intent to force the Palestinians to recognize Israel's right to exist, to abandon any form of resistance, and to cut off support from actors seeking to destroy the Jewish state. The conditions envisioned for resolving the conflict under this paradigm, therefore, involve the Palestinians recognizing their defeat, renouncing the peace process (i. e., mutual concessions), and fully submitting to Israel's will [24]. Especially following the events of 7 October 2023, this "victory paradigm" – which rejects the Oslo framework and accepts the possibility of reaching agreements with the Palestinians only after a decisive Israeli military triumph – is gaining increasing traction in Israeli politics.

<sup>15</sup> Yisrael Beiteinu – Our Home – Israel party – headed by A. Lieberman, a native of the former USSR, takes tough positions on the conflict with the Palestinians, but is known for an anticlerical orientation in domestic policy matters

## CONCLUSION

For a decade and a half, the question of how to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians has been increasingly absent from the discourse of the Israeli society and the country's political leadership. Frustrated by the inability to achieve peace with the neighbouring nation through political means, Israelis have shown decreasing support for the left camp in electoral processes. The traditional political landscape – previously characterised by a clear right/left confrontation over the Palestinian issue – is being reshaped. The Palestinian agenda has been largely hijacked by centrist parties and alliances, which in their competition for voters, have adopted the right-wing camp's assessment of the security risks posed by territorial and other concessions to the Palestinian side.

At the same time, a process of radicalisation within the Israeli right-wing camp was going on, particularly through the rise of Religious Zionism, which is deeply infused with settler messianism. The inclusion of Religious Zionist parties – minor in terms of their socio-political weight – into the governing coalition for the sake of maintaining Likud's dominant position in power has resulted in their disproportionate influence within state institutions. This has allowed them to significantly advance their ideological agenda, including in matters concerning relations with the Palestinians. The objective of achieving peace with the Palestinians has been erased from political discourse, and the very notion of a political partnership with the Palestinian side has become increasingly irrelevant.

In the absence of any realistic prospects for a political settlement, a new military escalation of the conflict was inevitable. Following the brutal HAMAS terrorist attack on Israeli territory on 7 October 2023, the seizure of hostages, and their inhumane treatment, right-wing ideas promoting a forceful resolution of the conflict – such as the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza, and the expulsion of Palestinian Arabs beyond historical Palestine – are increasingly viewed by various segments of the population, including within the army, as a legitimate response to existential threats from the Palestinian side. For

most of Israeli society, the model of “two states for two nations” is now regarded as a utopia that has lost all practical meaning.

Whatever new proposals on the Palestinian issue may be advanced by the American administration – keen to promote the normalisation of Israel’s relations with its regional neighbours, especially

Saudi Arabia – they are likely to meet the same fate as D. Trump’s 2020 peace plan, which failed to bring peace or prosperity to either side. The revival of the two-state principle, even in a regional context, is likely to require radical political change on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides.

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