



THE NETANYAHU GOVERNMENT'S WAR ON ISRAELI DEMOCRACY

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In the shadow of the war in Gaza, the Netanyahu government is escalating its war on Israeli democracy in a quest to amass more executive power and advance its far-right agenda. Israel's democratic institutions, the Supreme Court, Attorney General, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and dissenting Jewish Israelis are all under attack. Fundamental democratic freedoms of the press, expression, and protest face an existential threat from the far-right Israeli governing coalition. All those who care about a US-Israel relationship based upon shared democratic values must support Israelis fighting to protect their democracy.

Attack on the Supreme Court

This week, Justice Minister Yariv Levin [threatened](#) to revive Netanyahu's antidemocratic judicial overhaul that had [wrought](#) countrywide social unrest before the Gaza war. The [High Court](#) has left the government with "no choice," Levin claimed, after it [ordered](#) him to hold a vote in the Knesset's [Judicial Selection Committee](#) to elect a new president of the Supreme Court by January 16 — lest a constitutional crisis ensue. Levin has [resisted](#) holding this vote because it would result in the election of a liberal judge to the Supreme Court presidency, who is viewed as an adversary of the Netanyahu government. Leader of the Opposition Yair Lapid [characterized](#) these efforts as a "coup d'etat," undertaken by ministers "who want to crush Israeli democracy."

The Israeli government's attempts to restrict judicial oversight, separation of powers, and fundamental checks and balances do not stop there: Members of the coalition are [reportedly](#) considering legislation to restructure the Judicial Selection Committee in order to double the number of allied justices on the Supreme Court, as well as a [bill to prevent](#) the High Court from reviewing Basic Laws that grant more power to the executive branch. They have also launched a campaign to fire Israel's Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara.

Attack on the Attorney General

Coalition members have [accused](#) Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara of being an "anarchist" who has practiced "selective enforcement" in her prosecution of violent anti-government protesters and those who incite against senior officials. Specifically, after flares were fired near the prime minister's residence in Caesarea, Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi [implied](#) that Baharav-Miara is trying to "kill" Netanyahu. These attacks also come after Baharav-Miara [refused](#) to defend several proposed government measures that she determined would be unlawful, called on Netanyahu to [consider firing](#) his far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir (for illegal interventions in police conduct), and allegedly [declined](#) to represent the state before the High Court.

The attorney general has now been [summoned](#) to defend her record before the full cabinet. Following the hearing, the cabinet plans to issue a non-binding vote of no-confidence and declare that Baharav-Miara has officially lost their trust.

Members of the coalition have already [passed](#) a symbolic motion to remove the attorney general from her post, after [failing](#) to pass it the first time. This effort to oust a top law enforcement official is part of the wider assault on the Israeli judiciary, which includes the [attempted firing](#) of several government legal advisers – [derided](#) by ministers of the Netanyahu government as “gangsters” who have “breached the public trust.”

Attack on the Free Press

Meanwhile, the Netanyahu government is also [waging](#) a war against the Israeli press, with Israel’s paper of record *Haaretz* being the latest target. The government has [accused](#) *Haaretz* of “support[ing] the enemies of the state in the midst of a war.” Minister Karhi’s proposal to ban government bodies from communicating with or advertising in the newspaper was recently [approved](#) by the prime minister. *Haaretz* [responded](#) to these government sanctions by calling them “another step in Netanyahu’s journey to dismantle Israeli democracy,” and [identified](#) a total of 38 bills intended for this purpose (which [target](#) not just Israel’s judiciary, but its security, economic, and communication sectors too).

The attack on Israel’s longest-running newspaper follows the Knesset’s “[Al Jazeera Law](#),” adopted in May of this year, that bans foreign news outlets deemed a threat to national security.

The Israeli government, which had previously ordered a [raid on](#) the *Al Jazeera* office in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, [shut down](#) *Al Jazeera* operations in Israel, including the closure of its Jerusalem offices, seizure of its equipment, blocking of its website and television broadcasts. Further undermining freedom of the press, Minister Karhi and Likud firebrand Tally Gotliv have [pushed a bill](#) to privatize Kan, the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, arguing that its coverage is “obsolete.” This move is similar to Republican Party [attempts to slash](#) US government spending for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR). Both the Likud and Republican parties are [at war](#) with the free press – a fundamental pillar of democracy.

Attack on Freedom of Expression

The Netanyahu government is also threatening the rights of Israelis, especially Arab citizens, to free expression and protest. One bill under consideration by the Knesset would [ban the public display](#) of the Palestinian flag, prohibiting Israelis from expressing solidarity with Palestinians. Under the leadership of Netanyahu’s far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israeli Police have [violently cracked down](#) on anti-government protests, brutalizing Palestinian citizens and dissenting Jewish Israelis, including [former hostages](#) and their families. Four Jewish Israeli protesters charged with firing the aforementioned flares in Caesarea are being [held](#) as “security detainees,” including on arbitrary charges of terrorism, and harassed by Israeli prison guards.

Another bill passed last month grants the education minister the [authority to fire teachers](#) for their political expressions. Additional legislation sponsored by a minister from the far-right Jewish Power party would allow Israeli police to [spy on the computers](#) of suspects using secret warrants, while a related bill would restrict the travel and communication of suspects on the basis of “[secret evidence](#).” The free expression of Palestinian citizens of Israel is also being restricted by the Israeli government in the form of a legislative package that would make it more difficult for [Arabs to run](#) in Knesset elections and [petition](#) Israel’s High Court of Justice.

Netanyahu on Trial

Netanyahu is waging a war on the Israeli judiciary in part to evade justice in his own corruption trial. Eight years ago, the Israeli police launched an investigation into Israel's longest-serving prime minister, and four years ago his trial began. Netanyahu [finally took the stand](#) in Tel Aviv this month, accused of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. A litmus test for Israeli democracy, the Netanyahu trial will determine whether a sitting prime minister is held to account for crimes he committed while in office. Netanyahu has attempted for years to avoid testifying, most recently by [trying to reschedule](#) the Knesset speech of the Paraguayan president to conflict with his trial. Minister Ben-Gvir attended the hearing in solidarity with his boss, attacking the democratic proceedings in the underground courtroom as a "[campaign of persecution](#)."

During a second Trump presidency, those of us who support a Jewish and democratic State of Israel must continue to sound the alarm every time Netanyahu strikes another blow against Israeli democracy. Israelis on the ground who are bravely resisting this erosion of democracy will need us to keep amplifying their voices. We must remain vigilant in the years ahead and steadfast in the fight to preserve a US-Israel relationship based upon shared democratic values.