

ISRAEL'S FUTURE

NETANYAHU'S DYSTOPIAN VISION

President Lyndon B. Johnson once said that the first rule of politics is to learn how to count. By that reckoning, Benjamin Netanyahu is a singular failure. The two-state solution to the problem of Palestine, which the Israeli prime minister has now publicly and explicitly rejected, has long been seen as the only viable way to preserve Israel's security and its identity as a democratic Jewish state. That cannot be detached from the Palestinians' right to a sovereign self-governing homeland.

The demographics are conclusive, even if population statistics in a conflict-ridden situation are unreliable and invariably out of date. The proportion of Israeli Jews to Palestinian Arabs is just over seven million to an estimated six million (and nearly half the latter are under 25). Only a small proportion of Palestinian Arabs are Israeli citizens with the right to vote. In other words, Israel is sitting on a demographic time bomb. This is the reason many right-wing Israeli politicians – unlike Netanyahu, able to count – have accepted the logical necessity of a two-state solution. The alternative would involve turning Israel into a military dictatorship, with its Palestinian citizens ruled with a rod of iron. In the past, the accusation that Israel's treatment of Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank amounted to an apartheid system was unfair. But that is the direction in which Netanyahu is taking Israel: a country divided by race and religion where one side is granted permanent supremacy over the other. It is a dystopian

vision at odds with Jewish ethics and culture – a formula for brutal repression and, inevitably, a violent response.

Benjamin Netanyahu's anti-two-state obsession explains much of his behaviour as prime minister, not least his sinister role in creating the conditions which led up to the catastrophe of 7 October. It suited him to bolster Hamas as an irreconcilable enemy of Israel, for instance by turning a blind eye to the huge transfers of funds to Hamas from Qatar. Hamas' military infrastructure, including its extraordinary maze of underground tunnels, was built with Netanyahu's tacit permission. His invariable reply to his critics who wanted him to open a dialogue with the Palestinians – "How can you negotiate with such people?" – reeks of duplicity. He schemed to divide Palestinian politics between Hamas (in control in Gaza) and Fatah (controlling the Palestinian Authority) so there would never be one united entity Israel could talk to.

In dealing with Israel, western nations have to recognise the malign direction of travel under Netanyahu's leadership. Israel's right to defend itself is not the same as Netanyahu's right to defend himself. Indeed, these rights are opposed to one another. A majority of Israelis blame him for the security lapses which led up to 7 October, and see that those lapses were part of the same project: the sabotage of the two-state solution. Israelis are calling for a general election. Netanyahu would not survive as prime minister if they get one, and that would be in the best interests of both Israelis and Palestinians.