FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 25.03.2024 | Ralf Melzer

An opportunity amidst the crisis

Despite the current disaster, there is also some hope in Israel for a new political process towards a two-state solution

More than five months have passed since Hamas' unprecedented terrorist attack on 7 October 2023 and the start of Israel's military response. Since then, tens of thousands of people have been killed. It is not known how many of the 134 hostages remaining are still alive, and liberated hostages raise fears that female hostages are being subjected to sexualised violence. Meanwhile, Ramadan has begun and heavy combat is continuing in the Gaza Strip. In February, an agreement to exchange additional hostages with Palestinian prisoners together with a ceasefire seemed achievable but did not materialise. The conflicting objective of destroying Hamas' military potential and also freeing the hostages is coming to a head. Furthermore, there are many indications that the Hamas leadership's propaganda strategy was to provoke religious riots during Ramadan due to the ongoing fighting.

For Israel, 7 October represents a turning point with unforeseeable long-term effects. Trust in state institutions was shaken and the country collectively traumatised. The country's economic losses are huge: just the cost of paying reservists and compensation, as well as evacuating tens of thousands of people, amounts to some € 250 million a day. In the north, the military situation remains highly volatile: hardly a day goes by without Hezbollah's massive shelling and Israeli counterattacks. It is uncertain if or when the evacuees from the north – and from the south – will be able to go home. Meanwhile, Israel is in the dock in The Hague. (Hamas is not charged because the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction is limited to states.) In Israel, the proceedings are rejected as one-sided and politically and ideologically motivated but are being taken seriously nevertheless.

International and internal pressure on the government

The catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is causing

international pressure on the Israeli government to mount. At home, pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is also steadily increasing, with top security representatives calling the government's actions irresponsible and disastrous. Every Saturday, throughout the country tens of thousands of people demonstrate for the return of the hostages and against the government. Most Israelis are also calling for Netanyahu, with his solely self-interested politics, to resign.

Within his governing coalition, fault lines are emerging on another issue: the law exempting ultra-Orthodox men from military service, which is deeply unpopular among the secular population but has been renewed and adapted since the country's founding. The law expired in the middle of last year, but given the present danger, some members of the government are rejecting the coalition's new version. The High Court is also still debating whether special rules for the ultra-Orthodox are compatible with Israel's Basic Laws.

It is highly improbable that elections will only be held after the current legislative period ends.

In late February, opposition members Benny Gantz and Gadi Eisenkot – who had joined the emergency government together with three other ministers of their alliance after 7 October – presented a bill allowing the army to also draft ultra-Orthodox men. Then Defence Minister Yoav Gallant (Likud) declared that he would only submit a new conscription law with the support of Gantz. If their clientele is no longer exempt, the ultra-Orthodox parties will likely leave the governing coalition, which would cost Netanyahu his majority — just at a time when opinion polls are showing that a large margin favours Gantz. However, former Justice Minister Gideon Saar recently broke with the National Unity faction led by Gantz. He declared to now act independently again and that he wanted to be part of the war cabinet, which could shift the balance of power back to Netanyahu.

Despite Likud's persistently poor poll ratings that show new elections would halve its seats in the Knesset, potential *moderate* Likud challengers to Netanyahu, such as former Knesset President Yuli Edelstein, have been lying low. The recent mayoral and municipal council elections showed Likud's descent, too, while orthodox and progressive-liberal candidates running in various alliances emerged stronger. Should Likud ditch Netanyahu now and a new Likud prime minister sack far-right

ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, Gantz and his party could remain in government until new elections are held, assuming that's soon. It is highly improbable that elections will only be held after the current legislative period ends.

Peace plans

Yet, an opportunity is emerging in the midst of the war and multiple crises. On 7 October, the failure of Netanyahu's plan – or that of the right-wing – to normalise relations with Arab states without reaching peace with the Palestinians and to instead just manage the status quo, became shockingly clear. Heavy political pressure from Washington and Saudi Arabia's readiness to normalise relations with Israel in return for a solution to the Palestinian question are building momentum to revive a political process leading to a two-state solution. Prominent representatives within the anti-government camp insist that military action is no substitute for political engagement and that Israel can have no lasting security without an agreement that includes defined borders and self-determination for the Palestinians.

Progressive think tanks have developed concepts and, together with opposition politicians, have presented a roadmap that could ultimately lead to a demilitarised Palestinian state. Their plan foresees a regionally integrated and internationally accompanied process starting with a peace conference, reconstruction and a temporary multinational military mission for the Gaza Strip that includes moderate Arab states. After a two- to three-year phase of confidence-building and reform of the Palestinian Authority, direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations could be resumed.

There are real prospects for political change in Israel, with opinion polls showing a constant majority for the pre-war opposition.

For such plans to gain political and parliamentary support and revive public interest in a peace process, the marginalised left-wing Zionist camp must reorient its personnel, structure and programme. Recent developments indicate that this is happening. The beacon of hope is former Deputy Chief of Staff Yair Golan, who rescued several people attending the Nova Festival from the Hamas attack. Once a member of the Knesset and deputy minister of the economy in 2021/2022, Golan declared his candidacy to become the Labour Party head. In a second step, he wants to create a new left-wing Zionist party by merging Avoda with Meretz and involving activists of the protest movement,

as well as centrist candidates. In the meantime, Naama Lazimi and Gilad Kariv, both prominent Knesset members for the Labour Party, expressed their support for Golan. The Labour Party primaries are to be held in late May, which many criticise as very late.

Golan supports physically separating the Palestinian and Jewish populations in the West Bank, abandoning some Jewish settlements and swapping land to compensate Palestinians for the remaining settlements. He views Israel as responsible for security in the West Bank for now, but his concept, too, can be seen as a path towards a two-state solution.

Meanwhile, there are real prospects for political change in Israel, with opinion polls showing a constant majority for the pre-war opposition. First polls held after Golan announced his intention to unite the left showed a left-wing Zionist alliance gaining nine seats. Changing the political majority is also linked to hopes of overcoming social division and the damage to democracy wreaked by Netanyahu and his far-right coalition. Even if right-wingers are likely to continue to try to influence High Court appointments and weaken the judiciary, the Netanyahu government's other pre-war legislative projects regarding the judiciary are probably not feasible — at least not in their original form. That, too, is a crisis opportunity.



Ralf Melzer

Dr Ralf Melzer heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Israel. Previously, he was Head of the Regional Office Dialogue South East Europe and the FES offices in Tunis and Munich, among others.