



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Israel's democracy fails 7 October probe test



Israel's current failure to appoint an **official state commission** of inquiry into the events of 7 October 2023, when Hamas killed some 1,200 people and kidnapped almost 250, is a watershed in the country's history and further marks its steepening democratic decline.

The attack has been characterised by many, including Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu**, as the worst in the country's history and the biggest slaughter of Jews since the end of the Second World War.

Yet, rather than follow the precedent set after earlier fiascos, for example, the October 1973, or Yom Kippur, war and the 1981 Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon, the government on Wednesday pushed through a lower-level inquiry, controlled by its own appointees.

Among the senior levels of the country's security and defence leadership, only Netanyahu himself is left in place since the attack. He has dismissed numerous associates, including the then Defence Minister and the head of the Shin Bet security service. Others, such as the Chief of Staff of the armed forces, have resigned.

Now, the long-serving Prime Minister, who is standing trial on **corruption charges**, has engineered the parameters of a politicised and tightly circumscribed partial inquiry.

The country's critics might argue that there are worse derelictions that need closer scrutiny, such as the conduct of the war in Gaza that followed the attack.

Or that Israeli democracy has never been fully functional for all its citizens, and particularly not for those in the territories that it occupies.

Still, the relative strength of its democracy and its institutions is of crucial importance to the way a country behaves towards its subjects, wages its wars and conducts its international affairs, and vice versa.

The price of radicalisation

As the for-now dominant military force in the Middle East and an increasingly important economic player – witness the recent massive gas export contract with **Egypt** – the domestic politics of Israel have become even more of a geopolitical issue.

Continuing radicalisation toward the far-right, religious-nationalist, messianic, settler and hardline side of the political spectrum will inevitably affect policies that reverberate both within and beyond the country's borders.

Even if the current extreme right-wing coalition loses elections due by October 2026, there is no immediate end in sight to this rightward trend. Several of the main opposition parties are at least as hardline as Netanyahu's Likud party.

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This means that crucial policies such as agreeing to work towards a Palestinian state cannot be expected to be endorsed by Israeli coalitions in the foreseeable future.

Yet, an alternative government without Netanyahu and his party in power could at least be expected to ease the political assault on the country's democratic and judicial institutions and possibly even strengthen them.

A more stable Israel could be more predictable and less likely to embark on the kind of regional adventurism that has characterised recent years. Even its allies should recognise that it has overreached, despite some apparent military successes.

The country's opponents might, on the other hand, see an ever more radical Israel as being easier to isolate internationally and sanction, but the price for this further radicalisation would be a very heavy one, paid by Israelis, Palestinians and others in the region and

possibly beyond.

Why Israel's allies should care

A true, impartial and effective state commission of inquiry, overseen by the judiciary, into the 7 October events would not help the Palestinians, nor erase Israel's growing democratic deficit.

But it would shine a light on some of the long-established policies promulgated by Netanyahu and his right-wing cabinet.

It would show how the occupation has skewed Israel's security doctrine, how its army has, over time and under increasing settler pressure, become an occupation army rather than a citizen's defence force, how endless attempts to merely manage the Palestinian conflict rather than solve it are backfiring, maybe even how the hubris at the heart of the religious-nationalist extremism is damaging the country.

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Israel's allies have an interest in this reckoning, as they seemingly continue to embrace the country and even rely on its battle-tested technologies. Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and Finland, to name but a few, have all recently signed massive contracts for **arms purchases** from Israel.

The recently signed gas deal with Egypt, worth tens of billions of dollars over the next 15 years, favours a US company, Chevron. It will also partly help Europe diversify its LNG supply by securing shipments from Egypt.

True, Western democracies, such as they are, have no compunction doing business with undemocratic or even oppressive regimes.

But the nature of the ties with Israel is

different, and it would be hard to maintain the same level of cooperation in the long run, if only because of growing domestic opposition both in Europe and the US.

A flawed democracy

The EU has notoriously been unable to suspend part of its trade association with Israel over the Gaza war. Even when it takes up the conflict, its efforts are purely focused on Israeli actions against Palestinians, not internal democratic backsliding.



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The US under **Donald Trump** is actively helping to worsen Israel's internal safeguards by demanding a pre-emptive pardon for Netanyahu in his corruption trial.

The latter is on a par with the US administration's support for other far-right nationalist movements and strongmen around the world.

While Trump has deployed some leverage to at least stop the worst of the fighting in Gaza for now, his overall influence on the political situation in Israel, as elsewhere, is bound to be overwhelmingly negative.

Despite the adoption of overtly anti-democratic legislation and regulations, particularly the 2018 nation-state law, Israel is still ranked by, for example, the EIU as a flawed democracy – in the same category as

now also France, the US and Belgium, albeit for different reasons.

Democratic decline, along with the weakening of the international order, brings with it a much more disordered world, as we can see in places as varied as the US, Russia, India and elsewhere.

Israel has for a long time been mixed up in these developments, both living them and partially driving them, as a focus of international polarisation.

In the past, it could be argued that the country's institutions were resilient and self-correcting to a degree. The failure to appoint an independent state commission of inquiry into the 7 October attack is among the clearest signs yet that this is no longer the case.