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Netanyahu's legacy: Being Israel's first post-Zionist PM

I wrote recently that Benjamin Netanyahu is a post-Zionist. Paradoxically and counterintuitively, he is the first post-Zionist prime minister of Israel. This depiction is so counterintuitive to some that it deserves further scrutiny and elaboration.

It is obvious that Netanyahu does not intellectually subscribe to post-Zionist ideology. He is a post-Zionist by virtue of his actions and policies, his crude and broad assault on Israeli democracy and Israeli society, his undermining of the defining and orga-

nizing narrative of the Israeli republic: the Declaration of Independence.

His tenure has witnessed a deliberate deconstruction of the Zionist project, eroding principles and straining the delicate seam lines that have held the nation together since its inception in 1948.

Since the 2015 election, Netanyahu has essentially declared war on his own country. This is an unprecedented phenomenon in the history of

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Western democracies. He has effectively weaponized his grievances, anxieties, insults (past and present), vengeance and political frustration, transposing and elevating them from the personal to the national level.

His multifront assault has targeted the fragile but resilient edifices of Israeli democracy. He has declared war on Israel's institutions, processes and the elites he detests, and is now waging total war on the judicial system and law enforcement, the checks and bal-

ances, gatekeepers, media, state bureaucracy and civil society organizations. He is also tangibly damaging Israel's national security and deterrence.

His campaign of smears, incitement and division reached its peak in 2023, further widening existing fissures and creating new ones. What began a decade ago with an electorally expedient but nasty division between "Israelis" and "Jews" has intentionally evolved into a de facto schism between the Republic of Israel and the Kingdom of Judea.

Netanyahu's actions constitute a preplanned attempt to propel Israel into a regressive developmental stage, directly opposing

the core tenets of Zionism. Rather than serving as an agent of historical change, as Charles de Gaulle did during France's transition from the Fourth to the Fifth Republic in 1958, Netanyahu has positioned himself as an agent of chaos, surrounding himself with an extremist, messianic-theocratic ruling coalition and a cohort of incompetent, vulgar ignoramuses ill-suited for governance.

Netanyahu's resemblance to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is far more pronounced than any affinity he may have with Budapest-born Theodor Herzl, the visionary founder of political Zionism. And when it comes to his values, mor-

als and political worldview, Netanyahu bears a closer resemblance to Winston Smith – George Orwell's protagonist in "1984" – than to his proclaimed hero, Winston Churchill.

Beneath the surface of Netanyahu's post-Zionism, a possible psycho-political phenomenon lurks: a deep animosity toward the State of Israel. This notion may appear perplexing and hard to digest when applied to a sitting Israeli prime minister, but the evidence seems to support this claim.

The phenomenon can be explained by a term known as "oikophobia": a person's aversion to their home, environment or country. It is the opposite of xenophobia.

If we accept this assumption, the question is: What fuels such intense antipathy toward one's own country and its elites, particularly from a position of power?

First, there's the stark disparity between Netanyahu's self-perception and what he sees as a lack of gratitude from the condescending and unappreciative elite.

Netanyahu's father, historian Benzion Netanyahu, developed a theory of cyclical Jewish history. It posits that every few hundred years, attempts are made to annihilate Jewish civilization: Hellenists, Romans, Crusaders, the Spanish Inquisition, anti-semitic persecution, fascism and Nazism. Yet in every generation, the Jewish people re-

sist and produce a leader or fortuitous circumstances that thwart such attempts. Netanyahu sees himself as ordained by history to stand against "Islamofascism," yet the ungrateful Israeli elite persecute rather than venerate him.

Second, Netanyahu nurtures a sense of persecution and rejection that has grown more acute over the years.

Some argue that leadership requires a blend of narcissism and paranoia, but an excess of both leads to catastrophic political behavior. Netanyahu perceives himself as being pursued by the legal, military, political and media elites. The world is against him, he believes, because he presents an un-

flattering mirror of reality as he sees it.

Third, Netanyahu has developed a self-image akin to Louis XIV's famous proclamation of "L'État, c'est moi" ("I am the state"). Complementing his authoritarian tendencies, reminiscent of Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Netanyahu envisions himself as the indispensable savior of the nation.

An amalgamation of these factors, combined with his legal predicament, has propelled him toward political nihilism and, consequently, post-Zionism.

This will be his legacy. Not his failure to curb the Iranian nuclear program or achieve a resolution between

Israel and the Palestinians. He failed in both. Nor his inability to cultivate robust relations with the United States, to which he may have inflicted lasting structural damage. And certainly not his mantra of "governance," which has proved an exercise in futility.

Netanyahu's historical legacy will be his audacious but ultimately doomed attempt to deconstruct the Zionist enterprise. In doing so, he is trying to transform Israel from a powerhouse of science, technology and innovation into a kakistocracy – government by the incompetent and unfit – that is managed like a kleptocracy, with distinct overtones of a theocracy.