

## Book Review

Guy Ziv (2024) *Netanyahu vs the generals: The battle for Israel's future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 266 pp., ISBN: 1009425692

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The author of this book probably couldn't have anticipated how relevant and potentially insightful his work would become in light of subsequent international political events. The book was released in the first quarter of 2024, just a few months after the terror attacks in Israel on 7th October 2023. The political landscape in Israel, as described by Guy Ziv, has shifted dramatically since then. Although the author managed to include a brief afterword to reinforce his main ideas in the context of these new events—presumably just before the book went to print—many of the main themes of his text remain highly relevant to discussions about the Middle East and become increasingly pertinent with each passing day.

To begin with, it must be emphasised that this book addresses several topics of particular interest to those studying civil–military relations and to those interested in Israeli society and military culture. It also explores the occasional “excursions” of former military personnel into public life and politics. The book is especially valuable for researchers and enthusiasts who do not speak or read Hebrew, as it provides access to sources, media interviews, and other data that are otherwise unavailable in other languages.

The book also provides a snapshot of the Israeli society and politics just before another war erupted, involving Israel and several hostile countries from the region, including Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. Had peace lasted, the local political tension between the Left and the Right in Israel might have escalated into a revolution on the level of the Israeli

society (see Naftali Bennett's, Israel's 13th Prime Minister, interview on Peterson's (2024) YouTube channel). However, as is often the case, an external threat—comprising Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran—has temporarily united the Left and the Right, offering an opportunity to smooth over political disagreements, at least for the time being.

The book is structured into an Introduction, five chapters, and the aforementioned Afterword. Its accessible format makes it easy to read for laypeople interested in the topic of Israel. The introduction provides readers with the main ideas discussed in the book: the unique history of Israel, the importance of its conscript-based army, the origins of the Tzahal (IDF—Israel Defense Forces), and its role in the social and public life of the country. For those unfamiliar with Israel's specific history, it is important to note that the country has been in a constant state of war since its creation due to hostility from neighbouring Muslim countries. Wars have included the 1948 conflict with Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon; the 1956 war with Egypt; the 1967 war with Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria; the 1967–1970 conflict with Egypt, Syria, and Jordan; the 1973 war with Iraq and Jordan; and conflicts with Lebanon in 1982 and 2006. This is compounded by the rise of global anti-Semitism, which unites elements of the cultural Left and various Islamist movements, creating a unique political and societal environment where a strong military and a militarised culture are essential. However, such an environment presents a paradox: Israel is a functioning democracy—probably the only one in its region—yet civil–military relations are carefully balanced. This paradox has inspired significant academic interest, and Israel's example is particularly relevant for researchers studying balanced civil–military relations. Therefore, the book makes a valuable contribution to the existing extensive literature on the subject. The author discusses, in broad terms, the IDF's influence on the formulation of government policies and the frequent transition of former army officers into politics as leaders of various political parties. The book focuses primarily on the impact of Israel's military culture on society and he takes Benjamin Netanyahu's politics and persona at the centre of his critique. Guy Ziv expresses concern about the IDF's diminished status, for which he blames Netanyahu, his government, and the demographic shift in the Israeli society, which, at the time of writing, was leaning towards the Right.

The first chapter offers a brief overview of the Israeli security establishment and the military's attitude towards the conflict with the Palestinians. It situates some high-ranking IDF officers within a segment of Israeli society—along with the intelligentsia—that has historically supported the two-state solution. Guy Ziv describes the early support of the Israeli security establishment for the idea of a Palestinian state, the generals' push to initiate and sustain peace negotiations, the Oslo process, and similar efforts. This trajectory is traced up to the return of Netanyahu and the subsequent shift towards the political Right.

The second chapter investigates the core issues that the author seeks to address. First, the author analyses Benjamin Netanyahu's personality, who is mockingly referred to in the local press as “Mr. Security” due to his focus on security as the cornerstone of his political agenda. Ziv's portrayal of the Israeli Prime Minister is far from flattering, which aligns with the broader trend in modern politics, where many leaders are depicted as possessing an incommensurable amount of human flaws. This chapter is principally interesting for its rough insight into the contemporary political scene of Israel and the ongoing debates in the Israeli society.

The third chapter explores the shift of Israeli society towards the political Right and the decline of the two-state solution as a feasible and desirable political outcome to the nearly century-long armed conflict. It describes the settlement policies implemented under Netanyahu, who seems to navigate masterfully between various political factions

(the religious, the Zionists, and the pragmatists, among others) to maintain his hold on power for as long as possible, regardless of the costs.

Chapter four is the crux of the book. It offers an analysis of Israeli society from the perspective of the declining role of the army. According to the author, the downgrading of the Palestinian issue and in society is somewhat connected to the diminishing public trust in the country's security apparatus.

Chapter five provides an in-depth analysis of the Israeli society and its socio-political transformations, focusing on the shift from the cultural, political, and cosmopolitan (or globalist) Left towards populism and nationalism. This chapter is particularly thought-provoking, as Ziv describes the main features of the nationalist, Right-oriented sentiment, which, according to him, not only influences the political elites but also permeates the ranks of the military leadership.

Finally, the book concludes with the aforementioned Afterword, added following the 7th October 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israeli civilians. In this section, the author criticises Netanyahu for the dysfunctions in the security apparatus, which he argues could have provided warnings and prevented such a devastating wave of terror attacks that compelled an immediate and forceful retaliation by the country. The author cites a survey showing that "80 percent of Israelis believed that Netanyahu needed to take responsibility for the failure, including 69 percent of those who voted for his party in the November 2022 elections." He further accuses Netanyahu, stating that

Netanyahu's distractions may explain the timing of Hamas's actions, but it was his strategy toward[s] Hamas that had strengthened the Gaza-based terrorist group. Throughout his years in power, he had sought to weaken Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, regarding him dismissively rather than negotiating with him in earnest toward[s] a two-state solution (p. 194).

That being said, the situation in Israel evolves daily, and at some point, the political and military leadership—especially Netanyahu—will have to account to the Israeli public. Israel has a history of forming public commissions to investigate such incidents thoroughly, examining the security system under a microscope and learning from mistakes. For instance, the Agranat Commission, mentioned by the author in his Afterword, was established after the Yom Kippur War to investigate its failures. It placed blame on IDF generals, leading to the resignation of the IDF Chief of Staff and other senior officers. However, the book conveys a blissful unawareness regarding the long-standing rejection of the two-state solution by the Palestinian political elite since 1947. While part of Israel's social and military elite has supported—and likely still supports—the two-state solution as a means to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Hamas, which seized power from Fatah in 2006, has been explicitly opposed to it. This rejection is rooted in history, exemplified by the 1967 Khartoum Conference, where Muslim states in the region, along with Sudan and Kuwait, opposed negotiations, peace, or recognition of Israel. This historical context adds weight to the traditional stance of the Palestinian elite against the Western-conceived two-state solution. Therefore, the prominence given to this solution in the book may feel somewhat imposed upon informed readers. Moreover, the book has quiet omissions and small flaws that may leave readers unsatisfied. Although it intersects with the field of civil-military relations, the author rarely references the abundant theoretical literature on the subject. One particularly notable omission is [\*Finkel's Studies in Generalship: Lessons from the Chiefs of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces\* \(2021\)](#), a groundbreaking work absent from Ziv's bibliography. While Ziv focuses on the influence of personality on politics, Finkel's framework could have provided a robust model for this endeavour.

The author also ambitiously seeks to examine the ongoing societal shift in Israel from the cultural Left towards nationalism and the Right. However, his theoretical groundwork for addressing this shift is relatively weak, relying primarily on Cas Mudde's work and A. Pedahzur's definitions. He appears unaware that political populism can also be Left-wing oriented (Nicolás Maduro serves as an example). In his narrative, he also positions populism in opposition to democracy. He sees populism as an erosion of society and democracy—likely stemming from his stance that populism can only be Right-wing. It is important to note, however, that populism can be applied to any (political) movement that challenges political conformity. Not to mention that social conservatism, such as that represented by Haredi Jews, is not synonymous with populism. A more pluralistic methodological approach would have been better suited to tackling the topics of civil–military relations in Israel and the societal shift towards the Right. Minus the dramatic title of the book (*The Battle for Israel's Future*—which, with the irony of history, has become a “battle for survival” in the meantime), the work is significant. This is not only because it addresses a topic that is difficult for international readers to access due to language barriers but also because of its robust methodology, for which the author deserves commendation. The book is based on

forty-six personal interviews conducted from 2015 to 2022 for this project. Interviewees included retired (and one active) Israeli senior security officials, demographers, politicians, a former US ambassador to Israel, and leading Israeli civil society experts and activists. These interviews complement [the] published interviews, op-eds, surveys, reports, and various forms of public testimony by retired senior security establishment figures as well as contemporary journalistic accounts from a variety of media outlets (p. 7).

In this sense, the book is an interesting asset for understanding the complexities of the current era.

At present, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. This is the first time that any Israeli official has been indicted by an international court. This indictment carries several potential implications. Beyond being a legal precedent for the indictment of high-ranking Israeli officials on the international stage, it could strain Israel's diplomatic relations with other countries, lead to its diplomatic isolation, and hinder future peace negotiations in the ongoing conflict (due to travel restrictions and the risk of potential arrests). These are just a few of the possible repercussions. It is precisely at the intersection of these potential consequences that this book, despite its theoretical shortcomings, becomes a valuable resource. Its well-informed insights provide a useful lens for understanding the political scene of Israeli society leading up to 7th October 2023 and the subsequent impact on political attitudes across various layers of the Israeli society.

## References

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