**The Failure is the Result of Netanyahu’s False Reality**

**Shaul Arieli** | *Haaretz* | October 19, 2023

Each of the different groups that comprise Israeli society has its own distinct perception of reality. In contrast to the past, it is not just a matter of different interpretations of an agreed reality, but rather disagreement about the facts themselves and the presentation of alternative “facts” that create a fake and false reality. Benjamin Netanyahu and his associates have created a fake reality in the minds of half the Israeli public in order to justify their policies and vision, which have led, among other outcomes, to the failure of October 7 in the Gaza Envelope.

Throughout most of modern Zionist history, the three groups within the Jewish people – secular Zionists, religious messianics, and Haredim – have agreed in principle about the facts. Their disagreements revolved around the different interpretation of these facts by each group, in keeping with its vision. Secular Zionists regarded the Balfour Declaration, the Partition Resolution, the establishment of Israel, the 1948 War of Independence and the 1967 Six-Day War, as milestones in the success of the national movement of the Jewish people in securing international recognition for its right to self-determination in its homeland and for the aspiration to become a nation like any other and part and parcel of the international community.

Religious messianics saw these same events as evidence of the revealed “End Times” and the beginning of redemption, ultimately leading to the establishment of the Kingdom of David and a return to Temple days. Conversely, Haredim regarded the events as violations of the “Three Oaths” that prohibit organized migration by Jews to the Land of Israel and hence a desecration of the messianic ideal.

In the next stage, the gulf between these three groups widened, resulting in each moving in almost-parallel realities. This process was due in part of the failure of the peace process between Israel and the PLO, which had sought to secure a permanent agreement, and to Netanyahu’s policy of refusing the resume negotiations toward such an agreement, which was supposed to ensure a separation between Israelis and Palestinians. This policy eroded the feasibility of the secular-Zionist vision: maintaining a democratic state with Jewish national characteristics as a member of the family of nations. The path was now ostensibly clear for the religious messianics and their new allies – the “Hardal” or Haredi-nationalist stream – to realize dream of “inheriting the land” in keeping with the doctrine of conquest and settlement presented in the Book of Joshua. But in actual reality – which was ignored by Netanyahu and his government – the Palestinians, the international community, and a majority of the Israeli public refused to cooperate with this goal.

In order to adjust reality to his policy, Netanyahu began to act through various channels – the conventional and social media, the education system, government ministers, and coalition Members of Knesset – to inculcate a fake reality in the minds of the Israeli public consistent with his policies and his personal and political aspirations. In other words, instead of basing his policy on a professional and responsible examination of the reality in terms of the feasibility of the messianic-nationalist vision, he chose to inculcate among the public a sense of fake reality based on a collection of lies in order to justify his irresponsible and opportunistic policy.

Lies and incitement laid the foundation for this fake reality: the leftists have forgotten what it means to be Jews; the protestors against his government are anarchists and traitors; the Arabs are flooding to the polling stations; the Supreme Court is endangering state security; Abu Mazen supports terror; Hamas serves our interests, and so forth.

In the diplomatic and security sphere, Netanyahu aimed to frighten the public and convinced Israelis that they will always be left to stand alone. And so Iran becomes the “Nazi dictatorship” and ISIS and Hizbullah are proof that in every generation people seek to annihilate us, as the Passover song goes. According to his approach, the peace initiative of the Arab League from 2002 is impractical, Mahmud Abbas adheres to the “phased plan” for the destruction of Israel, while Hamas should be nurtured and strengthened. It is vital for him to maintain the division among the Palestinians, which undermines Abbas’s legitimacy and authority as the only possible partner for ending the conflict. Similarly, he nurtured the illusion that this division removes the Palestinians in Gaza from the demographic equation, thereby facilitating the annexation of the West Bank.

This ghetto policy sparked and fueled processes in the domestic and social sphere. Netanyahu demanded that even his opponents display “unity” and support the nation’s political leaders. He demanded total support from the judiciary for his antidemocratic laws and for actions that violate international law. And he expected that the media would always be supportive, and that the public would readily pay with its life when violence erupted.

By nurturing this fake reality, Netanyahu sought to ensure that opposition to his rule would disappear, in the absence of any possibility of changing the government. He chose his ministers carefully to this end, sending them off to erode the stability of the pillars of democracy. Ayelet Shaked, Amir Ohana, and Yariv Levin undermined the status of the Supreme Court; Naftali Bennett and Yoav Kish targeted the field of education; Miri Regev focused on culture and sport; Yuli Edelstein worked in the Knesset; Betzalel Smotrich in the fields of finance and defense; Itamar Ben-Gvir in public security, and so forth.

When the reality on the ground refused to cooperate, the strategy shifted to one of meaningless platitudes: from “economic peace” to “conflict management” or “conflict reduction” … anything to maintain the fake consciousness that brought Netanyahu back to the prime minister’s office again and again over 14 years, while the leaders of the messianic-nationalist and Haredi parties served as his viziers. His behavior toward the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and his decisions during the various military operations against Hamas in Gaza, and during the processes leading to these confrontations, exposed his simple political goal: to return as quickly as possible to his comfort zone – a situation he mistakenly calls the “status quo” that allowed him to remain in power.

The fake “status quo” that has formed the foundation for Netanyahu’s policies over the past few years does not reflect a reality of security and diplomatic balance and stability. On the contrary: it manifests the prime minister’s profound fear of any diplomatic initiative that might end the recurring rounds of escalation under his rule, including the terrible price we are being required to pay now. Netanyahu’s “status quo” is a euphemism for conceptual stalemate on the Israeli side, preserving the conditions that allowed Hamas to spark a series of confrontations culminating in the horrors and war crimes of October 7.

Thus the status quo protected Netanyahu’s position as prime minister while enabling the messianic nationalists to implement his policy and theirs: the expansion of the settlements, construction of illegal outposts, Jewish terror, expanding the Jewish presence in East Jerusalem, opposing true negotiations with Mahmud Abbas, nurturing the division between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, and maintaining the siege of Gaza. All this came at the price of eroding Israel’s democracy, its image, and its international standing; damaging social cohesion and solidarity; and enabling the strengthening of Hamas and the weakening of the Palestinian Authority.

Even after October 7, Netanyahu and his government had refused to wake up and abandon their fake reality. Voices can be heard in messianic-nationalist circles that adhere to the teaching of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the spiritual father of Gush Emunim, who claimed that the Holocaust was caused by the Jews’ refusal to recognize the signs of the “revealed End of Days.” Kook thundered: “God’s people adhered so much to the impurity of the land of the nations [i.e., to exile – S.A.] that it had to be cut and torn away from exile through the bloodshed that comes with the End.” An article by Prof. Yoel Elitzur argues that the massacre perpetrated by Hamas is part of the divine plan for the Israelis who “bring disasters upon the Jewish people and thwart the divine plan” (Srugim website, October 13). He associated the massacre with secularism and the failure to advance the idea of a “Greater Israel.”

Netanyahu personally ignored numerous warnings from senior figures in the defense establishment, denied that he had received alerts, and continued to push his judicial reform, weakening Israel’s resilience. Detachment from reality is the only way to explain the transfer of most of the forces in the Gaza Envelope to the West Bank just before Simchat Torah; the dismantling of the rapid response squads in the Gaza Envelope; and conversely – the allocation of forces to protect illegal outposts and a Sukkah in the Palestinian town of Hawara, the allocation of billions of shekels to Haredi students at the expense of the purchase of equipment for reservists; the declaration by Ben-Gvir of “Operation Guardian of the Walls 2” in the heart of an Arab town struck by Hamas; and attempts to place the blame for the current failure on chiefs of staff who retired a decade ago and on newsreaders and the leaders of the protest movement.

Even more seriously, the detachment from reality in the Netanyahu government and the appointment of unqualified ministers for alien motives contrary to proper governance explain the government’s inability to manage the campaign and to define a diplomatic purpose behind a military operation that will wreak a heavy cost from Israeli society.

In his book *The Bar Kokhba Syndrome: Risk and Realism in International Relations* (1982), Yehoshafat Harkabi draws on an analysis of the failure of the Bar Kokhba Revolt in the first century CE in order to understand the detachment from reality that characterizes Netanyahu and is government: “The risk of a national error was inherent in our nature as a land of vision, since a vision demands the changing of reality. However, the greatness of a vision and the condition for its realization lie in its realism, rooted in a recognition that while the vision seeks to soar above reality, its feet are also grounded in this reality. This is the difference between a vision and a fantasy that floats on the wings of illusion.” In other words, a vision based on a fake reality will ultimately fail to change the existing reality and will crash to the ground, taking its faithful with it, and leading society and state to disaster.

It has now become clear that Netanyahu’s policy allowed Hamas to undermine the imaginary status quo and to lead to the collapse of all Netanyahu’s false strategies. With this in mind, and given the current events, which make a mockery of the incitement against advocates of democracy and of the canonical secular-Zionist vision, will the Israeli public find the maturity to reject the fake reality? Will it finally have had enough of a man whose entire philosophy is confined to survival, and who allowed extremists to lead Israel? Will it demand that Netanyahu resign and choose a new leader in the next elections – one who will prioritize the national interest by resolving the conflict with the Palestinians and the Arab world, while defending Israel’s security and its international standing?

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