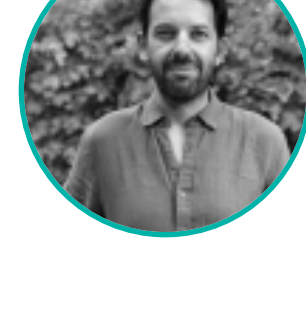




Open

# Western obsession with Netanyahu is misplaced. Most Israelis want war to go on



Antony Loewenstein

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Getting rid of Netanyahu would solve nothing. He might be personally unpopular among Israelis, but his policies in Gaza and the West Bank enjoy huge public support



A protester during an anti-government demonstration in Tel Aviv on 3 February 2024 calling upon the current Israeli government to resign (AFP)

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Israel has a "refugee problem". So wrote the editor-in-chief of Israeli newspaper Haaretz in a recent article.

Aluf Benn explained that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was on the verge of having to decide how to manage the huge number of Palestinians who were forcibly displaced from northern Gaza after Israel invaded the area after 7 October 2023.

"The issue," Benn wrote, "is whether Israel will allow Palestinians to return to the northern Gaza Strip, from which they were expelled at the beginning of the war, or whether they will be permanently displaced from there, leaving the area under Israeli control."

Note the use of language and the passivity of describing ethnic cleansing (though it's unclear if Benn himself has a strong opinion about the subject).

Haaretz is a prominent and daily opponent of Netanyahu, but seems torn between the mainstream Israeli view of the Gaza onslaught, publishing a slew of nationalistic and militaristic stories in the last six months, and a more humane position that correctly understands Israel is committing horrific abuses in Gaza that will stain the country forever.



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Benn's analysis frames the debate in the Israeli political elite as between two irreconcilable positions. The "centrist parties" in the country want to make a deal with Hamas and get the Israeli hostages released, while the right prefers to ignore the fate of the hostages and instead focus on re-establishing colonial outposts in the north of Gaza, a wish of many in Netanyahu's far-right coalition.

While this is true to some extent, it also wilfully ignores the political shift that's occurred in Israel in the last few decades, long before 7 October. Netanyahu has been prime minister for longer than other Israeli leaders since the country's birth in 1948 and is increasingly unpopular, but many of his policies in Gaza and the occupied West Bank enjoy huge Israeli support.

### West's obsession with Netanyahu

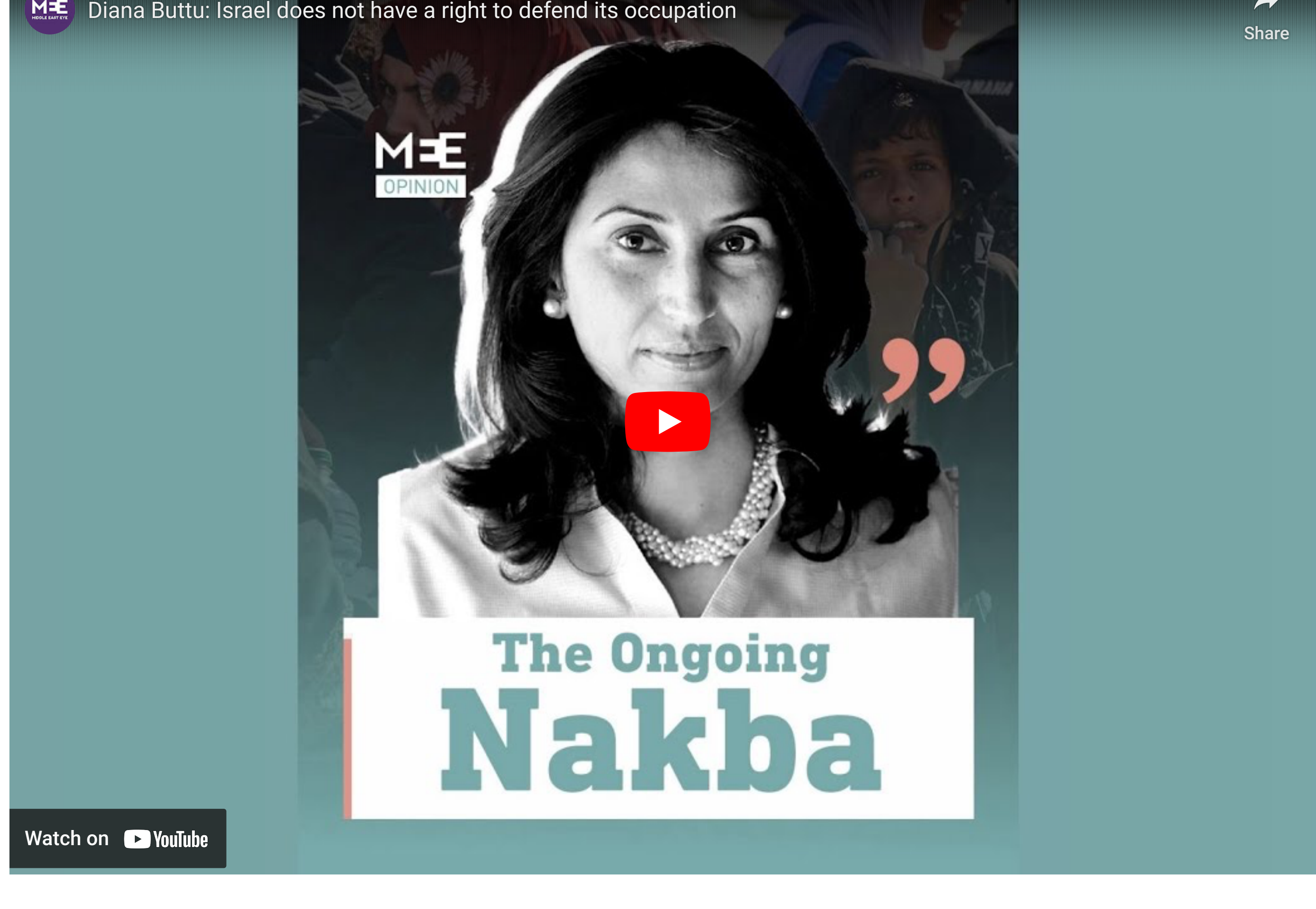
The problem in Israel isn't solely Netanyahu. He's the symptom of a major larger societal shift. Replacing him with another carbon copy will change little for the millions of Palestinians who live under a brutal military occupation.

One possible successor, Benny Gantz, has spent his career proudly promoting the destruction he's caused in Gaza in previous wars.

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There's long been a western obsession with Netanyahu, wrongly believing that he's the impediment to a more humane "Jewish state". It's the same mistake recently made by US President Joe Biden and Senate Leader Chuck Schumer, who argued that Netanyahu was blocking any prospect of peace in the region.

It's his belligerence, we're told, that makes ending the Gaza onslaught impossible.



While it's undeniably true that Netanyahu wants to prolong the war as long as possible, desperate to avoid a public reckoning for the profound intelligence and military failures on 7 October, it's delusional to believe that his removal is the answer.

When cautiously questioned by CNN recently, Netanyahu said that he wasn't some fringe player in Israel but a leader who spoke for many Israelis, pursuing policies in Gaza with broad mainstream backing.

He was right, and ignoring this reality doesn't make it go away.

### Undeniable truths

Back in 2019, I wrote for the Jewish Forward outlet in the US that anti-Palestinian racism was ubiquitous in Israel, undeniably exploding since 7 October, and Netanyahu had simply been a reflection of contemporary Israel.

A 2016 poll found that close to half of Jewish citizens wouldn't live in the same apartment blocks as Arabs. Fast forward to early 2024 and 68 percent of Israeli Jews opposed facilitating humanitarian aid to Gaza, according to an Israeli Democracy Institute study.

This is at a time when Palestinians in Gaza are starving to death due to Israel's deliberate policy of withholding lifesaving aid into the besieged territory.

As far back as a 2012 poll, a majority of Israeli Jews opposed voting rights for Arabs if the Jewish state annexed the West Bank, and one-third of Israelis wanted Arabs in Israel to be denied the right to vote.

In other words, apartheid was the Israeli vision for Palestine.

Rather than acknowledging these undeniable truths, many in the western media peddle the fiction that Israelis crave democracy and just need a bold leader to lead them out of the morass.

Enter the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman. He's a former journalist who has grossly misjudged every major US action since 9/11, backing the US-led "war on terror" for years in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2019, he told an audience in New York that, "Israel had me at hello... In times of crisis, I know where I will be. When the Jewish state is under threat."

Since 7 October, he's become one of the most outspoken opponents of Netanyahu, constantly telling his readers that the Israeli leader is a disaster for the Jewish state. Friedman's vision for the future involves an Israeli alliance with the corrupt and unpopular Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to build the conditions for a two-state solution.

### In denial

But who exactly is he talking to? The vast bulk of Israeli settler Jews have no interest in working with Palestinians, and Israel's far-right settler movement successfully hijacked the state's institutions years ago.

It often feels like Friedman is in denial about a country, Israel, that he's spent decades fawning over and can't accept that it's become in large part wholly opposed to Palestinian self-determination or even equal rights.

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A Palestinian woman outside her house, which was set on fire by Israeli settlers the day before, in Turmus Ayya near the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, on 22 June 2023 (Ahmad Gharabi/AFP)

He's also not opposed to engaging in racist rhetoric himself when explaining the dynamics of the Middle East.

Israel finds itself in a situation that's precarious and in uncharted territory. The scale of death and destruction unleashed by Israel in Gaza is worse than the 1948 Nakba and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. There's no coming back from this moment, no wishing for a lost past of fanciful cohabitation with Palestinians.

The West Bank is on the verge of exploding, with settler and Israeli soldier violence at unprecedented levels. There are credible calls, long overdue, for an arms embargo against Israel. Israeli officials, soldiers and politicians will spend the foreseeable future wondering if they may be arrested for war crimes in capitals across the globe.

None of this means that Israel is truly isolated. It still maintains a close relationship with the US and most of the European Union (Washington and Berlin are the two biggest providers of weapons to Israel).

Many American Jews still back Israel, regardless of the genocidal violence in Gaza. The Republicans under Donald Trump could win the US election in November and deepen the US relationship with Israel.

As with apartheid South Africa and the ultimately successful campaign to end its repressive regime in 1994, global civil society today will need to play a crucial role in mobilising support to pressure and sanction Israel.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Middle East Eye.

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Antony Loewenstein is an independent journalist, best-selling author, filmmaker and co-founder of Declassified Australia. He's written for the Guardian, the New York Times, the New York Review of Books and many others. His latest book is The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World. His other books include Pills, Powder and Smoke, Disaster Capitalism and My Israel Question. His documentary films include Disaster Capitalism and the Al Jazeera English films West Africa's Opioid Crisis and Under the Cover of Covid. He was based in East Jerusalem from 2016 to 2020.

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