

A DESPERATE ISRAELI LEADER PLAYS THE SECURITY CARD

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'Mr. Netanyahu has begun to project himself as the country's unifier and saviour' | Photo Credit: AP

The five-day Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza [ended in a truce on May 13](#). In this war, the Israelis had carried out targeted assassinations of six commanders of the radical Palestinian group, Islamic Jihad. The latter had responded with several hundred rocket attacks, which led to 250 Israeli air strikes in which 33 Palestinians were killed and several more injured; one Israeli was killed and 45 people injured. There were skirmishes in the West Bank as well.

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Over the last four months, Israel has been in the grip of demonstrations against the government of Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) that is seeking wide-ranging changes in the country's judicial system. The need to restore Mr. Netanyahu's authority and credibility is linked with the escalation of confrontations in the occupied territories.

Israel's elections last November, the fifth since 2019, showed a significant shift in favour of the country's ultra-orthodox and ultra-nationalist parties. Mr. Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving Prime Minister, facing criminal charges for fraud, bribery and breach of trust, had no choice but to form a coalition that included Israel's extreme right-wing parties (the Religious Zionism party of Bezael Smotrich and the Otzma Yehudit of Itamar Ben-Gvir) and include their leaders in his cabinet.

The extreme right has a clear-cut agenda: besides pursuing tough policies towards Palestinians, it also seeks a "reform" of the country's judicial system, which is viewed as upholding Palestinian rights and being hostile to the ultra-religious community. In January, four Bills were introduced in the Knesset to effect the required changes: they diluted the court's powers of judicial review, gave the executive greater say in the selection of judges, and also sought to protect the Prime Minister from criminal proceedings. However, the government was totally unprepared for the ferocity of the opposition to these changes. The demonstrators have included businesspersons, professionals, workers, and even military reservists. In the face of such fury, on March 27, Mr. Netanyahu grudgingly announced a "time-out" in the implementation of the changes, saying this was "to prevent the nation from being torn apart".

The agitations have revealed the deep split in Israeli society between those seeking to protect the country's liberal order from the increasing influence of the ultra-orthodox. Thus, this is an intra-Jewish divide. Generally, both sides uphold Jewish superiority over the Arabs and Israel's control over the occupied territories, and neither voices support for Palestinian aspirations.

Given Mr. Netanyahu's cunning and strong survival instincts, observers have been surprised by his failure to anticipate the strength of the opposition to the judicial initiatives. Through April, it became clear that his reputation had been severely tarnished — he was widely seen as a leader who placed his personal interests above the country's democratic order.

These negative assessments were reflected in polls: over two-thirds of Israelis supported judicial review and opposed changes in selecting judges; more than half of them faulted the administration for governance failures. Public opinion swung in favour of the opposition; polls showed that, as against the 64 seats won five months ago by the parties in government, they would now win just 50, while the National Unity Alliance led by Benny Gantz would move from 12 seats to 28 seats, becoming the largest party in the Knesset.

It is in this background that Mr. Netanyahu has played the "security" card. Already, at the end of March, there had been reports that the government would try to divert popular attention from the judicial changes by highlighting a "security threat" from the Palestinians or the Iran-backed Hezbollah. Soon thereafter, on April 5, Israeli forces attacked the Al-Aqsa Mosque and arrested 300 Palestinians, setting the stage for tit-for-tat violence. Israeli media anticipated a major military operation "to bolster the coalition's legitimacy in the eyes of the public".

The ground for the next stage of violence was carefully prepared by Defence Minister Yoav Gallant. He said on April 20 that "the era of limited conflicts" was over, and that Iran was mobilising multiple anti-Israel fronts that would include Palestinian militants in Gaza and Lebanon, the Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militants in the region. He also provided details of massive financial transfers from Iran to these militants.

A few days later, Israeli media highlighted the Defence Minister's focus on the impending "multi-front war". It was said that Israel's enemies had been emboldened by widespread anti-government agitations over the previous four months and perceptions that the United States was distancing itself from Mr. Netanyahu.

This is the backdrop to the latest round of Israeli-Palestinian violence. The Associated Press reported on May 11 that, after weeks of Mr. Netanyahu's plunging popularity, "the bombardment of Gaza has united the country against a common threat and appeared to put the seasoned leader back in control". Mr. Netanyahu has begun to project himself as the country's unifier and saviour. The latest polls show a gain of three seats for his party.

The next few weeks will show whether Mr. Netanyahu will survive in office on the basis of this blood-letting. Or, whether the Israeli people will see through the machinations of their cynical and wily leader and seek his speedy departure from office.

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