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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks at the weekly cabinet meeting on Sunday, July 15, 2018. (Photo by: ALEX KOLOMOISKY / POOL)

Forget BDS, losing its liberal democracy is real threat against Israel

By ANDERS PERSSON
08/04/2018

A big question for the future is where the authoritarian trend will lead Israel, Palestine and the conflict between them?

The world's largest academic democracy ranking project upgrades Tunisia and downgrades both Israel and Palestine-West Bank in its latest report.

A big question for the future is where the authoritarian trend will lead Israel, Palestine and the conflict between them? V-Dem's annual democracy report for 2018, released in May this year, downgraded Israel from "liberal democracy" to "electoral democracy." Israel is now placed 53/178 on V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index, three places behind Poland and eight ahead of Hungary.

Tunisia (44/178) was simultaneously upgraded to become a 'liberal democracy' for the first time, thus replacing Israel as the only liberal democracy in the Middle East. All other Middle Eastern countries trailed far behind, with Lebanon coming a distant third, followed by Iraq and Kuwait. But there was more bad news for the Israel-Palestine region in the V-Dem's report. Palestine-West Bank was also downgraded from 'electoral democracy' to 'closed', finishing 132/178, while Palestine-Gaza was ranked 164/178 on the Liberal Democracy Index.

V-Dem's findings have similarities to other similar surveys and indexes over the last years. Freedom House's Freedom in the World 2018 survey also placed Israel (79/100) between Poland (85/100) and Hungary (72/100), but ahead of Tunisia (70/100). All four were, however, considered 'Free' by Freedom House. The Freedom in the World 2018 survey rated the West Bank (28/100) and Gaza (12/100) as 'Not Free'. The Economist Democracy Index for 2017 rated Israel (7.79/10) clearly ahead of Hungary (6.64/10), Poland (6.67/10) and Tunisia (6.32), but still categorized all of them as 'flawed democracies', while Palestine (4.46/10) was categorized as a 'hybrid regime'.

With both Israel and Palestine-West Bank being downgraded, in addition to Palestine-Gaza being placed at the bottom of the list, the main conclusion to draw from the latest V-Dem report regarding Israel-Palestine is that the past decade has been bad for democratic development there. This, of course, is not really news for those who follow Israel-Palestine closely. In the West Bank, Mahmoud Abbas's four-year term as president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) has entered its 13th year. Just last month, the PA's security forces brutally suppressed peaceful demonstrators who demanded an end to the PA's punitive measures against Gaza, which has experienced a constantly deteriorating situation over the past decade. Already in 2012, five years into the Israeli/Egyptian blockade, a much-noted UNRWA report predicted that Gaza would not be 'a livable place' by 2020 unless urgent action was taken to improve water supply, power, health, sanitation and education. Today Gaza has been under blockade for over a decade and has since the 2012 UNRWA report experienced one minor war later that same year and one major in 2014, together with several failed reconciliations attempts between the rival Palestinian factions. Now Gaza is on the verge of blowing up once again.

In Israel, the past years, including the present, have seen a steady stream of anti-democratic bills in the Knesset, the latest of which was the nation-state bill from last week. One of the big questions for the future is therefore where these authoritarian trends will lead Israel, Palestine and the conflict between them.

It is certainly not an easy question to answer. More than 60% of the Palestinian public demand Abbas' resignation, while an even greater majority, 64%, are worried that conditions might deteriorate after he leaves, according to the latest Palestinian PSR poll.

In the absence of peace negotiations, Palestinians support various alternative directions, according to the PSR poll: 75% support joining more international organizations; 67% support popular non-violent resistance; 43% support a new armed intifada; 42% support dissolving the PA; and 30% support abandoning the two-state solution and demanding a one-state solution. The many different alternatives suggest that there is no clear way forward on the Palestinian side.

There has indeed been a form of stability in the PA's authoritarianism, which may disappear with Abbas.

Had Abbas been more democratic and listened more to his population, the West Bank would likely have been more confrontational against Israel during the past decade. Palestinian authoritarianism has also been legitimized when it served a higher goal, such as a Palestinian state down the road, as was the case during Salam Fayyad's term as prime minister from 2007 to 2013. There is a famous quote from a Palestinian police officer telling the International Crisis Group in 2010 that: "Before I go to bed at night, I look at myself in the mirror with pride, as I know that what I am doing is the only way to an independent Palestinian state".

However, it is much harder to legitimize authoritarianism when there is no imaginable light at the end of the tunnel, as is currently the case in the West Bank.

The implications of the V-Dem report for Israel are very different compared to the Palestinians. No longer being ranked as a liberal democracy should come as a very late wake-up call for

Israel. In truth, this is nothing less than a strategic threat for Israel, much more severe than the widely exaggerated threat from the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement under which Israel has grown politically stronger and economically richer than it has ever been before. But Israel's strong economy and the fact that it is Israel, not Palestine, that is getting increased recognition in world politics have made many of Israel's supporters complacent.

When I speak in front of pro-Israeli audiences, hardly anyone accepts arguments that Israel's democracy is in danger. 45% of Israelis, however, including overwhelming majorities of Israeli Jews on the Left and of Israel's Arab/Palestinian minority, believe that "Israeli democracy is in grave danger," according to the 2017 Israeli Democracy Index. There should be little doubt that there will be major identity and hasbara problems for Israel if it can no longer use epithets such as "liberal democracy" and "the only democracy in the Middle East." It will also most likely contribute to the split in the Jewish Diaspora and among pro-Israeli groups between Right and Left, conservatives and liberals.

In recent years, Benjamin Netanyahu has often referred to Israel as 'the only liberal democracy in the Middle East' and similar terms in his many speeches to the UN and elsewhere. He will most likely continue doing so, but Israel is no longer a liberal democracy and no longer the only democracy in the Middle East, according to the latest academic research.

The writer is a postdoctorate researcher at the Centre for European Politics at the University of Copenhagen, specializing in EU-Israel/Palestine relations. Follow him on Twitter: @82AndersPersson



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