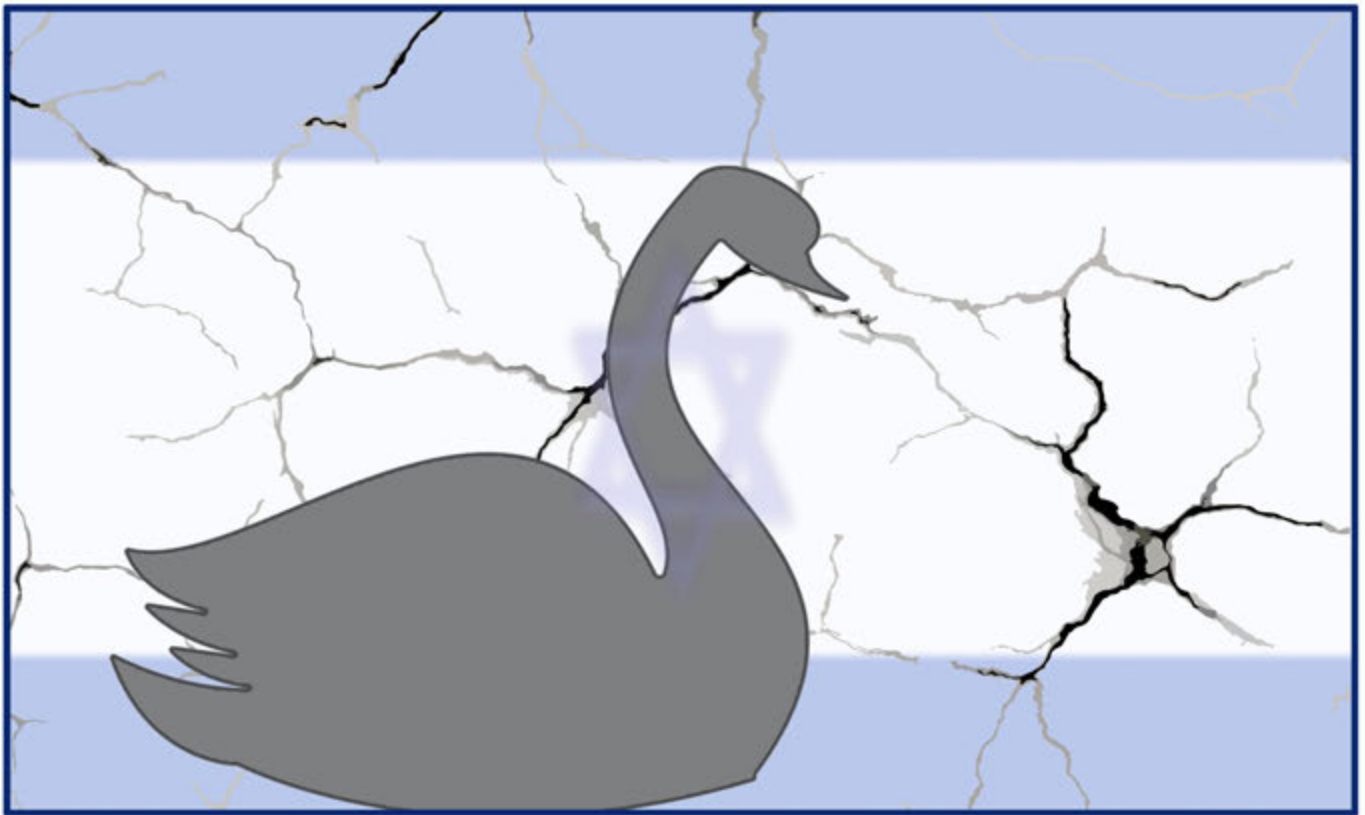




Academic Paper

The Black Swan Event in Israel's Future



Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay

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The Black Swan Event in Israel's Future

Prof. Dr. Walid 'Abd al-Hay¹

Introduction

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statement on 18/6/2024, asserting that "there will be no civil war" in Israel,² reflects ongoing debates within Israeli political circles, as well as at official, academic and popular levels, both before and after Operation al-Aqsa Flood, as demonstrated by the following evidence:



1. On 17/1/2024, *Haaretz* headlined an article, "Israeli Democrats Must Get Ready for the Civil War."³ The same newspaper revisited the issue in late May 2024, headlining another article: "Netanyahu's Loyalists Spawn Another Milestone on the Path to Civil War in Israel."⁴

2. Two months before Operation al-Aqsa Flood, Lior Akerman, a former Shabak officer, authored an article titled "Is Civil War a Possible Scenario in Israel?" This was during a time when protests were being held in Israel against Netanyahu's proposed judicial amendments. In the article, Akerman made a distinction between a civil war, where "different populations within the same nation, each with its own military force, battle over control of their country," and a civil coup, where "a civil force with no military capabilities manages to topple a country's regime and replace it by means such as protests and revolts." Akerman then identified various fractures within Israeli society that could serve as a gateway to civil war, such as:⁵

- ✓ a. The profound ideological gap and wide rift between the secular pluralistic views and religious messianic ones seeking to transform Israel's character. The disparity between how law enforcement is perceived by either side. The huge difference in understanding and grasping the essence of a democratic regime, or the role played by its institutions and authorities. All of the above undoubtedly create a concrete platform for the development of an Israeli civil war already.
- ✓ b. If the government will be utterly complacent, and refrain from calming and uniting actions, the protests are likely to exacerbate, chasms to deepen, and reactions and violence from both ends to radicalize.



- ✓ c. The Israeli army was defined since the establishment of the state as above and outside all social and political disagreement. However, something seems to have shifted in that regard too. The refusal and reactions to it, aggravating public argument over the exemption for yeshiva students, and religious Zionist debate over the duty to obey commands to evacuate illegal outposts in the West Bank (WB) all pose a threat to the Israeli army's power and status as the People's Army, dragging it into the political discourse on the citizens' level, at least. The Israeli army is comprised of an extremely broad command echelon that consists of numerous Religious Zionist commanders. In the recent elections, many soldiers voted for Itamar Ben Gvir's extreme rightwing party, and political disputes about how the Israeli army should operate in emergencies or other situations that fall outside of consensus in Israeli society seem to be emerging within its ranks.

- ✓ d. Considering all known data, and based on an analysis of the current state of affairs, a conclusion must be drawn whereby the State of Israel may end up in a violent civil clash that could escalate to civil war involving Israel army troops acting on their own behalf.

3. At the level of Israeli political leadership, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert expressed concerns about the possibility of civil war as early as July 2023, before Operation al-Aqsa Flood.⁶ Israeli President Chaim Herzog also “warned repeatedly of civil war,” citing the insistence of certain Israeli factions on continuing settlement activities, displacing Palestinians, and the nature of the solution with the Palestinians and Arab countries, as well as how to engage with the broader international community.⁷

4. In academic circles, Professor David Passig, a leading expert in futures studies at Bar-Ilan University, has been predicting a civil war in Israel since 2005, as outlined in his books and articles.⁸ Passig draws on Jewish historical experiences, particularly the recurrence of civil wars, which he meticulously reviews.⁹ He forecasts that another civil war will occur in Israel by 2040. He says:¹⁰

Political and national entities that emerged similarly to the State of Israel experienced violence three or four generations later, and that is what I base my prediction on. Most of the time, it begins with the assassination of a leader, and then with a civil war. It happens when the unifying factor of a country begins to disintegrate. The outcome is not only constant clashes in the legislature but also violence that leads to dozens of deaths.

(.....)

But of all the groups that came together to build this home [Israel], each one had a different view. At some point, this one-time glue started to fade, as it also happened with other groups throughout history.

(.....)



Throughout almost all of history, most of the groups within the Jewish people came about as a result of external processes, from kingdoms all the way to Zionism. After all, Zionism is ultimately a reflection of the process of nationalism in human history. And the Jews used this process to realize their national aspirations. And the external processes change all the time. So saying “Zionism forever” is a mistake, because it is a reflection of external processes, and when things change on the outside, they also change on the inside.

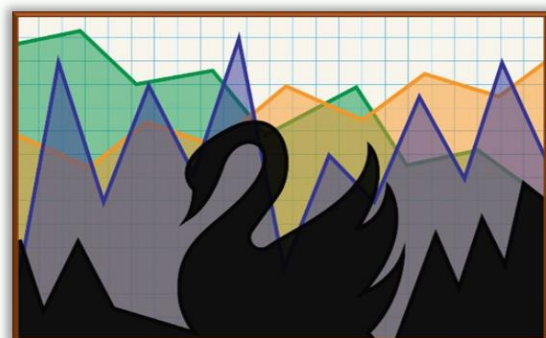
5. This obsession with the fear of civil war extends beyond leaders, media professionals, and intellectuals to also encompass Israeli public opinion. In the most recent poll, 46% of Israelis expressed fear of civil war. This figure had been 58% in a poll conducted before Operation al-Aqsa Flood and was even 67% in a previous poll.¹¹

Three events that occurred between 2023 and 2024 appear to have fueled the heightened obsession with civil war in Israel:

- ✓ 1. The judicial amendments proposed by the Netanyahu government, which the opposition considered a coup against legitimacy, led to frequent and almost daily protest demonstrations on the Israeli streets in the period leading up to Operation al-Aqsa Flood.
- ✓ 2. The issue of Israeli captives held by Palestinian resistance forces, who were captured during the initial days of Operation al-Aqsa Flood, and the Netanyahu government's failure to address and secure their return, have led to ongoing and escalating protests against the government and security institutions. Consequently, military and political leaders have been blaming each other for this failure.
- ✓ 3. The debate between political and cultural factions in Israel has intensified over the recruitment of religious Jews, particularly the Haredim. This issue has emerged as a significant consequence of Operation al-Aqsa Flood.

A Theoretical Framework for Analyzing Global Civil Wars

Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s “Black Swan” theory addresses how to handle unexpected events that significantly impact the phenomenon under study and offers a quantitative model for predicting such variables.¹² While civil war is an anticipated phenomenon in some societies, Western, Israeli and Arab political literature largely neglected this possibility in Israel until the



years 2023 and 2024, as noted in the introduction to this study. The question arises: does the issue of civil war in Israel constitute a special case that aligns with the concept of a black swan, or does it fall within the context of a broader global trend that has developed over the past few decades?

International relations scholars agree that the number of civil wars has been rising since World War II.¹³ This increase is attributed in the international relations literature to several factors, with the most significant being the rapid pace of technological development and the resulting acceleration of change and interdependence in the international community. This phenomenon is illustrated by the Logistic Curve. Simultaneously, there is a notable lack of effective adaptation mechanisms to address the repercussions of this accelerated change. The gap between the speed of change and the complexity of adaptation is seen as a critical factor influencing the future of political systems and social structures. Consequently, many theorists in international relations and political sociology connect the occurrence of civil wars to this disparity between rapid change and adaptation.¹⁴

Quantitative indicators underscore the trend of rising civil wars. From 1950 to 2001, the global annual average of new civil wars was approximately 1.6, with an average duration of 5.5 years per conflict. If these trends continue, the global average number of civil wars per year is projected to stabilize at around 12, which aligns closely with the global average observed between 2015 and 2023.¹⁵

In 1991–2015, the percentage of internationalized conflicts increased tenfold. In 1991, 4% of internal conflicts involved military intervention by other states. By 2015, this figure had risen to 40%, transforming the nature of these conflicts from civil wars to “internationalized civil wars.”¹⁶

The issue of external intervention in a civil war centers on whether such intervention amplifies violence and expands the conflict or encourages local forces to unite. Most studies suggest that external intervention tends to increase violence, broaden the conflict’s scope, and involve more segments of society.¹⁷ However, it is important to recognize that external intervention often results in alliances between internal and external actors for various reasons. The situation in Israel differs from these conventional models. From an Israeli perspective, if we consider the axis of resistance as an external party, its intervention fosters internal solidarity and mitigates internal divisions. This is because the axis of resistance, or support front, acts as a common adversary for all factions within Israeli society. In contrast to typical foreign interventions in civil wars, where external parties support specific local forces against others, this dynamic is not present in the Israeli context.¹⁸ This will be further explored later in this study.



Conversely, David Emile Durkheim’s model can be employed to connect civil wars to the dynamics of “organic solidarity” (technical and economic relationships within and between societies) and “mechanical solidarity” (such as religion, nationalism, ethnicity, etc.) in contemporary societies. Organic solidarity diminishes the influence of mechanical solidarity within a society. As organic solidarity intensifies due to globalization, mechanical solidarity may resist this shift, leading to a potential weakening or disintegration of its traditional bonds.¹⁹



The Causes of Civil Wars and Their Relevance to the Israeli Context

The Arab-Israeli conflict is a distinctive phenomenon in terms of its characterization, as it encompasses many of the features found in war studies. According to the Norwegian Peace Research Institute Oslo’s (PRIO) definition of wars, there are four distinct forms:²⁰

- ✓ 1. Colonial conflict: This applies to the settler colonial phenomenon in occupied Palestine.
- ✓ 2. Interstate conflict: This applies to all Arab-Israeli wars, as well as the current situation in Iran.
- ✓ 3. Civil conflict: From the perspective of some Israeli political groups, the First and Second *Intifadahs*, as well as confrontations with the Palestinians of 1948 occupied territories or between settlers and Palestinian citizens, are viewed as internal wars within the state itself.
- ✓ 4. Internationalized civil conflict: The Arab-Israeli conflict stands as a prominent example of international and regional military intervention. The wars of 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973, among others, illustrate this pattern. As we have previously discussed, the Arab region ranks highest among global geostrategic areas in terms of external intervention.²¹

Civil war, the focus of this study, is a political phenomenon that has affected many societies. Most academic studies agree on identifying the variables and weights of this phenomenon as shown in the following table:²²



Table 1: Key Civil War Variables, Prominent Sub-variables, and Their Relative Weights²³

Central variable	Most important sub-indicators	Relative weight
Political	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Percentage of political representation in senior posts 2. The right to express one's sub-identity. 3. Relations with external powers 	0.582
Social	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The nature of sub-identities, such as religion, ethnicity, nationality, language, and sect. 2. Hierarchical Fragmentation 3. Percentage of sub-identity within the total population 	0.637
Economic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gini index 2. Concentration in specific productive sectors. 3. Fair distribution of government services. 	0.627
Geographic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Concentration in a border region. 2. Concentration in a specific area. 3. Topography of the area with a high concentration of minorities. 4. Expansion of the sub-identity beyond national borders. 	0.779

Application: The Israeli Case

Given the concerns and predictions of various segments of Israeli society about the potential for civil conflict, it is essential to first define the characteristics of the Jewish community in Palestine in terms of "sub-identities." The fragmentation within the Jewish community in Israel is evident and has been expressed by various segments on numerous occasions, as illustrated in the following table.²⁴



Table 2: Ethnic Diversity in Israeli Society²⁵

Sub-identity	% in the society
Mizrahi (Eastern Origins)	45
Ashkenazi (Western Origins)	36
Sabra (Born in Israel with Diverse Origins)	78
Arabs	23
Russians	18
Africans (Including North Africa)	14.5
Black Jews	2.9
Asians	11.2
Traditional (Not very observant)	21
Religious	24
Religious Extremist (Ultra-Orthodox Jews)	13
Secular	44
Jewish	73.5
Muslim	18.1
Christian	1.9
Druze	1.6
Other	4.9

This suggests that the degree of homogeneity in Israeli society, in terms of ethnic, economic and political diversity, requires careful consideration. Identifying as Jewish does not eliminate the variations in the depth of this identification. The differences in religious affiliation are evident in various aspects such as dress codes, Sabbath observance, religious rituals, military service, and the distinction between those with Jewish parents and those with only one Jewish parent. This creates a separation between Jews and Israelis, leading some studies to draw parallels between the Israeli situation before Operation al-Aqsa Flood and the American situation before the Civil War in the 19th century, particularly concerning the varied acceptance of slavery laws across different states.²⁶



The table above also highlights the significant multi-ethnicity within Israeli society, offering a typical example of the Pyramidal-Segmentary theory. According to this theory, an individual may have multiple hierarchical loyalties, such as being Jewish but also Sephardic, or being of African descent but Ethiopian. The theory posits that in the event of a conflict between higher and lower loyalties, individuals are more likely to align with their lower loyalties over their higher ones.²⁷ Consequently, the theory suggests that the more layers of loyalty within the pyramid, the greater the potential for conflict. Applied studies show that 64% of civil wars have been primarily driven by sub-identities.²⁸

Examining models that measure ethnic fractionalization, including religious and national factors, we find that Israel ranks 74th out of 160 countries, with an index score of 0.526. This places it in the middle range for ethnic fractionalization.²⁹

Ethnic fractionalization is accompanied by several factors that heighten the risk of civil war: poverty, which is typical of financially and bureaucratically weak states and aids in the recruitment of insurgents; political instability; rugged terrain; and large populations.³⁰

Studies focused on civil wars aim to determine the correlation between subcultural variables and the level of violent tendencies in society. The highest correlation was found with the geographical variable, followed by the social variable, then the economic variable, and finally the political variable (see table 1).

Given that definitions of civil war rely on two criteria—armed conflict between the government and a specific subculture, and a death toll of one thousand or more—measuring the relevant variables in Israel indicates a probability of civil war recurrence of 0.403, which is below the average.³¹

However, the number we obtained suggests that the likelihood of a decline or increase in war is related to the current intensity of the war with the resistance axis and the broader Arab context. This implies an inverse relationship between the intensity of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the likelihood of civil war among Jews within Israel. One potential trigger for civil war among Jews in Israel is the nature of the peace settlement Israel might accept for the Arab-Israeli conflict. Notably, 65% of Israeli society “oppose the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.” Additionally, there are significant divisions between settlement residents and the rest of Israeli society, particularly between settlement communities and what is considered left-wing Zionist groups. This tension has been evident in past events, such as the 1982 forced evacuation of the Israeli settlement of Yamit in the Sinai Desert, where approximately six thousand settlers were relocated and around 600 houses were demolished, and the 2005 evacuation of settlements from the Gaza Strip (GS).³²



Correlation between the Level of Propensity for Violence and Sub-Identity Mobilization Variables

Studies examining the relationship between variables influencing civil war and the expression of differences and demands—whether through peaceful or violent protest, or civil war—show that the geographical variable, as detailed in Table 1, has the most significant impact on the mobilization of sub-identities. Thus, calculating the average level of civil war in Israel based on the relative weights from the previous table reveals a probability of civil war recurrence of 0.403, which is below the average. In contrast, the global average stands at 0.651, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Relationship Between Levels of Violent Tendencies and Indicators of Ethnic Secessionism³³

Protest types/ variables	Geographic	Social	Economic	Political: local, regional and international
Sub-indicators ³⁴	4	4	4	15
Peaceful	0.787	0.628	0.623	0.592
Violent	0.781	0.646	0.635	0.580
Armed:				
World	0.770	0.638	0.623	0.573
Israel	0.204	0.629	0.588	0.194
Global average	0.779	0.637	0.627	0.582

However, it is important to note that in the Israeli case, the most influential variables are the social and economic factors, while also acknowledging the significance of the political factor, particularly in the following areas:³⁵

- ✓ 1. The number of parties based on sub-identities—such as religion, country of origin, and narrow interests—rose from 21 to 32 between the late 1990s and 2021.
- ✓ 2. The weakening of ideological commitment in favor of the rise of utilitarian individualism.
- ✓ 3. The frequency of Knesset dissolutions has risen significantly in the past four years, resulting in five parliamentary elections during this period.



- ✓ 4. The growing influence of small parties is evident as coalition governments increasingly rely on them, granting these smaller parties excessive power to make demands.
- ✓ 5. The decline of major parties with broad societal perspectives in favor of smaller, sectoral parties.
- ✓ 6. The decline in governance indicators according to World Bank metrics.³⁶

Applying the model of the study presented to the American Political Science Association on the relationship between ethnicity and civil wars, changes in social and economic variables could affect the likelihood of civil war in Israel. If the income gap between Israeli sub-identities widens, the probability of civil unrest may increase, given the high correlation between these variables as observed in the study, which was applied to 161 countries over 54 years (1945–1999).³⁷ Data show that Israel ranked 64th in wealth inequality in 2023, with a Gini index ranging from 0.38 to 0.39.³⁸ Additionally, political stability has significantly declined, now remaining in the negative zone at –1.29.³⁹ This level places it in a “medium-high” category, which increases the likelihood of civil war compared to the previous rating of 0.403.

Conclusion

There is academic debate about the primary factors leading to civil wars, which can be categorized into three main perspectives:⁴⁰

- ✓ 1. The view that diversity in identities, such as religious, national, linguistic, racial and sectarian differences..., is the primary variable.
- ✓ 2. The perspective that the unequal distribution of resources, income, high positions and discrimination among different sectors of society (e.g., rural vs. urban areas, regions...) is the most significant trigger for civil wars.
- ✓ 3. A third perspective argues that the key factor for rebellion among disgruntled sectors is the availability of “opportunities” due to political, social or economic grievances. In a previous study, we identified the geographical variable as the most crucial factor in providing these opportunities. This geographical variable encompasses the following sub-indicators: the presence of the minority at the periphery of the state, the concentration of disaffected minorities in that region, and the emergence of significant economic resources in the minority area.

However, the holistic perspective suggests that the likelihood of civil war is determined by the interaction of all components of the phenomenon. This necessitates developing a matrix to analyze the mutual influences between these components,



particularly the relationship between the risk of internal conflict in Israeli society and perceptions of external threats to both society and the political entity. Israeli opinion polls prior to Operation al-Aqsa Flood reveal varying levels of confidence in security, when comparing internal security factors (internal discrepancies) with external security factors (regional or international threats). Data from 2021–2022, prior to Operation al-Aqsa Flood, reveals perceptions of external threats as follows: 23% feared Iranian nuclear threat, 10% perceived a danger from Palestinian resistance, 45% believed that Israel could effectively manage international isolation, and 46% felt Israel could successfully address the decline in US support. Internally, concerns about social polarization, ethnic diversity, and the inadequacy of existing institutions to address these issues reached 62%. Overall, 66% of respondents viewed internal societal threats to Israel as more significant compared to 27% who saw external threats as more pressing. There is a notable decline in confidence in state institutions, especially those responsible for addressing internal threats. The main internal concerns are: the relationship between Palestinian of the 1948 occupied territories and Jews (43%), ideological divides between left and right (24%), socio-economic gaps (13%), ultra-orthodox and secular divisions (12%), and intra-sub-identity divisions (4%).⁴¹ Notably, following Operation al-Aqsa Flood, there is a significant rise in concern about the external environment, with 61% expressing extreme or very high concern about the war potentially expanding into other regional countries. This shift in focus could potentially lessen the impact of internal factors on societal division and internal conflict.⁴² The sense of external danger is heightened by the perception of Israel's declining international standing. Approximately 60% of Israelis believe their country is not respected internationally, which amplifies anxiety about external threats while diminishing concern about internal changes.⁴³

However, an important issue related to the current war between the axis of resistance and Israel is emerging. Increased security pressure on Israeli society might lead to a push for a settlement, potentially intensifying internal divisions among Israelis over the peace process. The question of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders sharply divides Israeli society and has gained significant traction in international diplomacy. Yet, the Israeli right wing and over three-quarters of a million settlers in WB strongly oppose this solution, which could exacerbate internal conflict.

The potential transformations discussed suggest that the 40.3% probability of civil war in Israel, which we estimated, could increase if two factors converge: first, the steadfastness of resistance forces in GS, and second, the growing impact of the external threat as international acceptance of the two-state solution rises, leading to greater political and social polarization in Israel in response to this possibility. Some researchers argue that if the two-state solution is adopted, Israel might face confrontations with settlers in WB, potentially leading to conflicts resembling a civil war. Such a scenario might be driven by a ruling authority based on theocratic principles that starkly contrast with those outlined in the Israeli “Declaration of Independence.”⁴⁴ This possibility could



be a central concern for the current Israeli political leadership, potentially intensifying its inclination toward greater violence in its ongoing war with the resistance axis.

This means that the resilience of the resistance axis, particularly in GS, will likely increase international and Arab pressure on Israel to accept a settlement for the Arab-Israeli conflict. This could be the key factor that raises the 40.3% figure related to internal ethnic fractionalization, due to the deep divisions within these ethnic groups regarding a peace settlement. This is reflected in Israeli public opinion, which views internal divisions and the lack of consensus on a specific peace settlement as a significant threat, with 66% viewing it as more pressing compared to 27% who consider external threats more urgent.



Endnotes

- ¹ An expert in futures studies, a former professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan and a holder of Ph.D. in Political Science from Cairo University. He is also a former member of the Board of Trustees of Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan, Irbid National University, the National Center for Human Rights, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Media. He has authored 37 books, most of which are focused on future studies in both theoretical and practical terms, and published 120 research papers in peer-reviewed academic journals.
- ² Netanyahu says ‘there will be no civil war’ in Israel amid protests, site of Anadolu Agency, 18/6/2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/netanyahu-says-there-will-be-no-civil-war-in-israel-amid-protests/3252910>
- ³ Uri Misgav, Israeli Democrats Must Get Ready for the Civil War, site of *Haaretz* newspaper, 17/1/2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2024-01-17/ty-article-opinion/.premium/israeli-democrats-must-get-ready-for-the-civil-war/0000018d-18e6-dd75-addd-fae74e1d0000>
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We won't delve into the technical specifics of the Fat Tail statistical model, which aims to capture the probability distribution of a particular phenomenon's dimensions. The “fat tail” refers to the probabilities with the greatest impact and those most likely to fall into the low-probability range. In other words, these are the events that are least likely to occur but have the most significant impact if they do. The objective of the model is to identify this “fat tail.”
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- ¹⁴ James N. Rosenau, *The Study of Political Adaptation* (London: Frances Pinter, 1981), pp. 125-146.
- ¹⁵ When calculating the annual rate of new and ongoing civil wars, it is important to consider the following:
 - a. New wars are initiated each year at an average rate of 1.6, resulting in 16 civil wars every decade.
 - b. Wars end each year, with the average duration of a civil war being 5.5 years.
 - c. Ongoing wars continue but tend to shorten in duration each year, with the average ending after 5.5 years. However, it is noted that the overall trend in the lifespan of civil wars tends to increase.



This indicates that the cumulative rate of civil wars is increasing, with varying levels of violence, while the rate of war termination is relatively low. This trend is supported by quantitative studies on international and civil conflicts.

See details in: “Why Is Civil War So Common?,” in Paul Collier et. al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*, World Bank policy research report (Washington, DC: World Bank and Oxford University Press, 2003),

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 - b. The degree of availability of sub-indicator variables for each main indicator in Israel.
 - c. The average relative weight of the main indicators in Israel, determined by the availability of sub-indicators for each main indicator.
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- ³⁴ The central variables comprised a total of 27 indicators, with the most significant ones detailed in Table 1.
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