

# Q&A: Israel's democracy protests—what happens next?

August 22 2023, by Dov Waxman

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The massive pro-democracy protests that shook Israel since January 2023, when its right-wing government introduced so-called "judicial reforms," have quieted down for a while. The country's legislature is on a break. But the government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, [the most conservative](#) in Israel's short history, plans to continue its quest to erode the independence and power of the country's Supreme Court. That will likely ignite further protest when the lawmakers reconvene.

The Conversation's senior politics editor, Naomi Schalit, interviewed political scientist and Israel scholar [Dov Waxman](#) about what comes next

for Israel, its Jewish and Arab citizens, the Palestinians in the occupied territories—and the future of democracy in the country.

## **What has come out of this bitter fight so far, and where might it go?**

Up to this point, the most remarkable positive development that's come out of this battle against the judicial overhaul—or judicial coup, as its critics call it—has been the political awakening of the Israeli center, which includes a large swath of Israeli society.

For many years, these Israeli Jews have been somewhat depoliticized. They may have had some misgivings about Israel's treatment of Palestinians and concern about what's called religious coercion in Israel, the increasing influence of the ultra-Orthodox. But generally speaking, as the economy was growing, their main concern was the cost of living. These were swing voters who weren't really politically mobilized and weren't standing up at all against the rightward direction of Israeli policies on a range of issues.

You had a small and shrinking left that was almost on the verge of extinction, and a growing and increasingly confident and assertive Israeli right.

What's happened since January has been this emergence of an incredible protest movement that I think [really surprised everyone](#) in terms of its endurance.

Many of the people involved in this protest movement [are centrist Israelis, not the typical leftists](#), so to speak, who always are coming out and condemning the occupation. These are Israelis who don't tend to take to the streets. The fact that they are outraged by what their

government is doing and have mobilized has created a new political opening.

## **An opening for what?**

There's the potential for centrist Israelis who are now mobilized trying to defend Israeli democracy against this attack by the government to also see that there are other threats to Israeli democracy that go beyond the judicial overhaul. In particular, they could begin to make the connection with the occupation in a way that they hadn't before this movement emerged. Before now, the occupation wasn't something that most Israelis spent much time thinking about, because it wasn't directly impinging on their own lives.

As has been seen in the case of [other protest movements](#), mass mobilization and a political awakening [don't automatically yield](#) any lasting political results. Governments can just wait it out and hope the protests will subside and continue with whatever they were doing. So, I'm not saying that this is going to automatically change Israel's political trajectory or lead to policy changes.

But I think that this protest movement is very significant, not only because it's been so resilient, but also that it's remained peaceful for so long in the face of [growing Israeli police violence against peaceful protesters](#). The police's response, which was initially very restrained and respectful of the rights of these protesters, [has shifted markedly in recent weeks](#).

**We've talked in the past about how the protest movement hadn't incorporated the Palestinian question into it. I'm curious where you think that goes?**

There are two legitimate and related criticisms that could be made of the protest movement. One is that the protesters have been [refusing to address the occupation](#) and how the judicial overhaul is driven in large part by the desire to annex the West Bank and entrench an unequal, apartheid-like reality there.

Another related criticism is the [failure to bring Arab citizens of Israel](#) into the protests. One of the reasons why the protesters haven't is because of the movement's [refusal to tackle the issue of occupation](#). These two things limit the potential of the movement. If the protesters really want to "save" Israeli democracy—as they have declared—in my view [they need to address the ongoing occupation and annexation](#) of the West Bank. So, ultimately, the movement will not succeed in its stated goal if it doesn't recognize that the judicial overhaul is a symptom of a broader crisis.

## **What would that look like?**

The political center and the left could reach out to Arab citizens of Israel and work with Arab political parties. Arab citizens of Israel, for obvious reasons, are going to be committed as much as possible to defending the Supreme Court and Israeli democracy, such as it is, even if it hasn't served them that well and [it's a flawed democracy for them](#). If you weaken the Supreme Court, you weaken the [last line of defense for minority rights](#) in Israel.

So they are a constituency that needs to be engaged. The movement hasn't done that, because it's been more concerned to bring in Israeli Jews on the right and centrist Israeli Jews than Arab citizens of Israel. It's very hard to do both.

**So far, you've sounded optimistic. What is the worst**

## **version of what happens?**

Two things: First, in addition to growing police brutality against the protesters and growing civil disobedience, there could be increasing political violence on the right, and then maybe even on the left. There's the danger, then, that as political violence increases, that could even turn into a civil war. That's one [worst case scenario](#).

The other is, as more and more Israeli reservists protest by refusing to do their reserve military duty, including pilots, that Hezbollah, the Lebanese Islamist militant group backed by Iran, thinks that this is a good opportunity to test Israel's resolve and engage in some sort of violent provocation or attack.

What Hezbollah sees is an Israeli society that's fractured and in turmoil, and they may think that Israel might not respond to a provocation on Israel's northern border. But they could miscalculate and you have a third Lebanon War, which would likely result in massive casualties and destruction.

## **Iran would be more than happy to see that.**

Exactly. The more likely scenario is that the government will push through at least one more of its "reforms," changing the way judges are going to be appointed. Gaining control over the judicial appointments process is probably the most important part of the judicial overhaul.

I don't think this government is in a position to fully abandon its judicial overhaul—the coalition will collapse if it does, and the last thing they want is new elections. So they are on a raft, they have to cling together to survive, and this judicial overhaul is the glue.

And then they say, "OK, that's it. We've done enough."

The [protest](#) movement fades away.

Over time, I expect this government will introduce more anti-democratic legislation, maybe not focused on the judiciary but basically following the authoritarian playbook where gradually the institutions and gatekeepers of Israeli democracy are increasingly weakened and undermined. Israel [within the Green Line](#)—the de facto border with the occupied territories—would become a hollowed-out democracy. More and more liberal Israelis, the secular ones, may just emigrate.

I doubt there will be this obvious moment when you could say, "That's the day Israeli democracy died." It would just increasingly resemble illiberal democracies like [Turkey, Poland or Hungary](#).

I think that's the most likely scenario. That's the path the country is on now.

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