

The Status Quo Illusion Is a Recipe for Another Disaster

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While public attention is fixated on the renewed war in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, led by Israel's nationalist-messianic government, alongside attempts to dismiss the gatekeepers, a highly dangerous process is accelerating below the news radar. Israel is rapidly moving toward annexation and the loss of its identity as a Jewish and democratic state. This is not an apocalyptic prophecy of doom, but an insight based on systematic and consistent analysis of political discourse in Israel regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A comprehensive study we recently conducted, based on an analysis of more than 15,000 posts on X (formerly Twitter) by party leaders in Israel from 2018 to the end of 2024, exposes the falsehood in the "status quo" perception — the comfortable illusion known to the Israeli public as "conflict management." Beneath the veneer of ongoing crisis management, Israel is advancing with determined steps toward the annexation of territories and the application of Israeli sovereignty over them. This move will seal its fate as either an apartheid state or a binational state.

The data speaks with disturbing clarity: Of the 15,135 posts analyzed, 9,692 dealt with the status quo, compared to minute numbers of posts dealing with long-term policy alternatives: 886 for separation, 848 for annexation, and only 333 for the two-state agreement. The meaning is clear: The political establishment prefers to nurture the status quo illusion, which is nothing but a disguise for creeping annexation. This is a mechanism of collective self-deception, allowing the public to believe that the current situation can continue forever, while in practice each day advances Israel toward an irreversible one-state reality. While the public is captive to the illusion of "the existing situation," the messianic-nationalist right works to promote the reality of one state.

The analysis reveals the division of "ideological territory" between the political camps in Israel. Bezalel Smotrich leads the annexation discourse with 143 mentions — about a third (31.1%) of all mentions in this category, and an almost absolute level of support. Itamar Ben Gvir demonstrates full support for annexation, and Benjamin Netanyahu, although for international media he disguises his true positions under the pretense of "I'm not connected to this," displays complete support for annexation when he addresses the topic.

Surprising, though perhaps not entirely, is discovering that Yitzhak Goldknopf, leader of an ultra-Orthodox party, is an active ideological partner of Smotrich and Ben Gvir. This is further

confirmation of the alliance of interests between religious-nationalist neo-messianism and ultra-Orthodox orthodoxy; an alliance that endangers the secular-liberal character of Israel.

In the second camp, Yair Lapid leads the discourse on the possibility of a diplomatic agreement with 83 mentions, about half of all mentions in this category. Yair Golan and Ayman Odeh, representing the left edge of the spectrum, consistently support the two-state agreement and separation, but their voice is increasingly weakening in the radicalizing political landscape. Benny Gantz continues to adhere to the status quo discourse (637 mentions), and only rarely expresses support for a diplomatic agreement. This is a clear symptom of the reluctance of central Israeli politicians to courageously confront the need for strategic decision-making.

One of the fascinating phenomena revealed by the research is the use of the term "separation" — the magic word, enabling everything and nothing — by almost all political camps, while each camp has its own interpretation of the concept. For Odeh and Golan, separation is the basis for political and geographical division, leading to two states. Lapid and Gantz see separation as a move that will ensure a Jewish majority in a democratic state. Ben Gvir and Smotrich interpret separation as ethnic separation without territorial concessions; meaning, ghettoization of the Palestinian population under Israeli sovereignty.

This is a classic exercise in political Orwellianism. The same word is used to describe completely opposing visions, creating the illusion of broad agreement. In reality, the term "separation" is nothing but a semantic fiction, enabling the continuation of procrastination and avoidance of decisions. Contrary to what might have been expected, the events of October 7 did not lead to a strategic soul-searching on the failure of the "conflict management" policy. On the contrary, they served as a catalyst for the radicalization of positions and the strengthening of short-term security discourse.

As evidence, 53.5% of the posts supporting annexation were published since October 2023. The discourse on the status quo has almost doubled, from 1,451 supportive posts before October 2023 to 2,658 supportive posts afterward. Support for separation, however, decreased by 24%. This is a particularly troubling paradox. The very event that exposed the failure of the conflict management policy led to the strengthening of discourse supporting this failed policy. Israel behaves like an addict standing before a broken trough, but instead of sobering up from the addiction to the status quo illusion, he increases the dosage.

The last quarter of 2024 provides an up-to-date picture of the political discourse. Despite a general decrease in the scope of discourse on the conflict (1,097 posts compared to 1,260 in the previous quarter), trends of radicalization and polarization are strengthening. 96% of the posts referring to annexation support it — an alarming rate indicating a developing consensus among those dealing with the issue. Netanyahu, in a familiar exercise of "conscious denial," avoids posting on the topic of annexation in the last quarter; a transparent move, designed to preserve the ambiguity he so desperately needs in the international arena.

Meanwhile, Goldknopf deviates from the traditional neutrality of the ultra-Orthodox and presents a distinctly right-wing position on annexation — another worrying sign of overall radicalization

in the political system. Lapid, Golan, and Odeh continue to adhere to the approach of diplomatic agreement and separation, but their voice is increasingly eroded in the general public discourse.

Conflict researchers warn that the point of no return in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a theoretical matter, but a tangible threshold that Israel is rapidly approaching. The UN report from 2017 already indicated that the conflict is approaching "a point of no return," and the trends since then have only intensified.

The demographic, geopolitical, and infrastructural reality in the territories has already created a situation where physical separation between the populations is possible, but at increasing costs. The Palestinian population in the West Bank numbers about 3.2 million people, but the road system that Israel has built and continues to build has created a reality of intertwining and confinement of Palestinians between settlement areas, to which illegal outposts are added, mainly in the pattern of agricultural farms.

A mechanism of collective self-deception allows politicians to advance toward an irreversible one-state reality

In this situation, adherence to the status quo illusion is essentially a passive choice in the path leading to a one-state reality. A reality in which Israel will be forced to choose between its Jewish character and its democratic character.

The political elite in Israel, led by Netanyahu, has chosen a strategy of postponing decisions and avoiding difficult choices. But the bitter irony is that the attempt to avoid choice is itself a choice. A choice that led to the events of October 7 and will lead to the loss of the Jewish and democratic state.

The iron law of demography does not allow Israel to continue ruling over millions of Palestinians without civil and political rights, without becoming an apartheid state. At the same time, granting full rights to Palestinians will fundamentally change the Jewish character of the state. The evasive choice of the status quo is a slow but certain slide toward an abyss. Especially in a period of geopolitical turmoil, Israel needs brave leadership, willing to make the difficult choices necessary to secure its future as a Jewish and democratic state.

Separation from the Palestinians and the establishment of two states for two peoples — this is the only solution that will ensure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state. Any other solution represents one version or another of denial, self-deception, or fraud. The sooner we come to our senses, the smaller the national price we will pay.