



By: *Ferry Biedermann*

# An increasingly radicalised Israel will push on in Gaza at all costs



There's a longstanding axiom in the Middle East that when militant leaders of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas make threatening statements, they will eventually follow through on them. When Israel's leaders, including Benjamin Netanyahu, issue a threat, you never know whether they will act on it.

A new set of realities that include October 7th, 2023, as well as the ever more rightward slant of Israeli politics are now changing this paradigm.

When Netanyahu says, as he has done repeatedly, that he will continue the war in Gaza until Hamas is **eliminated**, it looks increasingly likely that this is indeed what he is pursuing.

The past divergence between the credibility of the statements from both sides was not very surprising. Militant groups and countries such as Iran with autocratic systems might be restrained by outside forces but are relatively free from internal political fluctuations.

That used to be less the case in Israel, where outside a quite broad national consensus on security, political changes could at least re-arrange priorities.

Also, the country used to set some store by being part of a Western-oriented international system that sometimes reined in its wilder impulses.

Now, both the Israeli interest in belonging to it, as well as the system itself, are rapidly evaporating.

## The continued drift to the right

Still, the clearest, most persistent and impactful change that drives the hardening and radicalisation of Israel's on-the-ground actions against Palestinians, both in Gaza and the West Bank, is the continued drift to the right. Policies long-advocated by an extremist fringe have now gone mainstream, a process not dissimilar to what's happening in other democratic countries.

In Israel, though, radicalisation is driven, among other things, by continued violence. Whatever we might think of the original rights and wrongs of the conflict, it is both sides that get radicalised when blood flows.

Extremists have long been aware of this and use this dynamic to sabotage any chance of de-escalation, and drive the conflict into an ever more dead-ended direction.

**The new settler-driven extremism is seeping through into the country's non-political leadership, at least on the security and defence levels**

The new, more naked and heedless settler-driven **extremism** that has been increasingly influential in Israeli politics is also seeping through into the country's non-political leadership, at least on the security and defence levels.

There is still at times a remnant of 'professional' pushback, but it's clear that this is also being eliminated, with Netanyahu replacing more-or-less independent-minded officials with his backers.

In the case of Gaza, where the short-lived, fragile and wholly inadequate **ceasefire** has seemingly come apart, this means that not only Netanyahu's pronouncements but also those of his more extreme right-wing associates now have to be taken more at face value.

Whereas they might once have been dismissed as posturing, intended for domestic consumption, or as a way of turning up the pressure on Hamas, it increasingly looks as if they are meant to be implemented.

## Genocidal statements

This not only affects the immediate situation in Gaza, it might also influence the genocide **case** against Israel before the International

Court of Justice. Both intent and follow-through are part of the determination in the case.

Genocidal statements from some politicians, including ones on “erasing Gaza”, or using a nuclear weapon, become more significant if they’re seen to have actual policy implications.

It is often argued that Netanyahu’s natural instincts tend to a less contentious, or at least more opaque, middle ground of at least a more gradual approach towards further dispossession of Palestinians.

**Netanyahu has always been a divisive radical right-wing leader in the mould of Donald Trump, well before Trump was on the political horizon**

In this reading, his current acquiescence to the more extreme right-wing demands stems from his judicial predicament and his need to cling to power at all costs.

Yet, this ignores his lifelong opportunistic extremism. He played a key role in the 1990s in incitement against the Oslo peace accords and the country’s left-of-centre leader Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated by a religious ultra-nationalist Israeli. Netanyahu has always been a divisive radical right-wing leader in the mould of Donald Trump, well before Trump was on the political horizon.

## All bets are off

Trump taking a wrecking ball to the international rules-based system suits Netanyahu well, just as it suits Vladimir Putin and other populist or authoritarian-inclined ultra-nationalists around the world.

Constraints that remained in place during Trump’s first term and, despite much criticism, also during Biden’s presidency are now coming off.

Clearly, it looks incongruous to use the word constraint in light of the already staggering death toll in Gaza. Yet, a lot worse could still happen.

It is not by chance that the Palestinian death toll on the first night of the resumption of Israeli attacks after the ceasefire was the highest ever.

**Even the absurd Trump plan for Gaza can be seen as preparing the ground. It too foresees a Gaza ‘cleansed’ at least of Hamas, if not its entire population**

The message from Netanyahu, with explicit approval from the White House, seems to be that now, really, all bets are off. The elimination of Hamas will proceed whether or not this will mean more mass death or the near-total displacement of Palestinians from Gaza.

In this context, even the absurd Trump **plan** for Gaza can be seen as preparing the ground. It too foresees a Gaza ‘cleansed’ at least of Hamas, if not its entire population.

Israel changing the terms of the ceasefire to demand the total demilitarisation of Hamas was foreseen. Very few people believed that the process would move into phase 2, which would include a total withdrawal of Israeli troops from the strip and a sustained end to the fighting.

## Trump’s real limit is still unclear

On some level, the Israeli and American demand makes sense. It would be folly to leave Hamas in control of the Gaza Strip, with its capacities partly intact or being rebuilt through still-functioning parts of its tunnel network. It is a recipe for repeating the same cycle of violence over and over, with equally devastating consequences for the civilian populations.

Yet, there is absolutely no evidence that Israel could militarily reach its goals without even more extreme measures against Palestinians in Gaza. Other than in its relatively short, targeted and efficient operation against Hezbollah last year, its army has been unable to achieve its objectives in Gaza in more than 15 months of trying.



*The return of the Israeli hostages in Gaza has never been the only, or even the main, objective; the elimination of Hamas is*

And even if, at a terrible cost, Israel were able to excise Hamas from Gaza, the likelihood of something similar or even more radical reconstituting itself is overwhelming. The same would still be true externally if the unthinkable were to happen and the whole of Gaza's population was to be driven out of the strip.

There are no one-sided solutions possible without unacceptable breaches of moral, ethical and international judicial norms. Yet, this is what Netanyahu and his government keep single-mindedly pursuing, now with the backing of the Trump administration.

The return of the Israeli hostages in Gaza has never been the only, or even the main, objective; the elimination of Hamas is.

While Netanyahu's intention to see his plans through is coming more into focus, Trump's real limit is still unclear. The American president has made a career out of U-turns and blithely ignoring his own outrageous statements. Although his second term seems different. Still, the only limit that can be placed on Gaza's continuing devastation might be

Donald Trump, and that's a scary thought.