

Israel's Italian Moment, in a World on Edge

by Eric Rozenman



PIJ leader Ziad al-Nakhalah (unmasked left) and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (President.ir)

Israel is having an Italian moment. One that, as it faces potential war with Iran, it might just ignore.

Since the end of World War II in 1945, Italy has had 70 governments, each in office an average of 1.1 years. The most recent collapsed in July.

As for Israel, early in November it will hold its fifth election in three years.

Both countries are multi-party parliamentary democracies. Before jumping from the frying pan into the fire, Americans disenchanted with only two parties might want to keep the

political fragmentation of Rome and Jerusalem in mind.

In Israel, multiple party voting—14 in the last election—always necessitates coalitions. Eight of those parties, from right to left, religious to secular, Jewish and Arab formed an administration bound mainly by the desire to prevent Benjamin Netanyahu from returning [as prime minister](#).

Israeli governments rarely last their full four-year terms and the most recent, having ousted Bibi, as Netanyahu is widely known, crumbled in June after one year. A caretaker cabinet headed by Yair Lapid, television newscaster-turned-politician and foreign minister in the late coalition, now holds the reins.

Outwardly, Israelis and Italians share other Mediterranean traits besides transient governments. Five weeks in the two countries this summer confirmed, for example, that in both places unhurried diners fill late-night restaurants and tanned, tattooed sun worshippers crowd the beaches by noon.

But unlike Italians, Israelis face a relentless international campaign—facilitated by the United Nations ever since General Assembly adoption in 1975 of the Soviet-inspired, Arab League-endorsed “Zionism-is-racism” resolution—to [delegitimize](#) and destroy their homeland. Though the slander was repealed in 1991, U.N. bodies led by the oxymoronomically named Human Rights Council and Goebbels-like Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People spread it relentlessly.

Bad Neighbors

Also, unlike Italy and most other democracies, Israel abuts homicidal neighbors. These include Iranian-backed Hezbollah (the Party of God) in Lebanon, Iranian-backed Hamas (Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement) and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip

and the duplicitous U.S. and European Union-financed Palestinian Authority headed by Fatah (Palestinian National Liberation Movement) in the West Bank. Hezbollah possesses an estimated 150,000 missiles and rockets, some precision-guided. Hamas, Islamic Jihad and others in Gaza held 15,000 or more before Islamic Jihad, [at Iran's direction](#), fired approximately 1,175 at Israel over three days early in August.

Israel's Iron Dome defense against short-range missiles and rockets intercepted about 450 headed toward populated areas. Another 500 or so struck harmlessly and perhaps 200 fell short, landing in the Strip itself. Reports say 49 people died in Gaza; according to Israel, 20 were terrorists targeted in "Operation Breaking Dawn's" pin-point attacks, at least three PIJ leaders among them. Eighteen women and children were killed, 14 in Israeli attacks, four by [misfired PIJ projectiles](#).

Meanwhile, Palestinian Islamic Jihad's sponsor, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a few hundred miles to the east, pantomimes a new nuclear agreement with the strangest of bedfellows, the United States, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Russia and China. Paralleling its decades of incitement against author Salman Rushdie—resulting in a brutal attempted murder in New York state in August—it repeatedly spews [genocidal rhetoric against Israel](#) and further enriches uranium close to weapons grade.

Israelis sleep soundly primarily because police and security forces are at work, using what the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs reported early in August is "[remarkable intelligence and technological capabilities](#)." This often happens just a few miles from their homes, over the pre-1967 Six-Day War "green line" in the Palestinian Arab-majority West Bank. And, judging by the elimination of that PIJ trio, in the Gaza Strip as well. Also, apparently, in Iran itself, considering the 2018 heist of a warehouse full of documents related to the Iranian nuclear program.

Again, dissimilar from Italy are Israel's geography and demography. Sixty million Italians live in a country more than 700 miles north to south and at least 100 miles wide down the "boot," flanked on the west by the Mediterranean, on the east by the Adriatic seas. Nine million-plus Israelis—seven million of them Jews—populate a New Jersey-sized country rarely 20 miles wide along its densely-populated coastal strip. Seaside Tel Aviv's high-rises are visible to the naked eye from West Bank hills as we saw during a walk one Shabbat afternoon on streets full of children and empty of vehicles in ultra-Orthodox Modi'in Illit. Unyielding terrain leaves Israel too small to impose, and still too threatened to concede something for what diplomats might term peace.

Analysts found it noteworthy that the larger Hamas, which has run the Gaza Strip since ousting Fatah and the Palestinian Authority in a five-day battle in 2007, did not join August's PIJ's bombardment of Israel. Even more remarked upon was Arab countries' lack of support for the embattled Palestinian faction and disenchantment with the Palestinian cause. This in contrast with bastions of Israel-phobia like the [Presbyterian Church U.S.A.](#), National Education Association and [Teen Vogue](#).

Ayatollahs on the Horizon

PIJ being another Iranian instrument, its leader was in Tehran meeting with top officials during "Operation Breaking Dawn." On the other hand, Western-leaning Sunni Muslim Arabs look to Israel, these days perhaps as much or more than the United States, to counter-balance Iran's Persian imperialism. Iranian subversion in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon through surrogates including, respectively, the Houthis, [Kata'ib Hezbollah](#), [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps spin-offs](#) and Hezbollah, helps explain the Trump administration-mediated [Abraham Accords](#) among Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, improved Israeli-Egyptian relations and arrangements with Saudi Arabia.

But looming much larger for the Jewish state than a fifth conflict with Hamas since 2008 is open war against Iran. This the United States urgently seeks to forestall, in part because—in a world destabilized by Russia’s attempt to destroy Ukraine, China’s preparations to swallow Taiwan and nuclear-armed North Korea’s renewed ballistic missile advances—such a conflict could ripple far beyond the Middle East.

Nevertheless, major Israeli military exercises and modifications of weapons systems, as well as warnings from Israeli leaders, indicate it [has been preparing](#) for the day after a feckless new nuclear deal between the United States and Iran. As for the day after an Israeli, or—however unlikely—American strike against Tehran’s nuclear facilities, unrest sparked by such an attack might resemble that which shook the regime in 2009, 2017 and 2019 rather than a patriotic rallying around the mullahs. At least, [so suggest](#) Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA Iran officer and Ray Takeyh, senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

How can Israel’s latest Italian-style government weigh the odds and plan? The axiom “two Jews, three synagogues” comes to mind. Twelve years ago, Gerecht and Takeyh recall, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak (himself a former prime minister and ordinarily Bibi’s political foe) wanted to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities. However, the larger cabinet and head of the Israel Defense Forces refused to back them. Can today’s care-taker government give the order and rally the country in the face of face potentially devastating retaliation?

Probably. When they don’t induce denial, existential threats concentrate the mind. Veteran *Jerusalem Post* reporter and commentator Herb Keinon wrote of “the commendable way in which Israelis coped with the three days of fighting in Gaza.” Hundreds of thousands of Israelis near the Strip and millions more in the country’s center “went on with their lives even knowing that their cities may be targeted by indiscriminate

missile fire.” And the country rallied around the military.

In the fractious Jewish state, the difference between unity and solidarity is clear, Keinon says. “Throughout Israel’s 74-year history its enemies have mistaken its lack of political and social unity for weakness.” But political disunity has not resulted in any loss of [the people’s resolve.](#)”

Raw and Energetic

Martin Sherman finds a structural explanation for Israel’s simultaneous political fragmentation and national determination. Sherman, politically a most unrepresentative kibbutz resident (the kibbutzim are Israel’s unique collective agricultural and/or industrial villages), heads the Israel Institute for Strategic Studies, a small, right-leaning think tank.

“The giant achievement of the Zionist parties” early in Israel’s history, he says, was “establishment of very strong institutional pillars” for the state. These included the military, intelligence, medical and in some respects educational communities. Even recently, with the government unable to pass a new budget, these institutions functioned more or less “on their own without outside management.”

The 74-year-old country is still new, still raw and still full of energy. In the 120-mile strip between Ashkelon six miles north of Gaza and Nahariya, six miles south of Lebanon, construction cranes are everywhere; after years of building delays the high-speed train between Jerusalem and Ben Gurion International Airport outside Tel Aviv is a 22-minute ride; and urban highways are always being widened yet remain still nearly gridlocked. Israel exemplifies a paradox, Sherman says.

“Virtually in every field of human endeavor Israel is on the cutting edge,” he maintains. (For example, in 2020, it passed the United Kingdom and France to reach 19th in [gross national](#)

[product](#) at nearly \$44,000 per person and, in the past two decades, has ranked in the top 10 in [per capita patent filings.](#)) “Except in politics ... there we’re bottom of the barrel.” He says it’s not that good people with impressive resumes don’t enter Israeli politics. Rather, “they get chewed up” by an electoral system that enables small parties—3.5 percent of the vote qualifies for entry into the 120-seat Knesset (parliament); votes by party list instead of constituent districts, empowering bosses; and doesn’t penalize legislators who bolt parties between elections.

Regardless, dysfunctional politics are unlikely to prevent Israel from hitting an Iran about to go fully nuclear. In June, Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Avi Kochavi issued a familiar caution: If war erupts between Israel and Lebanon’s Iranian-backed Hezbollah, Lebanese territory [will be devastated](#). Similarly, Iranian-instigated destruction in Israel could be severe, the [Israeli military has warned](#), citing the possibility of strikes by hundreds of accurate missiles and raids into the Galilee to massacre and capture Israeli civilians.

In Italy, political fragmentation doesn’t seem to matter. For Israel, before Iran gets the bomb, it can’t be allowed to matter. Look for solidarity to be called on to trump political instability once more.

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