

Netanyahu Is King in a World of Perpetual Fear

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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[Jonathan Cook: The View from Nazareth 7](#)
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Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Religion](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Barack Obama used an Israeli TV interview last week to gently rebuke Israel's prime minister. He warned Benjamin Netanyahu that security obsessions made him able only to "see the worst possibilities".

Mr Netanyahu's intransigence had destroyed Israel's "credibility" in regard to a two-state solution, Mr Obama added, indicating that he would not seek to revive peace talks.

Driving home the point, senior White House officials met for the first time with Breaking the Silence, a group of dissident soldiers vilified by the Netanyahu government.

The organisation recently published soldiers' testimonies that they received orders during Israel's attack on Gaza last summer to shoot Palestinians, whether they were armed or not. Such testimony could one day assist war crimes investigators at the International Criminal Court.

Meanwhile, Israel went into diplomatic meltdown over an exhibition of testimonies that Breaking the Silence is staging in Zurich. It lambasted Switzerland for funding a "slandorous" event. At the same time, Mr Netanyahu hurriedly held a press conference to defend Israel as one of "the world's greatest democracies", and barred government ministers from referring to the Obama interview.

The Israeli prime minister has proved himself a master of mining the rich seam of fear that dominates Israeli political discourse. It is the source of his power, as he illustrated during the election campaign when he warned voters the country's Arab citizens were "coming out in droves".

A poll of schoolchildren last week showed how deeply entrenched such chauvinist sentiments have become. It found that only a quarter of Jewish youngsters believe it is more important for Israel to be democratic than Jewish. Barely more – 28 per cent – condemn the settlers' "price-tag" attacks, random violence aimed at the Palestinian population to exact a price for any action taken against the settlement enterprise.

One statistic helps explain the findings. Two-thirds of Jewish teenagers report never having had contact with a member of the country's Palestinian minority, one in five of the population.

That is not accidental. Successive governments have carefully structured life in Israel to avert any danger of Israelis developing relationships across the ethnic divide in their formative years.

Education is almost completely segregated, as is residency. The few spaces where the Jewish and Arab populations can meet come later, usually in asymmetrical roles at work. By then, ideas about Arabs are pretty fixed through schooling, army service and the wider political climate.

There is no popular demand for binational education apart from a half dozen private schools, one of which was firebombed last year by right-wingers who term the mixing of Jews and Arabs "assimilation".

Even Israel's most liberal Jewish parents turn their back on mixed education beyond junior school, teachers tell me. They fear exposing their offspring to the psychological stress of developing friendships with Arabs just as they ready themselves to serve in an army that treats Palestinians as less than human.

Most Jewish children learn no Arabic, experience no Arab culture and are exposed to Arabs chiefly through images of war and violence. Despite living in the Middle East, they are encouraged to look westward, not east.

A majority of Jewish children are taught in religious schools that consciously eschew modern education in favour of a Biblical tribalism. Worse, the education ministry is now firmly in the hands of settler leader Naftali Bennett.

The dehumanisation of Arabs only accelerates for Israelis during the military draft. The mechanics of prolonged occupation play a part, as do the growing influence of settlers in the officer corps and the extremist rabbis who indoctrinate soldiers in "Jewish awareness".

So dominant have the rabbis become that Gadi Eisenkott, the military chief of staff, called last week for their role to be curbed.

In Israeli cultural life, Palestinians appear only as an enemy. Two shows offering a rare insight into life under occupation face closure by the government. Critics, including Mr Bennett, of one play - about Palestinian political prisoners - object precisely because it humanises its subjects.

In the political arena, the ever-present bogeyman is the Palestinian, Arab or Iranian.

The Knesset's Arab MPs, even moderates, are barely tolerated, while the occupation is pushed into the political shadows. Last week the parliament refused a debate to mark the 48th anniversary of the 1967 war.

Regional political disputes centre on how Israel should achieve military supremacy. Should Israel attack Iran alone or lobby the US to do it instead? How can Israel best destroy Hizbollah and its tens of thousands of rockets aimed at Israel's heartland? All but a tiny left is agreed that a Palestinian state would be an existential danger.

In this world of perpetual fear, Arabs and Iranians are viewed only as distant and dangerous objects, not people. And in the world of worst possibilities, Mr Netanyahu is king.

But Israel's enemies are changing. Where once it fought Arab states, now its tanks and attack helicopters struggle against the guerrilla tactics of Hamas and Hizbollah.

That same heavy artillery will provide even less protection against Israel's next opponents:

civil disobedience, an anti-apartheid struggle, international boycotts and war crimes investigations. Then Mr Netanyahu may truly have reason to be afraid.

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