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Extremism feeds extremism

Peace in the Middle East cannot be achieved with Netanyahu in power

As an Israeli directly affected by the horrors that Hamas inflicted on Israeli civilians on 7 October, my power of analysis – and more importantly, my power of hope – are marred by that day, the blackest in Israeli history. Like many liberal Israelis, it feels as if my life's work for peace and democracy is lying in ruins alongside the burned Kibbutzim.

When I speak to international audiences, I could choose the easy path, voicing temperance and reason. I could repeat my vision of a two-state solution, which I held ever since I was a teenage demonstrator against the earliest Israeli settlements in the West Bank in the 1970s. I could express the virtuous hope that Israel and Palestine would rise from the ashes of the northwestern Negev and of Gaza, reach a territorial compromise, sign up for peace and deradicalise their respective populations.

There is no harm in voicing a dream and framing a horizon. But I must also spell out the prevalent mood among Israelis in my own milieu, and those who are not. I must also put myself in the shoes of moderate Palestinians, who are keeping silent for their own safety.

What I cannot do is 'imagine the other' to Palestinians and pro-Palestinians hoping to kill or banish me and destroy my country. As my late father used to say, the only long-term compromise with Hamas is that Israel would exist on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and cease to exist on the other days of the week. The same goes for every Hamas supporter ('pro-Palestine' in their own eyes) who deems Israel an illegitimate colonialist project. I can debate the political and historical facts with them, but I would not try to make peace with anyone who wants me dead.

Thus, my voice is fully dedicated to representing those seeking a future independent Palestine next to a secure and democratic Israel. I need to assure Israel's liberal friends that we exist, and that we are hoping to struggle and prevail.

Holding Netanyahu accountable

In an opinion piece in this journal, the authors blamed the German government for supporting a 100 per cent guilty and criminal Israel, only because of the Federal Republic's historical commitment to the Jews. Berlin is thus accused of basing its current policy on a post-Holocaust automatic pilot gone mad. The article managed to mention the word 'Hamas' only once, and the October catastrophe twice, in passing, as 'the events of 7 October'. It echoes the prevalent demand to stop the war without mentioning the Israeli hostages' fate. Like many of the 'Free Palestine' flag bearers, it accepts Hamas' ongoing rule of Gaza. To wit, it criticises that Germany is blocking efforts to stop supplying arms to Israel, regardless of whether these weapons are intended for self-defence, presumably as a first step towards disowning Israel altogether.

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Let me say loud and clear: The Federal Republic of Germany should consider sharp and vocal sanctions against the Netanyahu coalition government, which – in my own view and that of 70 per cent of the Israelis – has lost its right to govern. Not because of the excessive suffering this government is inflicting on Gaza – which many people in Israel are still unable to see due to their own shock and trauma – but for its crimes against its own civilians. While the world is witnessing war crimes in Gaza, what many Israelis see is a horrible, but utterly necessary bid to destroy Hamas. Some of us changed our minds, me included, as the war dragged on and Gazan civilian tolls rose. Contrary to our expectations, the November hostage deal and humanitarian ceasefire were not repeated. In the domestic arena, Netanyahu and his ministers continued to ignore the bereaved and hostage families (except the few among them who belong to Netanyahu's political base), and Ben Gvir's radicalising police force started beating them up in demonstrations.

It is evident that Hamas destroyed the lives of both Israeli and Palestinian civilians. From an Israeli perspective, however, the Israeli government is constantly abusing both groups, too, not as barbarically as Hamas but in its own political, Machiavellian way. Netanyahu and Hamas leader Sinwar are not, of course, morally on par, but they share a reluctance to end the war, each for his own self-interest, and a blindness to the

suffering of their own people, let alone others. This was Hamas's policy from the beginning, and Netanyahu's policy ever since he was put on trial for corruption in 2020. And it is prominently his well-oiled domestic propaganda machine that prevents the Israeli media and public from discussing Gazan suffering. Very few Israeli media outlets even show their readers and viewers the devastation of innocents on the other side.

The red line between extremism and constructivism

How can Israel's remaining friends prepare for 'the day after'? The first task is to empower Israeli and Palestinian moderates. Israeli civil society, that includes Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens, has shown great resilience against the anti-democracy legislation in the passing year and currently supports a ceasefire, a hostage deal, and a politically negotiated peaceful horizon for the region. You can help civil society, for instance, by resisting the academic boycott of Israeli universities and students; by making the streets of German cities safe for Jews as well as Israelis; and yes, by punishing and even deporting extremists calling for the annihilation of Israel and the death of Israelis.

According to recent opinion polls held in Israel by academic teams, over 50 per cent of the Israelis would accept a two-state solution if the future Palestine is demilitarised and the whole region protected by international safeguards. The poll question may reflect an overly optimistic future, which depends on still sorely absent Israeli and Palestinian leadership, but the results are nevertheless somewhat encouraging. Given reliable precautions, there is a horizon for the Israel-and-Palestine formula, at least on the Israeli side. Will the Palestinians join in? There is great support among Palestinian citizens of Israel, and even signs for a rise in approval of the two states solution in Gaza itself. Far less so in the West Bank.

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But worse of all is the 'progressive' global movement pushing for a final (and, as many on social media call it, 'eternal') delegitimisation of Israel. Ask a 'Free Palestine' protester what she or he thinks about the two-state solution, and the answer will give you a clear idea of whether that person is pro-peace or not. This simple question marks the red line between extremism and constructive future orientation.

Because the real chasm threatening the Middle East and the rest of the

world is not between right and left, west and non-west, global north and global south, or even Jews and Arabs. It is between moderates and extremists. Consider the recent EU elections results in this light: left and right extremism have fed each other, building up a feverish pitch, while most middle-of-the-road voters stayed at home, sleepily enjoying their private lives as if these were the 1920s. The political laziness of sensible people is the greatest prize for fanatics.

An appeal to all moderates

Israel heralded this global rise of extremism (almost wholly nationalist and/or religious, in our case). Netanyahu's rise to power preceded Trump's by twenty years. We Israeli peace seekers have been far too dormant during the 28 years of almost-constant Netanyahu regimes. This cannot be emphasised enough: Netanyahu nourished Hamas in order to bring down the PLO and any other potential Palestinian peace partners, thus feeding the growing zealotry of Israel's own extremists and radicalising his own political base. The Jewish river-to-sea fanaticism was only too happy to help the Palestinian river-to-sea fanaticism, because it falsely believes that a Gog and Magog war is requisite, ending in Israel's divinely ordained total victory.

Except that after such a victory, Israel would no longer be Israel. By contrast, a smaller Israel next to an independent Palestine – secured by demilitarisation and international guarantees – will bring Israel closer to what it was initially meant to be: a liberal democratic state for the Jews, safeguarding equal civil rights for its non-Jewish citizens, and seeking peace with its neighbours wherever it can be found.

Netanyahu and his cronies must be ousted not only for the brutal and purposeless war inflicted on Gaza, but also for their mortal sins toward their fellow citizens.

I share responsibility for this great fault of the moderates and therefore urge all moderate citizens to take to the streets and western moderate governments to help us to democratically end Netanyahu's regime. Now that Gantz, a moderate turned fig leaf, has left the government, Netanyahu's final moral alibi is gone. And I stress: He and his cronies must be ousted not only for the brutal and purposeless war inflicted on Gaza, but also for their mortal sins toward their fellow citizens. For tearing Israeli society apart through his vile propaganda empire, ambushing Israel's democracy and separation of powers, extreme negligence of our security, and the ongoing destruction of Israel's economy and international standing.

‘The day after’ is not a two-state solution on the very next morning, but on the horizon. The first task is a change of leadership in both Israel and the Palestinian territories. The new leaders had better be sensible men and women, judicious enough to negotiate a territorial compromise and charismatic enough to rekindle their constituencies’ hope and reactivate their rationality.

‘I am neither pro-Israel nor pro-Palestine’, my late father used to say, ‘I am pro-peace.’ But as long as the weakness of the moderates continues, there will be no peace of the moderates.



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