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The deconstruction of the Israeli state

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This paper argues that the core of Israeli crisis of democracy has been an attack of the Israeli government on the state. That is, the current Israeli government has been transforming the regime and undermining its liberal characters by dismantling the state—its functioning, legitimacy, orientation, and philosophy. It has done so through democratic measures and in the name of the people's will and sovereignty. That is, via populist rhetoric. Such a process is called here deconstruction of the Israeli state. In fact, the similarity is no accident; the causes of the crisis of Israel and US partly overlap, and go beyond isomorphism and political learning. The agenda of the government harms the Israeli middle class and it is too radical even for some of those who voted for the parties participating in the coalition. However, it has support among settlers in the west bank, ultra-orthodox and large portion of potential right-wing voters. Moreover, the current war is used by the government to continue with its radical agenda and to cope with the massive public protest. The causes of the Israeli crisis are local as well as global, and the consequences are far reaching. So far, as the papers shows, the government has reduced political rights, violated human rights and deteriorated the state's power.

KEYWORDS

state, democracy, populism and democracy, authoritarianism, democracy backsliding, Israel

1 Introduction

This study contends that the Israeli government is engaged in a hegemonic project to reconfigure Israel's power structure by fundamentally transforming the state. That is, first and foremost, challenging the moral authority of unelected state institutions to govern. It is an attempt for a complete deconstruction of the system as a whole.¹

While this project might be interpreted as another case of populism (Mudde, 2019),² democratic backsliding, or authoritarianism (Haklai, 2024; Motchoulski, 2025),³ its characteristics and consequences warrant a new conceptualization. Simply put, the current political change in Israel (as well as in the US and in other countries), has been not simply an

1 The notion of state in this paper is almost a synonym for the entire political system or the power structure. However, we use the former to emphasize the issues of authority, legitimacy and the functionality of the government, which are not dominant in the notions of political system and power structure.

2 The conceptualization of populism as a set of ideas centered on the notion that "the people" are opposed to "the elite," is almost a consensus in the scholarship. We follow this consensus.

3 We agree with Haklai (2024) that the government aims "to reshape the character of Israel's political regime." As a conceptual clarification he suggests democratic backsliding and autocratization. The notion of authoritarianism has no clear conceptualization. The most recent attempt to conceptualize it asserts that it is a form of justification of imposing power on others. This is not the case at the moment. In other words, today we are not dealing with justifications to impose political power but rather with two opposing camps that believe that the other camp is undemocratic and lack legitimacy.

attack on “the elite,” but, more precisely, an attack on the institutions of the state and on the idea of the state. In the current attack of the government on the state, the people are not presented as pure or moral, and there is scarcely sincere talk about corruption. Similarly, the core of the Israeli governmental project is not taking power from the people or justifying the imposition of political power over others, as in the case of authoritarianism. Indeed, this project potentially paves the way for all these dangerous results, and others, but at the moment it is not undemocratic or authoritarian.

Considering the similarities and differences between populism, authoritarianism and deconstruction of the state is important because it allows to see that there are tensions and even contradictions between democracy and democratic infrastructure—i.e., state. Thus, we can understand better the appeal of this dangerous attempt, and hopefully cope with it better.

Similarly, the framing of the current Israeli government’s project as a “coup” is flawed for several reasons. First, a “coup” implies the seizure of power, whereas the current coalition has already held power for many years.⁴ Second, this interpretation emphasizes the anti-democratic aspects of the government’s actions. Yet, the political project being advanced by the government operates under the banner of democracy and in the name of “popular sovereignty.” Third, this framing is blind to the inherent and irreconcilable tension between democracy and liberalism (Green, 2015). Fourth, unlike a coup, which is about seizing power but not necessarily ambitious in its further goals, the current government seeks to bring about a revolution, that is, a complete break from the legal order. Fifth and finally, the coup narrative obscures the possibility that this process enjoys broad public support. In other words, the framing of a “coup” fails to capture the depth of the rupture and the magnitude of the government’s project.

Parallel to other populist governments, the current hegemonic project is often framed as an expression of popular sovereignty but with an important twist: rather than sovereignty within recognized borders and as a right of all people, sovereignty (*ribonut* in Hebrew) became a right of Jews alone (Jones and Shitrit, 2024). The ultimate aim of the government initiative—referred to here as “the deconstruction of the Israeli state”—is to change the meaning of togetherness and civilized co-existence. Practically, it means to subordinate state powers to the directives of politicians (Nielson, 2021).⁵ Insofar as this project achieves its objectives, it risks undermining the democratic infrastructure and liberal character of the regime, and the legal order.

Our analysis focuses on four specific domains: the judicial system, the economic bureaucracy, law enforcement, and the security apparatus. This focus is driven both by the constraints of scope and by our view that these domains constitute key centers of state power. While the government’s attempts to fundamentally alter the structure

of the mainstream media are also part of the state’s deconstruction (Rogenhofer and Panievsky, 2020; Peri, 2004; Yadlin and Klein-Shagrir, 2024), these efforts will be addressed only briefly due to limitations of scope. The analysis is based on political declarations, legislative proposals, policy measures, and structural changes. We aim to provide a detailed account of Netanyahu’s government policies over the past decade and demonstrate how they purposively deconstruct the state.

In the following section, we outline our conceptual framework, characterizing what we term the “deconstruction of the state.” Next, in Section 3, we analyze the coalition led by Benjamin Netanyahu, which is effectively working to deconstruct the state. We also explore the diverse motivations driving the coalition’s constituent members. Section 4 provides a detailed account of Netanyahu’s government policies over the past decade. In Section 5, we examine the intensification of the current government’s agenda and analyze the radicalization that occurred in the aftermath of the war that erupted on October 7, 2023. We conclude with reflections on the political implications of this moment.

2 Analytical framework: *The state, a state and their deconstruction*

The state is a foundational concept in political theory, political science and public discourse (Mitchell, 1991). It is an essentially contested concept—one whose disputes are often opaque, their depth and origins unclear. Despite this contestation, there is broad consensus regarding the state’s basic features: its territory, population, monopoly on violence, and, some would argue, its legal order. Additionally, there is general agreement that the state—to the extent that it exists, not being a mere fiction—represents the highest authority in matters of governance (Skinner, 1989),⁶ and yet, the boundaries between states and societies are porous (Krasner, 1984).

Various approaches have been developed to conceptualize and study the state. Our analysis draws significantly on the works of Skinner (1989), Jessop (2001, 2015)⁷, Arendt (1994), and Tsao (2004).⁸ Central to our framework is a distinction between “a state” as a complex institutional mechanism of governance (also referred to as a “ruling power”) and “the state” as “a state” imbued with the idea of “the state” (Steinberger, 2015). A state, as a governing apparatus, is an assemblage of social forces that consistently directs the behavior of a population within a defined territory, wielding authority through its monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force (Ariely, 2021).⁹ In contrast, *the state* is a governing power animated by an idea—whether real or fictive—of the public interest and supreme authority (Runciman, 2003). It rests on the idea of a uniform, impersonal legal order, that is supposed to protect and guarantee all kinds of rights, and to integrate the rival groups in society. That said, the state has to be a state first, because “only a strongly centralized administration which

4 As Oded Haklai asserted, the term coup means the overthrow of an existing government using unlawful means. The coalition was elected according in accordance with the law.

5 We use the notion of deconstruction to describe the Israeli government’s politics because it resembles Stephen Bannon’s famous announcement that the Trump administration sought the “deconstruction of the administrative state.” We use an ambiguous term (“deconstruction”), that can mean destruction or demolition, but also a radical examining of the state.

6 We use Skinner mainly for our general distinction between a state and the state.

7 We use Jessop mainly for the theorization of a state.

8 We use Arendt mainly to shed light on the functions of states as such.

9 The distinction is not very common. For example, Gal Ariely’s discusses the meaning of the notion of a state under the notion of *the state*.

monopolized all instruments of violence and power-possibilities could counterbalance the centrifugal forces constantly produced in a class-ridden society” (Arendt, 1994).

The state also embodies a belief that the ruling power operates in service of the public interest rather than being subordinate to particular or partial interests. In other words, when a state exemplifies *the state*, its officials and the broader population perceive its functionaries as public servants. Furthermore, the state is understood as a historical manifestation of a political and social ideal, lending it an almost sacred quality.

Over time, as a ruling power is increasingly perceived by both a significant portion of the population and public servants as *the state*, the concept of *the state* takes on a tangible reality. In this process, an idea of *the state*—rooted perhaps in illusion or imagination—becomes concrete and palpable. Such a development has a positive effect on the strength of the ruling power and on state powers, or state capacities. In other words, the power of a particular regime and the strength of a/the state are not merely functions of administrative performance but also of the perception that the regime embodies a genuine state—a specific realization of the idea of *the state* (Jessop, 2010). Conversely, repeated claims that a ruling power does not constitute *the state*, whether because no such thing as “*the state*” exists or because the particular ruling power fails to embody one, undermines it.

Our contention is that the various reforms pursued by the Israeli government are not mere attempts to consolidate control over the regime—since the current government is already in power—but deliberate efforts to deconstruct *the state*.¹⁰ By deconstruction of *the state*, we mean a deliberate process, often accompanied by explicit criticism, aimed at fundamentally altering one or more of the following: (1) the validity of the idea of *the state*; (2) the rule of law; (3) the portrayal of a specific ruling power as systematically failing to act as *the state*. We now elaborate on each of these three dimensions.

The first aspect of deconstructing the state involves an assault on the very idea of *the state*. The validity of the idea of *the state* depends on the belief that an institutional organization can exist where those staffing it are guided by the public interest, rather than by confusion between personal and public interests or by extraneous motives such as the pursuit of power and personal gain. Portraying the idea of *the state* as fictitious can also manifest in critiques of specific aspects of *the state*, such as skepticism about human motivations, the very existence of a defined public interest, or the practical possibility of advancing a legitimate, shared collective interest. As the idea of *the state* comes under attack, the ability of the regime to present itself as a state is increasingly undermined. In fact, until the late 1960s, many scholars reject the idea of *the state*, viewing it as a myth (Nettl, 1968). For example, Arthur Bentley’s political theory, which significantly influenced American political science from the late 1940s,¹¹ presents a realist approach to politics, framing it as nothing more than a

struggle among groups pursuing their interests, unified solely by opposition to other groups. For Bentley, the term “state” is misleading, serving merely as a way to articulate an idea about the stability of intergroup conflicts (Bentley, 1926).¹²

The second aspect of *the state*’s deconstruction involves challenging the rule of law or the language of the ruling power. This challenge can occur on one or both of the following levels. First, at the level of fundamental critique, questions arise about the very nature of law: is it merely a set of *ad hoc* decisions by elected officials, or does it constitute a system designed to impose limits on human will and constrain elected officials from implementing their immediate preferences (Schauer, 1991)? Additional critiques may target the purpose of law: is it meant for declarative purposes, or does it exist to guide behavior? Other foundational critiques of the rule of law challenge its key principles, such as generality, publicity, impersonality, and stability. For instance, framing personal loyalty as a supreme value in governance constitutes a direct critique of the rule of law. Similarly, frequent changes to legislation, which undermine stability and obstruct the law’s function of guiding behavior (Marmor, 2004), exemplify such challenges.

The second level of undermining legalism involves presenting competing interpretations of the meaning of meta-legal concepts, legal terms, distinctions, and words. The rule of law can only operate in practice if there is consensus on its language. Without agreement on the meaning of terms such as “personalized legislation,” basic distinctions (e.g., between private and public spheres), the actual meaning of specific legislative terms (“incapacity” or “good faith”), or essential concepts underpinning legal prohibitions (e.g., the distinction between a “gift” and “bribe” as defined in criminal law, or between legitimate interest and conflict of interest), the rule of law cannot function. Consequently, when a powerful actor systematically and extensively promotes competing interpretations of essential words, terms, and distinctions, it not only destabilizes the rule of law and, more broadly effectively deconstructs *the state*.

Examples of this dynamic include rejecting the binding nature of customary practices (“the seniority system for judicial appointments is corrupt”), discrediting canonical documents (“the Declaration of Independence is not legally binding”), or advancing competing interpretations of the commonly accepted meanings of words such as “war,” “emergency,” “governance,” and even “Israeli hero.”

The third aspect of deconstructing *the state* involves portraying the ruling power as fundamentally and systematically failing to embody the idea of the modern state. For example, consider Avishai Ben-Chaim’s (a journalist, a researcher and an intellectual who turned into an outspoken advocate of the Israeli periphery) critique that the State of Israel has been nothing more than a tool serving “First Israel” (the elites) against “Second Israel” (the people) (Ben Haim, 2022). This type of critique does not target the idea of *the state*, the rule of law, or the specific logics of governance per se. Instead, it questions whether the governing system has ever truly functioned—at least for a sufficiently sustained period—as a state in the manner it claimed or was expected to. Consequently, if such critiques are deemed valid, they

10 It is a significant error to describe the series of reforms promoted by the government—beginning chronologically with the declaration made by Justice Minister Yariv Levin in January 2023—as a “regime coup.” We discuss this point in the final section.

11 Arthur Bentley’s most renowned work, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures*, was first published in 1908. However, it was the book’s second edition, released in the 1940s, that truly left a lasting impact on the scholarly community.

12 According to Bentley, “The term state indicates a great complex of closely coinciding activities, which hold together, and get enough representative process for stability. The state is fundamental not as a mystic being but only in the sense of this stability, this durational extent, this relative permanence.”

provide legitimacy for fundamentally altering the structure of the state and its specific governing principles.

Three clarifications regarding our argument are necessary to avoid potential misunderstandings: First, the deconstruction of *the* state is not a binary phenomenon but exists on a spectrum. The extent of deconstruction increases as the effort encompasses more domains and as the accompanying critiques and initiatives become more systematic and severe. Similarly, *the* state is dismantled to a greater degree as an incumbent government deviates from the rule of law as it has been historically established within a given ruling power, attacks the functioning of non-elected institutions of that ruling power, or rejects the accepted interpretations of language and legal norms traditionally upheld by the ruling power. This dismantling occurs regardless of whether it is the government's explicit objective.

In contrast, when elected officials openly state their intention to favor associates and allies over others or act systematically in ways that create the impression they are driven by personal motives, they engage in behavior that deconstructs *the* state. However, not every sharp critique of the ruling power necessarily contributes to the state's deconstruction. For example, when a major newspaper exposes a corruption scandal involving a prime minister, it does not necessarily undermine *the* state but rather challenges the regime at a specific moment in time. How will we distinguish between democratic and authoritarian deconstruction? More broadly, what distinguishes democratic critique of state from an authoritarian or undemocratic one? The answer is that according to our conceptualization, in some cases there might be no distinctions at all. That is, while some politicians might advance deconstruction to destroy democracy, others might use it sincerely, to enhance it. In retrospect, however, deconstruction would lead to the end of functioning and sustainable democracy, and in the end, even to an authoritarian regime.

Second, some degree of state deconstruction has been a recurring phenomenon in the short history of the modern state. For example, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, imperialism introduced ideas and practices that destabilized the nation-state (Arendt, 1994). A more well-known instance is the critique of the "administrative state" that has been voiced in the United States since Roosevelt's New Deal, or the rejection of impersonality in favor of personal loyalty (Beermann, 2018; Moynihan and Roberts, 2010).

Finally—and this is our most critical clarification—we argue that recent developments mark a significant deepening of this phenomenon (Rosenblum and Muirhead, 2024).¹³ Since the current government received the Knesset's (the Israeli Parliament) vote of confidence at the end of 2022, it has pursued the deconstruction of *the* state in an unprecedented and remarkably comprehensive manner.

Before delving further into the Israeli case, we will now briefly address alternative conceptualizations of the Israeli case and their limitations. The consensual conceptualization is that the Israeli government is populist. While our conceptualization does not contradict this claim, the existing literature on populism fails, in our understanding, to provide the specification of democratic backsliding in Israel (and perhaps elsewhere) precisely because populism is more of a political logic/reasoning (Laclau, 2005) than a policy prescription

with coherent goals, even in Cas Mudde's ideational approach (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). That is, while parts of the current coalition (but not all—ultra orthodox for example) have indeed adopted a distinctly populist discourse over the past decade, the positive project common to all of its components, as we argue, is the attempt to deconstruct the state. In this sense, while recent literature illuminates various aspects of populism in power, they miss not only the government's ultimate aim, but also the motivations of its components. For example, Filc and Avigur-Eshel (2024) and Gutwein (2016) focus on the political economy of right-wing populism in power, Levi and Agmon (2021) propose a conceptualization of Israeli populism as "security-driven populism," and other scholars focus mainly on the legal-constitutional aspects of Israeli populism (Roznai and Cohen, 2023; Navot, 2023). Despite their important theoretical contributions, they all focus on the threat to the liberal and democratic characteristics of the regime, so that the deconstruction of the state is seen as a by-product, rather than as a desirable goal in itself.

In addition, the tendency to give the concept of populism excessive explanatory power misses aspects of Netanyahu's coalition that do not exactly fit together. Inter alia, the government has persisted in actions against state institutions despite lacking public support for such measures. For example, a substantial majority of the public, including voters of the coalition itself, consistently opposes the continued promotion of the judicial reform (Herman et al., 2024). Moreover, at this stage, the rhetoric has moved beyond the binary framing of "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite." Instead, it now pits elected officials and their electorate against state institutions and the institutionalized media. While populists always tend to pit elected officials and their electorate against state institutions and the institutionalized media (Rogenhofer and Panievsky, 2020), the novelty here is that since the outbreak of the war and as support for the government and the state's deconstruction project has significantly decreased, there has been much less appeal to popular legitimacy, and more to nationalist legitimacy. In other words, we contend that at the very least, the current development should be recognized as expressing a new phase in the phenomenon of populism—late-populism—that is not yet sufficiently developed.

3 The coalition for the deconstruction of the Israeli state

The deconstruction of the Israeli state is a project spearheaded by a diverse actors and organized groups who reject the idea of *the* state and contend that Israel's governments, across generations, has failed to uphold the ideal of statehood. This coalition includes ultra-Orthodox groups, settlers, leaders in conflict with the rule of law, populist politicians, billionaires, and, notably, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself.¹⁴

¹³ This is true also for US.

¹⁴ This study challenges the interpretation that reduces the project to an attempt by Netanyahu to evade justice. According to this narrative, Netanyahu was once a politician who supported the rule of law, but his entanglement in criminal investigations in 2016 motivated him to undermine the state.

3.1 Benjamin Netanyahu

Benjamin Netanyahu's critique of the State of Israel stems, in our view, from his fundamental skepticism (Navot et al., 2017), and from his profound rejection, as a revisionist, of the Labor movement (Kaplan, 2005; Shindler, 2017). For Netanyahu, the Labor movement constructed a state characterized by the very flaws he attributes to socialism: hypocrisy, centralization, cronyism, and ultimately, economic and moral decay.¹⁵ His self-declared mission has been to rectify these foundational defects. Beyond this Revisionist worldview, Netanyahu's personal familial conflict with the Labor movement and his critique of Israel's development added to his animosity toward the state.

Netanyahu's attitude toward the rule of law, as it evolved in Israel, has been highly critical. He believed that the system had deviated from the principles of separation of powers. Not only did he mistrust key figures in the judiciary and public service, but he also felt no obligation to work with legal officials who did not align with his views. From his first day as prime minister, nearly three decades ago, Netanyahu moved to replace the Civil Service Commissioner and the Attorney General, dismissed the legal adviser to the Prime Minister's Office and appointed Yaakov Ne'eman as Minister of Justice, a man long harboring animosity toward many Supreme Court justices (Navot, 2012). In addition, and for similar reasons, there has been a mutual antipathy between Netanyahu and the security community (Ziv, 2024).

However, during his first term, the state remained robust, and Netanyahu lacked sufficient political experience to fully implement his agenda. Having learned valuable lessons, he proceeded with greater caution upon returning to power in 2009. In 2015, Netanyahu began to advance the deconstruction of the state with renewed intensity and effectiveness, while adopting an anti-establishment rhetoric (Navot and Goldshmidt, 2022). We now turn to examine additional elements of Netanyahu's coalition and their contributions to the deconstruction of the state.

3.2 Lower classes, settlers, and the ultra-orthodox

The immediate beneficiaries of the state deconstruction project are parts of socioeconomically middle-to-lower groups, organized along sectoral lines, who seek compensation for the social services cut

during the neoliberal hegemonic project (Gutwein, 2016). One example of such compensatory mechanisms is the distribution of coalition funds, which increased significantly under Netanyahu's tenure. This redistributive tool reached its peak under the current government's coalition agreements, with settlers and ultra-Orthodox communities receiving far more than their proportional share of the population (Tucker, 2023a). Their loyalty to Likud has further solidified due to the opposition's staunch rejection of these compensatory mechanisms (Knesset, 2017) and the consistent stance of the "liberal camp" against funding for yeshiva students, their exemption from military service, and financial support for settlements and religious nuclei.

From our perspective, the group most hostile to the state is the settlers. The primary reason is the state's declared commitment to international law, which conflicts with the settlers' ideology and their perception of ownership over lands held by Palestinians. Additionally, there are more specific tensions, such as the settler movement's high dependence on heavy state funding (Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde, 2020), or the Supreme Court's overturning of government decisions to grant economic benefits to settlements (Navot and Goldshmidt, 2022). Another example is the state funding of "religious Zionist nuclei" projects, contrary to the position of the Ministry of Finance (Ilan, 2024). This contradiction is also reflected in the escalating tensions over the past decade between settlers and the defense establishment, heightened by the growing role of the "policing army" in the West Bank—at times in opposition to the military's official stance (Levi, 2023). A similar tension exists between settlers and law enforcement agencies, whose efforts to curb settler violence in the West Bank are perceived by settlers as "selective enforcement" (Zinger, 2021). The lack of defined borders and the occupation of Palestinian territories in Gaza and the West Bank, (with millions of Palestinians that are ineligible to vote), can coexist only with a state that is being penetrated and does not enjoy autonomy. In fact, the settler movement's attempts to capture the state for its own purposes, particularly the organizations in charge of administering the West Bank, have been going on for decades (Haklai, 2007; Hirsch-Hoefler and Mudde, 2020).

Another hostile group is the ultra-Orthodox, whose proportion among settlers is steadily increasing and expected to become a majority in the coming years (Arieli, 2022).¹⁶ The source of their hostility partly overlaps with that of the settlers but also stems from a unique reason: the state's institutions pose a threat to the ultra-Orthodox way of life due to their high dependency on selective state funding. Indeed, the level of trust the ultra-Orthodox public has in state institutions is among the lowest in Israeli society (IDI, 2016).

Various statements by ultra-Orthodox politicians reveal the sectoral motivations behind the weakening of the state. The chairman of the United Torah Judaism faction, Yitzhak Goldknopf, said: "The settlements in Judea and Samaria represent a very significant housing solution to the housing crisis in the country overall, and we see the addition of cities and settlers in Judea and Samaria as a strategic necessity. Today, more than ever, it is evident and well-known that the connection between the religious Zionists and the ultra-Orthodox

¹⁵ It is possible that this critique was shaped not only by Ze'ev Jabotinsky's ideology but also by the influence of his disciples—Netanyahu's father, Benzion Netanyahu, and his father's close friend, Abba Ahimeir (For Ahimeir, see Shindler, 2017: 16–18, pp. 133–137). Netanyahu himself testified to the affinity between his father and Ahimeir, noting that Benzion Netanyahu held no one in higher regard than Ahimeir, admiring his intellectual independence and unwavering commitment to the truth. According to Amnon Lord, a right-wing intellectual and journalist who supports Benjamin Netanyahu (and whom Netanyahu regards as an important and legitimate journalist), Ahimeir did not view the Labor movement as a Zionist body but rather as a collection of "Palestinian Bundist entities" (Lord, 2015). Netanyahu's regard for Amnon Lord can be gleaned from the testimony of Noni Mozes, who stated that Netanyahu suggested hiring Lord at *Yedioth Ahronoth*.

¹⁶ According to Shaul Arieli, the proportion of the ultra-Orthodox population in Judea and Samaria is four times higher than in Israel proper.

is a bond of shared destiny” (Inn, 2023). His faction colleague Meir Porush admitted: “There is no chance for a legislative solution to regulate the status of yeshiva students that will hold up without judicial reform... The fact that the judicial system persecutes the world of Torah has not changed” (Breitkopf, 2024). Finally, the chairman of the Degel HaTorah party, Moshe Gafni, acknowledged: “For 34 years, I have been waiting to weaken the power of the Supreme Court... There is no issue related to our lives, the Jewish Torah lifestyle in the Land of Israel, that the Supreme Court has not intervened in. People ask why we are interfering in this matter, but we are happy—the greatest troubles we have faced came from the Supreme Court. There is no field in which it has not harmed us... They will never rule in our favor... We need a weak court” (Ilan, 2023).

3.3 Likud

Likud has established distributive mechanisms based on political loyalty. This method has further fueled contradictions with the rule of law and the logic of the state. For example, the sophisticated loyalty mechanism known as the “traffic light system” ensures the allocation of state resources based on political loyalty to Miri Regev and Likud (Channel 13, 2024). The logic of loyalty was revealed by Likud Minister of Culture and Sport Miki Zohar, following the 2015 elections, argued that communities voting for ‘Likud’ should receive tax benefits: “We do not want to turn our backs on the cities that voted for us... This is gratitude for the good they did for you in the last elections.” When asked whether this amounted to bribery, he responded, “It’s saying: I’ll give you something in return for you giving me something, it’s a matter of gratitude” (Srugim, 2015). Similarly, Minister Dudi Amsalem asserted, “Likud is not a Hasidic sect, and Bibi is not a Rebbe. But loyalty is above all” (Rubinstein, 2019).

3.4 Think tanks

The deconstruction of the Israeli state is supported by an institutional and organizational infrastructure that provides ideological resources. At the center of this effort is the Kohelet Forum, an applied research institute founded in 2012 by Prof. Moshe Koppel, and inspired by the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute (Tversky, 2023). Prof. Koppel elaborated on the forum’s principles: “Economic liberty, Israel as the nation-state [of the Jewish people] and governing—governing is a euphemism for dismantling unelected centers of power that exploit the state’s power in order to impose their values” (Slyomovics, 2021). The forum promotes libertarian ideals and collaborates with a network of affiliated civil society organizations to reshape the Israeli right.

From its inception, the forum asserts that: “Israel suffers from a severe governing problem, namely, the inability of elected officials to implement policies” (Klein, 2012). According to the forum, the root problem lies with certain entities within the civil service—particularly the Budget Department of the Ministry of Finance and the Office of the Attorney General—operating as “gatekeepers” with the power to block ministerial policies. The proposed solution was to politicize public service appointments and create a broad system of politically appointed positions.

The forum has closely collaborated with Yariv Levin in drafting reform legislation and government ministers have vigorously advanced legislative proposals crafted by the forum, which has also invested significant resources to promote them (Egri, 2024a). Furthermore, in several instances, senior forum members were appointed to key roles within the public service.¹⁷ Kohelet Forum operates alongside a complex network of affiliated bodies and organizations. In addition, the network’s members mainly belong to two minority factions within Israel’s right wing: religious Zionists (primarily settlers) and American immigrants connected to U.S. business leaders and the political culture of American think tanks (Katzman, 2024). In other words, the libertarian economic vision of state deconstruction aligns seamlessly with the national-messianic aspirations and sectoral interests of the settlers (Kashti and Slyomovics, 2023).

3.5 Billionaires

The principal donors to the Kohelet Forum are Jeffrey Yass and Arthur Dantchik, Jewish Americans who amassed their wealth through gambling ventures, stock trading, and investments in the Chinese social media platform TikTok. Yass and Dantchik are also among the largest donors to the Republican Party in the United States, particularly its Trumpist wing, as well as to libertarian-conservative think tanks such as the Cato Institute (Slyomovics, 2021). The Tikvah Fund is primarily funded by the estate of the late billionaire Zalman Bernstein, a Jewish financier and owner of the investment bank Sanford Bernstein.

Another group of billionaires consists of Netanyahu allies who have provided critical support by leading a media revolution in Israel over the past decade. Over 15 years ago, *Israel Hayom*, owned by Jewish-American billionaire Sheldon Adelson—a close Netanyahu confidant—was launched under the editorship of Amos Regev, Netanyahu’s personal friend, with the explicit aim of breaking the monopoly held by *Yedioth Ahronoth*. In 2013, billionaire Yitzhak Mirilashvili, another Netanyahu associate, obtained a license to operate Channel 14. Netanyahu’s governments modified regulations, granted the channel benefits worth tens of millions of shekels, and exempted it from obligations imposed on competing networks. Netanyahu even attempted to shut down the regulatory authority overseeing it. Under the current government, Channel 14 has become the second-highest-rated news channel. Content monitoring reveals it serves as a major platform for discourse hostile to the state (Egri, 2024b). Another player is Len Blavatnik, an oligarch and majority owner of Channel 13, and a close associate of Netanyahu.

The objectives of these billionaires vary: for some, the goal is to advance libertarian ideas—testing, legitimizing, and promoting them.

¹⁷ In early 2023, Education Minister Yoav Kisch appointed Avital Ben Shlomo, head of the Forum’s Education Department, as Deputy Director-General of the ministry in a trust-based position under the “Jobs Law.” Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi appointed Elad Malka, a Likud member and Kohelet researcher, as Deputy Director-General. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich appointed Shmuel Abramson from the Forum as Chief Economist, while MK Simcha Rothman brought on a Kohelet advisor to draft the “Legal Advisers Law.”

Others align with Netanyahu's vision of Zionism. The fact that many of these billionaires reside outside Israel or operate global businesses rather than local enterprises is significant. Unlike domestic tycoons, their profits are not tied to the strength of the Israeli state, therefore its deconstruction does not conflict with their economic interests.

3.6 Leaders in conflict with the rule of law

The final group within the coalition for dismantling the state comprises individuals who believe they have been wronged by the legal enforcement system, or seek to escape the reach of the law. Beyond Netanyahu himself, an example is Aryeh Deri, leader of Shas, who has promoted a narrative portraying the legal proceedings against him as persecution by members of the "old elites" against a representative of "the people" (Filc, 2010). Deri was also the first to actively work toward weakening state institutions such as the Attorney General's Office and the police (Navot, 2023). Similarly, figures such as Itamar Ben-Gvir, Bezalel Smotrich, and Yitzhak Goldknopf all have a history of clashes with the judicial system.

4 Policies prior to the current government

Since 2015, Netanyahu's governments have pursued an agenda aimed at undermining state institutions and challenging their foundational logic (Shaked, 2016). Initially, this campaign was justified by the claim that bureaucrats were obstructing politicians from implementing their policies. The campaign adopted an anti-establishment rhetoric, signaling a shift from a horizontal populist discourse—focused on internal and external enemies (the left, Palestinians, immigrants)—to a vertical deconstructionist discourse targeting "enemies above," headed by the state (Navot et al., 2022). The government quickly began advancing a series of policy decisions, legislative proposals, and structural changes aimed at weakening state institutions and eroding the principles underpinning the state logics.

Following Donald Trump's election in 2016, Netanyahu remarked, "Trump has 4,000 trust-based appointments; we need a few hundred appointments that are not subject to tender committees," concluding, "We too need the ability to govern" (Ilan, 2016). In February 2016, Netanyahu attacked the appointment process in the public service: "I want to abolish search committees... We were elected to govern, and part of governing is selecting people... I reject the entrenched practice of appointment committees. If ministers cannot make appointments, they should not be ministers. If they err in their choice of personnel, they'll pay for it in the elections" (Bassok, 2016). He simultaneously sought to amend the procedure for dismissing senior regulators and promoted legislation to legalize political appointments to senior public and governmental positions.

In 2017, the government approved a law allowing any government ministry with over 150 employees to appoint a deputy director-general as a managerial extension of the minister and director-general, without a tender. The coalition then targeted institutional gatekeepers such as the Civil Service Commission, the State Comptroller, and legal advisers. In September 2018, after a year and a half of an acting appointment, Netanyahu selected Professor Daniel Hershkowitz as Civil Service Commissioner. Upon taking office, Hershkowitz declared

his intention to "reduce regulation to the necessary minimum" and implement "a reform, delegating authority from the commission to government ministries, particularly in the area of appointments" (Tuchfeld, 2018). In June 2019, Netanyahu appointed Matanyahu Englman, an accountant, as State Comptroller. The comptroller's reports under his leadership were notably favorable to the government and Netanyahu (Zerahia, 2021).

4.1 The Ministry of Finance: a challenge to professional autonomy

Up until recently, the Ministry of Finance and the Bank of Israel had been powerful players in Israel's institutional framework (Grinberg and Shafir, 2000; Maman and Rosenhek, 2011; Maron and Shalev, 2017; Cohen, 2013). However, since 2015, Netanyahu's governments have sought to politicize these institutions, weaken them, sideline them from decision-making processes, and strengthen alternative economic bodies.

On January 2018 *Kutchnik Committee* that was appointed by the minister of finance warned of "a trend of weakening professional bureaucracy as part of a broader phenomenon under the guise of strengthening governance... This trend involves attempts to expand ministers' trust-based appointments at the expense of senior bureaucrats" (Filut, 2018). On 2019, five deputy budget directors sent a letter to Babad accusing him of political interference that undermined the Budget Department, disregarded professional opinions, and excluded them from decision-making processes (Waksman, 2019).

Simultaneously, Netanyahu elevated the National Economic Council (NEC), previously a marginal advisory body within the Prime Minister's Office focused on Advising on Economic Matters and Assisting with Long-Term Economic Planning. In 2016, Netanyahu appointed his ally Avi Simhon to lead the NEC, which subsequently became more involved in short-term government economic decision-making. Simhon himself remarked, "We will no longer deal solely with long-term plans but will focus on assisting the government in the immediate term" (Levi-Weinrib, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the NEC effectively replaced the Ministry of Finance as the architect of economic policy, designing the "Economic Assistance Program" (Tucker, 2023b). On August 2020, Shaul Meridor, head of the Budget Department, resigned, citing attacks on ministry economists and their exclusion from key economic decisions. Weeks later, Ministry Director-General Keren Turner and Accountant General Roni Hezekiah also resigned, alleging that the finance minister was "instilling terror in the ministry" and sidelining them from decision-making (Lior, 2020).

4.2 Law enforcement: the Ministry of Public Security and the Police

There have been repeated attempts over the past decade to politicize the law enforcement system. On November 2019, following the Attorney General's decision to indict Netanyahu, he claimed that law enforcement agencies had "fabricated cases" against him, that police investigators "operated like a criminal organization," and that "we are witnessing an attempt at a coup against a prime minister based

on false accusations and a contaminated investigative process... An investigation of the Investigators must be called for" (Schneider, 2019). Meanwhile, the government avoided appointing a permanent police commissioner for nearly 2 years. In his resignation letter, the acting commissioner stated, "I had to contend with attempts to interfere in police work," and noted that the decision not to appoint a permanent commissioner was "not free of ulterior motives." During this period, political pressure on the police escalated, including direct demands on senior officers, such as instructions to the acting commissioner and the Jerusalem District Commander to suppress anti-government protests and crack down more harshly on demonstrators (Kurz, 2021). In December 2020, Netanyahu appointed Kobi Shabtai as police commissioner, bypassing more experienced officers. Shabtai was a weak commissioner, and his tenure was marked by heightened political interference in police operations.

4.3 The judiciary

Following the 2015 elections, Netanyahu appointed Ayelet Shaked (Jewish Home) to the role. Shaked adopted a confrontational stance that included limiting the judiciary's powers and redefining the role and authority of the Attorney General. Polls conducted at the time indicated that Netanyahu's legal trials intensified his supporters' antagonism toward the judiciary. These developments led to the formation of the "right-wing bloc" and framed opposition to the judiciary as a democratic struggle (Navot, 2023).

5 The current government

The tenure of the current government has been marked by significant radicalization of discourse from coalition members and ministers against state institutions. The coalition agreements of Netanyahu's sixth government included commitments to significant structural changes to the State of Israel. Simultaneously, the coalition agreements, along with the policy measures advanced by the government immediately thereafter, included additional clauses and initiatives with significant structural implications. For example, an agreement with ultra-Orthodox parties (IDI, 2022a) stipulated that their private educational networks would receive full state funding without being required to meet the standards of the public education system. We will now turn to examining the attempts to deconstruct what is considered the core of Israel's "deep state": The Ministry of Finance and the Bank of Israel, the law enforcement system, the judiciary, and the security establishment.

5.1 The Ministry of Finance

Bezalel Smotrich's appointment as Minister of Finance marked an escalation in tensions with the Ministry of Finance and, to a lesser extent, the Bank of Israel. Promising political appointments, he proceeded in appointing his ally Shlomi Heisler as Director-General of the ministry despite having no prior familiarity with the ministry's operations and his lack of prior experience in finance (Tucker, 2023c). Similarly, Israel Malachi, known for directing sectoral budgets to settlements and various religious Zionist initiatives, was

appointed as Acting Director-General. Smotrich also delayed appointments; for instance, no Chief Economist was named for 6 months, and the Capital Market Authority operated without a permanent head due to his refusal to convene the selection committee (Egri, 2024c). Smotrich also worked to weaken the Finance Ministry's departments by initiating a plan to subordinate the three key departments to his political advisors, led by the Deputy Director-General. This move faced strong opposition from the Ministry of Finance's Legal Advisor, Assi Messing, and the Head of the Budget Department, Yogev Gardos, who argued that the change violated the law (Marciano, 2023). In response to Messing's opposition to the plan, Smotrich acted to strip him of his powers. Additionally, Smotrich excluded senior Finance Ministry officials from meetings and decision-making processes and refused to consider their professional opinions. Smotrich also worked to strip the Finance Ministry of its authority by strengthening alternative mechanisms and bodies. For instance, he sought to weaken the Capital Market Authority by establishing six different committees to handle core issues under its jurisdiction. Another example is his announcement of plans to reform the state budget formulation process by drastically reducing the number of budget line items and increasing the autonomy of government ministries over their budgets, while simultaneously cutting the Budget Department's oversight powers (Tucker, 2024a).

5.2 Law enforcement

With the formation of the government, Itamar Ben-Gvir, leader of Otzma Yehudit, was appointed Minister of National Security. Upon taking office, Ben-Gvir initiated legislation to amend the *Police Ordinance*, stipulating that "the minister shall determine the policy of the police and the general principles of its activity" and that "the minister may establish general policies in the field of investigations, including determining principal priorities" (Knesset, 2022). The law expanded the minister's authority at the expense of the police commissioner, enabling the minister to interfere in the routine operations of the police as well as in the subjects of its investigations. Ben-Gvir quickly began exercising these powers (Hakmon, 2023; Morag et al., 2024; Kurz, 2023). Another attempt to weaken the police was reflected in the minister's proposal to place the "National Guard" under his direct authority. Established in 2022 following the "Guardian of the Walls" events, the National Guard was designed as a "dedicated, skilled force to address events including emergencies, nationalist crime, terrorism, and to strengthen governance."

Ben-Gvir's office was effectively run by Hanamel Dorfman, who served as the minister's chief of staff in violation of the law, as he was not a government employee (Breiner, 2023a). Dorfman interfered with police operations, directly contacted the commissioner, disregarded senior officers, shouted at police personnel, interfered in their work, and participated in sensitive discussions, creating a climate of fear. This conduct led to the resignation of senior ministry officials. Following the resignation the Director-General of the Ministry, Ben-Gvir appointed his close associate, Elazar Ben-Harosh, as Acting Director-General. The Civil Service Commission opposed the appointment, citing Ben-Harosh's complete lack of experience in internal security and his failure to meet the minimum qualifications for the position. Ben-Gvir dismissed these objections and refused to reverse the appointment. Amid public criticism and petitions to the

Supreme Court, Ben-Harosh ultimately announced his intention to step down, but not before orchestrating the dismissal of another senior ministry official, the Deputy Director-General for Human Resources and Administration. Following Ben-Harosh's departure, the Ministry of National Security operated without a Director-General for 6 months. Simultaneously, the Deputy Director-General for Strategy also resigned, leaving the position vacant.

The weakness of the ministry's Legal Advisor led to the approval of the "Israel Arms Up" campaign as part of the minister's efforts to arm citizens since the outbreak of the war, despite its legal issues. Additionally, Sisel, along with the head of the ministry's Firearms Department, Israel Avishar, allowed Ben-Gvir's office staff and associates to issue firearm licenses conditioned on a shooting range qualification, despite not being legally certified. Avishar confirmed that Ben-Gvir's associates were operating a command center to approve firearm license requests from the minister's office. Two days later, Avishar resigned, pointing to deficiencies in the department's conduct. This incident was part of Ben-Gvir's policy to establish around 600 emergency response units nationwide and distribute tens of thousands of firearms to civilians without background checks (Breiner, 2023b). Documentation of Ben-Gvir distributing rifles to these units led to a diplomatic incident, as the U.S. threatened to halt arms shipments to Israel. The U.S. administration clarified that it would not supply weapons to Israel if intended for arming civilians or distributed during a political event (Bar-eli, 2023).

At his retirement ceremony in June 2024, Commissioner Shabtai claimed that his tenure "was marked by significant tensions, part of which with politicians who tried to influence and steer operations according to their positions..." (Breiner, 2024a).

The current Police Commissioner, Danny Levy, was in contact with Ben-Gvir and his office for an extended period of time before his appointment as commissioner, in violation of orders of Shabtai who prohibited police officers from independently contacting the minister (Breiner, 2024b). Another controversial appointment was Kobi Yaakobi as Prison service chief, who had served as Ben-Gvir's security secretary, had no prior experience in the Prison Service and was considered to be closely aligned with the minister (Breiner, 2024c).

So far, the ministry's leadership and subordinate institutions are aligning with the minister's agenda. A notable example is the handling of anti-government protests: an increase in wrongful arrests (Peleg, 2024a), threats against protest activists (Hason, 2024), excessive use of force during searches (Peleg, 2024b), and regulation of protest signage (Breiner, 2024d). At the same time and for similar reasons, the number of murders in Arab communities has increased significantly compared to his predecessors (Breiner, 2023c). Likewise, in 2023, the total murder rate in Israel reached an all-time high and is expected to rise further in 2024 (Breiner, 2024e). Likewise, arrests of nationalist terror suspects in the territories have also been delayed to such an extent that Shin Bet Chief Ronen Bar told the Prime Minister, "There is no police in Israel" (Dvori, 2024).

5.3 The judicial system

On January 4, 2023, Justice Minister Yariv Levin unveiled a series of legislative initiatives aimed at fundamentally altering Israel's judicial system. The stated goal was to "strengthen democracy, restore governing, rebuild trust in the judicial system, and restore the balance

among the three branches of government" (Roznai et al., 2023). The measures sought to curtail the judiciary's powers and independence, expand the executive branch's authority, and remove political constraints on its power (Navot, 2023).

The second part of the reform included a proposal to change the composition of the Judicial Selection Committee to ensure a majority for the government and the Knesset at the expense of the judicial system, allowing the government to effectively control all judicial appointments at all levels, including the Supreme Court. The third proposal, the only one enacted at the time of writing this document, is the abolition of the "reasonableness doctrine," which until then allowed courts to Conduct Judicial Review of the reasonableness of decisions made by the executive branch. The final part of the reform proposed transforming the role of legal advisors to ministers into political appointments and abolishing their status as "gatekeepers" (Roznai and Cohen, 2023).

Under the state of emergency declared following the October 7, 2023 and the "Iron Swords" War, the government has continued advancing its agenda. The focus shifted from amending Basic Laws to other measures, including weakening the Attorney General's Office and other gatekeepers by creating alternative legal advisory channels through private consultants. This also involved politicizing appointments and stalling the Judicial Selection Committee (Justice Minister Levin refused to discuss appointments he opposed, including for the Supreme Court President). Accordingly, the Supreme Court has operated since October 2023 with a reduced bench of 12 out of 15 justices. Additionally, for many months, numerous senior positions in the system remained unfilled on a permanent basis, particularly the failure to appoint a permanent President of the Supreme Court, in violation of the customary seniority principle (Tahon Ashkenazi, 2024).

In late October 2024, Acting Chief Justice Yitzhak Amit sent a letter to the Justice Minister accusing Levin of budgetary interference, particularly the cancelation of judicial positions (Kurz and Zerahia, 2024). In November, Levin declared it was "time" to resume legislating the "judicial reform." Simultaneously, the government approved a seven-year term limit for legal advisors in government ministries. The immediate objective of this decision was removing the Ministry of Finance's legal advisor, Assi Messing, and undermining the Finance Ministry's Legal Department (Tucker, 2024b).

5.4 The defense system

The hostile rhetoric toward the state intensified during the war, this time targeting the defense establishment, which the government began portraying as solely responsible for the October 7 disaster. Channel 14, for example, promoted a narrative claiming a "gatekeepers' coup against the government" led by the Attorney General, the Shin Bet Chief, and the IDF Chief of Staff, who were described as "enemies of the people" and "traitors within," and accused of withholding information from the public and the Prime Minister (Alpher, 2024). The government has systematically incited against the defense establishment and its leaders, aiming to place on them the exclusive blame for the October 7 failures. Among other statements, Sara Netanyahu, the Prime Minister's wife, accused senior IDF leaders of wanting to stage a military coup against the Prime Minister (Haaretz, 2024). Additionally, Netanyahu and his associates propagated the narrative that the Defense Minister and senior security officials were

preventing the government from winning the war (Itamar, 2024). Netanyahu described the IDF, Military Intelligence, Shin Bet, and the police—and to a lesser extent, the Mossad—as “a front” he must contend with, in addition to the seven fronts in which Israel is fighting, expressing this sentiment in a video he released in November (YouTube, 2024).

As we asserted, while the campaign against the military escalated after October 7, its origins predate that event. The coalition agreement between Likud and Religious Zionism (IDI, 2022b) promised the party a ministerial position in the Defense Ministry, which, while subordinate to the Defense Minister, nevertheless wields full control over the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and the Civil Administration—two central governing bodies in the West Bank. This change in the structure of military governance in the territories was intended to transfer all civilian aspects from the military to Bezalel Smotrich, the party leader, Finance Minister, and appointee to this role. This move effectively constituted the informal annexation of territories and settlements, but equally, the stripping of extensive powers from the military to the political echelon, making Bezalel Smotrich the supreme civilian authority in the West Bank. Another coalition clause mandated legislation to formalize the status of the Chief Military Rabbi (Ravzar), institutionalizing the politicization of this key military institution (Cohen, 2022).

In November 2024, following security-related affairs from Netanyahu's office, the coalition began advancing a series of laws, including a proposal granting immunity from prosecution to anyone who shares classified information with the Prime Minister. Another proposed law aimed to protect security officials from criminal investigations if they provided sensitive intelligence to the Prime Minister, cabinet members, or the Chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Additional legislative initiatives proposed the establishment of a new intelligence department directly under government authority, intended to challenge existing intelligence bodies, effectively bypassing Military Intelligence and the Shin Bet. In November 2024, it was also revealed that Netanyahu's office had asked the Shin Bet for an opinion that would allow him to avoid testifying in his trial. The organization refused the request, prompting backlash from MKs and ministers, with Netanyahu considering his dismissal (Hauser Tov, 2024). These measures gained significant momentum with the dismissal of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, a staunch representative of the military establishment, whose consistent support for security bodies positioned him as an internal opposition figure within the coalition and the primary obstacle to the aforementioned initiatives. He was replaced by MK Israel Katz (Likud), a close Netanyahu ally with no background or experience in the defense system and a vocal supporter of the project to dismantle the state.

6 Summary and discussion

In this article, we proposed an alternative conceptualization of what is commonly referred to as democracy backsliding in Israel. We asserted that over the past decade, Netanyahu's coalitions have consciously and systematically have been engaged in dismantling the state through a fundamental transformation of its structure and image, thereby establishing a new, semi-statist political order. This

dismantling, we argued, is not merely a byproduct of the government's actions but rather its organizing principle and ultimate purpose. Our empirical analysis, which focused on the economic bureaucracy, law enforcement, the judiciary, and the defense establishment, showed that this is indeed the case.

The deconstruction of the state has become particularly evident since the establishment of the current government, and even more so since the onset of the war. First, the coalition denied the possibility that Israel's public service could represent the public interest or the common good. Senior officials and state institutions were portrayed as reflecting the interests of “left-wing elites,” as an illegitimate “clique” obstructing “popular sovereignty,” or as advancing particularistic interests. The government consistently casts doubt on the intentions of civil servants, categorically rejecting the possibility of professional objectivity. While these are common characteristics among populist governments (Rogenhofer and Panievsky, 2020), the motivations here are not necessarily a direct and unmediated connection between a leader and voters or the removal of institutional restrictions on elected officials, as populist literature suggests, but rather the deliberate and conscious weakening of state institutions and the legitimacy by which they operate. Second, Netanyahu's governments undermined the logic of the state by promoting public service appointment campaigns aimed at ensuring political appointments to key public service positions. In doing so, fundamental state principles such as formality, transparency, objectivity, universality, impersonality, and impartiality were abandoned in favor of other ideals, such as personal loyalty, political allegiance, or obedience. These ideas were enthusiastically promoted by the Kohelet Forum and the conservative movement in Israel and warmly adopted by coalition politicians under the banners of “governability” and “sovereignty.” Additionally, Netanyahu's governments systematically challenged the prevailing interpretation of the law, which underpins state logic, resulting in a deep rupture with the system itself. Finally, the coalition undermined the image of the state as an institution with a distinct history that transcends any specific government. State institutions were depicted as fully representative of the opposition, and their professional objectivity was denied, ostensibly legitimizing their dismantling. Alongside the erosion of the concept of the state, the government advanced a series of legislative proposals, reforms, and policy measures aimed at the practical weakening of the state. These included efforts to undermine the autonomy of the economic bureaucracy, a series of legislative initiatives to weaken the judiciary, and the politicization of law enforcement agencies.

To clarify the project being advanced by the current government, we distinguish between the concept of a state as a government and the state as a political and social ideal, which defines authority, public order, and shared life based on common values and legitimate institutions. We argue that the modern state is not merely a governing structure; it embodies an abstract but essential belief in the possibility of organized institutions serving the public good, with civil servants capable of acting independently of private interests and committed to the rule of law and the general interest. In this context, the image of governance and ruling power as representing the ideal of the state is critical to gaining public legitimacy and enabling stable, fair, and reasonable coexistence through a rule of law backed by coercive means.

The dismantling of the state has far-reaching consequences. For example, the state's failure to effectively respond to the October 7 disaster is a direct result of the destruction inflicted by the government

on state institutions. The central question that emerged in the days and weeks following October 7—“Where has the state disappeared to?”—reflected a widespread perception that the state was “absent,” dysfunctional, and weak. Israel’s conduct during the war in Gaza, and its alleged violation of the international law, are also manifestations of the deconstruction of the state. Theoretically speaking, the Israeli case adds to the political pathologies that are the result of failures of the state. In addition to antisemitism, imperialism, tribalism and totalitarianism, that have been discussed by Hanna Arendt among others (Tsao, 2004), we can add chaos, social disintegration and loss of the ability to work together in civilized manners.

Ultimately, unless the deconstruction of the state meets effective political resistance, and as long as this project continues and progresses, both the state and the rule of law will undergo fundamental changes in their nature and in how they are perceived by the public. Consequently, the democratic character and liberal nature of the regime are being eroded. Indeed, this is a far-reaching development that exceeds the scope of how the current situation is typically described in research literature on the crisis of democracy and the populist wave, as it fundamentally undermines the ability to live together in a fair and reasonable manner. The reason, simply put, is that we have no better option than the modern state to live together peacefully and in a decent way. As Robert Dahl put it “[i]n the absence of a state, highly undesirable forms of coercion would probably persist” (Andersen et al., 2014).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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