

Israel Is Courting Disaster

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By Michael R. Bloomberg

In more than 20 years of public life, I have steadfastly supported Israel and its people in both word and deed, including by building medical facilities there, co-founding a leadership center, supporting its innovative local programs and funding other good causes. I have never gotten involved in its domestic politics or criticized its government initiatives. But my love for Israel, my respect for its people and my concern about its future are now leading me to speak out against the current government's attempt to effectively abolish the nation's independent judiciary.

Under the new coalition's proposal, a simple majority of the Knesset could overrule the nation's Supreme Court and run roughshod over individual rights, including on matters such as speech and press freedoms, equal rights for minorities and voting rights. The Knesset could even go as far as to declare that the laws it passes are unreviewable by the judiciary, a move that calls to mind Richard Nixon's infamous phrase "When the president does it, that means that it is not illegal." Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government is courting disaster by trying to claim that same power, imperiling Israel's alliances around the world, its security in the region, its economy at home and the very democracy upon which the country was built.

The economic damage is already being felt, as the pummeling of the shekel has showed. A broad swath of business leaders and investors have spoken out against the government's proposal, publicly and privately. And in a disturbing sign, some people have already begun pulling money out of the country and re-evaluating their plans for future growth there. As the owner of a global company, I don't blame them.

Companies and investors place enormous value on strong and independent judicial systems because courts help protect them — not only against crime and corruption but also government overreach. Just as important, they protect what their employees value most: individual rights and freedoms.

Companies are in a global competition for talent. So are countries. The best and brightest want to live in countries where they can be assured they will not be persecuted or discriminated against because of what they believe or whom they love. Israel's commitment to those legal protections played a crucial role in its development as a so-called start-up nation, able to compete with Silicon Valley and other tech centers for high-skilled workers.

In fact, the extraordinary rise in Israel's economic standing over the last generation may be Mr. Netanyahu's greatest achievement. It's fair to say that no prime minister has done more to transform its economy into a global powerhouse. Yet unless he changes course, Mr. Netanyahu risks throwing all that progress — and his own hard-earned legacy — away. The economic damage could make the cost being paid by the United Kingdom for Brexit look like bubkes.

But it's not just the economy, of course. Israel's security is based partly on a relationship with the United States built on shared values — freedom, equality, democracy — that can only be sustained by a

commitment to the rule of law, including an independent judiciary capable of upholding it. If Israel retreats from that long-term commitment and moves its model of governance toward one that mirrors those of authoritarian countries, it risks weakening its ties to the United States and other free nations.

That would be a devastating loss for Israel's security, harm prospects for a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian conflict and could even imperil the future of the Jewish homeland. It would also undermine the deep attachment millions of people around the world feel toward the country, often because of the pride our parents instilled in us not only for its Jewish character but also for its strong commitment to freedom.

In the United States, our founding fathers' insistence on checks and balances to control the tyrannical tendencies of majorities was part of their genius. Our Constitution is not perfect — no law is — but its many checks and balances have been essential to protecting and advancing fundamental rights and maintaining national stability. It was only through those safeguards that the United States has managed to withstand extreme shocks to our democracy in recent years — including a disgraceful attempt to prevent the peaceful transfer of power — without a catastrophic fracturing.

In withstanding those shocks, the United States also has had a luxury that Israel does not: friendly neighbors on our borders. We could afford some painful national divisions without fearing that our neighbors might exploit them militarily. Israel cannot. It is in one of the world's most dangerous neighborhoods, facing threats from Iran and others that Mr. Netanyahu rightly calls existential. The more divided it is at home, the weaker it appears to its enemies.

Countries bordered by external enemies have even greater need to seek internal compromise, and it is my fervent hope that Mr. Netanyahu will convince his coalition of the need to heed President Isaac Herzog's plea to pull back and slow down.

In 2014, when the Federal Aviation Administration prohibited U.S. airlines from flying to Israel after a Hamas rocket landed near Ben-Gurion airport, I boarded an El Al flight, never fearing any danger. Israel takes extraordinary measures to ensure the security of airline passengers, and it correctly argued that banning flights amounted to a capitulation to Hamas that would effectively close the country's economy, given air travel is the only practical way to get in and out for nearly all travelers. I wanted to stand with Israel against Hamas, by highlighting the safety of travel to Israel and urging the Obama administration to reverse course — which it soon did, to its credit.

Greeting me on the tarmac that day was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He thanked me for my support, and I thanked him for Israel's support of New York City and the United States after the Sept. 11 attacks. Close allies bound together by shared values stand together in times of need — not only to support each other but to reaffirm the inviolable obligations we have to defend those values. And that is why I am standing up again now.