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Carlo Strenger

Peter Beinart and illiberal Zionism

Peter Beinart's detention and questioning at Ben-Gurion Airport (disclosure: he and I are friends) has been condemned by many commentators. Even Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a brief apology, calling it a case of overzealousness. But dismissing the incident as the mistake of a single officer means overlooking its significance as an expression of the much broader and darker ideology guiding Netanyahu's current government.

Anyone needing to question arriving visitors could have Googled Beinart. They would have found that he is an avowed Zionist who has defended Israel's right to exist, and that his most recent book, "The Crisis of Zionism," argues for the liberal Zionism of Theodor Herzl and Ahad Ha'am, among others.

They would also have seen that Beinart is indeed a persistent critic of Israel's occupation policy, which he argues is bound to destroy the country's liberal-democratic character. It would have been utterly unnecessary to question him, since the internet shows exactly what Beinart's views are and indicates that he is a frequent visitor to Israel, for whose existence he cares enormously.

So why detain and question one of the most prominent American journalists and harass him at the airport — an experience that is becoming ever more common?

The answer is often not seen clearly. The Netanyahu government is of course very keen to maintain Israel's status as "the only democracy in the Middle East." But it wants to undermine the liberal aspect of democracy by defining it primarily as a system in which parliament is elected in free and fair elections — that is, majority rule without minority rights. It is much less keen on the liberal aspects of democracy: judicial oversight of government and parliament, which the governing coalition has tried to destroy in several initiatives, and a free media.

Netanyahu, if allegations being investigated are found to be true, has done everything in his power to undermine freedom of the press, by influencing figures such as Yedioth Ahronoth publisher Arnon Mozes and Bezeq and Walla news site owner Shaul Elovitch, to give him favorable coverage. The government is also trying to undermine academic freedom by forcing an "ethics code" on universities, which in a free society are self-governing institutions even if they are financed by the state.

I remember a speech by Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked in which she made her illiberal intentions very clear. She mentioned a conception of democracy maintained by "certain circles," by which she meant liberals, and that this is by no means the only form of democracy. She then developed her preferred version of democracy, one based exclusively on majority rule and in which the judicial system must follow the majority view.

Shaked and her associates from Likud, mainly Yariv Levin and Zeev Elkin, have been working for years to undermine the liberal conception of democracy in Israel — a conception held by the great theorists of liberal democracy like John Stuart Mill and Karl Popper, who coined the term "open society" for political systems that don't put any institution or viewpoint above free thought and critical debate.

Israel's right-wingers systematically falsify the central issues disputed in Israeli society by arguing that they're a matter of the right (in their vocabulary meaning "patriotic," "uncritical of the current government" and "Jewish") versus the left (meaning "unpatriotic," "undermining Israel's right to exist" and "un-Jewish").

This is simply untrue. Likud used to be a liberal party, even though it was right-wing in its views. Unfortunately, there are very few liberal Likudniks left; they include President Reuven Rivlin, who has fiercely criticized some of the governing coalition's anti-liberal legislation; Benny Begin (Menachem Begin's son), who has been completely sidelined by the party and Moshe Arens, a former defense and foreign minister (and current Haaretz columnist). All these men have right-wing views but adhere to liberal principles, and they are becoming a rare species in Israel's right-wing parties.

Israel's current government is striving toward an illiberal democracy, a position proudly endorsed as official ideology by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and Poland's ruling Law and Justice party, led de facto by Lech Kaczynski. Both have proudly abolished judicial oversight of government and freedom of the press and academia. Poland did it by outlawing positions the government abhors and legally pursuing historians who argue for such positions on the basis of their free research.

Netanyahu's government is strongly encouraged by these illiberal democracies, which so far have only received slaps from the European Union, and by the election of Donald Trump, who couldn't care less about liberal values and even disregards them and calls media outlets that criticize him "fake news." Netanyahu, Shaked and their ilk assume the current climate will allow them to gradually realize their illiberal conception of democracy without paying a high price internationally.

So beware: Beinart's treatment at Ben-Gurion Airport isn't an isolated incident. It's a preview of where Israel is headed if Israelis don't fight for the values of liberal democracy with all the legal means available.