



USA FOR ISRAELI DEMOCRACY

Wednesday | Aug. 2 | 11 am ET

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The Implications of the Recent Democracy Upheaval in Israel

Dr. Ido Baum, Israeli professor of law and legal commentator, will discuss the legal and political landscape in Israel, and Tom Friedman, Pulitzer prize winning author and New York Times columnist, will describe the perspectives of senior policy makers.

Tom Friedman | Dr. Ido Baum

In August of 2023, Tom Friedman, Pulitzer prize winning author and New York Times columnist, spoke at a USA4IL Democracy Webinar and provided perspectives of senior policy makers.

Below are excerpts from Tom Friedman's insights, edited for clarity of reading:

[Why should the world care about what happens in Israel?](#)

If Israel goes autocratic, if Ukraine goes Putin, and America goes Trump - the world that I want to leave for my now almost 2 year old grandson, just won't be here. Donald Trump and Bibi Netanyahu are simply brothers from different mothers. They are so much the same person, and our two democracies are facing such similar threats.

The stakes are so high, just as the decision pending at the Israeli Supreme Court is not unlike the decision that will be pending before twelve jurors in Donald Trump's trial for basically launching a coup against our democracy. We're both in very much the same place.

Part of what I'm doing is using Israel as an allegory, to make people understand what's going on both in Israel and America. But the other, frankly just happened by accident. And the accident was that as the struggle in Israel unfolded around democracy, I realized that **nobody was telling the story of these amazing - I call them democracy defenders - in Israel.** The Israeli Embassy doesn't tell your story. AIPAC doesn't tell your story. Nobody was actually telling this remarkable story.

I have great admiration for President Herzog. He's a personal friend. I'm so old I covered his father - and I understand the very difficult situation he's in, because there needs to be some sort of neutral body in space that can try to bring the country together. And so I really respect and understand that.

At the same time it occurred to me that when he spoke to the US Congress - and he gave a beautiful speech in many ways - there was one line that was missing. And the line that was missing was to say to the 535 Senators and Congressmen and women that gathered there:

I want you all to look out the window of this Capital of the United States. I want you to look down that mall all the way down to the Washington Monument. Now I want you to imagine that every Saturday night for 30



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weeks, 2 to 3 million Americans gathered on that mall, and demanded justice and accountability for the January 6 Takeover. I want you to imagine it - that's what's been happening in Israel, my friends. So don't give me a standing ovation. I want you each to get up out of your seats and give a standing ovation for those Israeli democracy protectors. When I tell you that democracy is alive and well in Israel, I'm not just speaking in the abstract.

That's what I mean. That line was missing. And it's been missing.

[What is the threat to Israel if the Judiciary loses its independence? Will Israel become a Hungarian style of autocracy?](#)

I've actually lived for just under 5 years in two countries right next door to each other in the Middle East. I lived in Beirut from 1979 to 1984, with 9 months off in between, and then I lived in Israel from 1984 to 1988.

I've lived in these 2 countries right next door to each other. They have many, many differences, but they are identical in one very fundamental way. They are two very, very, very small countries that are very, very, very diverse. They are extremely diverse.

Now, America is an extremely diverse country, too, but it's very, very big, but Lebanon and Israel are quite unique. They are extremely diverse, ethnically, politically, religiously and they're extremely small.

When you are an extremely small country that is very, very diverse - there is only one governing system that works. It's called: "*Live and Let Live.*" Or, in the case of the Lebanese Peace Agreement that ended the Civil War in 1985 which I covered, it was called "*No Victor, No Vanquished.*" "*No Victor, no Vanquished.*" That's the only way you can govern a small country that is this diverse.

And that was the system that Israel, in a way, I don't want to say fell into, but it kind of adopted. There was a certain balance between the political system, the judiciary, the media, the business, it all kind of added up to a kind of "*live and let live*" context.

By the way, what happened in Lebanon is the abandonment of the principle of "*Live and let Live,*" for the principle adopted and often attributed to African dictators: "*It's our time to eat. Oh, we got in now - It's our time to eat.*"

That's what's new about this government. They won by 30,000 votes. They know that, but they have an extreme agenda. And when they got in, they simply said, "*It's our time to eat*" - and when you take an incredibly small, incredibly diverse society, and you replace "*live, and let live with*" with "*it's our time to eat,*" you threaten the whole system.

And this is a point that my friend Ari Sharvit made to me just the other day. The threat to Israel is not that it becomes Hungary or Poland. It's that it becomes Lebanon. **That it simply disintegrates.** Israel is not going to become Hungary or Poland. The demonstrators have made that clear. They are not Hungarians or Poles. I mean no insult to them. But these are people for whom democracy is in their bones, and they're just not going to be ordered around.

The danger to Israel is that it disintegrates.



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And, by the way, the same danger applies to the United States, and that's what I've been warning from the very beginning. So all of these are one story for me. But that is the real trend, and I think that is the very real danger, because what I learned in Lebanon - what I saw - is that you had politicians, selfish, who thought it was their time to eat, and oh, did they eat.

And they hacked away at the system, and hacked away with it with a hammer. Always saying, You know, *"when I get in, I'll behave responsibly, but for now I'm just going to hack away."* And then one day - I can't say exactly when it was - that hammer blow landed on the system. And it all fell apart. Now, **when it falls apart, you can't get it back.**

And what's the name of the party most responsible for doing that in Lebanon? Hezbollah - **The Party of God.**

And what is the group in Israel? If I gave them a name between, you know Ben-Gvir, and Smotrich and the ultra-orthodox - **the Party of God.**

So there are a lot of similarities here.

....

Yariv Levin, all these people - taking a country for whom *"live and let live"* can be the only sustainable governing philosophy - and replacing it with *"it's our time to eat."*

[Bibi Netanyahu and the Media](#)

No one's telling your story. Not only that - Netanyahu, we know, does not give interviews with Israeli media, except Channel 14, or whatever it is - the Fox Channel - and occasionally, you know, once every 3rd Tisha Ba'av [*an annual Jewish holiday*] to the *Jerusalem Post*. So he only gives interviews with the American media.

And I'm trying to explain to my American media friends. If Bibi Netanyahu is giving you an interview, that is not a compliment. It's because he thinks he can fool you. Just watch the interview he did with George Stephanopoulos, where he said, Netanyahu says: *"Biden invited me to the White House."*

I sat in the Oval Office across from the President of the United States, who told me he did not invite him to the White House. He said, *"We'll get together in September,"* - a statement that was reinforced by the White House spokesperson Admiral Kirby.

But he just goes on, he just says this stuff, and unless you know the details... Bibi Netanyahu is a world-class heavyweight propagandist. Do not get in the ring with him unless you have been in training for 3 months to take him on.

And so I was thinking about it, you know if Netanyahu were a Palestinian activist with George Stephanopoulos and he said, that this Palestinian activist said, President Biden has invited Abu Mazen to the White House because he really admires his position. And if that weren't true - do you know where the first call would come from? The Israeli Embassy. Oh, man they'd be all over ABC



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News. *"That's a lie, that's not true. You got to correct that."* In fact, they'd start a watch, you know every day. *"When are you going to correct that?"* you know.

But you got nobody here, folks. You got nobody here telling your story, fighting your media campaign and basically explaining what is going on. And so you've done remarkable on your own. God bless you all! But the deck is stacked against you and I'm doing what I can. But one of the things, part of this has to be, **you need a media war room** - that when Netanyahu goes out and lies, you are on him immediately, and not only that, following up, *"hey, ABC, this guy lied."* Okay, if it was Trump, would you just let it hang out there? If he were a Palestinian activist, would you let it hang out there? Why, why are you just sitting there nodding like a bobblehead, you know.

So the only good news I can tell you is that actually, Netanyahu is doing this, and no one believes it. You, people can tell, you know. I would say, in my estimation and in my understanding of the President's estimation - this is not a quote, but it is my perception - he knows that the vast majority of American Jews and Americans are with him on this issue. So Bibi can go out, and you know, prevaricate all that he wants. But it's not really getting through - there's kind of a competition of who they like least, MBS or Bibi Netanyahu.

[A possible meeting with Biden and Netanyahu](#)

First of all, Biden has never promised to invite Bibi to the White House at any time. All he promised was that they would meet sometime in September when their paths crossed, possibly at the United Nations. When Netanyahu did that and he did, he agreed to meet with Bibi at the request of President Herzog, the whole situation wasn't where we are now.

The one reason I actually hope that Netanyahu actually comes to New York and maybe meets with Biden there, is, I think you will see, a protest of significant proportion of Israeli Americans, and I would like to see that show. I think there would be a significant protest. You know I've said for many years, much to Netanyahu's annoyance, that if he came to the University of Wisconsin - if Bibi Netanyahu was invited by the Israel Student Union at the University of Wisconsin - they would have to bring out the National Guard. There would not be enough police in Madison to handle that.

Now imagine this situation in New York. So New York will provide no relief for him and his wife. If they think they're coming here to stay at the Plaza to get away from Israel - I guarantee you - there would be huge protests - and I also believe if President Biden met him, President Biden would not sit there like a stage dummy, like some of the people who have been interviewing him. He would use that opportunity in public to make very clear where he stands. So I'm not too worried about that.

A lot of people ask me because I've had a chance to see the President on numerous occasions. What's his state of mind like? His state of mind is crystal clear and **he knows a bullshitter when he meets one.**

[Shared Values, Shared Interests, and the Saudi Initiative.](#)

That is a segway to why I wrote about the Saudi potential deal between the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Palestinians - because there is only so much - and this is what Israelis have got to understand in the democracy protection movement - there's only so much a President of the United States can do when it comes to shared values and defending shared values and using his



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moral persuasion to encourage an Israeli government to not neuter its judiciary and the separation of power. There is only so much a President can do when it comes to intervening in such an internal affair.

The reason I introduced the Saudi initiative was to basically say, and I began the column this way, dear democracy defenders in Israel - I know you're really depressed that this was forced through but help may be on the way - because the Saudi-Israel-Palestinian normalization, American dynamic has the potential to shift the American involvement in the Israeli internal matter, from shared values to shared interests.

Now, when you get in the way of American shared interests, then, you're in a totally different dynamic. You can mess with our shared values. There's not much we can do if a country wants to abandon its shared values with us in the immediate term. But you get in the way of our shared interests, then you're dealing with a whole different dynamic. And that's why I was trying to explain that.

What was I laying out? I was doing several things in that column. I was explaining that, if and this thing is such a long shot - I need binoculars to see how long a shot it is - is a long shot. But if the United States were to agree to Saudi Arabia's demands, of a security treaty, civil nuclear program and advanced weapons, in return for normalizing relations with Israel and if Saudi Arabia made as its condition for that normalization the preservation of a 2 state solution with a freeze on settlements, or roll back, whatever conditions those are - I was signaling in that column that I will know whether the Saudi demands are real if it blows up Netanyahu's coalition, that if it actually puts before the Netanyahu coalition: *"You can have annexation of the West Bank and 2.9 million Palestinians forever, or normalization with 1.5 billion Muslims around the world. Which do you want?"*

I, personally, will only support a deal that puts serious and stringent conditions on the table.

If we did not do that, let's take the extreme case. If President Biden did this deal, and MBS said, *"I don't care about the Palestinians"* - and rewarded Netanyahu with a normalization with Saudi Arabia without any demands on the Palestinians, the United States would be killing, literally killing, two principles with one bullet. We'd be killing Israeli democracy by rewarding Netanyahu with this geopolitical benefit of massive proportions and we'd be killing a two-state solution.

I personally do not believe the Joe Biden I know would ever do such a thing. But I am making it my business to make sure that everyone understands that's what's at stake here.

The downside is, it could be too much, and the Israeli Cabinet would find a way to accept it and stay in power, in which case it's not serious. The upside is we change this dynamic between Israel and the United States from one of shared values, to one of shared interests. In which case you will taste real American power, and it blows up this coalition.

I'm very focused on this. And just to make sure that I was being understood, I quoted Chris van Hollen, my Senator, member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and a member of the Senate Operations Committee that funds American diplomacy as saying, *"there is zero chance that the base of the Democratic party would support an agreement that does not advance in a very credible and measurable way the restoration of a possibility of a two state solution."*



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And that's one Senator. and I haven't gotten to the rest of the base of the party which is to the left of him. It's why I keep warning that Joe Biden is probably the last pro-Israel Democratic President.

If you actually listen to what's going on - the head of the Progressive Caucus called Israel a racist state. She took it back. She misspoke, you know, under enormous pressure - she represents half the Democrats in Congress. So if you think she misspoke, I have a bridge in Hebron I'd like to sell you.

I'm just one columnist. I'm just doing my thing, but I'm very much watching this dynamic between the Saudi deal, normalization with Israel, and what effect it would have on Netanyahu's cabinet when you introduce the question of American interest now, and not just American values. But I have to underline getting this deal is the equivalent of putting together a Rubik's Cube. It will be very, very difficult, and there will be a lot of opposition on many, many grounds. So, but I wanted to put it out there just to give the democracy defenders in Israel something to, to maybe hope for and look out for.

I will say that we've gotten farther along on this Saudi normalization deal than I understood which is what I wrote about it. And who knows? You know we still don't know enough about the deal. I don't know enough about the deal in terms of American interest, whether I'd support it frankly.

[A message to Israeli democracy defenders](#)

You're home alone. America can only do so much for you. And Joe Biden did a lot in the current context. He understands American Jews are with him. I'm not worried about him, you know, going overboard.

But if I had one piece of advice for you is: **you need to send a team over here** - of people like Tamir Pardo - you know the former head of the Shin Bet, a group of generals. And they need to visit - people who no news organization could turn away. And they need to go to the editorial board of the Wall Street Journal, and to Fox News, and to the Congress and everywhere, and say, look, and to their colleagues here, by the way, to the head of the CIA, to the head of the State Department, to the head of the US military and say, *"Hey, you know us - we're not, you know some flower children, ok?" Netanyahu is not telling you the truth."*

And that's why we're here. When Tamir Pardo says - *we are now ruled by the equivalent of the Ku Klux Klan - that gets people's attention.*

And no one is telling your story.

And it's one of the most remarkable stories of democracy defense in the world.

No one is telling your story because the system here is set up against you. The Embassy is not going to tell your story. The knuckleheads who run AIPAC are not going to tell your story. Only you can tell your story.

I'm doing my best in my own little way. But I got to write about other things too eventually. So it's on you at the end of the day. It's on you to win this court case. It's on you to tell your story, and I just really hope that you can and will, because it is a remarkable story.



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[Thoughts on Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.](#)

I just have to give a shout out to Yoav Gallant, the Defense minister, who you know, first of all, opposed this thing, and is now clearly doing everything he can, I mean, Gallant is a serious guy, this guy was Head of Navy Seals. I barely know him, but I imagine he must wake up every morning and think, you know, I was head of navy seals - just to be an Israeli navy seal is no small thing - to be head of the Navy Seals is something else and I've got to deal with a guy who is too crazy to even be allowed into the Israeli army, and another guy who did some 6 weeks summer camp, and so I'm reaching out here, you know.

It's one of the things I try to explain to American Jews. You don't know these people. You did not go to Camp Ramah with these people. They were not in the Catskills with your family. These are Jewish supremacists of a Messianic strain and anyway, so I really just want to express my admiration for what Gallant is doing. I'm glad he didn't quit, because judging from what happened the first time around - all that would have happened is, some of the other people in the party would have tried to get his job rather than taking his example. So....it's the multiple fronts.

One of things I always used to say about Hezbollah is that compared to the PLO in Beirut, these are serious guys. They know how to get stuff done. They know where all the levers of power are.

And so, if you aren't as serious as them... one of my models about the Middle East was that **the extremists go all the way, and moderates tend to just go away.**

So I behave as an extremist moderate.

That's what I do, just because I know all their tricks. I've been doing all this for a long time, **but you've got to be as extreme as they are because you can't just go away. You gotta dig in. You gotta stand. You gotta fight. You got to stay on top of them at every minute.**

But it's going to be a challenge, because we've never seen this before. A group of Israeli right who think it's their time to eat **and you're gonna have to really dig in. These are serious people.**

[End of excerpts]