

# Israel Under Netanyahu

Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy

Edited by Robert O. Freedman



# ISRAEL UNDER NETANYAHU

Examining Benjamin Netanyahu's more than a decade-long period as Israel's prime minister, this important book evaluates the domestic politics and foreign policy of Israel from 2009 to 2019. This comprehensive study assesses Israel's main political parties; highlights the special position in Israel of Israel's Arab, Russian, and religious communities; appraises Netanyahu's stewardship of Israel's economy; and analyzes Israel's foreign relations.

The scholars contributing to the volume are leading experts from both Israel and the United States and represent a broad spectrum of viewpoints on Israeli politics and foreign policy. The case studies cover the Likud party; the nonreligious opposition parties, such as Labor, Meretz, and Yesh Atid; the Arab parties; the religious parties; and the Russian-based Yisrael B'Aliyah party and presents analyses of the ups and downs of Israel's relations with the United States, the American Jewish community, Iran, Europe, the Palestinians, the Arab world, Russia, China, India, and Turkey, as well as Israel's challenges in dealing with terrorism. Another highlight of the book is an assessment of Netanyahu's leadership of the Likud party, which seeks to answer the question as to whether Netanyahu is a pragmatist interested in a peace deal with the Palestinians or an ideologue who wants Israel to hold on to the West Bank and all of Jerusalem.

This volume will be of interest to readers who wish to understand the dynamics of Israel during Benjamin Netanyahu's time as prime minister and are interested in the history and the politics of Israel and the Middle East.

**Robert O. Freedman** is Visiting Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University, where he teaches courses on the Arab-Israeli conflict and on Russian Foreign Policy. He is the author or the editor of 23 books, including *Israel and the United States: Six Decades of US-Israeli Relations* (2012) and *Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question: The Putin Record* (2006). Dr. Freedman is also past president of the Association for Israel Studies. Prior to coming to Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Freedman served as President of Baltimore Hebrew University.



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*Edited by Robert O. Freedman*

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Norman Lavy,  
a true friend of the academic study of Israel*



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# PREFACE

In order to successfully complete this multicontinental project, a book on Israel under Netanyahu, the help of many people is required, and I would like to express my thanks to them. First, I would like to thank Dr. Steven David, my colleague in the Political Science Department of Johns Hopkins University, who helped to get the project off the ground. Second, I would like to thank Dr. Neta Stahl, Director of the Jewish Studies Program of Johns Hopkins University, who gave her full support for the project. Third, I would like to thank Ms. Mary Otterbein, the administrator of the JHU Jewish Studies Program, for her help with the logistics involved in bringing scholars from Israel and throughout the United States to participate in the conference at Johns Hopkins University on which this book is based. Fourth, I would like to thank the Hillel Foundation of Johns Hopkins University for providing an excellent venue for the conference. Fifth, I would like to thank Mrs. Diane Kempler for typing the manuscript for the book. Sixth, I would like to thank Ella Panczel and Joe Whiting of Routledge for their editorial assistance in transforming the manuscript into a book. Seventh, I would like to thank my wife, Sharon, for her strong support for all my academic activities, including this book. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the Lavy family for their support in making both the conference and this book possible. It is to the memory of Dr. Norman Lavy that this book is dedicated.

Dr. Robert O. Freedman  
Baltimore, Maryland

# ACRONYMS

AIPAC American-Israel Public Affairs Committee  
AJC American Jewish Committee  
AKP Justice and Development Party (Turkey)  
AMAN Israeli Military Intelligence  
AWACS Airborne Warning and Control System  
BJP Bharatiya Janata Party (India)  
CHP Republican People's Party (Turkey)  
EU European Union  
FSU Former Soviet Union  
GDP Gross Domestic Product  
IAEA International Atomic Energy Agency  
IDF Israel Defense Forces  
IISS Israel Institute of National Security  
ILS (previously NIS) Israeli New Shekel (Israeli Currency)  
IRGC Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps  
MERIA Middle East Review of International Affairs  
NII National Insurance Institute  
PA Palestinian Authority  
PKK Kurdish Workers Party  
UAL United Arab List  
USD United States Dollars  
UTJ United Torah Judaism  
YB Yisrael Beiteinu



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# INTRODUCTION TO ISRAEL IN THE NETANYAHU ERA

*Robert O. Freedman*

This book is the third in a series on Israel that came from conferences held at Johns Hopkins University. The first, *Contemporary Israel* (ed. Robert O. Freedman) (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), was published in 2009. The second, *Israel And The United States: Six Decades Of Us-Israeli Relations* (ed. Robert O. Freedman) (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), was published in 2012. This book originated from discussions between members of the Political Science Department of Johns Hopkins University and members of the university's Jewish Studies Program in the spring of 2018. At the time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, although under police investigation, was nearing a record for time in office, 13 years, held by Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion. It was decided that a conference evaluating Israel's domestic politics and foreign policy was needed. Consequently, in October 2018, a conference was held at Johns Hopkins University that brought together scholars from both Israel and the United States who presented papers on Israeli politics, Israel's Arab minority, the Israeli economy, Israel's Russian community, and Israeli foreign policy. Subsequent to the conference, two papers were added to round out the book. One, on Russian-Israeli relations, was prepared by a former Israeli ambassador to Russia. The other, on Israel's response to terrorism, was written by a US terrorism expert. The conference papers were completed and edited by the beginning of December 2018. Three weeks later Netanyahu succeeded in dissolving the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) and arranging for new elections to be held in April 2019. The election campaign caused a major shake-up in a number of Israeli political parties, with some splitting and others amalgamating into new parties. Following the election, right-wing parties formed a majority, 65–55, in the newly elected Knesset, but Netanyahu proved unable to form a new coalition government, as he had successfully done in 2009, 2013, and 2015. Consequently, he once again got the Knesset to dissolve, with new elections scheduled for September 2019. This, in turn, led to another round of parties splitting and



amalgamating. Rather than having the authors of the papers in this book try to keep up with constant changes in Israeli politics, it was decided to keep the original papers as they were so as to present to reader with a solid foundation of Israeli politics and foreign policy as of December 2018. However, a detailed epilogue was added to the book that will trace the major changes in Israeli politics and foreign policy since December 2018.

The first section of the book, which deals with Israeli domestic politics, will evaluate Netanyahu's role as leader of the Likud party, as well as his role as prime minister, and will discuss how the other Israeli political parties have adjusted to him – for example, some, such as the Russian-based Yisrael Beiteinu (YB) and the two Haredi (ultraorthodox) parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, have joined his coalition governments, while others, such as Meretz, have stood in opposition to him. There will also be an evaluation of Netanyahu's economic record, whose foundation was set when he was Minister of Finance in the government of Ariel Sharon from 2002 to 2005, and his policies toward Israel's Arab minority, with whom he has had an ambiguous relationship. The second section of the book will examine Israeli foreign policy under Netanyahu. It will begin with the ups and downs of Israel's relations with its most important ally, the United States, and with the American Jewish community, which, until Netanyahu returned to office in 2009, had been a major supporter. It will then turn to a series of case studies of Israel's relations with Iran, Turkey, Russia, the Palestinians, and the Arab world. There will also be a chapter analyzing Israel's political and economic move from Europe to Asia. The final chapter of the book will analyze Netanyahu's success in dealing with terrorism.

The scholars participating in this book are drawn from both the United States and Israel and represent a broad spectrum of viewpoints on Israeli politics and foreign policy. It is hoped that exposing readers to differing viewpoints on Israel will give them a richer understanding of the dynamics of Israel during Netanyahu's tenure as prime minister.

The first chapter of the book, by Dr. Ilan Peleg of Lafayette College, argues that, contrary to the opinion of some analysts, who see Netanyahu as a pragmatist, he is in fact an ideologue and that any concessions he has made – such as his Bar-Ilan University speech of 2009, which appeared to indicate support for a Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution – were for tactical purposes only. Peleg asserts that Netanyahu's fundamental goals are to prevent a two-state solution while appearing to accept it and to replace Israel's earlier Labor ideology of equal rights and peace with Likud's advocacy of Jewish hegemony in Israel – a goal reflected in the Nation-State Bill passed by the Israeli Parliament in 2018 (but subject to review by Israel's Supreme Court). Peleg also notes that Netanyahu's efforts to move Israel to the right were facilitated by the general move of the Israeli Jewish population to the right as a result of the failure of the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and its withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 – both intended to bring peace but instead led to rocket attacks from both Lebanon and Gaza.

By contrast, Dr. Yael Aronoff of Michigan State University is more optimistic about the direction of Israeli politics in the Netanyahu era. Writing about the secular opposition parties – the slightly left of center Zionist Union Party (primarily the old Labor Party), the centrist Yesh Atid Party, and the left-wing Meretz Party – she argues that the center still holds in Israeli politics. She further asserts that the 2015 election was more of a realignment of the right-wing parties than an overall shift to the right of Israeli politics. She does acknowledge, however, that the failure of the peace process – for example, Israel’s three wars with Hamas (2008–09, 2012, and 2014), its 2006 war with Hezbollah, the lone-wolf stabbings in the West Bank, and continuing attacks from Gaza – have hurt parties such as the Zionist Union, which had strongly backed the peace process. She suggests, however, that if the Zionist Union Party chose a general to lead it in the 2019 Israeli elections and the party became more responsive to Mizrahi Israelis (Jews who originate from the Middle East), it would have a better chance in those elections.

While Likud, the Zionist Union, and Yesh Atid can be considered major parties in Israel, Yisrael Beiteinu (YB) is a sectoral party comprising primarily former Soviet Union (FSU) immigrants. It has aspirations to become a major party. Dr. Ze’ev Khanin of Bar-Ilan University describes the 20-year evolution of YB from its modest beginning in 1998 to winning 15 (out of 120) parliamentary seats in the 2009 elections, when Netanyahu returned to power, only to fall to six seats in 2015, in part because of an alleged corruption scandal. Khanin analyzes the reasons for the rise and fall of the party and the role of its leader, Avigdor Lieberman, himself an FSU immigrant who served as Israel’s defense minister until November 2018. Khanin notes that while most immigrants from the FSU vote for mainstream parties like Likud, there are enough FSU immigrants who feel that they have special needs and representation to keep YB viable for the next few elections – even if its hopes to become a mainstream party may not be realized.

Israel’s Jewish religious parties are divided into the Religious Zionists, now represented by the Jewish Home Party (Bayit Yehudi, which evolved from the old Mafdal Party) and the two ultraorthodox (Haredi) parties, United Torah Judaism and Shas. The chapter by Dr. Shmuel Sandler and Dr. Aaron Kampinsky of Emuna-Efrata College discusses the religious parties. United Torah Judaism is primarily composed of ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of European and American origin), while Shas draws support both from ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Jews and from other Sephardi Jews who have prized Shas, at least while it was under the leadership of the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who was seen as the beacon of Sephardi culture in Israel. These parties have evolved, Sandler and Kampinsky argue, with the Jewish Home Party, whose current leader, Naftali Bennett, is now primarily concerned with expanding Jewish settlements on the West Bank. The two ultra-Orthodox parties are increasingly concerned with expanding the role of the Jewish religion in Israel’s public spaces, such as opposing the opening of stores in Israel on the Jewish Sabbath. They also continue to oppose the conscription of their students who study in Jewish religious colleges (Yeshivot). The two ultra-Orthodox parties did not join Netanyahu’s coalition government after the 2013 Israeli elections

and, as a result, faced legislation opposed to their interests, including military conscription for students in Yeshivot. Consequently, following the 2015 elections the two parties joined Netanyahu's new coalition government. By contrast, the Jewish Home Party was a key member of Netanyahu's 2013 and 2015 coalition governments as Naftali Bennett, from within the government, pressed Netanyahu to allow further settlement expansion, even at the cost of alienating then-US President Barack Obama.

There are four Arab parties in Israel: the Nationalists (Balad), the Communists (Hadash), the Secularists (Ta'al), and the Islamists (United Arab List). In the 2015 elections, they combined to form the Joint List Part in order to surmount the new and more stringent electoral requirements (3.25 percent of the total vote was now needed for a party to obtain a seat in parliament). But there are still strong ideological differences among the four parties. These are discussed by Dr. Elie Rekhess of Northwestern University in his chapter on the Israeli Arabs. The Arab parties have never been part of an Israeli government, although they tacitly supported the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1992) as it pursued the Oslo Accords, a joint peace process with the PLO. During Netanyahu's time as prime minister, the Arab parties have been vociferous in their opposition to his government, with some of their members publicly supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, organizations dedicated to the destruction of Israel. For his part Netanyahu has tended to see the Israeli Arabs as a security threat, and during the 2015 elections, Netanyahu sought to motivate his base by claiming the Israeli Arabs were "coming out in droves" to vote. In addition, Israeli Arabs interpreted the Nation-State Bill, passed by Netanyahu's government in July 2018, not only as a downgrade of their status as equal citizens but also as a demotion of Arabic from equal status with Hebrew to "special status." Despite these major political differences, Netanyahu has invested ILS\$15 billion (about USD\$3.8 billion) to raising the economic status of the Israeli Arab community. A new Arab middle class has emerged that is sometimes at odds with the Arab representatives in the Knesset. Arabs represent about 21 percent of the Israeli population and now form 15 percent of Israel's college students, a sharp increase over only a few years ago.

Netanyahu's overall economic policies, as discussed by Dr. Roby Nathanson of the Macro Center for Political Economics in Tel Aviv, have produced impressive results – GDP growth has averaged 3.7 percent since 2010, and unemployment has dropped from 13 percent in 2003 (Netanyahu's first year as Sharon's finance minister) to only 4.7 percent in 2017. Among his reforms as finance minister were cutting corporate income taxes and privatizing major Israeli businesses, while also cutting welfare payments and child allowances. These actions led to major public demonstrations in 2011 as Israelis protested rising prices, especially in the housing market. Nonetheless, given Israel's security challenges – security concerns almost always trump economic problems when Israelis vote – Netanyahu prevailed in the 2013 and the 2015 elections.

While Netanyahu's economic policy has, on balance, been successful, his foreign policy record is more mixed. I trace the ups and downs (Chapter 7) of Netanyahu's

relations with the United States during the presidencies of Bill Clinton (1996–99), Barack Obama (2009–2017), and Donald Trump (2017–). I note the pressure Clinton put on Netanyahu to make territorial concessions to the Palestinians during Netanyahu’s first term of office (1996–99) and demonstrate how Netanyahu sought to use the Republican-controlled US Congress to alleviate that pressure, a tactic he would employ again to try to circumvent efforts by the Obama administration to reach a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, at a time when both the upper and the lower houses of the US Congress were under Republican control. Netanyahu and Obama also clashed over Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank to the point that the Obama administration did not veto a UN Security Council Resolution in 2016 condemning Israeli settlement policy. Nonetheless, the Obama administration, which showed a genuine concern for Israel’s security, did sign a USD\$38 billion agreement with Israel to provide modern arms over a ten-year period. When Donald Trump came into office, there was a sea change in relations between the White House and Netanyahu. Trump walked away from the Iran nuclear deal signed by Obama, moved the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, closed the PLO office in Washington, and cut funding to UNRWA, which supports Palestinian refugees. Trump also promised the “Deal of the Century” to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but at least at the time of writing (December 2018), no such deal had been forthcoming despite Trump’s being in office for almost two years.

If Netanyahu had his ups and downs with successive American administrations, the same could be said about his relationship with the American Jewish community. Dr. Steven Bayme of the American Jewish Committee argues that there have been three major reasons for the sharp deterioration in relations between Israel and the majority of the non-Orthodox American Jewish community during Netanyahu’s time in office: The first is the growing assimilation in the non-Orthodox American Jewish community as a result of the high intermarriage rate between Jews and non-Jews, which Bayme contends, makes the intermarried couple less tied to Jewish issues, including Israel. Second, he notes that Israeli policies have driven a sharp wedge between non-Orthodox American Jews and Israel – policies such as Netanyahu’s renegeing on a compromise agreement that would have set aside a special zone of prayer for non-Orthodox Jews at Judaism’s holiest shrine, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount; Netanyahu’s continuing settlement drive in the West Bank, which many American Jews see as damaging to the prospects for peace; and the virtual excommunication of American Reform, Conservative, and even some Modern Orthodox Rabbis by Israel’s Orthodox establishment, which controls Jewish religious life in Israel. Finally, especially since the US presidential election in 2016, there is a sharp divide between American and Israeli Jews over Donald Trump – between 70 and 80 percent of American Jews oppose him, while the vast majority of Israeli Jews, thankful for what Trump has done for Israel (see earlier), embrace him.

While Jewish settlements on the West Bank have been a problem in relations between American and Israeli Jews, Dr. Glenn Robinson of the Naval

Post-Graduate School sees them as a major factor in the failure to achieve a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Robinson (Chapter 9) also blames Palestine Authority leadership, especially President Mahmoud Abbas, for its corruption, lack of legitimacy, and incompetence. He points both to a rightward shift in Israeli politics and to Donald Trump's favoritism toward Israel as further causes of the weakening of the chances for a two-state solution. Robinson also argues that Netanyahu's efforts to forge an alignment with such Sunni Arab states as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, even as the prospect for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians fades, may have some tactical success in the form of a *de facto* alliance against Iran, but he feels it is very unlikely that these Sunni Arab states would be willing – or able – to pressure the Palestinians into the kind of peace settlement that Netanyahu wants. The only bright spot Robinson sees is the growing vibrancy of political life in Palestinian municipalities on the West Bank, which might, one day, evolve into a new kind of two-state solution.

Netanyahu's efforts to form an alliance with Arab states relate to the fact that he sees Iran as Israel's top security threat. In his chapter on Israeli-Iranian relations, Dr. Steven David of Johns Hopkins University notes that Barack Obama did not have a credible military threat against Iran after he failed to follow through on his "red-line" warning against Syria in 2013 because of its use of chemical weapons. This was of great concern to Netanyahu, who, given the repeated pledges by the top Iranian leadership to destroy Israel, sees Iran as an existential threat. Nonetheless, David does see the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran as beneficial to Israel – as have many in Israel's security establishment – because it keeps Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons for at least ten years. David also argues that, given the current nature of the Iranian regime, it would not agree to a better deal, as Netanyahu (and President Trump) seem to hope, and that it won't cut assistance to Hamas, to Islamic jihad in Gaza, or to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, nor will it stop intervening in Syria, though its intervention there carries a serious risk of further clashes with Israel.

While Israel's relations with Iran have been highly strained, its relations with Turkey have fluctuated from very good in the late 1990s, when they faced a common security threat from Syria, to very poor today. Dr. Mark Haas of Duquesne University analyzes the ups and downs of the Israeli-Turkish relationship and attributes the downturn in the relationship not only to incidents like the Israeli attack on the Turkish ship – the *Mavi Marmara*, where Israeli commandos killed eight Turks and one Turkish-American citizen while seeking to stop a Turkish-led flotilla of ships that were trying to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza – but even more to the growing Islamization of Turkish President Erdoğan's regime, which has required a constant Islamic mobilization to stay in power. Haas doubts whether the once strong Turkish-Israeli alignment can be resurrected, especially since Erdoğan's regime has gone through a number of recent challenges, such as the Gezi Park protests, a series of corruption scandals involving members of the regime, and the abortive coup against Erdoğan in July 2016 – all of which required a continued Islamic mobilization to protect the regime and consequently a negative posture toward Israel.

If Israel has had difficulty in its relations with Iran and Turkey, it has had considerably more success in the Far East, as it has reoriented its trade, and to a lesser extent its political orientation, toward Asia. Nations of the EU (a major trading partner) have criticized Israel for its policy toward the Palestinians. As a result, Israel has turned to the nations of Asia, particularly China and India. This pivot in Israel's policy is discussed by Dr. Efraim Inbar of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies in his chapter on Israel's policy in Asia. Inbar shows how trade has increased rapidly with India and China. India, which under its Hindu-oriented BJP government sees a similar Islamic threat to the one Israel faces, is buying USD billions a year in military equipment from Israel. In the case of China there was also an incipient military relationship as Israel sought to sell China an AWACS airborne battle control aircraft (the plane was jointly produced with Russia, which provided the air frame, and Israel, which provided the avionics), but the sale was vetoed by the United States, a development that somewhat chilled Sino-Israeli relations. Nonetheless, Israel's trade in nonmilitary goods soared with China, which sought high-tech exports from Israel to help develop its economy. At the same time China has begun to invest in the Israeli economy. Inbar concludes that so long as India and China need Israel's high-tech products, relations are likely to remain strong.

One of the most paradoxical aspects of Israel's foreign policy has been its relationship with Russia. Bilateral relations, especially since Russian President Vladimir Putin took office in 2000, have been very good – trade surpasses USD\$3 billion a year, there are extensive cultural contacts, Russian tourists come to Israel in large numbers, and Russian Jews continue their unimpeded immigration to Israel. However, at the regional level Israel has serious problems with Russian policy, as Moscow strongly backs two of Israel's most serious enemies, Iran and Syria, while also providing diplomatic support for Hamas, another enemy of Israel. The Israeli-Russian relationship grew more tense following Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, necessitating numerous trips to Russia by Netanyahu to coordinate Israeli military actions in Syria against Iran and Hezbollah with those of Russia against Syrian President Bashar Assad's internal opponents, as Netanyahu sought to prevent both Iranian arms supplies from reaching Hezbollah and Iran establishing military positions near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. These issues are discussed by Zvi Magen, a member of Israel's Institute for National Security Studies and a former Israeli ambassador to Russia. Magen contends that the Russian-Israeli military coordination system worked well until Syrian antiaircraft missiles shot down a Russian plane, with the Russian Defense Ministry blaming Israel for the incident. Magen argues, however, that given Russian interests in Israel, the incident is likely to be diplomatically settled and Russian-Israeli cooperation in Syria is likely to continue.

In the last chapter of the book, Dr. Joshua Sinai, a US expert on terrorism, evaluates the successes and failures of Netanyahu's antiterrorism strategy. He examines Israeli policy toward Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, toward both Arab and Jewish terrorism on the West Bank, toward the threat of terrorism from the Israeli Arab community, and toward Hezbollah in Lebanon. He also examines the

terrorist threats in the Golan and in the Sinai Peninsula, as well as in cyberspace and aviation. Sinai concludes that Netanyahu has been successful in combatting most of the terrorist threats Israel faces, especially in the Sinai; in combatting Hezbollah; and in handling cyberspace and aviation threats; however, he has been far less successful in dealing with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza and with Jewish terrorists on the West Bank.

These chapters represent the highlights of Israeli domestic politics and foreign policy since Netanyahu became Israel's prime minister in 2009. It is hoped that the reader will emerge from the book with a heightened understanding of the impact Netanyahu has had on Israel over the past decade.

## **PART I**

# Israeli domestic politics





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# 1

## THE LIKUD UNDER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU

### Readjusting revisionism to the 21st century

*Ilan Peleg*

Modern political Zionism has been characterized from its beginning by conflictual notions of the essence of the Zionist project and the mechanisms for implementing it. While all Zionists called upon Jews to return to Eretz Israel (the ancient homeland of the Jews), build an autonomous Jewish society there and eventually establish an independent state, diverse views have dominated the Zionist camp.

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 did not resolve the intra-Zionist conflict. Moreover, following the 1967 war in the Middle East – resulting in Israeli control over the entire territory of the post-1922 British mandate over Western Palestine – this conflict was reignited and has intensified beyond anything seen before. It has dominated Israeli politics ever since and has been directly linked to the political career of Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Likud party has been at the center of this ideological, political and cultural debate since its establishment in 1973. Its current leader, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has influenced the debate by his ideology, personality and policies more than any other individual.

This chapter, summarizing the author's views in previous publications, offers an analysis of the Likud under Netanyahu by focusing on five interrelated issues:

- 1 A brief history of the Likud (1973–2018) through its four leaders – Begin, Shamir, Sharon and especially Netanyahu;
- 2 The ideological foundations of Likud's political vision as a nationalist-territorialist movement – particularly as it has differed from alternative Zionist political visions emphasizing Arab-Jewish reconciliation, as well as social justice and equality within Israel as a Jewish state; this section will describe and analyze what might be called the Israeli *kulturkampf*,<sup>1</sup> the ideological struggle to define the Israeli political system and the country's very identity;

- 3 The ideological evolution of Likud's ideology within modern Zionism,<sup>2</sup> from Jabotinsky's "Revisionism" through Begin's "Neo-Revisionism"<sup>3</sup> and finally through Netanyahu's readjustment of the Revisionist and the Neo-Revisionist ideological positions to what he has perceived as Israel's current challenges – particular attention will be paid to Netanyahu's adoption of an Israeli version of American neoconservatism (especially a free enterprise economy, his expansionist and heavily militarized foreign policy and patriotism as a tool of cultural hegemony);
- 4 The foreign policy positions of Netanyahu's Likud and, in effect, the Israeli government, particularly since 2009, which have been designed to maintain the status quo while supporting a creeping annexation of the West Bank;<sup>4</sup>
- 5 Conclusions that emphasize what I will call Likud's well-established "cultural hegemony" in Israel<sup>5</sup> and its long-term implications for a possible peace between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as relations between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs within Israel.<sup>6</sup>

The thesis of this chapter is that Benjamin Netanyahu and the Likud party that he has led almost continuously for the last 26 years have had three fundamental goals:

- 1 To undermine the possibility of adopting a two-state solution for Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs based on a partition of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River – after 1993, this goal meant the derailment of the Oslo Accords while appearing, if and when necessary because of international and domestic pressures, as supporters of it. This position could be termed the "Bar-Ilan Strategy," following Netanyahu's ostensible public acceptance of the two-state solution while not only formulating a series of conditions that would make it unacceptable to the other side but also acting in numerous ways to prevent the two-state solution from being implemented;<sup>7</sup>
- 2 Replacing the Israel's traditional social democracy with a new neoliberal socio-economic regime based on US neoconservative principles, such as a free enterprise economy that benefits the wealthy, conservative social policies (facilitated in Israel by a coalition of right-wing parties and the ultra-Orthodox Haredim) and aggressive, militarized foreign and security policies;<sup>8</sup>
- 3 Replacing the so-called Old Elites and their ideology – (a) promoting an Arab-Israeli reconciliation based on territorial partition, (b) granting equal rights to all Israeli citizens (at least on an individual if not on a collective basis), (c) recognizing some minority rights (particularly in the areas of culture and language, including a special place for Arabic) and (d) sustaining a social democracy that provides a socioeconomic safety net to all Israelis – with a new elite and a new ideology based on complete Jewish hegemony both within Israel proper and in Western Palestine.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that Netanyahu's territorial-nationalistic foreign policy, his domestic socioeconomic conservative program and his leadership style fits

extremely well with growing worldwide trend noted at the time of writing (December 2018): The rise to power of prominent political elites in the United States (Donald Trump) and Russia (Vladimir Putin); the ascendance of new elites in several smaller European states, such as Hungary and Poland; unexpected political developments, such as Brexit in the United Kingdom; the rise of nationalist right-wing parties in Europe – each reflects Netanyahu’s philosophy and policies in his capacity as Israel’s prime minister. Furthermore, his political party, the Likud, has fully supported him. Thus, this chapter is not only a study of Netanyahu’s leadership and the Likud’s *modus operandi*; it is also a review of the political and governmental model contemporary Israel presents to the world.

### A brief historical sketch of the Likud, 1973–2018

An alliance of several right-wing parties in Israel, *Likud* (The Consolidation) was founded prior to the 1973 Israeli elections by the intense efforts of two prominent but very different politicians – Menachem Begin, the former commander of Irgun and leader of Gahal, and Ariel Sharon, then a recently retired general with a hawkish reputation and the leader of the Shalom–Zion (or Shlomtzion) party. The new party included Herut and the Liberals (which had been united in Gahal since 1965), the Free Center, the National List, and the Movement for Greater Israel (combining annexationist elements from all sides of the Israeli political map).

Following a strong performance in 1973 – cutting the left-of-center Alignment’s lead to merely 12 seats in the Knesset – the Likud won the 1977 elections, enabling Begin to form a right-leaning coalition government. The victory was an unexpected political earthquake and a dramatic turning point in Israeli history.

The circumstances of Likud’s historic victory were connected to three political, historical and ideological factors that had been present in Zionist and Israeli politics for decades:

- 1 Politically, the Yom Kippur War of 1973 was widely perceived as a major failure of the Alignment (Labor) government led by Prime Minister Golda Meir. After almost 30 years at the helm of the Jewish state, the traditional left-of-center Israeli leadership was perceived by many as arrogant, corrupt and ineffective; on the other hand, the newly established Likud was perceived by many Israelis as a fresh alternative to the long-term Mapai hegemony in Israel.<sup>10</sup>
- 2 As a result of both the 1967 war and (especially) the 1973 war, a sharp division reemerged in Israeli society over the future of the occupied territories. The wars strengthened both the secular Right (the nationalist party Herut) and the religious-national camp, which had been politically moderate in the first few decades of the state.<sup>11</sup> The emergence of the Likud as Israel’s leading party reflected the shift of the entire Israeli political system to the right, including the increased influence of national-religious elements within Israeli society.<sup>12</sup>
- 3 The rise of the Likud reflected the deep dissatisfaction of many Israelis of Sephardi or Mizrahi background (that is, generally lower middle class immigrants from Arab-speaking countries) with the overwhelmingly secular

Ashkenazi elite, who led the left-of-center Alignment. This sentiment prevailed particularly among blue-collar residents of some of Israel's "development towns."

Menachem Begin provided the Likud in particular and Israel in general with a strong nationalist leadership based on traditional Jewish religious values<sup>13</sup> but was able to show surprising geostrategic pragmatism – while intensifying the Israeli settlement project, he responded positively to Sadat's peace initiative and signed the 1978 Camp David Accords and the peace treaty with Egypt. However, it should be noted that this conciliatory policy on Begin's part was adopted primarily to avoid territorial concessions on the West Bank.<sup>14</sup> Begin also approved a series of additional nationalist actions, including the annexation of the Golan Heights, and the attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor and the 1982 Lebanon War.

Following Begin's resignation and departure from politics in October 1983, the Likud elected Yitzhak Shamir as its leader. As prime minister, Shamir pursued an extremely hard line on the settlement issue (conflicting with the American administration), sabotaged his foreign minister's attempt to reach a settlement with the Jordanians and was a reluctant participant in the Madrid Conference of 1991. He was eventually defeated by Yitzhak Rabin in the 1992 election.

Shamir's successor was Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu, a man who would become Israel's most prominent political figure for decades to come. Under Netanyahu, elected as Likud leader on March 24, 1993, the Likud emerged as a party of one man,<sup>15</sup> something of an imitation of the American political parties (with which Netanyahu was familiar), although still significantly more ideological. Netanyahu demanded total and personal loyalty from all party activists and saw any opponent as an enemy.<sup>16</sup> He introduced primaries to the Likud to weaken both the party's Central Committee and his political rivals,<sup>17</sup> thereby radicalizing the party and forcing politicians to constantly try to please the voters (in the case of Likud, people with already strong and sometimes radical nationalist proclivities).

Ironically, under Netanyahu, despite his adding democratic primaries, the Likud party structure became more centralized; the power of the leader (Netanyahu), greatly enhanced. Netanyahu "succeeded in manipulating the party to his advantage," but his "management style was well suited to the political culture of his party."<sup>18</sup>

Despite the centrality of Netanyahu's personality in his capacity first as Likud's leader and then (after 1996) as Israel's prime minister, it is important not to lose sight of the essential role of ideology in determining his and the Likud's policies. The political genius of Netanyahu has been in creating a common, indistinguishable identity between himself as an individual, the Likud as a political organization, and even the country itself. Netanyahu has reflected the core values of the Likud and, in a deeper way, the Israeli Right. In this regard, the argument of Caspit that "Bibi's new Likud was significantly less ideological than the old Likud"<sup>19</sup> is, at its core, incorrect. Netanyahu has simply adopted a newer and considerably more effective political style in "selling" the Likud ideology than the stale and ineffective

style of his immediate predecessor, Yitzhak Shamir. Netanyahu's style has been essentially a TV-based, American-inspired communicative style, reflecting his own remarkable ability to manipulate the party and, in effect, the entire country to meet his immediate political needs and interests.<sup>20</sup>

The political genius of Benjamin Netanyahu has been reflected in his ability to combine the fundamental ideology of his party<sup>21</sup> – the Likud – with his own remarkable talents as a political orator and use those to take advantage of opportunities presented to him by Israel's evolving political situation.

An example of this is Netanyahu's commitment to support energetically and consistently the settlement project in the West Bank, reflecting the territorial drive of the nationalist camp within Zionism since the 1920s, while deploying for his own political purposes the increasingly powerful settler movement in the West Bank. The Likud under Netanyahu was able to repeatedly win elections because of the support of the settlers and their political institutions. Netanyahu identified the settlement movement as a crucial electoral asset, taught himself to talk the settlers' language and convinced settlers in key political moments that only his regime was crucial both for their survival and for the achievement of their goals amid a hostile Palestinian population, the opposition of many Israelis (including the Old Elites) and widespread international pressure.

The Israeli election of 2015 provides a good example of Netanyahu's skill as a political leader. He was almost universally perceived to lose, but he was able in the last few days of the campaign to convince the settlers to abandon parties closer to them ideologically to sustain his position as prime minister. Thus, the settler movement became, in effect, Netanyahu's most crucial political "base"<sup>22</sup> even though in some of his statements and policies he deviated from their positions (e.g., his acceptance of the Oslo Accords, the recognition of the PLO as partner for negotiation or his endorsement or at least acceptance of the two-state solution).

Some analysts have argued that Netanyahu has been significantly less hardline in terms of his policies than other Likud leaders and that he has proven to be more pragmatic and even more compromising than his rhetorical pronouncements. This chapter, however, adopts a different interpretation of Netanyahu and the Likud by pointing out three key facts:

- 1 Overall, Netanyahu has carried out faithfully the Likud platform and, more broadly, the principles of right-wing Zionism, which are explored in more detail later in the chapter. In other words, Netanyahu must be seen as an ideological actor lacking the inclination or the ability to deviate from the nationalist orthodoxy on which he was raised.
- 2 While Netanyahu has made some concessions along the way – for example, signing the Wye Agreement in 1998 or agreeing to a settlement freeze in 2009 – these could and should be perceived and interpreted as merely tactical adjustments designed to maintain the overall program of the Zionist Right.<sup>23</sup>
- 3 The Likud itself, as Netanyahu's political base from the beginning of his political career, has not made it possible for him to show real flexibility on important

issues, and the same could be said of most of Netanyahu's coalition partners in practically all of his governments.

In 1999, the first Netanyahu's coalition (1996–1999) collapsed because of his lack of political experience and, more specifically, his inability to correctly assess the limits of his power within the “Nationalist Camp,” which comprised Likud and parties to its right. Under heavy pressure from the Clinton administration, Netanyahu showed tactical flexibility in agreeing to a limited withdrawal of Israeli forces from part of the city of Hebron. He was harshly criticized by right-wing elements (including former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir), was forced to run for reelection and lost power to Ehud Barak.

After seven years in the “political wilderness” (1999–2006), Netanyahu again won the Likud chairmanship. By that time, the country was governed by *Kadima*, a new political party that had promoted significantly more moderate policies than those of Likud despite the fact that it was led by former Likud members. The result was that Likud was seen by many Israeli voters as even less moderate and even more hawkish than before. The weakness of Likud, once again under Netanyahu's leadership, was reflected in the 2006 elections. The party won merely 12 seats in the Knesset.

Overall, it is clear that the Likud has gone through a constant struggle between its original ideological position and the need to come to terms with the reality of politics in the contemporary Middle East. The Oslo Accords (September 1993) is a particularly good example of this internal struggle. More specifically, the Likud under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu has experienced a real battle between ideological purity and pragmatic readjustment, and no one has proven more successful than Netanyahu in accommodating the traditional territorial ideology and the political necessities of the moment.

Following the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Likud under its new leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, was essentially shell-shocked, confused and bewildered. Its dreams of annexing the West Bank and Gaza – rekindled after 1967 (the Six-Day War) and especially after 1977 (Menachem Begin's victory in the elections) – had suddenly become irrelevant, a fantasy rejected by the entire outside world, as well as by the Israeli government itself and by most Israelis. The agreement between the Rabin government and the Palestine Liberation Organization under Yasser Arafat mandated Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with the assumption that these would lead to the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside that of Israel.

The Oslo Accords triggered a sharp ideological and emotional reaction by Netanyahu and the entire Likud party. Netanyahu's ideological belief system was challenged, and his reaction was as reflexive and instinctive as it was predictable. On September 5, 1993, the *New York Times* published an op-ed penned by the Likud leader under the title “Peace in Our Time.” He argued that the Oslo Accords presented a “mortal threat” to Israel and compared it to the Munich Agreement of 1938.

Why had Netanyahu responded so powerfully and negatively? Given that the Accords established a more limited autonomy for the Palestinians than the one promised to them in the Camp David Accord (an agreement that was signed by Likud's legendary leader Menachem Begin), Netanyahu could have adopted a more moderate critique, possibly pointing out some problems in the Rabin-Arafat deal and proposing revisions.

There are, it seems, two alternative explanations for Netanyahu's reaction to the Camp David Accords. First, as a new, young, inexperienced leader, he could not have afforded – or mistakenly believed he could not have afforded – to appear too moderate in view of his numerous Likud opponents and among Israel's Right in general. A second explanation, however, seems more reasonable, given what we know today about Netanyahu. This explanation is ideological and psychological. In reacting to Oslo, Netanyahu has simply shown his true ideological colors as a convinced Revisionist. While some Israeli premiers – Rabin and Sharon, for example – were essentially pragmatists, acting instrumentally to achieve their and Israel's goals, others – Shamir and Netanyahu, for example – were much more ideological; they were true believers and even “crusaders,” acting according to their inner convictions.

In reacting to Oslo in an extreme manner, Netanyahu and many Likudniks reacted in accordance with their fundamental belief system. Facing Oslo, their psychological shock was deep and genuine, confronting a rejection of their ideology not merely by the outside world, which has always supported partition, but also by an increasing number of Israelis, including many within the Likud rank and file.

For the first time since the transformative 1967 war, it became clear that Likud's vision of Israeli territorial expansion and Jewish exclusivity in Eretz Israel was unacceptable to major forces. Typically, many Likud leaders, such as Shamir and Netanyahu, could not admit publicly or even to themselves that their prophecy had failed.<sup>24</sup> Instead, Netanyahu and others in Likud explained away the new political developments by arguing that Rabin was “seducing” the Israeli public to support the agreement.

This “analysis,” developed by Netanyahu, assigned to himself superior analytical powers while allowing him to maintain his fundamental belief system. For Netanyahu and others in Likud, to accept Oslo would have amounted to negating everything that Revisionism has stood for since the early 1920s. The very integrity of the Revisionist belief system demanded a total rejection of Oslo. In rejecting Oslo, Netanyahu and his Likud supporters displayed a “closed mind”<sup>25</sup> in operation, dealing with the world not as it was but as they wanted it to be.<sup>26</sup>

Oslo is merely one example of Likud's internal struggle over its identity as a fundamentally ideological movement. While Oslo was a major shock to Likud, it quickly recuperated under Netanyahu's leadership and returned to power in 1996, only to lose its grip on power in 1999 and return to the opposition.

In the 2009 elections, the Likud returned to power for a longer period of time, winning 27 seats in the Knesset. The unilateral withdrawal of Israeli forces from



Gaza, ordered by Kadima's leader and then–Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, was seen by many Israelis as a fatal error. Netanyahu and the Likud used this narrative as a way of capturing the support of many of their countrymen.

After the elections, Tzipi Livni of *Kadima* was charged with forming a new government but failed. This failure opened the door for Netanyahu's return to power. Following intense negotiations, Netanyahu succeeded in forming a new coalition. He reemerged as Israel's prime minister. Moreover, Netanyahu won the following three elections (2013, 2015, and the first 2019 elections).

## Likud's ideological foundations

From the early 20th century, the Zionist movement, later the State of Israel, has been politically divided between those who were prepared to share Palestine with the Arabs, particularly through territorial partition, and those who claimed all of the land and, in some cases, even Transjordan. This factor became the major political fault line between the Zionist Right and the Zionist Left, determining the results of a series of great debates over the future of the land in 1922, 1937 and 1947. This divide has continued to dominate the Israeli political landscape since the 1967 war. Unlike other analysts (especially those who believe that the Likud had adopted a partition position), I believe that the resolution of this debate is not in sight; in fact, we might be moving away from it.

The ideological leader of the territorialist Right in the early 20th century was Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky (1880–1940), the man who developed "Revisionism." He was succeeded by Menachem Begin, who introduced some changes to the fundamental Revisionist belief system while maintaining its most important principles.

At the crucial moment of Israel's founding in mid-1948, the Zionist leadership under David Ben-Gurion, representing the vast majority of the Labor movement, accepted the partition offered by the United Nations and endorsed by both the United States and the USSR. As a pragmatist, Ben-Gurion thought that the partition was a positive step toward the fulfillment of Zionist goals. The opposition under Menachem Begin, however, rejected partition as a matter of principle.

This fundamental diversity of opinion, which goes back to the split within the Zionist Executive in 1922, has evolved into the greatest of all political debates in the history of Zionism and Israel – that between the territorial compromisers, who believe that some partition of the land is possible and desirable, and the supporters of "Greater Israel," who believe in un-partitioned land that is exclusively controlled by Israel as a Jewish state. For most of the post-1967 era, the Greater Israel camp has been led by the Likud, although other elements of Israeli society have been promoting an identical or a similar ideology, often with religious variants.

Since 1993, this right-wing, territorialist camp has been led by Benjamin Netanyahu as either its party chairman, its candidate for prime minister or its incumbent prime minister. It is therefore not possible to distinguish the Likud as a political organization from Benjamin Netanyahu as a leader.

For analytical purposes, it is important to realize that right-wing Israeli nationalism – found in Likud (under Netanyahu and the leaders who preceded him) and parties to the right of it (especially parties with a religious bent, such as *Habayit Hayehudi*) – is an identity-based ideology: At its foundation there is a belief system rooted in the perception that all of Eretz Yisrael belongs to only the Jews. It is thus an intellectual, a religious and a perceptual construction that goes far beyond any particular political calculation.

Secondly, there is an unmistakable, powerful territorialist element in the traditional Zionist Right's belief system, encapsulated in the term "Greater Israel." While the exact boundaries of that imagined entity have often been disputed among Zionists and especially among Rightists,<sup>27</sup> the maximalist-territorialist drive has remained rather constant on the right despite dramatic changes in the strategic situation faced first by the Zionists and then by the State of Israel. Territoriality (or the "territorial imperative") – that is, the "ideological drive for maximal geographical expansion of the State"<sup>28</sup> – has been the quintessential characteristic of right-wing Zionist and Israeli politics for almost 100 years.

Third, the right-wing political view of international politics has always been centered on what might be considered a somewhat crude realism, particularly, the belief that military power is the single key to all relations between nations. There has been a strong emphasis on military power going back to the founder of right-wing Israeli nationalism, Vladimir Jabotinsky, and this factor has clearly been continuing and in some ways has strengthened through Jabotinsky's self-described disciple, Menachem Begin.

In the right-wing Israeli political worldview, there is no contradiction between the idea of Greater Israel, strong territoriality and the emphasis on military power. In fact, I would argue that a reconciliation of these seemingly contradictory terms could be found in the notion of "Constructivist Realism," a concept that combines the insights of the realist and the constructivist approaches. While national power has been at the core of the Zionist Right's belief system, this belief system in its entirety has been grounded in the broader construct of that political camp.

### **The ideological evolution<sup>29</sup> of the Right, including Likud**

In assessing the ideological position of the Likud and of Netanyahu personally, it is important to have a dynamic, developmental approach, recognizing that this ideology has evolved for decades and changed from period to period while maintaining some crucial principles.

In this section, based on my previous research, I will provide a relatively brief analysis of the original Revisionist position as developed by Jabotinsky in the 1920s and 1930s, an equally brief exposition of what I call Begin's Neo-Revisionism (a product mostly of the 1940s to the 1980s), and then a longer analysis of Netanyahu's and Likud's ideological approach since the 1990s. Thus, the reader will be given a comprehensive review of the Right's ideology and, most importantly, its

evolution through the last four to five generations. Emphasis will be put on ideological changes while maintaining principles.

### ***Jabotinsky***

The principles of the Zionist Right were laid down during the illustrious career of Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky (1880–1940). They were adopted by his successors on the Zionist Right, and they still impact Likud and Netanyahu today.

First, there was the belief that power is the central factor in social and political life, especially internationally. It is reflected in Jabotinsky's 1910 Hobbesian pessimistic essay "A Man is a Wolf to Man,"<sup>30</sup> in which the readers are advised in a Rooseveltian manner to always carry their sticks with them as the "only way of surviving in this wolfish battle of all against all,"<sup>31</sup> a theme that is further developed in *Samson*,<sup>32</sup> Jabotinsky's most famous novel.

Like his political successors, including Netanyahu, Jabotinsky believed that the struggle for Palestine would be decided by the sword. In his most famous essay, "On the Iron Wall: We and the Arabs," he applies this belief to his own time, arguing that the Arabs will be defeated politically only if the Jews have superior military force. For Jabotinsky, who was greatly impacted by Italian nationalism (that eventually led to Fascism), history was determined by force and not by reason.<sup>33</sup>

Jabotinsky's thinking, however, was not primarily theoretical and abstract. In numerous writings he demanded the establishment of a Jewish state in all of Palestine (Eretz Israel) and on both sides of the Jordan River; territoriality was at the center of his thought. When a clear majority of Zionists and their leaders, rejected his advice, he established "Revisionism," a minority movement designed to promote maximalist territorial claims. His fiery speeches and writing encouraged others to take violent action,<sup>34</sup> as would be the case in later generations on the Zionist Right.

For Jabotinsky and, I would argue, his right-wing successors (including Netanyahu), the power of the nation was the key identity myth, an alternative to Labor's myth of establishing an egalitarian society. While Laborites dreamed of a society promoting universalistic values of peace and cooperation between all those living in Eretz Israel – including Arabs – Revisionists promoted the establishment of a particularistic, all-powerful, territorially expansive Jewish state, the reemergence of "Malchut Israel" (the Kingdom of Israel), the renewal of the glorious past. Those alternative myths still dominate the Israeli political debate today – the Right follows Jabotinsky's vision, and the Left endorses egalitarianism.

### ***Begin***

The sudden death of Jabotinsky in the summer of 1940 brought to the fore as his political and mainly ideological successor Menachem Begin, later the establisher of the Likud and Israel's prime minister. While an admirer and a self-described "disciple" of the Founding Father, Begin was not a blind follower of Jabotinsky.

In fact, on a number of occasions he challenged the much older man, and after his passing he developed an ideology that I would call Neo-Revisionism, an ideology that, while adopting many of Jabotinsky's ideas, changed some of them (often by radicalizing the original).

Begin's Neo-Revisionism can be summed up by five major ideas, some rooted in the original formula of Revisionism, others deviating from it in a significant manner:

- 1 A pronounced emphasis on power, especially in its military form – in this respect, Jabotinsky's ideas were accepted in full, yet while Jabotinsky never had the capacity to carry out his ideas through military means, Begin controlled the most powerful army in the Middle East and acted on occasion upon his convictions;
- 2 A tendency to romanticize the nation as the source of all virtue and an insistence that it is entitled to all the territory that it occupied in the past – while Begin accepted this premise of Jabotinsky, by the time he rose to Israel's premiership (1977), the East Bank, originally part of the Revisionist vision, had emerged as the very core of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and had thus become beyond reach; yet the territorial imperative remained central in Neo-Revisionist thinking, in total opposition to most Zionists and later to Israeli Jews who supported partition;
- 3 A perception of the non-Jewish world as not only inherently hostile to Israel and the Jewish people but also actively involved in efforts to cause severe harm to both. Interestingly, Jabotinsky saw the non-Jewish world in a substantially more positive light, leading the master and the disciple to public confrontations over this very issue;
- 4 A concentrated effort to dehumanize both the "enemy" – mostly Palestinians and other Arabs – and Jewish opponents, often condemned as "enemies of the people"; in this regard, Begin has measurably radicalized Jabotinsky;
- 5 Disrespect for international law and accepted norms of international behavior in the pursuit of the perceived national interest – e.g., the West Bank "settlement project."

## ***Netanyahu***

It is interesting and important to examine Netanyahu's philosophy in relation to the legacies of both Vladimir Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin, as well as Yitzhak Shamir, who was both Begin's successor as Israel's premier and Likud's leader and the man who chose Netanyahu as a public official and thus started his political career. In general, it could be argued that Netanyahu has developed a belief system and a set of policies that combine in a creative and fairly effective manner the ideas promoted by his predecessors as leaders of the Zionist Right.

Following the defeat of Shamir in the 1992 election, when he ran against Yitzhak Rabin, Netanyahu was elected as Likud's leader and eventually became

premier in 1996 (serving until 1999) and again in 2009 (still serving at the time of writing). In general, while Shamir was seen by many Israelis and by most non-Israelis as a radical, stubborn and non-compromising leader, his defeat was not perceived by the Israeli Right, particularly Likud members, as a repudiation of its ideology or long-term policies.

In fact, the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Likud leader in 1993 should be seen as a collective effort by Likud voters, activists and leaders to revive and energize the Nationalist Right, not as a move toward moderating or substantially revising the political message of that camp. In several fundamental respects, Netanyahu continued the policies and positions laid down by Jabotinsky, Begin and Shamir, although he has often presented these positions to the world in a new and generally more effective manner.

At the time of his election as Likud's leader, Netanyahu published *A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World*, a comprehensive treatise that reveals his ideology. Along with other publications, interviews, and speeches delivered over the last three decades, this book reveals the man, his thought processes, beliefs, and likely policies.<sup>35</sup>

In general, Netanyahu's approach to Israel's challenges is revealed in his *magnum Opus*. Despite some nuances, it is similar to the approach taken by previous leaders of the Zionist Right. Like them, he offers a distinctly territorial approach to Israel's political challenges by recommending the eventual Israeli annexation of all territories occupied during the 1967 war. Writes Netanyahu: "One simply cannot talk about peace and security for Israel and in the same breath expect Israel to significantly alter its existing defense boundaries."<sup>36</sup> It is instructive to note that the Likud leader and future premier dressed up his territorial position in a security argument, rejecting the exchange of territories for peace as the foundation of Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation.

Moreover, Netanyahu's "Territorial Imperative"<sup>37</sup> is not merely about controlling real estate – it is also about the hegemony of power in Israel. Within the future Greater Israel, Netanyahu envisions only Jews as having real political power, radicalizing the position taken by Jabotinsky, and, in fact, hinting at things to come once the Right assumed political power in Israel.<sup>38</sup> Palestinians in the future Israel might have rights as individuals but never as a group.

While Netanyahu is a territorialist *par excellence*, he justifies his land grab by a historical narrative that is often inaccurate, incomplete, and biased. Thus, he argues that Britain promised Palestine in its entirety (i.e., on both sides of the Jordan River) to the Jewish people, even though the Balfour Declaration on which he bases his argument spoke merely of a Jewish national home – not a state – in Palestine; that is, not necessarily in all of the undefined "Palestine." Furthermore, both the British and the League of Nations clarified their position in the early 1920s, limiting the national home to Western Palestine but, once again, not delivering this entire area to the Jews. In pushing the Rightist narrative, Netanyahu ignores important events, such as the issuance of the Churchill White Paper in 1922, which codified the separation of Transjordan from the Palestine Mandate and its endorsement by

both the League of Nations and the Zionist Executive (representing the vast majority of the Zionists, both in Palestine and worldwide). As prime minister he would continue to do the same.

In discussing the 1937 Peel's partition plan – the first official document endorsing partition as the only solution to the Arab-Jewish dispute – Netanyahu fails to mention that the majority among Zionists have expressed a willingness to negotiate on the basis of that plan, unconvinced by the arguments of the Revisionists (including Netanyahu's own father).<sup>39</sup> Similar treatment is given to the 1947 UN partition plan, accepted by the vast majority of Zionists and other Jews, as well as the emerging Government of Israel.<sup>40</sup>

As a committed territorialist, the Likud leader and future premier offers his readers a history lesson from a Revisionist, Neo-Revisionist, and post-1967 Annexationist perspective, trying to erase one simple fact: The majority of Zionists, Jews, and Israelis have been ready to partition the land as a means for resolving the Jewish-Arab or Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while a minority on the Right (as well as many Palestinians) have refused (as a matter of principle) to even consider such a solution.

In his book, and later as Israel's premier and Likud leader, Netanyahu has essentially updated the traditional position of the Right, although keeping its spirit and often its letter intact. In his attempt to update the Revisionist position, Netanyahu mounted an assault on Security Council Resolution 242, the 15:0 United Nations call for Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied in the 1967 war in return for Arab recognition of and peace with Israel. In a similar manner, Netanyahu has argued that the 1978 Camp David Accords – negotiated and signed by Likud leader and Israel Premier Menachem Begin – does not block the annexation of the West Bank by Israel.

It is important to realize that Benjamin Netanyahu has not been a blind, unthoughtful follower of his predecessors, either in his ideology or in his action. On the contrary, throughout his 13 years as Israel's prime minister, he has come across as a well-read and an innovative thinker and as a decisive policy-maker. Above all, however, Netanyahu has chosen selectively from the repertoire of the Zionist Right and adopted positions and policies that have matched the general philosophy of that camp.

In terms of the Arabs, Netanyahu has tended to be closer to Begin's Neo-Revisionism than to Jabotinsky's Revisionism, although in some significant ways Netanyahu has struck a new position that moved away from strictly following either of these brands of Zionism. Thus, in an effort to minimize the centrality of Palestinian nationalism and its claim for an independent state – a centrality that has dominated the political scene for the last few decades and particularly since the First Intifada (1987) – Netanyahu has insisted that the major problems of the Middle East are Muslim and Arab hostility toward the West, pan-Arab nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism and a lack of democracy in the Arab and the Muslim worlds.

In *A Place Among the Nations*, Netanyahu argues, in the chapter titled "The Theory of Palestinian Centrality," that "only against the background of this intense

animus toward the West can the Arab rejection of Israel be grasped.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, for Netanyahu, the cause of Arab hatred toward Israel is to be found in Arab hatred of the West, not the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The dual advantage of Netanyahu’s position is that it could convince Western observers, for whom his book is written, that the main issue is the very nature of Arab hostility to the West, not Israeli occupation of Palestinian-inhabited lands. In other words, Netanyahu’s position is that no matter what Israel does, it will continue to be vehemently rejected by all Arabs as part and parcel of the Arabs’ anti-Western position. While Netanyahu’s rhetoric is quite impressive – and he has been as effective a speaker as he has been a writer – he has failed miserably in convincing people outside Israel that the Palestinian problem is marginal.

In comparing Netanyahu to his predecessors on the Right, it is important to note that while Jabotinsky and other Revisionists, as well as non-Revisionists, viewed the Arab challenge to Zionist settlement as authentic and even inevitable – in other words, they were completely Realist in their approach to the emerging conflict – Netanyahu tends to dismiss Palestinian desire for independence as artificial, manufactured, and marginal, essentially an “invention.” For him, the Palestinians have no legitimate claim to any part of the disputed land. Netanyahu’s fundamental approach is, thus, unpromising from the perspective of territorial compromise.

One of Netanyahu’s most interesting arguments is that the Arabs can never be “real partners” for peace and reconciliation unless they democratize.<sup>42</sup> This argument is problematic. First, Israel has already signed peace treaties with two nondemocratic states, as well as several agreements with nondemocratic Syria, and in all of these cases the treaties and agreements were, by and large, maintained. Second, Israel has had long-term close relationships with countries such as non-democratic Jordan. Third, democracy in the Arab world could actually be harmful for Israeli–Arab relations given that several elements within Arab societies – intellectuals, academics, media – tend to be highly anti-Israel; ironically, strongmen such as Mubarak and Sadat, as well as several monarchs, had a much easier path for dealing with the Israelis. Above all, Netanyahu’s democracy argument looks like yet another excuse for not dealing directly and boldly with the crux of the conflict, the Palestinian issue.

In part of his book and in other pronouncements, Netanyahu resorts to arguments that are false and baseless and have proven to be such for decades. He asserts that the occupied territories are “in large part vacant,”<sup>43</sup> repeating an old and refuted assertion.

Given that millions of Palestinians with increasing national aspirations reside in the West Bank and that much of the world supports their aspiration for independence, how does Netanyahu propose to deal with the issue? Netanyahu’s “solution” is to establish autonomy as a permanent condition for the West Bank Palestinians, while Israel maintains its sovereignty over the West Bank and Gaza<sup>44</sup> and continues to settle the occupied territories without limitation. The autonomy idea is Neo-Revisionist and comes from Begin, but it has no chance of being accepted by the Palestinians and other Arabs – or, for that matter, by the rest of the world.

Netanyahu, however, has gone much beyond Begin in proposing that Israel annex the West Bank and that four specified Palestinian urban areas (constituting about 20 percent of the West Bank) receive local autonomy.<sup>45</sup> Netanyahu's ideas in regard to autonomy were as strongly rejected as Begin's were 15 years before, with critics describing the proposed Palestinian enclaves with charged (and often intentionally ironic) language – for example, “ghetto,” “Soweto” and “Pale of settlement.” In 2009, although Netanyahu indicated support of the two-state solution, there could be no question that he much preferred the autonomy scheme as a permanent solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thereby continuing the Right's tradition.

### Likud's foreign policy under Netanyahu

In terms of foreign policy, six important points ought to be made about Netanyahu, both as leader of Likud and as prime minister:

- 1 From the start of his political career, Benjamin Netanyahu has been an opponent of the two-state solution as a way of solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While he accepted such a solution in his famous Bar-Ilan speech (2009), he couched his “acceptance” in so many conditions that the clear impression left within Israel and in the international community was that he never actually accepted the two-state idea and that he had no intention of ever carrying it out.<sup>46</sup>
- 2 Netanyahu has been a determined opponent of the entire Oslo Accords, even though he was eventually forced to accept it publicly under American pressure and the public reaction to the Rabin assassination. When the emerging Israeli-Palestinian agreement was announced in late August 1993, Netanyahu immediately expressed his fierce, uncompromising opposition to it, comparing the deal to the Munich Agreement of 1938, which paved the way for Hitler's conquest of most of Europe. In doing so, Netanyahu appealed to the emotions among Israelis and Jews in general, calling on them to oppose the path to peace envisioned by Yitzhak Rabin.
- 3 While Jabotinsky was an admirer of the British Empire and sought to remain in its good graces, Netanyahu has long been an admirer of the United States and has always tried to maintain the closest possible relations with it. Both Jabotinsky and Netanyahu had great difficulties in sustaining their relationships with Great Britain and the United States, respectively – each man had policy goals opposed by the nation he sought to emulate. Netanyahu had bad relationships with at least two American presidents, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, although he had a much better relationship with Obama's successor, Donald Trump (see Chapter 7).
- 4 Netanyahu has been a great believer in the use of military force as a major instrument for achieving Israel's (or perhaps Netanyahu's) national goals<sup>47</sup> – the eventual annexation of the West Bank, Israeli regional hegemony and a



sustained, special relationship with the United States. Like Jabotinsky, Netanyahu has promoted the idea that peace with the Arabs – or at least their acceptance of a Jewish presence in Palestine – could be achieved only through deterrence and demonstrated military superiority.<sup>48</sup>

- 5 Netanyahu has never entertained the idea that peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians is either possible or even desirable. His “solutions” to the long-term conflict have always gravitated toward one side submitting to the dominance of the other.
- 6 In general, Netanyahu’s foreign policy has closely followed his ingrained ideology rather than taking advantage of opportunities to advance Israel’s interests.<sup>49</sup> The principles and the goals of the ideology have remained intact – territorial expansion of the nation and one-sided rule inside the state, as demonstrated by the recent Nation-State Law. The tactics and the rhetoric have been more flexible, enabling Netanyahu to be more effective than some of his predecessors.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusions: theorizing Netanyahu, the Zionist Right and the Likud

At least seven specific factors have prevented Netanyahu’s moving from the status quo of post-1967 Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank to a two-state solution or any other power-sharing deal with the Palestinians:

- 1 The traditional ideology of the Zionist Right in all its forms (particularly the secular-nationalistic-territorialistic variant rooted in Jabotinsky’s Revisionism);
- 2 Netanyahu’s cautious personality and natural inclination to avoid far-reaching political initiatives;<sup>51</sup>
- 3 The overall conservative nationalism of his political party (Likud) and its supporters;
- 4 His coalition partners (some having even more radical right-wing positions than the Likud’s);
- 5 Israel’s sociopolitical rightward movement since the outbreak of the Second Intifada, also called the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000);
- 6 A lack of political pressure from the United States;
- 7 The Palestinians’ reluctance to compromise and their inability to produce an authoritative, unified leadership.

Analysts such as Ethan Bronner, Joel Greenberg, and Avi Shilon have argued that Netanyahu is now a nonideological pragmatist, has become one over the last few years, or may become one in the future,<sup>52</sup> that the Likud as a large political party has already deserted its historical commitment to Greater Israel,<sup>53</sup> and that the two-state solution has been accepted by Netanyahu not only formally but essentially. Several events over the last 40–45 years have led such keen observers to that conclusion, including Begin’s decision not to annex the West Bank following his 1977 ascendancy to the prime minister’s office and his acceptance of competing

claims to the West Bank (reflected by the Camp David Accords in 1978), and Netanyahu's decision to share Hebron with the Palestinian Authority (resulting in the Palestinians' full or partial control of about 40 percent of the West Bank) and his acceptance of the two-state solution in the famous Bar-Ilan speech.<sup>54</sup> The Hebron agreement in particular was mentioned by the promoters of the "moderation thesis" as evidence that Likud has accepted the idea of partition, thereby joining the Israeli Left and Center-Left and the vast majority of non-Middle Eastern governments, organizations, and analysts.

I do not share this moderation thesis and assess the probability of its implementation as extremely low for the seven specific reasons mentioned earlier. Furthermore, I believe that those factors – especially in their complex and reinforcing combination – make any fundamental change in Netanyahu's position extremely unlikely for the foreseeable future.

In this context, it must be remembered that the Zionist Right is nearing its "centennial" – it began, one can argue, in 1922 as a result of Jabotinsky's withdrawal from the Zionist Executive in opposition to the British decision to "partition" Palestine and limit Jewish settlement and the applicability of the Balfour Declaration only to Western Palestine. Over the last ten decades, the territorialist Zionist Right has often been thought to be completely defeated – in 1937, when the Zionist majority accepted the first proposed partition of Palestine (the Peel Report); in 1947, when the UN General Assembly authoritatively endorsed partition; in 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed; and so forth. But on each of these occasions the "lion" came back roaring, intensifying the demand for Jewish or Israeli exclusive control of Palestine in its entirety or at least of Western Palestine. Moreover, right-wing Zionism, traditionally the "odd man out" among Zionists and later Israelis, has now taken control over the hegemonic, unchallengeable narrative in Israel, to a large extent because of the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu and the persistence of Likud's ideology and policies.

The process that brought the Likud to power in Israel is fascinating and has enormous implications for the future. The political rehabilitation of the traditionally marginalized Herut, Begin's ultranationalist party, started in 1965, when it created an alliance with the respectable middle-class Liberal Party, itself a continuation of the General Zionists. This alliance, called Gahal (bloc of Herut and Liberals), gave Begin and his political colleagues broader legitimacy within the Israeli public. It led eventually to the election of Menachem Begin as Israel's premier in 1977. What is truly remarkable and highly important for the future of Israel is that, throughout the many years of national, regional, and international turbulence since the 1967 war, the Zionist Right (particularly the Likud) has remained essentially stable, particularly in terms of its adherence to fundamental ideological principles (although much less so in terms of policies).

The central factor of this stability is the Territorial Imperative, "a societal and often ideological drive for maximal geographical expansion of the State."<sup>55</sup> This particular factor has its roots in Jabotinsky's Revisionism and in Menachem Begin's more radical Neo-Revisionism.

Through the years, another principle has emerged among Israeli right-wingers – the exclusive control of the Israeli political system and the Israeli society by Jews, a principle that is reflected in the recent Nation-State Law. This law does not mention “equality” as a guiding principle of the Israeli regime, and it privileges the status of Hebrew while diminishing the status of Arabic, clearly in contradiction to Israel’s Declaration of Independence and Israeli practice since 1948.

This particular law came on top of numerous other initiatives designed to move Israel to the right, including the empowerment of the education minister to bar groups that criticize the Israeli occupation of the West Bank from speaking in public schools, limiting Palestinians’ access to the Israeli Supreme Court in land disputes, and blocking single men and gay couples from having children through surrogacy and so forth.<sup>56</sup> The *New York Times* called the Nation-State Law the “capstone,” a “law granting the Jewish people an exclusive right to national self-determination.”<sup>57</sup> The Law undermines Israeli pluralism and reflects a process of constant outbidding on the part of politicians seeking the support of their core primary-campaign voters. Prime Minister Netanyahu dismissed the widespread criticism of the new Nation-State Law; in fact, he described it as “the essence of the Zionist vision.” Some observers have interpreted the new law as clear evidence that the Right is moving closer to formally annexing the West Bank to Israel despite the fact that this will increase the minority Arab population from 20 to 40 percent.<sup>58</sup>

It seems that by mid-2019 the foreign and domestic policies of Netanyahu’s Likud (particularly toward the Arab minority) have merged into one indistinguishable ultranationalist and illiberal position, an extreme version of what some call “majoritarianism.”<sup>59</sup> The rise of illiberalism inside Israel has been a result of the long-term occupation of the West Bank, a condition that has hastened and deepened long-term processes within the Israeli society and polity.

In the final analysis, right-wing Zionism is above all about the national identity of Israeli Jews, an identity that has been rooted in the deep hunger for national redemption, the accumulation of national power (especially in its military form), and the expansive territorial control over all areas historically possessed (or allegedly possessed) by the ancient Israelites. Right-wing Zionism is a significantly more radical variant of Jewish identity than other types of Zionism, which typically allow non-nationalistic elements – such as social and political equality among all citizens and an emphasis on liberal and democratic perspectives – to be adopted in the State of Israel along with Zionist national goals. Unless right-wing Zionism’s nationalist zeal can be balanced by the acceptance of the non-Jewish other in Israel/Palestine, the long-term conflict between Jews and Arabs will continue and most likely intensify.

Netanyahu has been the undisputed leader of right-wing Zionism and the Likud party, particularly over the last decade but in many ways since the early 1990s. His leadership capabilities, particularly his oratorical skill, have allowed him to shape the parameters of “Israeliness” over the last few decades.

The French philosopher Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821) famously said that “every nation has the government it deserves.” Paraphrasing de Maistre and

applying his quote to contemporary Israeli politics, one can say that every party has the leader it deserves, and the Likud has surely deserved Netanyahu, who seems to uniquely combine a strict nationalist-territorialist variant of Zionism rooted in 1920s Revisionism, brilliant oratory in both Hebrew and English, great facility in expressing the Jewish-Israeli victimhood narrative, and the effective promotion of the politics of fear among his followers. In combining those characteristics, Benjamin Netanyahu has become the ideal leader for the Likud.

## Notes

- 1 On the general topic, see Harry Eckstein, "A Culturalist Theory of Political Change," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3 (September 1988), pp. 789–804; On Israel specifically, see Yitzhak Laor, *Narratives with No Natives: Essays on Israeli Literature* (Hebrew, Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Mehuah, 1995); Arye Carmon, *Beyond Exile & Return: Redefining the Concept of Peoplehood* (Hebrew, Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Mehuah, 1994); on combining the general and the particular and other sections in this part of the article, see Ilan Peleg, "The Peace Process and Israel's Political Kulturkampf," in *The Middle East Peace Process: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Ilan Peleg (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), pp. 237–263.
- 2 Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).
- 3 Eric Silver, *Begin: The Hunted Prophet* (New York: Random House, 1984); Ilan Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy: Israel's Move to the Right, 1977–1983* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).
- 4 My position here is different from that of other analysts who have argued that Netanyahu and even the Likud have moderated their position in regard to the final status of the West Bank.
- 5 See, for example, Dante L. Germino, *Antonio Gramsci: Architect of a New Politics* (New Orleans: Louisiana University Press, 1990).
- 6 In this context, the new Nation-State Law will be analyzed. For the broader context of Jewish-Arab relations, see Amal Jamal, *Arab Minority Nationalism in Israel: The Politics of Indigeneity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Ian Lustick, *Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel's Control of a National Minority* (Austin: University of Texas, 1980); Ilan Peleg and Dov Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians: The Conflict Within* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- 7 For the text of the Bar-Ilan speech by Netanyahu, see *Haaretz*, January 14, 2009.
- 8 While not all Likud leaders and members supported this idea, Netanyahu has become the quintessential Israeli Neoconservative. See Guy Ben-Porat, "Netanyahu's Second Coming: A Neoconservative Policy Paradigm?" *Israel Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Fall 2005), pp. 225–245.
- 9 The July 2018 Nation-State Bill reflects this particular Likud goal.
- 10 MAPAI was the dominant party within the Alignment (Maarach).
- 11 This process was particularly noticeable within the MAFDAL.
- 12 The emergence of Gush Emunim, the Bloc of the Faithful, was the most important event in that regard.
- 13 See, for example, Avi Shilon, "Likud: From Begin to Bibi," *The Daily Beast*, February 5, 2013.
- 14 Ilan Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy: Israel's Move to the Right* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1987), especially Ch. 4. This section is based on Peleg's 1987 book.
- 15 Yaffa Moskovich, "Authoritarian Management Style in the Likud Party Under the Leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu," *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2009, pp. 141–160.

- 16 Ben Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years* (Tel-Aviv: Hemed Books, 2018), p. 89 (Hebrew).
- 17 Moscovich, "Authoritarian Management Style in the Likud Party", p. 141.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- 20 It should be noted in this context that Netanyahu used in his many campaigns American political advisors, particularly image-makers. For comprehensive coverage of Netanyahu's personality, politics and policies see the recently published biographies of him by Caspit (2018), Lochery (2016), and Pfeffer (2018) in the Bibliography of this chapter.
- 21 More on this ideology is explored later on.
- 22 The analogous situation to that of the United States is fascinating, where the leader appeals to his core supporters. Orban in Hungary is another good example.
- 23 Even Begin's agreement to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula could be interpreted as a concession designed to maintain Israeli control over Judea and Samaria. See Peleg, *Begin's Foreign Policy*, Ch. 6.
- 24 Leon Festinger, *When Prophecy Fails* (St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).
- 25 Milton Rokeach, *The Open and the Closed Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1960).
- 26 Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross and Mark L. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation & Attitude Polarization: The Effect of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (1979), pp. 2098–2109.
- 27 Arye Naor, *Greater Israel: Theology & Policy* (Haifa & Lod, 2001) (Hebrew).
- 28 Gad Barzilai and Ilan Peleg, "Israel and Future Borders: Assessment of a Dynamic Process," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 59–73.
- 29 See, for example, Ethan Bronner, "Netanyahu, Once Hawkish, Now Touts Pragmatism," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2009, speculating on the eve of Netanyahu resuming his premiership that Bibi wanted to form a centrist governing coalition.
- 30 Zeev Jabotinsky, *Ktavim* (Writings), Vol. 26, No. 265 (Hebrew). This analysis, and the analysis of Begin (below), draws heavily on Peleg, 1987.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 Jabotinsky, *Samson* (Tel-Aviv, 1976) (Hebrew).
- 33 Joseph Schechtman, *Fighter & Prophet: The Vladimir Jabotinsky Story* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), esp. 476–477.
- 34 Organizations such as Brit Habirionim, the Etzel (commanded by Menachem Begin) and Lechi (commanded by Yitzhak Shamir) were directly inspired by Jabotinsky, as was Yigal Amir (the assassin of Yitzhak Rabin) by radical politicians and rabbis five decades later.
- 35 Merely three years after the publication of the book, Netanyahu was elected as Israel's premier. Most analysis here and below appears in my previous publications.
- 36 Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place Among the Nations* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), p. 343.
- 37 Barzilai and Peleg, "Israel and Future Borders."
- 38 The numerous legislative initiatives under the Likud, esp. since 2009, are very instructive in this regard. See Ayelet Harel-Shalev and Ilan Peleg, "Hybridity & Israel's Democratic Order: The End of an Imperfect Balance?" *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2014), pp. 74–94. The new Nation-State law is also extremely relevant.
- 39 Netanyahu statement that the Peel plan was "rejected by both Arabs and Jews" (xvii) is a clear falsehood.
- 40 Netanyahu, *A Place Among the Nations*, p. 68.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 351.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- 46 His father, Benzion Netanyahu, said as much in an interview he gave a short time after the Bar-Ilan speech.

- 47 Although on a few occasions Netanyahu was significantly more restrained than several of his ministers, both in regard to Gaza and in regard to Lebanon; this relative moderation has reflected Netanyahu's cautious approach, especially in regard to war and peace issues.
- 48 This idea became known as the "iron wall," following a famous essay by Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky under this very title, "The Iron Wall: We and the Arabs," *Razsviet* (Russian), April 11, 1923; Jabotinsky, "The Ethics of the Iron Wall," *The Jewish Standard* (London), May 9, 1941 (originally published on November 11, 1923 in *Razsviet*). Ian S. Lustick has written extensively on the use of the term "Iron Wall" and its implications. See Ian S. Lustick, "To Build and to Be Built By: Israel and the Hidden Logic of the Iron Wall," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 196–223.
- 49 Examples for Israeli prime ministers taking advantage of changes in the international situation include Menachem Begin's decision to conclude peace with Egypt (1977–79) or Yitzhak Rabin's decision to sign the Oslo agreement in 1993. Netanyahu's reluctance to move forward on the "peace agenda" has followed Yitzhak Shamir's veto in 1987 of Peres' negotiations with the Jordanian government.
- 50 Especially ineffective was Yitzhak Shamir, a man who actually brought Netanyahu into politics and who shared with him a fundamental belief system.
- 51 One might even say that Bibi Netanyahu prefers to write and especially speak about history rather than making history, although his passive non-decision inclination is, in and of itself, highly influential for Israeli, regional and even world history, given Israeli military hegemony in the Middle East.
- 52 A hope that one could call "waiting for Bibi," along the lines of Samuel Beckett's famous play "Waiting for Godot." Like the mysterious Godot, Netanyahu never arrives, certainly in terms of initiating any concrete, relevant peace plan between Israel and the Palestinians.
- 53 Dore Gold, a close associate of Netanyahu, said to Bronner that "Likud as a party has made a major transformation in the last 15 years from being rigidly committed to retaining all the land of Israel to looking pragmatically at how to retain for Israel defensible borders in a very uncertain Middle East" (Bronner, "Netanyahu Once Hawkish").
- 54 See Joel Greenberg, "Pursuing Peace: Netanyahu & His Party Turn Away from 'Greater Israel,'" *The New York Times*, November 22, 1998.
- 55 Barzilai and Peleg, "Israel and Future Borders," p. 61.
- 56 See David M. Halbfinger, "Israel Cements Right-Wing Agenda in a Furious Week of Lawmaking," *New York Times*, July 20, 2018.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ran Shkolnick, "The Nationality Law – Evidence of the Right's Intention to Annex the West Bank?" *Al-Monitor*, August 9, 2028.
- 59 Doron Navot and Yoav Peled, "Ethnic Democracy Revisited: On the State of Democracy in the Jewish State," *Israel Studies Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 3–27.

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# 2

## THE ZIONIST CENTER-LEFT OPPOSITION TO NETANYAHU

*Yael Aronoff*

Scholars and pundits alike point to the rightward shift in Israeli politics and the ineffectiveness of the center-left to win elections, much less stand as a formidable opposition to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Israel has remained a polarized society in which the center-right and the center-left blocs have not changed much in relative size during the last nine years of Netanyahu's reign as prime minister. Between 2005 and 2013, one could argue that the "center held." The centrist Kadima, founded in 2005 by Ariel Sharon to continue his planned unilateral disengagement from the West Bank, led the Israeli government from 2005 to 2009. In the 2009 election, Kadima, under Tzipi Livni, won more votes than Netanyahu with a platform of reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority. In 2013, the Zionist center-left collectively won 48 seats and the Arab parties won 11, for a total of 59 – nearly half the 120 Knesset seats. In the 2015 election, Likud was able to garner more seats (up to 30) largely from taking votes from other parties on the right, rather than gaining back votes from previous supporters of the center-left. The Right bloc won four fewer seats, 57, than it had won previously. The center-left parties, along with the Arab Joint List, still had 53 seats – a gain of two from the previous election – and the center-right Kulanu party could theoretically have made a coalition with the center-left.<sup>1</sup>

The center and the center-left have remained relatively stable through this period, so what accounts for the perceived relative weakness of the center-left to take back power or challenge the authority of Netanyahu's governments? Why, in 2013 and 2015, didn't the center and the center-left get more votes than the Likud or Likud-Lieberman bloc, and why have they not been able to form coalitions as they did in 2009?

In the following pages, I will suggest that the failure of the center-left to sufficiently challenge Netanyahu's rule over the past nine years is due to a combination



of factors: the center-right adopting some main positions of the center-left, the cooptation of the opposition, the stalemate in peace negotiations and continued violence, the lack of unity among the center-left, the continued challenge of the center-left to appeal to more religious and Mizrahi Israeli voters and to align with Arab Israeli Parties, latent sexism in Israeli political culture that hampered the success of female leaders of center-left parties, and multiple mistakes made by its leaders. After surveying these factors, I will suggest some signs that conditions may be ripe for a center-left reawakening.

## **Factors contributing to the Zionist center-left failure to challenge Netanyahu**

### ***1 Diminishing ideological clarity and cooptation by the Right***

While the ideological divisions among the center-right and the center-left remain, they have diminished over time. Israeli center-left parties long ago rejected their socialist roots, even though they still are relatively more committed to providing a social safety net than Likud. In addition, acceptance of a two-state solution has become a stance spanning from the left to the center to many parts of the right. Many individuals in right-leaning parties have either shifted to center parties around this issue or, if they remain in right-wing parties, at least rhetorically support a two-state solution. To get elected in 1996, Netanyahu famously shifted his position to support the previous government's commitments in Oslo; until this point, the Oslo Accords had been anathema to all parties on the right. From 2009 onward Netanyahu has rhetorically supported the idea of two states, as have parts of the Likud and the Yisrael Beitenu parties. The "Princes of the Likud," including Ehud Olmert, Dan Meridor, Tzipi Livni, Ron Milo, and others, came to support a two-state solution. Even the current far right-wing government has not yet dared to reject the Oslo Accords, says it is willing to negotiate with the Palestinian Authority, and, some suggest, has directly negotiated with Hamas.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the stark clarity that was offered in the 1992 election between Yitzhak Rabin, who wanted to urgently find a political solution to Israel's conflict with the Palestinians within a year, and Yitzhak Shamir, who was unwilling to abandon even one inch of the West Bank, has diminished. In the 2015 election, Likud did not even have a party platform, perhaps indicating the diminishing of clear ideological goals and priorities. Both Likud and the major center-left parties appeal to a greater extent to instrumental arguments than they do to ideological values.<sup>3</sup> Naomi Chazan claims that the back-and-forth between Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni confused people who wanted to know what they were voting for. Michael Biton of the Labor Party argued that ideology is changing radically and that politicians have to act by personal and social values, not by ideology.<sup>4</sup>

Contributing to the lack of ideological clarity between the center-left and the center-right was the stagnation of the peace process and mass social protests in 2011 over rising housing and food costs. In the 2013 election cycle, no parties

prioritized the urgency of peace negotiations as they had in 1992, 1996, 2000, 2001, and 2009. In 2013, Shelly Yachimovitch, leader of the Labor Party, did not highlight the importance of peace negotiations as much as her successor did in 2015. Likewise, Yair Lapid, chair of the centrist Yesh Atid party, emphasized socioeconomic factors in that election. Even Meretz, the most left-leaning Zionist party, which has been relatively more likely to retain its ideological purity, did not highlight peace and security issues in the 2009 and 2013 elections as definitively as it had in the past. In contrast, Meretz sharpened its positions on the left in 2015 rather than water them down.

Several Netanyahu governments also have tried to coopt the opposition parties by bringing them into the government and thereby weakening their opposition. Many of the center-left leaders were eager to join his governments, having become accustomed to being in power. This happened in the past as well: At other times when Labor was out of power, it continued to act as if it were entitled to govern the nation. Myron Aronoff quotes Moshe Carmel, former transport minister and a Labor Knesset member for five terms, who made this observation at the time of the Labor Party national convention in November 1991:

Labor's greatest problem is that it cannot come to terms with being in the opposition. Somehow, subconsciously, it still regards itself as the party to which power naturally belongs. For many years, it was accustomed to running things and determining the fate of the nation, and it can't accept or come to grips with anything different.<sup>5</sup>

As a case in point, the Labor Party joined the Sharon government in 2005 and thereby made sure Sharon had the support he needed to disengage from Gaza and get the security barrier built closer to the 1967 border than Sharon had planned. At the same time, it failed to orchestrate the disengagement in a manner that would have highlighted cooperation with Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas, thereby enabling him to benefit from the withdrawal; instead credit went to Hamas.<sup>6</sup>

Another example is Ehud Barak's decision to remain in Netanyahu's government after 2011. Barak, who had been prime minister for 18 months in 2000–2001, was the leader of the Labor Party until January 2011. Barak was in the Netanyahu government as minister of defense and deputy prime minister from 2009 to 2013. According to Barak, the decision by the Labor Party's central committee to join the Netanyahu government in 2009 was "For them, the choice between a share of power, however limited, and the wilderness of the opposition," while for him the decision to join rested on his concern about Iran's nuclear ambitions and his desire to engage in at least some peace process with the Palestinians.<sup>7</sup> In 2011, Labor party colleagues urged Barak to leave the Netanyahu government, and eight Labor MKs left the coalition in protest of the collapse of the Middle East peace negotiations. Isaac Herzog was one of the Labor ministers who quit the governing coalition, saying that this would pave the way for "a renewal of the party and its return to social

action and true vision.” He argued, “The time has come to stop lying to ourselves and leave the government which has brought us to a dead end and forced upon us Avigdor Lieberman and his party with its unacceptable racist discourse which threatens our democracy.”<sup>8</sup>

Instead, Barak formed a new centrist party, Atzmaut (Independence) which remained in the coalition with four other Labor members who joined. It did not significantly distinguish itself from other centrist parties, such as Kadima and Ha’tnuah, but was a vehicle for Barak to remain in the government. Barak said that it would be a “centrist, Zionist and democratic” party and declared that the break was also due to deep factions within Labor.<sup>9</sup> Barak later regretted his joining and staying in Netanyahu’s government, as it discredited him further among many center-left supporters. Barak acknowledged, “I underestimated the amount of energy, time, thought and sophistication that should be invested in just holding [a party] together.”<sup>10</sup> He also regrets having agreed in 2009 to become Netanyahu’s defense minister. Barak thought that he would be helpful with Iran and that he might have more influence over the Palestinian issue because it was secondary in importance to Iran for Netanyahu.<sup>11</sup>

At other times, Barak has defended his decision to create his own party and leave Labor to stay in Netanyahu’s government. He argues that he was one of the only strong voices seriously considering the targeting of Iranian nuclear facilities and that to maximize the chances of implementing this, he had to stay in the government. He says that his Labor Party friends disagreed and split but that “there are more important things than party.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Barak’s splitting of four members of Labor to form a new centrist party weakened the Labor Party and its ability to challenge Netanyahu in a unified fashion. Each time a center-left party considered joining the government, it was controversial within the party, but the leaders who do join argue that they will moderate the government from within; others suggest they merely want power.

Another instance of this was Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni, who served in the Netanyahu government from 2013 to 2015 – one of the shortest governments in Israeli history. Because Likud received fewer votes than the polls had predicted, Netanyahu was forced to form a coalition with centrist parties, including Yesh Atid and Tzipi Livni’s Hatnuah. Yesh Atid won 19 seats in the 2013 election and Hatnuah won six. Livni and Lapid ultimately faced criticism from center-left supporters since their presence in the Netanyahu government did not ultimately succeed in getting the government to reach a peace agreement. However, they argued that they thought that they might succeed in pushing Netanyahu along toward an agreement and that they thought they would have more chances to succeed working within the government. They also enjoyed having the power to influence the peace process, the finance ministry, and the efforts to compel the Haredim to share the burden of military service.

One could argue that their gambit to catalyze progress on the peace front from within a Netanyahu coalition was stymied not only by Netanyahu’s reluctance to make as many concessions on Jerusalem as Ehud Olmert had in 2008 but also by

external circumstances. On March 17, 2014, President Obama met with Abbas at the White House to convince him to go along with Secretary of State Kerry's proposals. Kerry had spent nine months negotiating with Netanyahu and Abbas, and by February 2014, Netanyahu had agreed to accept a document that stated that "the new secure and recognized border between Israel and Palestine will be negotiated based on the 1967 lines with mutual agreed swaps" and that the Palestinian refugees would mostly stay or return to the new state of Palestine, with a very small number returning to Israel. In Obama's version of Kerry's framework, there was a reference to a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem despite skepticism on the degree of eventual Netanyahu concessions on East Jerusalem. Yet Abbas did not give Obama an answer and instead asked for more time to think. This was the last time that Obama and Abbas met privately. Abbas did not answer for a few weeks, and Kerry's nine-month deadline set for April 29 expired. Netanyahu refused to release the fourth batch of Palestinian prisoners until Abbas would continue the talks, and Abbas would not do so until they were released. On April 23, he signed an agreement with Hamas, and the Israeli government withdrew from the peace talks.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably, the cooptation of the center in the 2013 government did lead to some relatively temporary headway in terms of challenges to the ultra-Orthodox in that it was the first government that did not include religious parties. They succeeded in passing a draft bill that would begin to transition Haredim into the draft for the Israeli Defense Forces. However, Netanyahu's government in 2015, which excluded these center parties and included religious parties, backtracked on the law transitioning Haredim into the draft. On December 2, 2014, Netanyahu fired Minister of Finance Yair Lapid and Minister of Justice Tzipi Livni and called for elections the next day. Livni had been critical of Netanyahu's call for new settlements on the West Bank, and his continued subsidies for existing ones; both Livni and Lapid had opposed Netanyahu's calls for the Nation-State Bill that would unnecessarily alienate Palestinian and Druze Israelis by highlighting the Jewish nature of the state, without simultaneously stressing that it was a country for all of its citizens.

If the Left has weakened itself by allowing itself to be coopted into right-wing governments in the false hope of positively influencing its priorities, such as the peace process, the Left has further weakened itself by even *trying* to get into the government – when they fail, they face recriminations and divisions within their left-wing parties. In the 2015 election Tzipi Livni and Chaim Herzog of the Labor Party formed the Zionist Union bloc. This unity succeeded in garnering 24 votes in the 2015 election, the second-most after Likud. Yesh Atid gained 11 seats, and Meretz got five seats. The Joint List of Arab Parties, by uniting, became the third largest party with 13 seats. However, they claimed that they would have refused to align with center-left parties to form a coalition if they had won the most votes.

Progress was being made in terms of peace negotiations, and Herzog seriously considered joining the coalition if Netanyahu would invite him. Herzog had been involved in negotiations with Kerry and the Egyptians for several months, and

Netanyahu knew about it. Netanyahu calculated that he could play along with the Kerry initiatives because he did not think that the Palestinians would go along or that the United States would follow through. He did not realize how determined Kerry was.

Herzog had made a big push in 2015 after the elections to get into the government, with a possible regional umbrella for a peace deal including the Egyptians as a key partner. Initially the post-2015 coalition had only 62 or 63 seats, and Netanyahu needed to expand the coalition. In the end, Netanyahu did not invite Herzog into the coalition, choosing Avigdor Lieberman of the Israel is Our Home Party as his Defense Minister instead. Facing corruption probes, Netanyahu became more paranoid and determined to remain in power. He felt – and feels – more confident that he has greater control over a right-wing nationalist coalition. This left Herzog to face a public and a party skeptical of his claims that he could have made progress toward peace. It cost Herzog his position as the head of the party.<sup>14</sup>

## ***2 Stagnation of the peace process and the perception of no partner***

Another strong reason why the center-left has not been more successful in challenging Netanyahu is that many Israelis do not primarily blame Israel, much less the Netanyahu government, for the lack of progress toward peace. The Left's own leader, Prime Minister Ehud Barak – who had won the 1999 elections by a landslide on a platform of reaching peace with the Palestinians within a year – publicly declared, upon the collapse of the 2000 Camp David peace negotiations, that Palestinian President Yasser Arafat was not a partner for peace and was unwilling to make the necessary compromises. (Despite this claim, Barak would continue to negotiate with Arafat over a possible peace agreement.) This conviction was magnified by President Bill Clinton publicly claiming that Ehud Barak had made the bravest and most significant concessions at Camp David than any prime minister in Israel's history, while Arafat was to blame for the failure of the peace negotiations. While this attribution of blame is contested, the narrative is widely accepted by the Israeli public. After all, Israelis worshiped Bill Clinton. Clinton ended his eulogy of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at his funeral in November 1995 with the Hebrew words *shalom chaver* (goodbye friend). Thereafter, almost every bumper sticker on Israeli cars had these parting words from President Clinton on them.

If the Israeli prime minister who was the most decorated military officer in Israel's history had said there was not partner for peace, and the beloved American president had concluded the same, why should Israelis continue to vote for center-left parties whose primary agenda for the past decade was a platform of urgently pursuing peace negotiations with the Palestinians? Barak's and Clinton's public censure of Arafat had the unintended consequence of pulling the rug out from under the center-left's agenda and priorities. That was of course compounded by a five-year cycle of violence during the Second Intifada, which included weekly and sometimes daily suicide bombings and during which 1,000 Israelis were killed.

For much of the Israeli public, this was a sign that the Palestinians were not ready for peace.

In the wake of these events, Ariel Sharon was elected prime minister in 2001, defeating Barak. Sharon later established the centrist Kadimah party in order to engage in unilateral withdrawals from Gaza and the West Bank – a result and an affirmation of the conviction that there was no true partner for peace. However, for much of the Israeli public, the unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 and the Israeli evacuation of all settlers and soldiers from Gaza in the summer of 2005 both resulted in emboldened nonstate actors seeking Israel's destruction and opposing its existence, even in the 1967 borders, by further arming themselves and firing rockets at Israel. These withdrawals, in the perception of many Israelis, did not lead to a more secure Israel or establish goodwill leading to peace agreements. Thus, both Labor's prioritization of urgent peace negotiations and the centrist party's focus on unilateral withdrawal came under question and were delegitimized.

Some Israeli perceptions are shaped by the notion not only that the Barak government's offer of a peace agreement leading to an independent Palestinian state was rejected by Arafat but also that Mahmoud Abbas rejected Prime Minister Olmert's offer for an even more generous peace agreement in 2008 by, in effect, ignoring it. These strong perceptions shaped the view among some Israelis that the center-left had failed to reach a peace agreement despite their generous and serious efforts. Thus, the road was open for the Likud to capitalize on its own priorities.

### ***3 Continuing violence favors the right***

The lack of progress in achieving a peace agreement is both a cause *and* an effect of continued violence; that violence, in turn, influences many Israelis – even the majority who support a two-state solution and a peace agreement – to believe that peace is not around the corner, that many Palestinians do not genuinely want peace, and that peace is nearly impossible to achieve with Hamas in power in Gaza and with the continued rivalry between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. Therefore, although a peace agreement is desired by most, it becomes a less urgent priority and basis for voting.

In the aftermath of what many Israelis considered to be a generous offer on the part of Ehud Olmert for a peace agreement and the establishment of a Palestinian state, thousands of rockets were fired upon Israelis from the Gaza Strip by Hamas, which formally rejects a two-state solution. There have been three wars between Israel and Hamas in the past ten years. While 2,433 projectiles were fired into Israel in 2007, in the three-week war of December 2008 and January 2009, which Israel called Cast Lead, there were approximately 35,570 rockets fired at Israel. Arguably, the violence of Cast Lead, occurring right before the election, helped propel Netanyahu into power in 2009. Netanyahu was able to capitalize on the perception that the Left was weak on Hamas by arguing that Israel did not go far enough in crippling Hamas and ultimately removing it.<sup>15</sup> Barak, on the other hand, was

forceful about the need to fight terrorism and provide security while simultaneously urgently pursuing a peace agreement.<sup>16</sup> Barak had also advocated stopping the operation after two weeks rather than three because he felt it would reduce the political costs of reaching a longer-term ceasefire. According to him, Prime Minister Olmert and Tzipi Livni were tempted to continue for a few more days.<sup>17</sup> The debates between right and center-left in this war were not necessarily more extensive than debates within the center-left as to when it should end.

This kind of violence has continued to erupt periodically over the last ten years. In Pillar of Defense, the eight-day war between Israel and Hamas from November 14 to 21, 2012, a total of 1,506 rockets were fired by Hamas into Israel, 421 of which were intercepted by Iron Dome. In Operation Protective Edge, the 50-day war between July 8 and August 26, 2014, about 4,500 rockets were fired into Israel, 200 of them exploding upon launch or falling into the Gaza Strip; 64 Israeli soldiers and four civilians were killed, and 34 cross-border tunnels dug by Hamas were destroyed.<sup>18</sup> In addition to these three wars, other kinds of violence take place, including the lone-wolf stabbings that seemed to peak in 2015, as well as protests and attempts to cross the Gaza border in 2018.

This violence, coupled with and shaped by the stagnation in the peace process, has bolstered the security fears upon which Netanyahu capitalizes and left citizens thinking that the center-left will not be able to achieve peace in the next election cycle; this in turn contributes to some center-left parties putting achieving a peace agreement lower on their agenda than domestic socioeconomic issues.

While Netanyahu promotes the perception that the Left is soft on defense, in fact the differences between the Right and the center-left have been blurred, as center-left parties often sound quite similar to their right-wing counterparts. Left-wing parties do differ on the urgency of achieving a peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority and the extent to which Israel should make concessions to reach such an agreement. At the same time, the center-left parties tend to make comments that are not too different from many in the center-right regarding Israel's wars with Hamas, which formally opposes Israel's existence. Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid in the spring of 2018 remarked that he's

proud of IDF soldiers and commanders for their determination and professionalism. We all celebrated the Seder with our families peacefully. I suggest that Hamas don't try us. The residents of Gaza need to protest against [Hamas leader] Ismail Haniyah and [Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud] Abbas who are to blame for their difficult situation.

The Zionist Union chairman said he

supports and backs the commanders and soldiers of the IDF [who] act to defend the state's borders. The sovereign State of Israel will defend its borders from every threat. No one is allowed to cross the border unauthorized, certainly not with weapons, Molotov cocktails, tires and rocks.

While Meretz called for an investigation into IDF action, these center-left parties reflected the reactions of Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who concluded Hamas was dealt with professionally and Israelis could therefore celebrate the Passover Seder in safety.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the Right has not been as eager to combat Hamas militarily as its reputation would lead one to believe. As I have written elsewhere, Netanyahu was initially quite averse to taking the risks of military action against Hamas in 2014's Operation Protective Edge – and repeatedly sought a ceasefire.<sup>20</sup> So while Barak might, as Netanyahu's minister of defense in 2012, have tried to avoid the war that became known as Pillar of Defense, once it had started he tried to end it as quickly as possible, as Netanyahu tried to in Operation Protective Edge.<sup>21</sup>

It is not only the violence directed at Israel from Gaza that contributes to the right being able to galvanize security fears but also the violence in the Middle East more broadly. Netanyahu is able to capitalize on growing Iranian bases and troops in neighboring Syria and their transferring of arms to Hezbollah in both Syria and Lebanon and can paint himself as the one who has always taken Iranian threats seriously. He also substantiates what he perceives as the risks of a peace agreement by suggesting that regimes are constantly falling in the region and that Hamas could take over an eventual Palestinian state and fire rockets from the West Bank into heavily populated Israeli cities such as Tel Aviv and Haifa, as well as into Ben Gurion Airport. Netanyahu warned in his Facebook page on January 18, 2015 that Israel cannot “surrender to international pressure, withdraw from vital areas, and give up on our security needs, which will allow for the establishment of a second terrorist state near Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and the Ben Gurion airport. This is what Buzi [Herzog], Tzipi [Livni], and the Left want to do.”<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the implications of the turmoil in the region is interpreted quite differently among leaders in the center-left. They draw the conclusion that peace with the Palestinian Authority is ever more urgent and that the risks of not reaching an agreement far outweigh the risks of an agreement. Tzipi Livni warns that Netanyahu is “blind to the danger of bi-nationality and refused to look at reality in the eyes” as such a state would demand voting rights for all Palestinians living in Judea and Samaria and therefore it will soon turn into an Arab state.<sup>23</sup> Yesh Atid and Labor leaders have also increasingly warned of the danger of Israel's increasing delegitimizing in the world as a consequence of it not urgently pursuing a peace agreement, and that Netanyahu has also endangered long-term relations with the US, which could have disastrous security and political consequences.

#### ***4 Mistakes made on the part of the center-left leadership***

While some of the Israeli perceptions cited earlier – questioning whether there is a Palestinian partner for peace and questioning the desirability of unilateral withdrawal – have weakened the Labor party and its agenda for urgently pursuing peace negotiations, even within the last ten years the Left has still maintained strong levels of support. As recently as 2009 Tzipi Livni still received more votes than



did Benjamin Netanyahu based on her centrist party's agenda to urgently continue peace negotiations. Therefore, at that time, still more Israelis put their faith in a woman who had left the Likud party for a centrist party, than in Benjamin Netanyahu, who had been their prime minister from 1996 to 1999. Tzipi Livni was respected for playing a major role in making progress in the peace negotiations under Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Therefore, despite the many eulogies proclaimed for Israel's center left, they actually were initially victorious over Netanyahu in the 2009 elections.

Therefore, rather than looking toward more structural, underlying forces – the Second Intifada, Hamas's continued attacks on Israel, and the blame that was put on the Palestinian Authority for lack of peace negotiations – we might look more close to home, at the concrete mistakes of individual leaders as the most powerful proximate cause for Netanyahu's return to power and his nearly ten-year reign as prime minister. As many have noted, Livni had a chance to form a government in 2009. Instead she stood on principle, at the expense of an opportunity to pursue her peace agenda: she wanted to have “clean hands” and not be tarnished by providing too big a “bribe” to the Shas party to have them agree to join her coalition so that she could form a government. This was a significant factor in her not being able to gain sufficient support from other parties to successfully form a coalition, leading the Israeli president, in accordance with Israeli law, to ask the candidate who had won the second most votes – Bibi Netanyahu – to form a coalition. Ehud Barak writes that Tzipi refused to engage in organized extortion and “I am sure she won the respect of many Israelis for taking an all-too-rare stand on principle. She certainly won mine. But I was not alone in wondering whether it was worth the price if Bibi did prevail in an early election and return as prime minister in a Likud-led coalition.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, Livni's subsequent formation of the separate Ha'tnuah party, along with Barak's formation of his new Ha'atzmaut party, splintered the center even further and diminished its unity and power. In addition, centrist parties like Yesh Atid have failed to adequately build an organizational structure and formal institutions that might help expand the party base.<sup>25</sup>

## ***5 Gender and Israeli political culture***

An additional factor that might help explain the lack of effectiveness on the left – a lack of effectiveness that goes beyond the mistakes individual leaders like Tzipi Livni might have made – is the latent sexism in Israeli political culture. While Israel was one of the first countries in the world to have had a female prime minister in the 1970s, has greater gender equality than most countries in the world, and has a record high of 28 female members (out of 120) in the present Knesset, there nevertheless remain obstacles faced by female leaders. Tzipi Livni's characterizations by the media and by opponents reflected similar challenges as did Hillary Clinton in her campaigns in 2008 and in 2016. While it might be considered a mistake on Tzipi Livni's part not to provide Shas with their demanded funds in exchange for their joining her coalition in 2009, the fact that Shas is led by only males and will

not allow women to lead their religious party, was certainly not helpful in her quest to get them to join her coalition. In addition, despite Tzipi Livni's years of public service in the military and in Israeli intelligence, there is still a yearning among many in Israel for a former general or IDF Chief of Staff to entrust the security of the country, especially if it is a center-left leader rather than a Likud leader (which arguably benefits, especially in recent years, from a perception that they are the security party). Revealingly, polls taken repeatedly over the last nine years show that if the center-left were to include a general and/or former IDF Chief of Staff as one of its leaders, they would be more likely to beat Netanyahu. This recipe for success, grounded on gendered perceptions of military leadership, seems to be driving recent decisions on the part of center-left parties as they seek to position themselves for future elections. Following the 2013 election, Shelly Yachimovich, the head of the Labor Party, was slammed for the electoral losses. Many began to look to former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi as someone who might lead Labor back to power. MK Binyamin Ben-Eliezer and Histadrut Labor Union Chairman Ofer Eini argued that Ashkenazi should be presented as walking in Rabin and Barak's shoes, both former generals who had brought the party back to power in 1992 and in 1999. In 2016 Yair Lapid offered Ashkenazi the number two party spot in the next elections, promising him the defense ministry.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, polls in July 2018 seem to indicate that if former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz were to head a new party he would receive 14 seats and the Likud would receive 29 seats. If he were to head the Zionist Union instead of Avi Gabbay, the Zionist Union would get 24 seats.<sup>27</sup> Certainly, the preference for a former general applies to polls among competing men as well. For instance, a poll in January 2016 by Channel 10 News indicated that a centrist party that included former chief of General Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid, and Kulanu chairman Moshe Kahlon would get 29 Knesset seats in a general election compared to 24 for Likud. The public thought that Ashkenazi had a better chance of defeating Netanyahu than either Zionist Union chairman Isaac Herzog or Lapid.<sup>28</sup> But this bias toward military leaders shapes and restricts the possibilities for women, as there are far fewer women with that level of military experience.

## ***6 Lack of unity between and within center-left parties***

There has been a tremendous amount of infighting within parties and between parties in the center-left. Fission and fusion within and among parties have been part of Israeli politics for many decades. Ass Myron Aronoff suggested even in 1993 in discussing Labor Party politics, "when factional strife became almost exclusively a manifestation of a struggle for power and control of the party, its impact on the party and on the political system became increasingly negative."<sup>29</sup>

On the one hand there has been a widespread recognition among leaders on the left that a unified front would be powerful – a position reflected in polling numbers. Before the 2013 election, opposition party leaders called for the formation of a center-left bloc to counter the newly emerged Likud-Yisrael Beytenu party

list. Labor Party leader Shelly Yachimovich called for unity among the center-left parties. Kadima party leader Shaul Mofaz, briefly in Netanyahu's coalition between May and July 2012, called on the center-left parties "to leave your egos aside" and unite to defeat Netanyahu's bloc.<sup>30</sup> A *Haaretz* Poll conducted in October 2012 found that a new centrist party formed by Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni and Yair Lapid would win more seats in the next Knesset than the Likud and would get 25 seats as opposed to the Likud's 24.<sup>31</sup>

If there has been disunity between left and center-left parties, there has also been division *within* parties. Michael Biton reflected that Labor had seven chair people in ten years.<sup>32</sup> Meretz provides a case in point. In Meretz the divisions go back many years: Shulamit Aloni reportedly would get upset every time she heard Yossi Sarid's name. More recently, ideological debates over purity and compromise have created divisions among the leadership. In the run-up to the 2013 elections there was a push by young supporters for prioritizing social justice issues. Haim Ramon, known as one willing to compromise, resigned about a year before the 2013 primaries, opening a path for Zahava Gal-On, who emphasized Meretz's ideological principles as the path to victory. This trend continued in the 2013 elections, such that Meretz became even more of an opposition party that would be even less likely to be considered as a coalition partner, even though Galon had succeeded in raising the number of Meretz Knesset seats to 6.

Meretz's marginalization increased in 2015 with the change in electoral rules. In the 2015 elections the percent of support required for a party to earn a seat in the Knesset was raised from 2.5 percent to 3.25 percent. This created a problem for Meretz. Gal-On continued to hew to her ideological line rejecting ideas of compromising with centrist parties, but two weeks before the election she started to say that if Meretz weren't able to get out the vote, they would not meet the threshold. In the 2015 election Meretz met the threshold but lost a seat to become the smallest party in the Knesset, with 5. Gal-On was blamed for being too radical, and there were calls for her to resign. In Meretz's open primaries Tamar Zanberg won, due in part to competition between Gal-On and Ilan Gilon, who seemed to want to go in a more pragmatic direction. Thus, divisions within individual parties – over ideological purity vs. compromise, between individual leaders – as well as between parties hampers left and center left parties from being more effective.

## ***7 Persistent perception that the center-left is Ashkenazi***

A contributing factor to the Labor Party's decline in the 1970s was the perception that it was dominated by *Ashkenazim* (immigrants to Israel from Europe) who had not sufficiently reached out to *Mizrahim* (Jews who immigrated to Israel from Middle Eastern countries), and often acted in a patronizing and discriminatory fashion toward them. Historically, center-left leaders have been perceived as secular, elitist, arrogant, and condescending to Mizrahim.<sup>33</sup> The perception of the center-left as largely being led by Ashkenazi leaders and representatives remains four decades later, and continues to influence some Mizrahim to vote for Shas or Likud, despite

occasional Labor success in mobilizing greater Mizrahi support. For example Amir Peretz was a Mizrahi Labor leader in the 2006 elections and was able to raise the percentage of Labor voters among the Mizrahi public. Netanyahu was able to mobilize Likud's Mizrahi supporters' right before the 2015 elections. When one man was questioned about the possibility of him voting for Labor, he said that "It's too hard, there is just too much baggage there."<sup>34</sup> Center-left parties still have the reputation of being largely Ashkenazi parties in their leadership, membership, and support. For example, Yair Lapid is aware of Yesh Atid's reputation as an Ashkenazi party, and that has played into his courting Gabi Ashkenazi, whose mother is of Middle Eastern origin.<sup>35</sup> Current Labor Chairman Avraham Gabbay is Mizrahi, but he does not seem to be succeeding in appealing to more Mizrahi voters. The traditional base of Meretz is upper middle class, well-educated, Ashkenazim. In 2009 it tried to look for new constituencies, but at the expense of its base. In 2015 its electoral strategy was to consolidate its base first.<sup>36</sup>

On one hand, this association of the Left with Ashkenazim does not bode well for the future: some suggest that the number of Israelis who are non-religious Ashkenazim has proportionally shrunk compared to the Haredi and Palestinian populations.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, perceptions may not have caught up to a growing reality that significant differences between some of the parties on the right and some on the center-left in terms of ethnic representation of Knesset members is diminishing. For instance, 68 percent of Likud Knesset members in the 18th Knesset were Ashkenazi and 25 percent Mizrahi. The percentage of Mizrahi Likud Knesset members went down to 16 percent in the 19th Knesset, and up to 39 percent in the 20th Knesset. In contrast, in the 18th Knesset, 44 percent of Labor's MK's were Mizrahi and 50 percent of Hatnuah's; in the 19th Knesset 50 percent of Kadima MK's were Mizrahi, 31 percent of Labor's were, and 33 percent of Hatnuah's were. In the 20th Knesset, the Zionist Union had 29 percent Mizrahi MK's, Yesh Atid had 23 percent. While these percentages are lower than Likud's in the 20th Knesset, they are not necessarily dramatically so, and in the 18th Knesset many center-left parties had higher percentages of Mizrahi Knesset members representing them than did Likud. Therefore, the historically based perception still lags somewhat behind the reality, with the exception of Meretz, which has significantly lower percentages of Mizrahi Knesset Members.<sup>38</sup>

## ***8 Lack of ability to partner with Palestinian Israeli parties***

If the center-left were to be able to form a bloc with Israeli Palestinian parties or potentially bring them into their government coalitions, they would have great flexibility to successfully form coalitions. However, they have been blocked in doing so by two major factors. One factor is that they would risk losing Jewish voters by including non-Zionist or even anti-Zionist leaders within their coalition. This would play into the right-wing parties' accusations that those on the left are not patriotic. Another factor is that some Balad (a faction of the Joint [Arab] List Party) leaders have at times seemed to support Israel's enemies, such as Hamas and

Hezbollah, and by doing so take themselves out of the running in terms of parties that would eventually be accepted into a coalition. Finally, in 2015 the bloc of Arab parties (the Joint List) said that they would refuse to be in a government coalition, even if it was a center-left one headed by Herzog and the Zionist Union. They also refused to sign a surplus vote agreement with Meretz, the most left-wing Zionist party – an agreement that could have resulted in an additional seat for the Joint List. With the narrow electoral results making it an open question which party – Likud or the Zionist Union – would be asked to form a government by the president, the Joint List also refused to recommend that the president appoint Yitzhak Herzog. This threw the first opportunity to form a government to Likud.<sup>39</sup> Avi Gabbay, the Labor leader, has claimed that he would not form a coalition with the Joint List.<sup>40</sup> Without the Joint List, the center-left only has 50 seats. Therefore, the ability of the Center-Left Zionist Parties to govern may depend on their being able to invite at least some Palestinian Israeli parties into the coalition, or at least gain their support.

*Signs of reawakening among the opposition and the deterioration of Likud party dominance*

None of the many factors or combination of factors discussed in this chapter are static or ensure Netanyahu's reign into the future. Certainly, the population was in shock after Netanyahu got elected in 1996 and many have been disillusioned. Much of the opposition felt like it had tried everything and nothing worked. But in 2018 there are the beginnings of a reawakening.<sup>41</sup>

Netanyahu's current position seems increasingly precarious. The narrow 2015 coalition has both made Netanyahu dependent on his coalition, but has also paradoxically given him some autonomy. If one party bolts, everything crashes. He has to outflank the Right as there is a zero-sum competition for votes among the parties on the right. Only approximately 25 percent of the Israeli population supports Netanyahu. Unity among Labor Party Chair Avi Gabbay, Meretz Chair Tamar Zandberg, and Hatnua head Tzipi Livni could work together to unseat Netanyahu. The new faction would have 29 Knesset members, almost equal to Likud's 30. Polls in July 2018 seem to indicate that if former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz were to head a new party he would receive 14 seats and the Likud would receive 29 seats. If he were to head the Zionist Union instead of Avi Gabbay, it would get 24 seats.<sup>42</sup>

Tzipi Livni is still vocal and speaking out as a leader of the opposition. In reaction to the Nation-State Bill she proclaimed, "we won't acquiesce to Israel conceding either half of the equation, regardless of whether it's the Jewish-state half or the half that promises equality to all citizens under a democratic system of government." She has gone on to say that she is "currently working to make the Declaration of Independence the basis of Israel's constitution by legislating it as a Basic Law."<sup>43</sup> Ehud Barak just published his memoirs and always seems ready to get back into politics, regularly castigating the Netanyahu government for undermining Israel's democracy as well as creating an existential threat by not resolving the

Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>44</sup> Even Meretz leaders have signaled their aim to move the party from seemingly perpetual opposition, to what newly elected party leader Tamara Zandberg calls “the center of the political stage” – even signaling a willingness to coalition with parties as different as Lieberman’s Israel Beytenu.<sup>45</sup>

Not only is there a re-awakening and re-mobilization of the opposition, but there are signs of a potential decline of the Likud party, as happened to Labor dominance in the 1970s. Although Likud has never come close to the dominance that Labor enjoyed for the first three decades of Israel’s history, the fact that Netanyahu is already the second longest serving prime minister after Ben Gurion, and is poised to become the longest serving, has sown some of the same seeds that resulted in Labor’s decline in the 1970s. Myron Aronoff has suggested that the decline of the Labor party in the 1970s was in part caused by the fact that its ideology had become restricted to ritual discourse, that its rule had been secured by the ineffectiveness of the opposition rather than the effectiveness of the party itself, that public scandals rocked the party, and that public morale was at an unprecedented low.<sup>46</sup> We are witnessing today some of the same trends for the Likud party. They have reigned long and become arrogant; Netanyahu faces the possibility of multiple indictments for corruption and his wife has already been indicted. This makes the political scandals of the 1970s look like child’s play. Surveys show that most of the public believes that Netanyahu should resign if indicted, a position taken by Moshe Kahlon of the Kulanu party.<sup>47</sup> In addition, Likud has benefitted from some of the ineffectiveness of the center-left Zionist opposition discussed in this chapter; public morale is low, and the ideology that defines the right, as noted earlier, has become fuzzier. Netanyahu himself seems like he intellectually and politically recognizes that in the long term there will need to be a two-state solution, but his heart is not in it and he thinks that the status quo could remain for many years to come.<sup>48</sup>

The center-left, in order to expand its support, must not only mobilize all of its supporters to vote in the coming election and try to expand its appeal to more Mizrahi voters, but must refrain from mere reshuffling within its bloc as has been happening on the right, and must get votes from the center-right.<sup>49</sup> One opportunity to do that may be utilized by an upcoming popular Knesset Member, Orly Levy-Ashkenazi. She was elected in 2015 on the Yisrael Beytenu Party but left them when they joined the government coalition and has been an independent member of Knesset since. She may form her own centrist party, expected to garner four to eight seats in the next election. Rather than necessarily taking votes from other center-left parties, she may be able to take votes from the Kulanu party, which she often challenges. She is a Mizrahi Israeli who focuses on socioeconomic issues and may attract both Mizrahi and center-right voters.

Just as the Right has remained in power by at times coopting policies (and leaders) of the center-left, so too the center-left at times has, at times, played a similar game, which may pull votes from the center-right. While Lapid’s courting of the Right arguably has contributed to the ideological lack of clarity outlined earlier, he at times has also seemed to succeed in taking votes from Netanyahu.

For instance, Channel Two polls in March 2017 showed that Yair Lapid could win 26 Knesset seats if an election were to be held at that time, while Likud would go down from its current 30 seats to 22 seats, possibly because of the corruption investigations of Netanyahu.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, a January 2017 poll by Channel Ten News showed that if elections were held, Yesh Atid would become the largest party in the Knesset with 27 seats (up from its current 11 seats), the Likud would drop to 23 seats, and the Zionist Union would drop from 24 seats to eight seats.<sup>51</sup> This suggests that perhaps Yesh Atid would be taking votes from parties both to the left and the right of it. Yair Lapid has at times courted the right, presenting for example his platform in 2012 at Ariel University Center in the West Bank, claiming that the major settlement blocs would remain in Israel. But even in that moment, he warned that a two-state solution is necessary as “my father didn’t come from the ghetto to live in a bi-national state, he came to live in a Jewish state.” Likewise, Labor leader Avi Gabbay straddles his appeals to the left and the right and has not yet succeeded in significantly attracting more voters to Labor. Yet, he was a senior member of the center-right Kulanu party, and may be able to attract former Kulanu voters to the center-left. Although he infuriated many on the left by repeating an old mantra of Netanyahu’s that the Left has forgotten what it is to be Jewish, he might on the other hand be able to attract more traditionalists like himself.<sup>52</sup>

The center-left faces the continual dilemma of differentiating itself more clearly from the center-right in order to provide a clear alternative, while trying to appeal to the center and gain votes from the center-right. Many Labor and Zionist Union MKs like Gabbay think that their party needs to “centrify” and differentiate themselves from Meretz. However, Gabbay, in doing that, at times seems like he has no agenda and seems to back-track on the historically strong Labor position of evacuating settlements and compromise on Jerusalem for a peace agreement. In contrast, Tzipi Livni still prioritizes the peace process and the compromises that are necessary to reach peace.<sup>53</sup>

Netanyahu’s reign can also be seen through a prism of a wave of populist nationalism sweeping many parts of the world, including the United States, India, and parts of Europe. The questions regarding how and why the rise took place, and what might bring it to an end, are being asked not only in Israel, but throughout the world. Is ideology playing a decreasing role – not only in Israel because of its specific circumstances but also in other democracies as well? Is the current trend of charismatic populist leaders playing on fears of internal and external enemies changing the way traditional parties have operated? Can the center-left in many of these countries (defined differently according to context) benefit from a backlash against the arrogance and excesses of these populist leaders if center-left leaders can adapt, unify, and make different kinds of populist appeals? In the Israeli case, this would include appeals against dividing a polarized society further, guarding the liberal elements of its democracy, and crystallizing the importance and feasibility of making progress toward ending, and not just managing, its conflict with the Palestinians.



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# 3

## THE ISRAEL IS OUR HOME PARTY

### Avigdor Lieberman and the evolution of Israel's "Russian Street"

*Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin*

In Israel there are different kinds of political parties. In the first category are the major parties, Likud (right of center), and the now defunct Zionist Union (the joint list of two left of center parties, the Labor party and the Movement, which terminated this union early 2019) which consider themselves "national" parties in that they hope to draw votes from a large percentage of the Israeli political spectrum. In the second category are parties that draw primarily from a particular segment of the Israeli political spectrum, such as Meretz, which primarily draws from the Ashkenazi secular left; Shas, which draws primarily from religious Sephardim (both traditional and ultra-Orthodox); United Torah Judaism, which draws primarily from ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews; and the Joint List Party, which primarily, if not exclusively, draws from Israel's Arab community.

The third category, a relatively new phenomenon, is represented by political movements, that one may call "nationwide-sectarian" parties that having a strong core of their voters in a specific sector, are also trying to address other potential voters on nationwide interest issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as national-civic and economic policy issues. Currently, this category consists of three Parliamentary parties. The first is the center-left (according to its platform) Yesh Atid, often defined as a party of "economically sound Ashkenazi's of northern Tel-Aviv" – although the party's performance in election 2015, and its polling for the next election (before joining the centrist Blue-and-White coalition), substantially diminishes its sectarian accent. The next was the right-wing party, "the Jewish Home" (JH) of Naftali Bennet, whose major support comes from the Religious Zionist communities of Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, as well as economically prosperous neighborhoods of cities with diverse populations inside the "Green Line" (Israel's pre-1967 war boundaries). Finally, there is the Israel is our home Party (YB) which is center-right (or, as they themselves call it, pragmatically right-wing, as opposed to the "romantically right-wing" JH party) The YB Party was

founded and is currently led by Avigdor Liberman and the majority of its voters come from Russian-speaking *olim* (Jewish immigrants) from the Soviet Union and the Former Soviet Union (FSU)

This third category of party presents a new challenge to the traditional Israeli political establishment, which understands and accepts only two patterns of political “sectarianism”: as secondary groups of particular interests within nationwide “catch-all-parties,” or as properly sectarian movements, that just demand a part of the economic and social “cake” in the interest of their communities without having any national leadership ambitions, and thus are convenient partners for “big” mainstream parties. By contrast, nationwide sectarian movements seek to become parties of power, while their leaders, Naftali Bennet (JH), Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid), and Avigdor Liberman, sooner or later hope to become a prime minister of Israel.

Of these three parties, Yisrael Beiteinu [Israel is our Home] (YB) was the first of these “nationwide sectarian” parties and can thus serve as a case study of this political phenomenon of the Netanyahu era. This chapter will analyze the political history of Yisrael Beiteinu and its political strategies against the background of the transformation of “Russian Politics” in Israel over the past two decades.

## The origin of Yisrael Beiteinu and the evolution of its political strategy

The establishment of Yisrael Beiteinu was declared on 30 December 1998 on the initiative of Avigdor Lieberman, himself an immigrant from the former Soviet Republic of Moldavia (Moldova). As a long-term associate and partner of Benjamin Netanyahu, Lieberman, a Hebrew University International Relations and East European Studies graduate, at different points of his political career was director general of Likud and director general (head of administration) of the prime minister’s office.

He had to leave these positions and quit the Likud party because of his conflict with Likud’s old Revisionist elite, including the so-called Likud “Princes,” that headed influential intra-party political camps. Lieberman was joined by some members of the Likud who were unhappy with the Likud “establishment” as well as several members of the ideological right-wing of the Russian Yisrael B’Aliya Party, as well as municipal movements composed of Russian immigrants, such as “Our Home – Ashdod.” All these groups became the core of Lieberman’s political movement and became the base for his new party, Yisrael Beiteinu.<sup>1</sup>

All this might be seen as a paradox, since from the dawn of his political career Lieberman was opposed to any sectarian party, including a Russian immigrant party. Yet he established a political party that in the course of the last twenty years has become the centerpiece of “Russian” community politics in Israel. However, the story is somewhat more complicated than this. Since the moment it was established, the YB Party became an umbrella for three different groups of voters. First, Liberman succeeded in making his political project attractive to right-wing “Russian” *olim* of two Aliya waves (the 1970s and 1989 to the present) who were

concerned Jewish nationalists and Israeli statistes and thus were not ready to vote for an accented sectarian community list (like Natan Sharansky's Yisrael b'Aliya party of 1996–2003). But these people also shared the idea of integration into Israeli society as well as the introduction of Russian–Jewish values into what they saw as the “shabby” Israeli national discourse, or at least this was the way they understood Lieberman's appeal. Consequently, they easily adopted his idea of a “Russian Party with an Israeli accent”

The second bloc of YB supporters included a modest group of “native” Israelis and immigrant old-timers, many of whom were former Likud voters, for whom Lieberman symbolized classical Revisionist (Jabotinsky-style) values that, as they saw it, were abandoned by historical parties of the right-wing camp. Finally, Lieberman gained the support of Russian-speaking citizens whose electoral priorities, despite their moderate-right political inclinations, focused on economic welfare and civic, rather than foreign policy and security issues. For this reason they gave their support to YB after the dissolution of the Yisrael B'Aliyah Party because Yisrael Beiteinu was now the only party supporting “Russian” interests.

This way, Lieberman had and still has the task of resolving three fundamental dilemmas that forced YB leaders to constantly revise the party's identity. **The first dilemma** resulted from the initial diversity of its constituency and consisted in finding a *modus vivendi* between the party's claims to national status and leadership and the mainly “Russian” community nature of its electorate. **The second dilemma** related to the national leadership ambitions of Lieberman himself. These ambitions constantly forced him to make a difficult strategic choice between the two models of “competitive cooperation” of YB with Likud and/or with other right-wing parties. For example, building his party as a platform for the conquest of the infrastructure of its partner rivals “from within,” or, on the contrary, promoting YB alone or in a bloc with other parties as an alternative to Likud to play the leading role in a “broad right camp.”

**The third dilemma** related to the search for an adequate ideological platform that would allow the brand “Lieberman at the head of the YB” to retain the firm right-wing and “liberal-market oriented” core of its camp, while also attracting socially oriented voters and the voters of a moderate political center, without which a politician in Israel cannot count on becoming Israel's prime minister. Thus, the YB leader initially held it out as “a national right-wing party, the majority of whose voters, for historical reasons, speak Russian”; in 2001–2003 he presented it as a “Russian non-sectoral party,” and in 2004–2006 YB functioned as a “Russian party with an Israeli accent.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, prior to the 2009 elections, YB came into the spotlight as an “nation-wide party with ‘Russian’ community roots,” or as Lieberman himself defined it “the Israeli liberal revisionist party, whose platform includes the integration of new immigrants (*olim*) as a primary objective of Zionism.”<sup>3</sup> The evolution of the political tactics of the YB, mirrored Lieberman's political strategy as during the first decade of its history YB either joined the ruling coalition, or quit it, losing some of its supporters in each case and making others disappointed.

As far as its ideological position was concerned, at first YB shared a moderately right-wing niche with Likud while competing in the Russian community for votes with Yisrael B'Aliyah, but in 2001–2003 YB shifted sharply to the right. In elections for the 16th Knesset YB was part of the rightist bloc “National Unity” with Lieberman at the top of the party’s list. After the 2003 elections, recognizing the unification experiment as unsuccessful, YB again ran as an independent list and returned to a moderate right niche, having managed, as the 2006 elections showed, to retain most of its “solid right community core.” In the 2009 elections, the basis of the YB electoral platform was the concept of the exchange of Jewish settlement blocks of Judaea and Samaria for the towns of South Galilee, populated by Israeli Arab-Islamic people (the so-called Kissinger-Lieberman Plan). All this, in the framework of the Israel ideological standards, appeared to be a “centrist” alternative to the “right-wing” (peace for peace) and the “left-wing” (peace for territories) ideologies. And at the same time, it contained tangible elements of the ideology of the European “New Right,” which in the Israeli context reflected a growing irritation with the perceived disloyalty of Israeli Arabs and the behavior of their leaders, some of whom supported Hamas and Hezbollah, which led many Israelis to perceive the Israeli Arabs as a “Fifth Column.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite all these rather complex evolutions, and possibly thanks to them – as well as to the effective political maneuvering of YB Chairman Avigdor Lieberman – the electoral potential of the party was constantly increasing, starting from four mandates (including at least 3.5 of them in the “Russian” sector) at the time of its electoral debut in 1999. The YB total increased to 15 mandates (five of them outside of the Russian-speaking community), at the peak of the party’s influence ten years later. With this force Lieberman in 2009 joined the second government of Benjamin Netanyahu, taking up the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and a key coalition partner of the ruling Likud party.

## **Ideological and political dilemmas of the YB’s second decade**

Lieberman himself could easily see this result as a stage on the way to achieving his main goal – to make his party ruling sooner or later, and himself – the prime minister of the country. Therefore, the years 2009–2013, when YB was a critical part of the government coalition, were for the party leader and his associates a period of searching for a new political role.

The first problem that required an urgent solution was the same dilemma of the party’s built-in ideological contradiction between its claims to national leadership and the mainly community nature of its mass base. As the share of the native Israelis and non-Russian-speaking voters in the YB electorate continued to grow (from less than 10 percent in 1999, to more than 20 percent in 2006, and approximately 30–35 percent in 2009), this problem only escalated. It was clear that to achieve the strategic goal set by Lieberman, a simple linear increase of an almost unconnected “Russian community” and “non-sectoral” YB electorate was insufficient,

especially since the resource limit of this model was, by that time, already achieved. Secondly, it was essential to consider the further ideological conflict within the Russian-speaking community itself, which limited the party's ability to play on the right-wing ideological, "civil-centrist" and "Russian sectoral" fields at the same time. The party leadership needed a new productive idea that would allow it, without losing its accumulated political leverage, to raise the status of the party to a new level.

Again, the niche of the "center party" was actually filled with YB in 2009 (on the "moderate wing" of the second Benjamin Netanyahu's Government), though in its "modified," neo-centrist version, it was clearly not suitable for this purpose. Therefore, the strategic choice of Liberman focused on two other theoretically possible and much more ambitious options. The first was to become, so to say the "new version" of the Kadima party in its original niche as the "centrist party of power," trying to turn the largest part of the votes attracted by YB in 2009 elections into part of its solid core. It would then dramatically expand its electoral base at the expense of the infrastructure and/or the electorate of the "partners-rivals" of the YB of the right-wing and centrist camps. This idea was in fact discussed in YB circles but was discarded by 2011.<sup>5</sup>

A second, even more attractive option was to abandon the centrist model, which required delicate balancing between the factions, different approaches to the critical issues for Israeli society (the Arab-Israeli conflict, secular-religious confrontation and socioeconomic policies) – in favor of an attempt to become a legitimate leader of one of the two "broad" ideological political camps, in this case, the right-wing one. And to do this, as previously noted, either by trying to push Likud out from the niche of the main party of the broad right-wing camp, or to form an alliance with it. The whole political career and the world view of Avigdor Lieberman influenced him to choose the second option. In addition, it was very difficult to become the head of the right-wing camp on the platform of an independent "movement of the leader" party, since for the average Israeli voter Lieberman still remains "Russian."

Accordingly, the idea of an electoral union (negotiations about which began at least one year before the elections in January 2013) and, in the long term, integration of YB with Likud, solved Lieberman's main task – not just to go beyond the community framework and become a politician on a national scale, but rather to become a politician who has in the eyes of society and the Israeli establishment a "legitimate" right to one of the top positions, and eventually the top one in the political hierarchy of the country. YB also played an important role in this Lieberman scheme: according to his understanding, it was about the restoration of GAHAL – the bloc of the revisionist movement Herut and the Liberal Party that dominated the right-wing camp in the 1960s and 1970s and provided a base for the emergence of Likud on the eve of the 1977 elections. According to Lieberman's logic at that time – which he has still not fully rejected,<sup>6</sup> – Yisrael Beiteinu was the genuine inheritor of the revisionist ideology and is the "contemporary Herut,"

while Likud, which had shifted over the years toward the political center with a capitalist market ideology, now played the role of the former Liberals.

For his part Netanyahu was interested in decisively defeating his opponents, unlike the situation in 2009, when he received fewer votes than did his opponent, Tsippi Livny, but still managed to form a coalition government and consequently embraced a union with Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu. Given that, both politicians took a significant risk: the merger of the two parties could have a negative impact on their "home" and attracted electorate – which, in fact, happened. Moreover, the leaders of both parties initially did not rule out the possibility of such a scenario, although publicly they declared otherwise.<sup>7</sup> However, the Likud-YB bloc received only 31 mandates – 11 fewer than the two parties had received running separately in 2009 – with losses in the Russian" voting community amounting to four to five seats.

As happened ten years before, the 19th Knesset elections again demonstrated the reduced activity of Russian-speaking voters (according to various estimates, from 56 percent to 62 percent), compared with 67.7 percent on average in the country, which of course affected the overall potential of parties having a statistically visible share of Russian-speaking voters. About 60 percent of the Russian-speaking immigrants who came to the election, judging from the research conducted on its eve, during and following those elections,<sup>8</sup> were cast for the joint Likud-YB list. There is a research-proven similarity of the main socioeconomic and ideological orientations of the Russian-speaking and other electorates of both parties.<sup>9</sup> For instance, according to polls of early 2009 and of January 2015, many YB voters considered Likud as their second electoral option, while Likud voters considered Yisrael Beiteinu as their second option. Despite this, these were two different cultural and political types of voters, who were ready to support their "own" party, but not the other. That is why joining two parties in the one electoral list for the January 2013 elections led to the loss of about a quarter of both Russian-speaking and indigenous Israeli voters of the total that the two parties, taken together had received four years earlier. Most of these lost votes on January 22, 2013, stayed at home. The rest mainly supported the real "center party" – the center-left list of Yesh Atid and the right-wing religious Zionist party The Jewish Home (Habayit Hayehudi) who more successfully than others mastered the "political trend" of that time – the struggle for the "rights of the discriminated-against middle class." Here it is important to note that this is the class that a significant number of immigrants from the former USSR in Israel really or psychologically belong to.

All this can be an indication of a more general trend: an independent "Russian party with an Israeli accent," that combines a "Russian" communal and a mainstream agenda can claim about half of the votes of immigrants from the former USSR. The YB played such a party role in 1999, and then again from 2004 until after the 2009 elections. However, if YB joined a bloc with mainstream Israeli parties, or "overloaded" its own party list with the representatives of other communities, while weakly accenting the needs of Russian Israelis in its slogans and platform



(as it happened in 2003, 2013 and, in some ways, also in 2015), the situation may be different.

A part of YB's voters had the impression that the party was losing interest in the "Russian Street," which led a large part of its traditional voters to choose one of three alternative options. First to support purely sectarian party lists although they would most likely fail to pass the electoral threshold. Second, to shift to supporting other parties such as Yesh Atid or the Jewish Home in 2013 or the new Kulanu Party in 2015. Third, simply to stay home and not vote in the election, perhaps the most popular choice.

## The "Russian Israel"

One way or another, as the election results showed, it is the changing sociocultural and political trends in the community of "Russian Israel" that determine the political status and strength of Yisrael Beiteinu. Let us try to analyze these processes in more detail.

### *Community, identification and politics*

Started in 1989, the "Great Aliya" from the (former) USSR, brought to Israel, as of July 1, 2018, about 1,090,000 Jews and their family members. Given the birth rate in Russian-speaking families and the death rate, the "Russian-speaking" community of Israel in 2018, is about 1,130,000 people.<sup>10</sup> This number does not include the people who were born in the former USSR, but immigrated to Israel from a third country, and therefore are not counted by official statistics as "Russian Speaking" Israelis, as well as the former Soviet immigrants of the previous wave of 1970–88. Thus, "Russian-speaking" Israelis now are some 13 percent of the total and about 18 percent of the Jewish population of the country. Prior to the 2015 elections, the total number of voters who were born in the USSR and the successor states and arrived in Israel between 1 January 1989 to 28 February 2015 was 857,000 people (not including the second generation), which at that time was equivalent to 17.5–18 Knesset mandates.

As to the question, as to whether this entity is an independent sociocultural body (and because of that, also a separate political constituency) – or is nothing more than a statistical category – judging by our own and other studies, the answer should be the first one, a separate political constituency. Only about 11 percent of respondents interviewed during our 2017 study,<sup>11</sup> said that "the Russian community of Israel" is nothing more than "the invention of journalists and interested politicians." On the contrary, more than 40 percent of respondents believed that "such a community does exist, and it will not disappear in the near future," and about 40 percent more believed that this phenomenon is of a "situational nature." There were no major differences between different age cohorts, except the young people between the ages of 18 and 24. But even about a fifth of these young people acknowledged their belief in the "Russian Israel" community as a long-term

**TABLE 3.1** A Russian Community in Israel – FSU Immigrants’ Views by Party Affiliation

<i>Does such a community exist in Israel?</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Potential “Russian-speaking” voters of the parties</i>					
		<i>Likud</i>	<i>YB</i>	<i>Yesh Atid</i>	<i>Zionist Camp</i>	<i>Kulanu</i>	<i>Jewish Home</i>
No, it does not	10.9%	12.9%	8.4%	11.6%	8.0%	16.5%	7.5%
It does, as a <b>long-run</b> phenomenon	42.4%	37.3%	52.4%	36.8%	40.8%	46.1%	48.6%
It does, for current generation	38.5%	41.2%	34.4%	47.5%	51.2%	35.2%	34.4%
Hard to say/do not care	8.2%	8.7%	4.8%	4.1%		2.3%	9.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
N	N=915	N=262	N=264	N=97	N=50	N=45	N=35

factor, and more than half of them believed the phenomenon to be relevant, at least for the first generation of new immigrants. What is more important, more than 70 percent of respondents in some ways feel their personal affiliation with this community. Moreover, if voters of YB and immigrants of 55 years old and older more often stated their “unconditional” communal identity, members of the age cohorts of 25–54 (also the voters of the other parties that have support in the “Russian Street”), mostly acknowledged that their identification with the Israeli “Russian” community actually “depends on the situation.”

Evidently, in the current Israeli situation, the availability of a communal identity also almost automatically acquires a political connotation, including the issue of the models of representation of this community before Government agencies, as well as the issue of the most beneficial political party platforms to Russian Israelis.

### ***In search of the optimal “Russian lobby”***

Electoral behavior of immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Israel underwent major changes during a quarter of a century of independent “Russian” community policy in the country. Its primary model was formed by the second half of the 1990s, at the peak of the political–demographic “might” of this community, equal to 20–22 of 120 Knesset mandates, which were almost equally divided between the supporters of all-Israeli parties and the supporters of movements that represented the interests (both specific and nationwide) of the Russian-speaking Israelis.

The first subgroup was dominated by those whose priorities lay in the security sphere, the national identity of Israel, as well as external and, in part in economic policy; the second mostly included those who more focused on socioeconomic interests (housing, employment, social welfare) and civil issues rather than the Arab-Israeli conflict. In addition, during the first decade of “Russian” politics in Israel (1992–2003), the votes of the first group were initially scattered over almost

the entire spectrum of Zionist political parties, while the second group voted for Russian sectarian parties.

In the following years this situation became more fluid, as one can learn from the sociological studies that were guided by, or with the participation of this author.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the share of supporters of the idea of “their own” communal political party representation went down from half of all Russian Israeli respondents in 2004 to a third in 2009–2013 and less than a quarter in 2014–2015. Moreover, the average share of supporters of the “purely Russian,” sectarian party did not exceed 5 percent (i.e., about one mandate); the remaining voters of this subgroup preferred the idea of the “Russian party with an Israeli accent.” The second model, “a nationwide party with a strong ‘Russian’ wing” in the same years consistently won the sympathy of a third to 40 percent of the respondents. Finally, the share of the respondents who thought that the Russian street of Israel does not need any special political representation, was only 12–15 percent in 2004, but doubled in 2009–2013 and tripled by 2014–2015.

In the second decade of “Russian politics” in Israel (2004–2013) YB absolutely dominated in the niche of “Russian” parties with or without an Israeli accent and managed to unite both camps of that part of the Israeli “Russians” who preferred to vote “for their own people.” Essentially, the strong Liebermanist core, identified with the conservative right-wing approach to politics and liberal-market judgments on the country’s economy, also adopted Lieberman’s idea of the Russian-speaking Israelis’ integration into Israeli society from “a position of strength.” The second

**TABLE 3.2** Party Traits Needed for a “Russian Israel” – Poll Results

<i>What sort of parties are needed for the “Russian Israel”?</i>	<i>Poll date</i>								
	<i>“Mutagim” Agency</i>			<i>Public Opinion Research Israel (PORI)</i>					
	<i>2004</i>	<i>March 2009</i>	<i>May 2009</i>	<i>2011*</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2015</i>	<i>2017</i>	
“Russian” Pure party/ sectarian parties	51%	5%	5%	31.4	7%	4%	6%	12.7%	
With an “Israeli accent”		25%	25%		21%	18%	16%	22.5%	
Nationwide party with a strong “Russian wing”	33%	41%	37%	43.5	39%	38%	33%	27.4%	
No need for a “Russian” community lobby	12%	25%	28%	25.2	27%	36%	35%	25.9%	
Do not know/not sure	4%	4%	5%	-	5	4	9%	11.6%	
Total,	% 100	100%	100	100	100	100	100	100	
	N 640	1012	1006	870	1013	1014	1004	915	

*Note:* In 2011, the question was, “Do you think that ‘Russian Israelis’ need a party of their own?” and the options were “Definitely”; “I think, yes”; “I think, they do not.”

group was a large part of the moderate-right and socially oriented voters (from the economic policy point of view) who were the “electoral inheritance” of Yisrael BaAliya party, who normally between the elections “sit on the fence.” Likud, in its turn, dominated in the niche of the parties “with a strong Russian wing”; while the third niche was captured by parties that were uninterested, or unable to demonstrate the “Russian accent” of their policies.

However, over the last five years the situation has changed again, primarily in terms of the disappearance of the rigid “party binding” of devotees of a wide range of “sectarian,” “combined” and “nationwide” models of promotion of the “Russians” political interests and a gradual change in their electoral and demographic weight.

This was shown by the results of our two polls of the “Russian Street” conducted in January 2015 (on the eve of the elections to the 20th Knesset) and March 2017. Thus, almost a half of the respondents in the subgroup of the supporters of the model of the “Russian Party with the Israeli Accent,” whose popularity was about a fifth of all the votes, in both surveys gave their support to YB. Still a fifth of this subgroup was ready to support Likud, and more than a tenth, Yesh Atid. In turn, in the niche of a “national party with a strong “Russian wing,” YB and Likud had almost an equal strength although Likud had previously been considered a “monopolist” of this idea. And, as in the past, both parties had to defend this niche from new applicants (which in the past used to be Kadima, then Yesh Atid, and from time to time, albeit with much less success, Labor, Shas and Jewish Home “).

**TABLE 3.3** Advancing Russian Community Interests in Israel – 2017 Party Preference Poll

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Likud</i>	<i>YB</i>	<i>Yesh Atid</i>	<i>Zionist Camp</i>	<i>Kulanu</i>	<i>Jewish Home</i>	<i>Did Not vote</i>	<i>No Opinion</i>
“Russian” sectarian	12.7%	10.4%	16.4%	13.6%	10.3%	8.3%	7.3%	16.1%	10.9%
“Russian with Israeli accent”	22.5%	16.7%	32.6%	21.7%	8.4%	18.5%	14.4%	20.7%	22.3%
Nationwide party with strong “Russian” wing	27.4%	34.9%	32.1%	23.9%	29.5%	21.7%	23.1%	12.4%	12.8%
No need for a “Russian” community lobby	25.9%	24.3%	10.8%	35.5%	47.7%	45.1%	48.4%	24.1%	31.8%
Hard to say	11.6%	13.8%	8.1%	5.3%	4.2%	6.4%	6.8%	26.8%	22.2%
Total	100.0	100.0%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0%	100.0	100.0%	100.0
	N=914	N=232	N=284	N=108	N=33	N=32	N=41	N=48	N=106

At the same time, about a quarter of the Russian-speaking Likud voters, more than a third – of the Yesh Atid voters, and about half of the Zionist Union, “Kulanu” and “The Jewish Home” voters in 2017 were supporters of the idea that the “Russian street” in Israel does not need any sectarian representation. However, 13 percent of the voters who believed so, meaning that they did not support the “Russian party” idea in principle, were ready to cast their vote for YB, which was a little a bit less than for Yesh Atid. Obviously, these respondents belong to those voters who believe that they support Lieberman and his list without reference to their own and his “ethnic communal” origin.

Disappointment with the results of the 2015 Knesset elections and a new outburst of immigration from Russia and Ukraine in the last five years can probably explain the surprising two or even threefold growth (from 4–6 percent in 2014–2015 to almost 13 percent, which is equivalent to about two mandates) in the survey of 2017 of the share of those who would be seeking “their own, purely sectoral Russian party.” However, in practice less than 1 percent of Russian-speaking respondents declare their wish to vote for such a party, in case it would be formed, which does not make such a project promising. Meanwhile, 40 percent of the supporters of this idea support Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Is Our Home), 20 percent Likud, and 12 percent Yesh Atid. The rest of the respondents in this category were strewn almost throughout the political spectrum or were unable to choose.

Not less interesting is the fact that the issue of the optimal model for the “Russian lobby” is by no means a monopoly of the elder generation of the FSU *olim*, which, in some media and even some academic circles, is still considered (in my opinion, erroneously) as the sociodemographic base of the “Russian ghetto” in Israel.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the popularity of the concept of the “nationwide party with a strong ‘Russian’ wing” and of the idea of “no need for the Russian community’s special political representation,” respectively, in all our polls (such as in 2015 and 2017) was directly proportional to the age of the respondents. However, the idea of a presence in the Israeli political market of the “Russian party” (with an Israeli accent or without it) in 2017 was supported by about one third of representatives of all age cohorts under 65 years old. This includes immigrants from the FSU who were socially, mentally and economically well integrated in Israeli society as well as young immigrants in the 18–34 age cohort. Even in 2015, when the popularity of a Russian-Jewish party was at an all-time low, 15–20 percent of the Russian immigrants supported it.

### ***“Russian interests”***

In light of this one may assume that the respondents’ electoral affiliation with a specific party, keeping in mind their desired model of political representation now is situational, and much of it is owed to the overall image of a political movement, and especially to the personality of its leaders. This was proved by a poll conducted on the eve of the 2015 Knesset elections: more than half of the respondents at that time declared that they were ready to vote for a party because of the party leader,

**TABLE 3.4** Advancing Russian Jewish Community Political Interests – Desired Modes

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Age</i>					
		<i>18–24</i>	<i>25–34</i>	<i>35–44</i>	<i>45–54</i>	<i>55–64</i>	<i>65+</i>
Opinion Poll, January 2015							
“Russian” sectarian	6%	7%	3%	6%	5%	5%	7%
“Russian with Israeli accent”	16%	8%	17%	16%	18%	19%	15%
Nationwide party with strong “Russian” wing	33%	21%	21%	30%	36%	42%	42%
No need for a “Russian” community lobby	35%	44%	46%	40%	35%	29%	27%
Hard to say	9%	19%	13%	8%	7%	5%	9%
Total, %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	N=1014	72	178	198	165	168	233
Opinion Poll, March 2017							
“Russian” sectarian	12.7%	5.2%	11.5%	10.2%	10.8%	12.0%	18.1%
“Russian with an Israeli accent”	22.5%	21.9%	15.2%	24.0%	21.3%	21.6%	27.1%
Nationwide party with a strong “Russian” wing	27.4%	19.6%	25.3%	23.9%	27.6%	31.2%	30.2%
No need for any special representation	25.9%	42.2%	32.5%	32.7%	27.5%	28.2%	11.4%
Hard to say	11.6%	11.1%	15.4%	9.2%	12.8%	7.1%	13.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	N=915	N=43	N=145	N=178	N=155	N=151	N=241

whose ideology and policy they supported. In the communal context, it means the ability of a politician to promote the interests of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

In this sense, Avigdor Lieberman on the eve of the elections to the Knesset in 2015 seemed almost not to have any competitors. Although he was behind Netanyahu as the preferred candidate for prime minister, 47 percent of potential Russian-speaking voters in January 2015 named Lieberman as a person who could meet the challenges affecting the Russian-speaking community better than any other politician; and only 9 percent of this group mentioned Benjamin Netanyahu

as such a politician. Second place in the “community rating” in all the 2015–2017 opinion polls was consistently occupied by the YB Minister of aliya and integration Sofa Landover, the third and fourth places belong to “Likudniks,” Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein and Ze'ev Elkin, the Knesset Foreign Policy and Security committee “Chairman,” and Minister for Jerusalem and for the Environment, (The latter two are the favorites among those “Russians” who claim that the community does not need any special representation, but still realize the importance of “sectoral guarantees”).

Essentially, “Russian immigrant voters basically expected their leaders to represent a “Russian-Jewish view” on the critical issues of the national agenda. Hence the parties’ “socioeconomic program” and their “platform for international policy and security” were of equal importance (with the rating of 40 percent each in the preelection study of 2015) among the Russian immigrants’ voting criteria. For a fifth of respondents these criteria also included position of a party in civic issues: fighting corruption, dealing with Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs, the military draft, issues of state and religion, the introduction of civil marriage in Israel, the conversion of non-Jewish immigrants to Judaism, etc.) Only a tenth of respondents stated that their main motive was the presence of Russian-speaking candidates on party lists and issues of importance to the Russian immigrant community in the party programs. Nonetheless, 63 percent of the respondents in January 2015 stated that it was of importance to them that immigrants from the former Soviet Union would have seats in the Knesset and would be in the government.

For a fifth of respondents these criteria also were the position of the party in civic issues (domestic security, fighting the corruption, ultra-Orthodox Jews and Israeli Arabs military draft; state and religion issues; introduction of civil marriages in Israel, non-Jewish immigrants’ conversion to Judaism, etc.). And only a tenth of respondents stated that their main motivation was the presence of “Russian-speaking” candidates on the party list and the accent on relations with the community in the party programs; although 63 percent of respondents in January 2015 claimed that it was important for them that *olim* from the former USSR and FSU countries should be a part of the Knesset and the government.

Does this mean that we see here a simple reflection of general Israeli state and society’s problems in the Israeli Russian-Jewish environment? On the one hand, between 50 percent and almost 90 percent of the respondents of the five large and comprehensive “Russian street” surveys of 2014–2017, when asked about Russian-speaking Knesset members’ and ministers’ (especially of the YB party) agenda, expected them to concentrate first on national security issues. Specifically, the elimination of the Iranian threat and Palestinian terrorism, as well as “combating the disloyalty of Israeli Arabs” (which was more relevant for YB voters than the community average), eradicating street crime, providing a universal draft for the IDF, and to a lesser degree – improvement of the relations between the state and religion. In the socioeconomic bloc of voters, the issues of economy and welfare, solving the housing problem of young couples, lowering retail prices, deregulation

of the economy and improvement in the quality of formal education were of the top priority, and all of them obviously important not just to the FSU *olim*.

On the other hand, an opinion poll conducted two months before the elections to the 2015 Knesset among readers of the then popular Russian-language Israeli news and analysis website “IzRus” showed that more than 70 percent of the respondents still believed that the Israeli “Russian street” has specific problems that “Russian” deputies had to solve.<sup>14</sup> Even more convincing was the data of our representative survey of 2017 which found that almost a third of Russian-speaking immigrants recognized many problems that were specific for the “Russian” Jewish immigrants in Israel (this view was especially popular among respondents aged 55 and elder). And almost 45 percent of the respondents at that time believed in a more limited list of the problems and challenges of this sort – this opinion dominated among middle-aged poll participants. Only about a quarter of the respondents (among young people – 1.5–2 times more than the average) believed that “those from the former Soviet Union have the same problems as other population groups in Israel.”

The list of these specific topics, that had increased in importance from survey to survey in 2014–2017, and which according to 60 to 80 percent of respondents were necessary for their representatives in the Knesset and the Government to resolve, included “solving the housing problem of elderly immigrants,” “problems of those immigrants who were unable to earn a decent pension in Israel” (a dilemma for those who arrived in the country aged 45 or older), as well as a solution to the issue of obtaining pensions from the countries of origin; “employment programs and affirmative action in favor of immigrants from the FSU in the private and public sector and in the civil service”; followed by “strengthening the status and influence of the Russian-speaking community,” and “promotion of Olim employment in the government sector.”

Unsurprisingly, the specific set of problems relevant mostly to the “Russian street” in Israel was more often supported by the potential voters of Yisrael Beiteinu. According to the December 2014 – January 2015 research data, YB was the party that respondents estimated as the most able to defend the interests of Russian Israel better than any other party. This opinion was shared not only by 87 percent of the potential YB supporters, but also by more than half of the Likud party voters, as well as from one third to over 40 percent of the potential “Russian-speaking” electorate of the parties visible in the “Russian street” and by those who by that time had not yet chosen a party. Moreover, right-wing party voters recognized this YB role more often than the role of their own parties.

How can one explain this dissonance? It seems that the very notion of “Russian interests” in communal discourse in recent years has been transformed from a simple interaction into a more organic combination of a nationwide and a specific community agenda. And it is in this new discourse, that the phenomenon of Avigdor Lieberman’s leadership is perceived. (This was also the statement of many of the participants of the focus groups conducted as part of our study). For “autonomists” (according to the polls – 20 to 25 percent of immigrants from the former



USSR), he was a unique Russian community leader, really promoting the position of Russian-speaking Israelis and giving a national legitimization to their sectoral interests. For “radical integrationists” (25 to 30 percent) – he is was national-level leader, able to find the optimal solution to the major problems the country is facing, irrespective of the ethnic origin of the citizens or himself. (Clearly, Lieberman in this niche competed with Benjamin Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett).

But for the biggest group of Russian-speaking immigrants (45 to 50 percent), he is “one of them” in the sense that, as a politician at the national level, he, understanding the mentality of Russian-speaking voters is able to implement their views and value-systems in solving common Israeli problems. At a common level, one of the respondents formulated this approach in the following way: “the interests of immigrants from the former USSR are the same today as those of other members of the society, although for ‘Russians’ these problems are three times more complicated.”

That was also the way, as respondents saw it, one may perceive the notorious problem of the “glass ceiling” for Russian immigrants. The existence of this phenomenon was obvious for 40 percent of the respondents of the March 2017 FSU immigrants’ poll. Among the young *olim*, from one third to 40 percent (compared to a quarter of the community average), on the contrary, were confident that “immigrants can work their way up to any position – it depends on education, abilities and luck.” However, for those of early middle age (35–44) with the largest percentage of people rising in their careers, the most popular response was “in principle, repatriates (immigrants from the FSU) can move up to almost any position, but it takes them a lot more effort than native Israelis.”

The respondents of the “intermediate middle age” (45–54), cohort who worked in areas still broadly controlled by the “old” Israeli elites, held a different opinion. They more often than others – 36 versus 24 percent on average in the sample – believed that while in some spheres (apparently in demonopolized sectors, more integrated into the global economy) the “glass ceiling” no longer existed, in the others it was still there. Finally, many of the immigrants over the age of 55 who had much less time for professional advancement in Israel were convinced of “the glass ceiling for those who were not native-born Israelis.” Moreover, supporters of YB, while paying tribute to the progress of the *olim*’s integration in Israel, however more often than not noted the permanence of the “glass ceiling” in a few economic and societal sectors of Israel, which is consistent with the average age of its voters, who (or their children) have faced this ceiling in the process of their own career progress.

Thus, in the interval between the 19th and 20 Knesset elections, polls recorded that about one-third of those who came from the former USSR had a fixed idea that the “Russian street” has several specific problems that they were willing to resolve in a dialog with the Israeli society. The main hope of this group, equal to six to seven mandates of the Knesset, was the YB, while also seeing it as the desired national market-oriented moderate right-wing party with a strong “Russian” wing.

## The election crisis for Yisrael Beiteinu in 2015

It was clear, however, for the YB leaders that six to seven mandates were not enough to satisfy their political ambitions. The first address for the further progress was the “floating” welfare-oriented and moderate right-wing Russian-speaking electorate, which, after the collapse of the Likud-Beiteinu bloc in the autumn of 2014, “by definition” should have had to return to their “home” parties. Indeed, this was a trend showed by our representative studies of the “Russian street” that were conducted with the help of the identical methodology used in the September 2013, February–March 2014 and January 2015, polls as well as nonpublic polls of different parties leaked into the media and social networks.<sup>15</sup> Likud quite quickly regained the level of support of 21–25 percent of the potential “Russian” Israeli electors (then equivalent to 4–4.5 “Russian” mandates); from this constituency in the 2009 elections.

In turn, the “Russian” YB potential, moderately but steadily, grew from poll to poll, and in March 2014 reached 38 percent of the whole Russian-speaking community of Israelis eligible to vote, which then approximately corresponded to 7.5–8 mandates. A continuation of this trend both among Russian-speaking and other Israelis was expected in the next seven months leading up to the 2015 election.

A series of surveys conducted by various Israeli pollsters in early December 2014, as well as “internal” polls commissioned by various parties, showed that at that time the “Israel Our Home” party could receive 10–12 mandates, including 7.5–9 of them, presumably in “Russian” sector. Assuming that the community back-up of the YB was almost assured, and the natural potential of the party in this environment was almost exhausted,<sup>16</sup> leaders of the party decided that the time had come to direct the main resources of the party to ensure an electoral breakthrough on the nation-wide field, by putting forward an attractive foreign policy that could gain support throughout a large part of the Israeli body politic.

Lieberman introduced his foreign policy plan at the “Academy and Entrepreneurship” forum at Tel Aviv University in December 2014. He argued that the two existing Israeli strategies were not working. The first, an attempt to achieve an agreement with the Palestinians, which was supposed to lead to the normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab world, wasn’t working because the Palestinians were unwilling to make any concessions. The second strategy, just maintaining the status quo, Lieberman argued, would not work in the long term.<sup>17</sup>

Instead of these two approaches, the YB Chairman proposed “to turn the pyramid over,” moving to a political settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict through a direct agreement with moderate pro-Western Arab Sunni regimes, which in the light of common challenges and threats, especially from Iran, were increasingly interested in the partnership with Israel and thus might be ready to consider a new “regional peace.” According to the Lieberman doctrine, such an overall agreement would also include the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict and the status of

the Israeli Arab community – not as a precondition, but as an outcome of the resolution of Arab-Israeli conflict. (For Lieberman the possibility of such development came from cautiously positive reactions to his “territories and population exchange plan” in some leading Arab media, where several commentators considered this plan, if properly implemented, more logical than the failed Oslo project).<sup>18</sup>

According to Lieberman, this policy initiative would achieve two goals – the withdrawal from the political dead-end that deprived Israel of the ability to put forth diplomatic initiatives and damaged relations with the United States and Europe, and the solving of the problem of the Palestinians through territorial delimitation between Jews and Arabs on a regional scale that would enable Israel to annex the major settlement blocs and the territories of Judea and Samaria that were vital for Israel’s security and identity. In the context of this plan, Lieberman’s previous idea – the “exchange of territories and population between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and the cantonization of the Arab-populated territories beyond the Green Line would become operational aspects of a general settlement that would remove the Palestinian Authority as an active negotiating partner.

In a sense, Lieberman’s plan was a partial repetition of a plan that Lieberman had offered on the eve of the 2006 Israeli elections, when the idea proved to be a popular platform issue for Israel Beiteinu leaders on the eve of the 18th Knesset elections, when, in fact, the idea of exchanging the cities of southern Galilee inhabited by Israeli Muslim Arabs for Jewish settlement blocks and the territories of Judea and Samaria uninhabited by Arabs was suggested. At that time, to minimize the outflow of right-wing voters from the party, Lieberman carefully “packed” his mainstream right and centrist ideas into hard right-wing rhetoric.<sup>19</sup> This time the direction of the process was different: In fact, Lieberman presented the “new right” (or a “pragmatic-right”) concept, disguised as a moderately centrist project, that could be attractive to almost the entire Israeli political spectrum, except for those on the right and the left extremes of Israeli politics. Indeed, Avi Shilon in his article published by the left-wing liberal “Haaretz” newspaper, with some concern called Lieberman’s new plan “the ultra-right center program.”<sup>20</sup>

There was also some risk that even a formal movement of YB toward the center could disappoint a part of its right-wing supporters. However, the sheer option of YB’s becoming a “trend party” could create a dynamic that might level out most of its image and political shortcomings, and force right-wing voters to put their doubts aside to “give Lieberman a chance.” It also allowed Lieberman to think that, as happened in the past, that the acquisition of centrist votes would comfortably cover the losses among YB’s right-wing supporters. Indeed, certain surveys conducted shortly after the publication of the Lieberman doctrine showed that the growth in popularity of his party was up to 15–17 potential mandates.

Unfortunately for Yisrael Beiteinu, the promising start of its campaign collapsed because of corruption allegations that involved a number of YB leaders. This hurt it badly on the national level and to a degree among its core Russian constituency as well. In addition, there was confusion in the party’s ideological message, and the only thing that remained in the public’s perception was Lieberman’s consent to evacuate “some settlements” within the framework of a territorial exchange with the Arabs,

as well as his readiness “to be in the same government” with Yitzhak Herzog and Tsippy Livni of the Zionist Union. This hurt YB among moderate Hebrew-speaking voters and also inflicted harm on the “Russian Street.” Given this situation, Lieberman decided to abandon the moderate voters, who were potentially sympathetic to his foreign policy ideas, but who were scared away because of the corruption allegations, and return to his Russian base. However, for many of the YB ideological faction, the YB party was not right-wing enough, and for the party’s social welfare camp, the party was not Russian enough. Another problem facing YB during the campaign was Lieberman’s unwillingness to appeal to Russian communal solidarity. Until the very end of the election campaign, Lieberman did his best to promote his mainstream political pretensions, preferring not to exploit the impression of some Russian Israelis that the corruption scandal was engineered by rival parties to remove YB from the Israeli political map or even damage the Russian Jewish community. Given all these developments 80,000 Russian Israelis, or 2–2.5 Knesset seats from Russian-speaking voters, stayed at home, rather than vote for Yisrael Beiteinu.

When the election results came in, Yisrael Beiteinu gained the support of about 40 percent of Russian Israelis.<sup>21</sup> In other words, of 215,083 ballots that the YB received in the elections (which was equivalent to 6.5 Knesset seats), 190–195 thousand, or some 5.7 Knesset seats were provided by FSU immigrants. That means that the number of non- “Russian” Israelis, that voted for the party was equivalent to about one Knesset seat, half of which was obtained from the Christian and Druze communities. (For instance, in Abu-Snan village, equally populated by these two groups, the YB received in 2015 some 16 percent of votes. That was 2.5 times more than Likud received, three times more than the Zionist Union received and in some neighborhoods even more than the United (Arab) List.

## Conclusion – old challenges and new perspectives

In summary, for the greater part of its 20-year life, Yisrael Beiteinu can be considered a political success story. It succeeded, for the most part, in achieving its two objectives – successfully positioning Yisrael Beiteinu as a political force able to represent the interests (both sectarian and nonsectarian) of the FSU immigrants, and as a party with a nationwide political platform. During the period from 2004 to 2013 when YB operated independently, Lieberman was able to both control YB’s strong right-wing and market-oriented core, and also attract the votes of Israelis concerned with welfare issues and those from the moderate Israeli political center.

However, between the 2013 and 2015 elections this previously successful scheme began to malfunction for a number of reasons. Consequently, the party completed the 2015 electoral campaign with just 6 Knesset seats, instead of 15 that it got at 2009 elections and 12–13 that YB enjoyed in 2013–2014. In fact, YB leaders remained with their “home,” the predominantly Russian-speaking electorate – which, according to the polls, this party also continued to control three and a half years later. Specific interests of such FSU immigrant groups as aged Russian-speaking citizens, immigrant “generation 40+,” representatives of the new wave of aliya from the FSU and other sources of sectarian politics would definitely remain

in the party in the medium-run, and thus for one and a half or even two decades could permit the YB to exist as a middle-range community movement of “Russian Israel.” (And in this status, a desirable junior partner in any coalition.)

However, this minimal goal is not being discussed seriously by the YB leadership. According to them, the very modest achievements of the party in the 2015 Knesset elections was a situational failure rather than an indication of the erosion of the YB’s social and ideological base. “It is clear to everybody that the whole story related to YB [in 2015 elections] was artificially engineered,” Lieberman noted in an interview in the Russian-Israeli internet publication Mignews in June 2016. “We received 215 thousand [votes]. During those elections our task was very simple, just to survive. We did that and now we are in the second phase, which is [party] reconstruction. Of course, in the third phase we plan a high soar.”<sup>22</sup>

Netanyahu evidently also found the YB program reasonable. Otherwise it would be hard to explain his very “generous” offer to Lieberman to join the fourth Netanyahu’s Government, getting two ministerial positions, the Foreign Ministry for Lieberman himself, and Ministry of Aliya (Immigration) and Integration for Sofa Landover. However, YB leaders at the beginning preferred to reject this offer initially to fill the niche of “secular right-wing opposition” to Netanyahu’s cabinet, but rejoined it more than a year later and was rewarded with two ministries, including the Ministry of Defense, which was the second most important position in the Israeli government, and Netanyahu’s pledge to implement YB demands, such as arranging pensions for Russian immigrants who came to Israel at advanced ages (40+), draft requirements for ultra-Orthodox Jews, and a comprehensive regional Arab-Israeli agreement.

It was obvious that strategic ambitions of the party leaders are again related to the prospects of a decisive breakthrough in the all-Israeli electoral square, which demands the political scheme that would enable the brand “Lieberman at the head of Yisrael Beiteinu” at least to repeat, and ideally to exceed the electoral success of 2009. Their major expectations in this sense were associated with keeping for Lieberman in the public discourse the “copyright” on the “regional peace” doctrine. This idea was again proclaimed by him, still in the opposition, in May 2015;<sup>23</sup> and, coincidentally or not, the formal adoption in the mid-2016 of the “comprehensive regional Arab-Israeli agreement,” as the part of the Israeli Government’s foreign policy agenda,<sup>24</sup> happened when the YB joined the ruling coalition.

Thus, regardless of the fact, that the overwhelming majority of the potential YB votes still comes from the “Russian” community, the party still positions itself as “nationwide liberal and pragmatic right-wing movement,” which aims to promote a “social-market economy” and “division between religion and politics” (rather than between the “state and religion”).<sup>25</sup> As far as the interests of “Russian” and other immigrants are concerned, YB leaders see them as to be implemented gradually, not just talked about.<sup>26</sup>

Lieberman’s strategy to promote the interests of the Russian-speaking community as part of the collective (rather than particularly Russian interests) of the Israeli society may well enhance his appeal to the Israeli electorate, provided Yisrael Beiteinu is not encumbered by corruption scandals as happened in 2015. YB may therefore not only retain the “home” electorate of the party, but eventually

win back the floating “Russian” voters (recent polls do show a rise in the party’s rating to seven to nine seats). While representatives of the community might have many questions and claims regarding YB’s social policy, the party’s foreign policy is in fact widely supported. In 2017, Lieberman’s ideas of “regional peace” and the termination of the political process with the PLO were fully supported by more than 27 percent of Russian-speaking respondents and partially supported by almost 55 percent more of Russian-speaking respondents.

Potential YB voters were almost equally divided between those who totally and in principle supported Lieberman’s foreign policy and security policies (47.7 percent and 45.4 percent, respectively). Russian community support for the YB leader’s policies by potential supporters of “Yesh Atid” and of the “Jewish Home,” as well as by undecided voters was also higher, than the community average.

It is clear from this analysis that there is a place on the moderate right section of the Israeli political spectrum for a party such as Yisrael Beiteinu, which appeals both to the Russian-speaking community and to the Israeli electorate as a whole. Whether that niche will continue to be filled by Yisrael Beiteinu or a new political party will try to replace it remains to be seen.

**TABLE 3.5** Support Among Russian-Speaking Israelis for the Foreign Policy and Security Doctrines of Israeli Politicians

<i>Support level:</i>	<i>Foreign policy/security doctrines of Israeli politicians</i>					
	<i>Gal-On</i>	<i>Herzog</i>	<i>Lapid</i>	<i>Netanyahu</i>	<i>Bennet</i>	<i>Lieberman</i>
Totally	2.4%	6.5%	20.6%	24.9%	6.6%	27.4%
With reservations	14.9%	35.6%	49.0%	53.7%	27.6%	54.9%
General support	<b>17.1%</b>	<b>42.1%</b>	<b>69.6%</b>	<b>78.6%</b>	<b>34.3%</b>	<b>82.3%</b>
No support	60.9%	39.9%	15.9%	14.5%	43.6%	10.0%
Do not know	21.8%	18.1%	14.5%	6.9%	22.2%	7.7%
Lack of support	<b>82.7%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>40.4%</b>	<b>21.4%</b>	<b>65.8%</b>	<b>17.7%</b>
Total, %	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total, N	915	915	915	915	915	915

**TABLE 3.6** Support by Party of Lieberman’s Doctrine Among Russian-Speaking Voters, 2017

<i>Level of support</i>	<i>Vote for parties if elections would be today:</i>								
	<i>Total</i>	<i>Likud</i>	<i>YB</i>	<i>Yesh Atid</i>	<i>Zion. Camp</i>	<i>Kulanu Jew. Home</i>	<i>Not vote</i>	<i>Don’t know</i>	
Totally	27.4%	23.0%	47.7%	15.2%	4.3%	24.2%	9.3%	20.0%	10.6%
With some reservations	54.9%	59.2%	45.4%	66.6%	65.6%	54.1%	67.2%	38.5%	63.7%
Not at all	10.0%	9.1%	3.7%	14.2%	23.2%	18.7%	21.3%	16.7%	8.3%
Do not know	7.7%	8.6%	3.2%	4.0%	6.9%	3.0%	2.2%	24.9%	17.4%
Total, %%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total, N	915	232	284	108	33	32	41	48	106

## Notes

- 1 Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin, "The New Russian Jewish Diaspora and 'Russian' Party Politics in Israel," *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (December 2002), pp. 38–51, 81–83.
- 2 For details see Vladimir Khanin, "Israel's 'Russian' Parties," in *Contemporary Israel: Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and Security Challenges*, ed. Robert O. Freedman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), pp. 97–114.
- 3 Quoted in *Ma'ariv*, December 2, 2005.
- 4 Vladimir Khanin, "The Israel Beiteinu (Israel Our Home) Party Between the Mainstream and 'Russian' Community Politics," *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 2010), pp. 105–123.
- 5 Interview with a high-ranking YB official (Jerusalem, 2011–2012) and personal observation of this author.
- 6 Author's interview with the Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, Jerusalem, May 11, 2018.
- 7 Author's interview with MK Avigdor Liberman, Jerusalem, May 15, 2013. See also: Tamir Cohen, "Polls and Numbers: The Story of Israel's 2013 Election," *Haaretz*, Jan 20, 2013.
- 8 Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin, "The Political Transformation of Israeli 'Russian' Street: The Case of 2013 Elections," *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (April 2015), pp. 245–261.
- 9 See Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin, "Russian-Jewish Political Experience in Israel: Patterns, Elites and Movements," in *Russian Israelis: Social Mobility, Politics and Culture*, ed. Larissa Remennick (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 55–71.
- 10 The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) and Ministry of Aliya (Immigration) and Integration data, August 2018.
- 11 The PORI sociological agency survey of 915 Russian-speaking respondents who arrived in Israel in the 1989–2017 period was conducted in February and March 2017. The survey, based on the methodology developed by this author, was conducted as a series of personal (face-to-face) interviews using a standard questionnaire. The respondents were selected on the basis of a random quota sample which was representative for the demographic profile of the target population (gender, age, time spent after aliya, and place of residence) calculated according to the CBS and Ministry of Aliya and Integration data. The research also included the expanded subsample (209 people) of most recent FSU immigrants of 2014–2017, whose responses were subsequently proportionally considered in the final sampling.
- 12 Studies in 2004, 2006 and 2009 (telephone opinion polls of the representable sample of 700–1,200 respondents in each of them), were conducted by "Mutagim" Agency. Studies of 2011, 2013 2014, 2015 and 2017 (face-to-face interviews of 950–1016 respondents in each of the representative polls) were conducted by the PORI institute according to the identical methodological approach described in footnote 11.
- 13 Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin, "Israelis in Their Way: Identity Models of Russian-speakers in Israel," in "*Russian* Israelis at 'Home' and 'Abroad': Migration, Identity and Culture, eds. Ze'ev Khanin, Alek Epstein, and Marina Niznik (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011) (in Hebrew).
- 14 "IzRus Opinion Poll Results: Whether Parties Need 'Russian' Candidates?" *IzRus*, January 20, 2015 [in Russian], <http://izrus.co.il/oprosov/article/2015-01-20/26660.html>.
- 15 See <http://cursorinfo.co.il/news/vybory2015/2015/03/13/mandati-ndi/>.
- 16 Author's interview with YB 2015 electoral campaign director Vladimir Beyder, Gush Etzion, December 2, 2014.
- 17 Quoted in Barak Raviv, "Lieberman: Netanyahu's Status Quo Approach Has Failed – Israel Needs a Peace Deal," *Haaretz*, December 24, 2014, [www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.633470](http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.633470).
- 18 Alex Grinberg, "Saudi-Israeli Silent Partnership? Unofficial Signals Indicate 'Yes'," *Mida*, March 12, 2014.
- 19 See for instance Avigdor Liberman's interview to *Ynet*, 15 November 2006 and Yitzhak Ben-Khoron, "Lieberman at the Saban Forum: 'the Peace Process is based on False Assumptions,'" *Ynet*, 10 Dec 2006 [in Hebrew].



- 20 Avi Shilon, "Lieberman Gives Pragmatism a Bad Name. Lieberman's Worldview Is Based on the Idea That Life, and Politics, Is a Game," *Haaretz*, December 24, 2014, [www.haaretz.com/opinion/1.633451](http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/1.633451).
- 21 Our estimations are based on the results of "Russian exit-poll," that was organized by this author and the New York-based Research Institute for New Americans (RINA) Director Dr. Sam Kliger and conducted on the day of the 2015 elections by the Sociological agency ASK at 42 polling booths in 16 cities and 2 villages. The sample was representative for the geographical distribution of immigrants from the FSU in Israel. The accumulated data was later compared with the results of the polls that were conducted in the Election Day by Israeli Russian internet media portals NewsRu and Cursor as well as with official voting results at the polling stations in the residential areas where "Russian" Israelis predominated.
- 22 Quoted in "Avigdor Lieberman: 'We Have a Lot of Common Sense and Healthy Forces,'" *Mignews*, June 17, 2016, [http://mignews.com/news/interview/170615\\_135820\\_60241.html](http://mignews.com/news/interview/170615_135820_60241.html).
- 23 Nahum Barnea, "Lieberman's Vision: Gulf States and Israel Together Against Iran," *Magazine Ynet*, May 24, 2015, [www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4660709,00.html](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4660709,00.html).
- 24 Yossi Kuperwasser, "Foundations of a New Middle East," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, May 25, 2018; Ofir Winter, "Arab Approaches to the Political Process and Normalization with Israel," in *Strategic Survey for Israel 2016–2017*, eds. Anat Kurtz and Shlomo Brom (Tel-Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2016), pp. 175–183.
- 25 Author's interview with the Director General of the Yisrael Beiteinu party, Inna Zilbergertz, Jerusalem, August 7, 2018. See also YB Party Manifesto, Jerusalem, 2017.
- 26 Authors interview with Israel Beiteinu former youth wing leader MK Oded Forer, Jerusalem, August 7, 2018.

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# 4

## THE RELIGIOUS PARTIES IN THE NETANYAHU ERA

### The politics of Israelization

*Aharon Kampinsky and Shmuel Sandler*

#### Introduction

The religious parties have been part of the political landscape of Israeli politics as far back as the prestate period.<sup>1</sup> Their influence increased dramatically with Benjamin Netanyahu's return to power as prime minister in 2009, when they were members of his coalition government. We need only mention the important government ministries in Netanyahu's current government (2015–2019) headed by religious and ultra-Orthodox politicians from religious parties: the ministries of education, justice, religion and health, in addition to chairmanship of the Knesset Finance Committee. Furthermore, the religious parties are a main component in Likud-led coalitions, and without them Netanyahu would not have a right-wing coalition majority. It is therefore not surprising that besides their achievements in the key positions mentioned earlier, the religious parties also play an important role in major decisions regarding the identity of the state and its allocation of resources.<sup>2</sup>

This article will trace the power of the religious parties in the Netanyahu era as prime minister, including an in-depth analysis of internal processes within the religious political camps in Israel. Netanyahu's relationship with the religious parties throughout his decade as prime minister (since 2009), compared to his previous term as prime minister in the years 1996 to 1999, will also be analyzed.

The main argument put forth in this article is that two interacting phenomena underlie the current political behavior of the religious parties in Israel: (a) the Israelization process within both the religious Zionist and the ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) camps. While this process plays out differently in each sector, it enables the religious sector as a whole to become increasingly involved in wide ranging spheres of life in Israeli society. And (b) the ideological affinity between the national camp headed by the Likud party and the religious parties that view themselves as an integral part of this camp.

The Israelization process taking place in the religious parties should be viewed as a sea change. The traditional distinction between ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) and national religious Judaism has been that the latter viewed its main role as maintaining the Jewish character of the Jewish People, while the former sought to ensure that ultra-Orthodox Jews could continue to follow their religiously observant way of life. On this backdrop the Israelization process is reflected in the religious agendas of ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism (Yahadut Hatorah) and Shas, that target Israel at large, while Habayit Hayehudi (Jewish Home), the successor of the Mafdal party (the National Religious Party), views its main mission as influencing national security issues and advancing a conservative agenda in shaping government policy and institutions. In other words, an all-Israeli national orientation instead of an all-Israeli religious orientation. It would appear that the ultra-Orthodox parties entered the sphere previously the province of religious Zionism, while the latter repositioned itself in a new role on the political map – a party that no longer sees itself as solely representing the national-religious sector.

### **Religious Zionism: from the Mafdal to Habayit Hayehudi**

The 2009 elections not only returned the Likud party headed by Benjamin Netanyahu to power but also were of great political significance for religious Zionism. To understand the background leading up to this change we must return to the 2006 elections to the 17th Knesset and to the combined list of the Mafdal and the Haichud Haleumi (National Union) parties. The aim was to maximize the power of religious Zionism after the trauma it experienced following the 2005 Gaza Disengagement Plan: the evacuation of Jewish settlements from and the destruction of Gush Katif in the Gaza Strip. However, the election results were disappointing for religious Zionism, as the combined list did not deliver the expected impressive political achievement and garnered only nine mandates. What's more, the Kadima party with Ehud Olmert as prime minister formed a center-left coalition, which the United Torah Judaism party could not join for ideological reasons, and therefore found itself in the opposition. It was Shas, which had won 12 mandates (the same as the Likud headed by Netanyahu) that represented the religious camp in Olmert's government.

In advance of the next election campaign in 2009 the various factions of religious Zionism agreed to unify in a new party framework, officially merging the two parties that had joined forces in the 2006 elections. As part of its branding efforts the party's name was selected in an online poll: "Habayit Hayehudi" (The Jewish Home). A public council was established, comprising a diverse group of rabbis and national religious public figures and headed by (retired) General Yaakov Amidror. The Council was charged with selecting the party's representatives to the Knesset while reflecting the diversity of religious Zionism. Following deliberations, Rabbi Prof. Daniel Hershkowitz was placed at the top of the list and the slated new members were ranked. However, the ultra-Orthodox national religious (Hardal) faction claimed that it was not adequately represented in the new list, which in its

eyes was too moderate and liberal. Religious Zionism faced a split once again, with two political parties representing religious Zionist voters in the 2009 elections: Habayit Hayehudi headed by Daniel Hershkovitz that won three mandates, and the Ichud Haleumi (The National Union) led by Yaakov Katz that received four mandates. Once again religious Zionism's dream remained unrealized. Many members of the national religious community voted for the Likud, which appealed to religious Zionist voters, among other things because of the many "knitted kippah" candidates, the identifying mark of the national religious community, on its list for the Knesset.<sup>3</sup> With three mandates, the Mafdal, in its new Habayit Hayehudi version reached an unprecedented low point in its history – continuing a process that had started in the beginning of the 1980s and gained further downward momentum in the 2009 elections.<sup>4</sup>

Benjamin Netanyahu succeeded in consolidating the right-wing bloc and the religious sector around him, despite the fact that in the 2009 elections the Likud won one less mandate than the competing party, Kadima. The new Habayit Hayehudi party was a natural partner of the Likud, but its low parliamentary achievement earned it a low-ranking ministry, the Minister of Science, that was given to the party's chairperson, Daniel Hershkovitz. The Ichud Haleumi remained outside the government, and the Labor party headed by Ehud Barak joined the coalition.

While in the aftermath of the 2009 elections the brand name change in religious Zionism appeared to be dramatic, the real watershed moment still awaited the party as the 2013 elections drew near – with the entry of the then unknown Naftali Bennett into party politics. Habayit Hayehudi announced primary elections for party chairperson and its list of representatives to the Knesset. Besides then minister Hershkovitz and former minister Zevulun Orlev, the newcomer candidate was Naftali Bennett, who had served as Netanyahu's chief of staff and as Secretary General of the Judea and Samaria Council, and had been a successful high-tech entrepreneur. Hershkovitz bowed out of the race at a relatively early stage and the new young candidate went on to defeat the veteran and experienced Zevulun Orlev. Bennett brought a new spirit to the party, including its rebranding: Habayit Hayehudi would be a national religious party, but also a party with secular representatives that sought to attract new electorates.

The notion of attracting secular voters to the nationalist religious party was not new to the classic Mafdal. It was advanced as far back as the mid-1970s by the young cohorts,<sup>5</sup> led by Zevulun Hammer, who maintained that the party's 12 mandates in the 1977 elections were also received from tens of thousands of voters that did not belong to the party's religious Zionist base. For the young guard, the democratic religious parties in Europe, mainly in Germany and Italy were the model to be emulated.<sup>6</sup> The idea was shelved owing to Mafdal's plunge to six mandates in the 1981 elections, the internal splits with the radical-religious right, and the four to six Knesset members the party went on to earn consistently in future elections.

By contrast, Bennett's efforts to open the party to the secular public were successful. Ayelet Shaked won a place on the list in the primaries held prior to the 2013 elections, becoming the first secular candidate, and then Knesset member,

of a religious party. Bennett also unified the Habaiyit Hayehudi with most of the Ichud Haleumi party, under the framework and name of Habayit Hayehudi. Public opinion polls conducted prior to the 2013 elections hinted at the party's unprecedented popularity, and the election results proved them right: the new and unified party won 12 mandates, a result that the Mafdal in its various forms had not been able to replicate since 1977.<sup>7</sup>

This outcome returned religious Zionism to its heyday as a large and influential party. Yet Netanyahu preferred a coalition with the ultra-Orthodox parties that he knew would be loyal to him and was not in a hurry to invite the leader of the Habayit Hayehudi, Naftali Bennett, owing to their poor personal relations in past years. Concerned that Netanyahu did not plan to add the Habayit Hayehudi to his government, and while Netanyahu was busy with negotiations to form his coalition, party chairperson Bennett forged an alliance with Yesh Atid party leader, Yair Lapid. When the Likud government coalition was finally formed it included Yesh Atid, Habayit Hayehudi and the Hatnuah party headed by Tzipi Livni. The ultra-Orthodox parties were left out. Naftali Bennett was appointed Minister of the Economy, along with two other representatives of his party, Uri Ariel as Minister of Housing and Uri Orbach as Minister for Senior Citizens.<sup>8</sup>

Habayit Hayehudi quickly found itself in a very uncomfortable position, obligated as a coalition member to support a new army Draft Law while facing the ire of the Haredi parties and its own Hardal sector. A rift flared up between religious Zionism and the Haredim regarding this fundamental religious issue, which in turn enraged some of the more conservative parts of religious Zionism who did not have a favorable view of the new party line. Bennett had succeeded in gaining the support of more voters, not only religious ones, at the ballot box, but was now also a partner to government decisions that the Haredi sector vehemently opposed.

Netanyahu's 2013 government was short-lived, and at the end of 2014 he already announced the dissolution of the Knesset ahead of early elections to the 20th Knesset. Habayit Hayehudi maintained the same party line, hoping to replicate its significant achievement in the former elections as a party that was no longer a "camp party," but an "open camp party."<sup>9</sup> This stance had already gained a foothold in the national religious sector, and indeed initial polls seemed to suggest that the party would maintain its achievements in the upcoming elections, and perhaps even exceed them.

However, with polls showing Netanyahu's Likud party losing the elections to the Hamachane Hatzioni (Zionist Camp) led by Yitzhak Herzog, voters gravitated toward the Likud in the last few days before the elections. This meant that many national-religious voters abandoned Habayit Hayehudi at the last minute, preferring to support the Likud in the hope of keeping Netanyahu in power. When the elections results came in, they were disappointing for Habayit Hayehudi, which lost four mandates and garnered only eight.

The migration of about one third of Habayit Hayehudi voters to the Likud offered decisive proof of the advantages and disadvantages of the rebranding from a "camp party" to an "open camp party." Many of traditional Mafdal voters did not

foresee a threat to the Jewish public domain as long as the Likkud was in power. Some of the Habayit Hayehudi voters in the prior elections returned to the Likud when the National Camp was in danger of losing the elections. Paradoxically, the polls that predicted the Likud's loss to the Hamachane Hatzioni drew many voters back to the Likud, especially National Camp voters who had wandered to other parties within the camp.

Bennett ultimately turned this outcome into an achievement: under his leadership, and following successful negotiations, Habayit Hayehudi received two highly important government ministries: education and justice (in addition to the Agriculture Ministry). Bennett himself was appointed Minister of Education, and Ayelet Shaked, Minister of Justice. Both have been highly influential in their positions. Shaked, for example achieved the goal of appointing conservative judges to the Supreme Court, impacting its composition for many years to come. Bennett advanced an agenda upgrading Math and English in the high school curriculum. Notably, the party's achievements under the current government are not considered to benefit only religious Zionism as a sector, but also the general public. This is the most significant transformation of religious Zionism in the current generation: its political party, Habayit Hayehudi, is no longer viewed as a sectorial religious party. Instead it is a party that transcends religious sectorial boundaries in favor of a nationalist agenda appealing to a nationalist audience.

Naftali Bennett has declared publicly that he plans to slate additional nonreligious candidates to the party's list, part of the party's rebranding as a nationalist and religiously traditional party indicating a diminished religious character.<sup>10</sup> Bennett announced that he intends to run for prime minister after the Netanyahu era.<sup>11</sup> Indeed it seems that in its classic religious form Habayit Hayehudi will not present a viable alternative to the centrist-left camp, and only by adopting a broader agenda that breaks away from sectoral boundaries will it be able to realize Bennett's aspiration to ascend to the premiership.

Another phenomenon hindering Habayit Hayehudi's efforts to differentiate itself from and compete with the Likud is Netanyahu's appointment of individuals with a religious Zionist leaning to key government positions. These include the head of the General Security Services, the head of the Mossad, the chief of Police and the director generals of the prime minister's office and the Foreign Ministry. No less important is Israel's ambassador to the US (Ron Dermer) who is religious and identified with religious Zionism, as well as the military secretary to the prime minister. The message this conveys to the national-religious sector is that talented individuals do not need the Habayit Hayehudi party in order to climb up the governmental-administrative hierarchy. The Likud-led government ensures that the gates of government are open to religious Zionism's younger generation.

In the current Netanyahu era, no candidate from the national camp – including the Likud party – has announced that he or she will run against Netanyahu, most likely for electoral reasons because he appears unbeatable. The entire camp recognizes that only an all-Israeli platform with both nationalist and traditional religious appeal can present a viable contender who will be able to form a government.

For this reason it is doubtful whether a distinctly religious Zionist party, similar to the Mafdal in the past, could survive in today's political reality. Public opinion polls that indicate a correlation between religious Zionism and distinctly right-wing positions<sup>12</sup> also show that the national religious public aspires to the victory of the national camp more than it wishes for an electoral achievement of a national-religious party as a camp party.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, among the core constituency of the national religious sector, national security and settlement issues take precedence (33 percent) over religion and state issues (19 percent).<sup>14</sup> This process toward Israelization is twofold – at the electorate level and also at the level of the leader who sees himself as a candidate that can succeed Netanyahu. On this backdrop, Bennett's political strategy appears to be compatible with the dynamics playing out in religious Zionism.<sup>15</sup>

### **Yahadut Hatorah: social split and political unification**

Ashkenazi Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) are represented in the Knesset by the Agudat Israel and Degel Hatorah parties, with the first representing the Hassidic wing and the latter the Lithuanian wing ("Misnagedim" – those who oppose Hasidism).<sup>16</sup> These unified into the Yahadut Hatorah (United Torah Judaism) party in 1992, and did so exclusively for electoral reasons, namely concern that the qualifying threshold would leave one of them out of the Knesset. Consequently, the two parties conduct themselves for the most part as two separate entities within a shared political structure. Thus, for example, each party has its own Council of Torah Sages (Moetzet Gedolei HaTorah), and when political decisions are called for in the political realm, they are reached separately by the councils of Agudat Israel and Degel Hatorah. A joint decision of both factions is a rare occurrence.<sup>17</sup>

Following the elections to the 18th Knesset in 2009, Yahadut Hatorah recommended that the president of Israel select Netanyahu to form the next government. The party then went on to join Netanyahu's government, ending a three-year period in the opposition during Olmert's Kadima party coalition government.<sup>18</sup>

Netanyahu views the Haredi parties as natural coalition partners. This is reflected in the positions he offers the Haredi representatives and his willingness to agree to their coalition demands. In his 2009 coalition for example, Yahadut Hatorah received the office of deputy Minister of Health (without a minister serving above him), of deputy Minister of Education (reporting to a minister) and chairperson of the Knesset Finance committee. The party also enjoyed significant achievements regarding budget allocations, religious institutions and religion-state relations.

Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv passed away at the end of the 18th Knesset term. Considered the greatest and most revered Haredi-Lithuanian rabbi in his generation he was accepted by all factions in this community. Following his passing, the dispute intensified between two factions: the central faction headed by Rabbi Aharon Leib Shteinman, and the Jerusalem faction headed by Rabbi Shmuel Oyerbach.<sup>19</sup> The conflict reached its peak close to the 2013 elections, when the Jerusalem faction submitted its own political list for the upcoming elections under the

name *Netzach* (eternity). However, as the elections drew near *Netzach* reached an agreement with a representative of the Gur Hassidic dynasty, and withdrew its list five days before the elections. Yahadut Hatorah's achievement of seven mandates was unprecedented.

However, a crisis erupted between Netanyahu and the Haredim following the 2013 elections. As noted earlier, to form a government Netanyahu had to agree to a coalition with Habayit Hayehudi and with Yesh Atid headed by Yair Lapid, thus leaving the Haredi parties out in the cold.<sup>20</sup> While they did not have a choice following the alliance between Lapid and Bennett,<sup>21</sup> their anger toward Netanyahu continued to reverberate and did not subside for a long time. To undermine the Likud's confidence that the Haredi parties are an integral part of the right-wing bloc, the Haredim announced that they would not be in any party's pocket in the future.

The tide turned very quickly. Netanyahu decided to dissolve the coalition and announced early elections, while dismissing Lapid and Livni from the government. This was Netanyahu's way of signaling the composition of the next government he would form: a return to the alliance between the Likud, the Haredim and the religious parties, and the homogeneous government he would form.

Following the 2015 elections and the Likud's distinct electoral advantage with Netanyahu at its helm, Yahadut Hatorah was eager to return to the coalition and to the same positions it had filled in the 18th Knesset. The alliance between the Likud and the Haredim returned to its heyday.

The Haredi concern over a centrist-left government in which Yair Lapid would be a partner dissipated. To its detriment, Yahadut Hatorah (mainly Agudat Israel, the Hassidic faction) had to agree to the appointment of Yaakov Litzman as minister, rather than deputy minister on behalf of the party, despite the party's principle of not taking on ministerial positions hailing back to the founding of the state (except in the first Knesset, when Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levin served as a minister representing Agudat Israel). This was after Yesh Atid petitioned the Supreme Court claiming that it was unconstitutional for a deputy minister to serve as an acting minister in a government ministry without a minister serving above him, and the Supreme Court accepted the claim.<sup>22</sup>

At a later stage Litzman would resign in reaction to work on the new railway system conducted on the Sabbath, although he did not leave the coalition.<sup>23</sup> This same coalition succeeded in passing an amendment to a Basic Law according to which ministerial authorities can be delegated to a deputy minister in a ministry in which the prime minister serves as the minister, enabling Litzman to return to serve as deputy minister of Health in Netanyahu's government.<sup>24</sup> As a deputy minister and not a member of the government Yahadut Hatorah did not share in the collective responsibility for the government's decisions and actions.

Current political reality does not leave Yahadut Hatorah many choices. A government with the centrist-left camp would mean a partnership with Yesh Atid headed by Yair Lapid, an unwelcome option for the Haredi camp, given his secularist orientation. This is why Yahadut Hatorah is one of the loyal partners of the Likud party in general and Netanyahu in particular. It also explains why Netanyahu protects Yahadut Hatorah and why it is willing to accommodate it on a variety

of issues, above all state–religion relations. For this reason for example the Likud invested intensive efforts to pass the “Mini–Market Law” that grants the Minister of Interior the authority to decide which shopping areas are permitted to open on the Sabbath.<sup>25</sup> The Likud also helped amend the Draft Law enacted during the term of the previous government and adapted it to Haredi demands, that included army service quotas that the Haredim would have to meet (even though the Supreme Court ultimately revoked the law, and returned the ball to the Knesset).<sup>26</sup>

### **Shas: change of leadership and internal crisis**

If Yahadut Hatorah achieved relative stability over the past decade, processes in Shas were much more dramatic. Founded in 1983 to represent Haredi Sephardi Jews, the Shas Movement underwent several upheavals.<sup>27</sup> The most notable was its transformation into a moderate party with a more national orientation relative to Yahadut Hatorah. For example its representatives serve as ministers rather than deputy ministers, in contrast to the classic position of Agudat Israel.<sup>28</sup> The notable leader of Shas, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, became a social-religious leader, even revered by Ashkenazi sages of the Torah who regarded him as a *Gadol Hador* (considered the most revered rabbi and therefore a leader of the Haredi public), with the attendant significance.<sup>29</sup>

Shas has undergone far-reaching changes since 2009. After the elections to the 18th Knesset it joined Netanyahu’s government in prominent key positions, notably Eli Yishai, the party leader, as Interior Minister. As indicated earlier, the Haredi and religious parties were key members of this coalition, and Shas with its 11 mandates played a major role in this government that was stable compared to prior governments.

Aryeh Deri returned to the political arena close to the 2013 elections. This was after a long period in which he was prohibited from filling government positions following his criminal conviction for moral turpitude. With Deri’s return, the leader of the party, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, faced two options: to dismiss Eli Yishai as head of the party and reinstate Deri in his place, or to leave Eli Yishai in his position, which would push Deri out of Shas and hurt the party. Ultimately it was decided that a threesome would head the party: Eli Yishai, Aryeh Deri and Ariel Atias – postponing the question of the leader and the dilemma it posed. This appeared to be only a precursory step on Deri’s journey back to lead the party.<sup>30</sup>

Shas was not spared the significant effect of the crisis in the relations between Netanyahu and the Haredim following the 2013 elections. As noted, the Lapid-Bennett alliance left the Haredim in the opposition, and although Shas had maintained its power with its 11 mandates it found itself in the opposition with its three-headed leadership.

In 2013 Rabbi Ovadia Yosef decided to officially appoint Deri as the leader of Shas. Several months later, in October 2013, Yosef passed away, leaving a leadership vacuum. The new official party leader is Rabbi Shalom Cohen,<sup>31</sup> who was a member of the Hachmei Hatorah Council (Sephardi Torah Sages) in the days of Ovadia Yosef. The decision to dismiss Eli Yishai as Shas leader created an unprecedented split in the party.<sup>32</sup> Eli Yishai left Shas to form a new party comprising individuals



from the Haredi national faction in religious Zionism and former Shas members. Yishai's new party, Yachad, did not pass the qualifying threshold in the 2015 elections, while Shas suffered a difficult setback and fell to only seven mandates, four fewer than in the previous elections. Shas joined the Netanyahu government after a period in the opposition, and Deri was appointed a government minister (first as Economy Minister and then as Interior Minister – in addition to Minister of the Periphery, the Negev and the Galilee). The party was also given the Religious Affairs portfolio.

The series of events in Shas: the replacement of Yishai with Deri, the split in the Sephardi/Haredi sector, the death of Rabbi Ovadia and the electoral decline – were all significant blows to the party. Public opinion polls point to a continuous decline in the party's electoral power, with some polls even showing it bordering on the qualifying threshold of 3.25 percent of the vote.

In the Deri era Shas returned to its days as a distinctly Sephardi-Haredi party, leaning less toward the traditional-Sephardi audience. Ettinger and Leon describe this process succinctly:

The main significance of the decline in the power of Shas is that if at the end of the 1990s some viewed it as a Haredi party based on the “soft” environment of religiously traditional voters that Shas leadership sought to connect to as part of the party's revolutionary ethos, then in the second decade of the twenty-first century it seems that dependence on the Haredi elements of the party and on their conservative leadership is increasing. This dependence limits the ability of Shas to expand to additional groups in the future, and may lead Shas to become a Sephardi Agudat Israel of sorts.<sup>33</sup>

On the one hand it seems that Deri's leadership is at the root of this shift. Yet most likely additional factors play a role, for example, the massive support the Likud headed by Netanyahu enjoys among national religious and Sephardi voters – the same pool of voters that in the past had supported Shas.

## **Analysis of religious party politics in the past decade**

### ***(A) The religious parties' relations with Netanyahu***

Initial interaction between Haredi Judaism and the State of Israel in fact centered on general Israeli issues. It is well-known that the status quo agreement originated in a letter Ben Gurion wrote to the leader of Agudat Israel, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levin in 1947.<sup>34</sup> Agudat Israel was a member of Israel's first government, until it was forced to resign on the issue of national service for women. This began a withdrawal of the Haredim from active public life, with Agudat Israel not participating in Labor-led coalition governments. This policy was in force up to the 1977 upheaval when Agudat Israel joined a Likud-led government after many years in the opposition.

Throughout this period (1952–1977) the historical alliance between the Labor party and the Mafdal continued. The latter was the torchbearer for preserving the state's religious identity and led the enactment of a series of religious laws in a variety of areas, most notably: the chief rabbinate, the rabbinical courts, who is a Jew, the Sabbath, military service and education. On two occasions the Mafdal left the coalition,<sup>35</sup> claiming that the balance between religion and state had been violated. The first time was in 1958 when the Interior Minister at the time, Israel Bar Yehuda (from the leftist Achdut Haavoda Party) legislated regulations regarding who is a Jew that contradicted Jewish law (Halacha). After leaving the coalition the Mafdal won the battle when the secular Interior Minister was replaced with the Mafdal leader, Haim Moshe Shapira. The second time was in 1977, when Mafdal ministers Raphael and Hammer abstained in a no confidence Knesset vote following what they called desecration of the Sabbath during a ceremony to receive F-15 planes that landed at Ben Gurion Airport late on a Friday afternoon, compelling the ministers who attended the ceremony to ride on the Sabbath in order to return home. Prime Minister Rabin decided to fire the ministers, the elections were advanced and the Likud won the elections and gained power for the first time.

Since the 1977 political upheaval the religious and Haredi parties preferred Likud governments while avoiding coalitions in left-wing governments (except in isolated cases when they did not have a choice). The religious camp views the centrist-left camp as more alienated from Jewish tradition than the right-wing camp, as reflected in the traditional religious character of right-wing voters compared to the secular image associated with centrist-left voters. This in effect created a two-bloc structure in Israeli politics.

Throughout Netanyahu's premiership the religious parties were full partners in his governments. Just as he could not have won the 1996 elections without the religious vote, he could not have formed his various governments since 2009. The relationship between Netanyahu and the religious parties' relationship can be divided into three types, as reflected in his three past governments:

- 1 Loyal partnership, without the religious parties threatening Netanyahu or the Likud as the governing party – this state of affairs characterized two of Netanyahu's governments: his first term as prime minister (1996–1999) and his first government in the last decade (2009–2013);
- 2 Forced partnership between the Likud and religious Zionism, with a threat posed by Habayit Hayehudi and a rift between the Likud and the Haredi parties (2013–2015);
- 3 Ideological partnership between religious Zionism, the Haredi parties and the Likud, based on mutual recognition that the Likud does not have a coalition without the religious parties, while the religious and Haredi parties maximize their achievements in these governments that they cherish the most (from 2015).

The analysis is presented in the following table:

**TABLE 4.1** Relations Between Israel's Religious Parties and Netanyahu

	<i>18th Knesset (2009–2013),</i>	<i>19th Knesset (2013–2015)</i>	<i>20th Knesset (from 2015)</i>
<b>Habayit Hayehudi (religious Zionism)</b>	A loyal partner of the Likud, did not pose a threat to it.	Forced itself on the Likud with the Lapid-Bennett alliance. Posed a threat to the Likud. Poor relations.	Correct relations, similar interests in a homogeneous government.
<b>Shas and Yahadut Hatorah (Haredim)</b>	Loyal partners of the Likud	Following the Lapid-Bennett alliance were forced into the opposition. Rift in relations with the Likud.	Relations with the Likud return to their familiar path: normal political relations.

***(B) The relationship between social processes in the religious and Haredi sectors and changes in the political behavior of the religious parties***

Habayit Hayehudi, as noted, underwent a dramatic change, from a “camp party” to an “open camp party.” This change led to the party’s significant electoral achievement in 2013, and to key positions in Netanyahu’s government in 2015. Yet it also created an internal argument within religious Zionism as to whether the party should represent religious Zionism as a sectorial party, or perhaps go beyond the confines of the Religious-Zionist arena to appeal to the greater Israeli public. Moreover, this is the first time a national-religious party has announced its aim to unseat the Likud as the governing party – causing continuous friction between the two parties.

It is difficult to draw a clear line marking the change in the character and role of the religious and Haredi political parties. Three main processes can be delineated for religious Zionism: (a) an impressive integration of individuals from the religious Zionist sector in all spheres of life. This is accompanied by the feeling that “we have achieved our goal,” and from here onwards the focus shifts from efforts to shape the character of the state to striving to become the ruling party; (b) growing diversity in religious Zionism that weakens the common denominator so that it is no longer binding or broad enough for the entire sector to share; and (c) eroding belief in the sagacity of waging battles over religion-state issues. The result is the large number of national religious Knesset members dispersed among a host of secular parties, among them the Likud, Hamachane Hatzioni and Yesh Atid, rather than on the slate of the national religious party.

Changes in the political sphere thus reflect social processes, primarily Israelization and integration into general Israeli society. In this sense, the change that Naf-tali Bennett led on the political level, by opening the party to other sectors in Israeli society, reflects current social processes in religious Zionism. This sector no longer

sees itself as one railway car among many in the Zionist state, but rather aspires to lead, to be at the helm. A prominent example is the dramatically increased number of kippah-wearing officers among the high ranking IDF military commanders – a clearly visible trend, even to the point of complaints by secular elements against alleged “religionization” in the IDF.<sup>36</sup> Another example is the education system: secular voices claim that under his stewardship as Education Minister Naftali Bennett is advancing a more Jewish and religious agenda compared to the past.<sup>37</sup> The success of *Habayit Hayehudi* in the political sphere goes hand in hand with social processes playing out in religious Zionism in particular and Israeli society in general.

The Ashkenazi Haredi sector has also not been immune to change. The leadership crisis in *Yahadut Hatorah* poses an obstacle to its functioning as the home of the entire Ashkenazi Haredi public. The death of Rabbi Elyashiv and the split within the Haredi Lithuanian community are only two of the dramatic events impacting not only the political arena but also Haredi social processes shaping Haredi society. The Haredim are no longer preoccupied with opposing Zionism or questioning its compatibility with Orthodox Judaism, and Zionism is viewed as a closed issue that cannot be challenged. Instead, they are now engaged with increasing and enhancing the Jewish identity and the character of the State, taking upon themselves the mission previously espoused by religious Zionism. Furthermore, forty years of participation and partnership in the political sphere, most of them as members of coalition governments, somewhat changed the focus of the Haredi representatives in the Knesset and in the government as they adopted a more general and less particularistic perspective. In addition, Haredi society is highly aware and sensitive to Halachic rulings and rabbinical outlooks, therefore increasing its preoccupation with these issues. Since information from the media, on varied media platforms, finds its way to Haredi society, Haredi leadership no longer has the privilege of ignoring or disregarding religion-state issues. Thus, while *Habayit Hayehudi* has moved on to national issues in all spheres of life, Haredi society and its political representatives now consider themselves the standard bearers ensuring the Jewish character of Israel.

A new subsector developed within Haredi society in recent years: modern Haredim, reflecting the emerging modern Haredi middle class. Haim Zicherman and Lee Cahaner, who studied the phenomenon,<sup>38</sup> note that this group is gaining momentum following several intra-sector processes affecting the mutual relations between the Haredi world and the State of Israel, characterized by “an increasingly growing interface between Haredism and secularism, preserving the Haredi ideology and way of life, even if more modern.” The authors note that owing to the characteristics of the middle-class Haredi group it has the potential to spearhead the integration of the Haredi population into Israeli society and its economy.<sup>39</sup> The future of this phenomenon is still unknown but has by no means bypassed Ashkenazi Haredi society in this generation.<sup>40</sup> Its integration in key positions in Netanyahu-led governments both reflects and strengthens this trend.

The Sephardi-Haredi sector has also been affected by the openness to Israeliness. As noted, *Shas* is experiencing the most severe crisis since its founding. The passing away of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and the replacement of Yishai with Deri along with other social factors merged to create a crisis the breadth and depth of which the

party may not overcome. Its typical voters, from both the general and Haredi sectors, are abandoning it in favor of other parties. As a political party that maintained impressive stability over the years, Shas now faces an unclear future.

It should not go unnoticed however, that the contribution of Shas to changes within the Sephardi/Haredi sector cannot be underestimated. If the Ashkenazi Haredi sector finds itself growing closer to Zionism and to the state, the Sephardi Haredim has been there for years. Nissim Leon in his book analyzes the phenomenon of soft ultra-Orthodoxy, referring mainly to remaining in the Haredi framework while formulating and implementing a softer interpretation of what it means to live a Haredi way of life.<sup>41</sup> In another study Leon examines the attitude of Shas toward Zionism and the state. For Shas, alongside the “sins” of Zionism, the miracle of the State cannot be denied, and therefore there is both a need and a practical possibility to correct what needs to be put right. On various occasions, when Shas people say that “we are the real Zionists,” they do not mean that they see themselves as part of the historic Zionist movement, but rather as those who hold values of an alternative and amended nationalism, and hence can correct Zionism in accordance with their views.<sup>42</sup>

This is reflected in the full participation of Shas in governments over the years, and in filling senior positions in Netanyahu’s governments in recent years. In contrast to Agudat Israel, Shas appoints ministers (as opposed to deputy ministers) and is a full partner to security cabinet decisions. The pinnacle of this partnership is reflected in its competing for the same pool of votes as that of the Likud – a phenomenon that in the past positioned Shas as a party that is more Israeli and less Haredi. As noted, in recent years it appears that Shas is returning to its Haredi identity, and public opinion polls predicting its decreased electoral power clearly reflect this trend.<sup>43</sup>

The weakening of Shas and of the Habayit Hayehudi in the last elections is also explained by the popularity and image of Benjamin Netanyahu as the undisputed leader of the Right. This affects religious voters who view themselves as part of the right-wing bloc. It played a major role and can explain Netanyahu’s victory in the 2015 elections.

### ***(C) Effects on the political system in Israel***

In the first generation after the founding of the state, the political system in Israel was characterized as unipolar because of the dominance of the Labor Movement.<sup>44</sup> After the 1977 upheaval, the system supposedly became more flexible, and indeed in the 1981 elections the Labor party headed by Shimon Peres received one mandate less than the Likud. In 1984 however, and despite the advantage of the Labor party, the religious parties were unwilling to join a government headed by this party as they had done up until 1977.<sup>45</sup> Yahadut Hatorah and the Mafdal were the most loyal to the right-wing bloc. In 1992 Shas led by Aryeh Deri entered Rabin’s Labor government (and resigned at a later stage). After the 1999 elections Shas joined Barak’s Labor Party government along with Yahadut Hatorah and the Mafdal. The three religious parties left his government after the Camp David II fiasco in 2000, forcing Barak to declare elections in 2001. From this year onward only Shas joined Ehud Olmert’s center-left government in 2006.

The identification of both the Mafdal and Yahadut Hatorah with Likud-led governments since the 1977 upheaval in fact turned the political system into a two-bloc system: a bloc headed by the Likud (national-religious) and the Zionist left bloc, with center parties willing to join one of the two camps.<sup>46</sup> In Netanyahu governments (including the first one in 1996), the Mafdal became the right-wing marker to the Likud, with Yahadut Hatorah and Shas demanding legislation on issues of army service and observing the Sabbath, demands on which no party on the left, or even in the center, could compromise. Despite attempts by Yair Lapid to signal to the Haredim that he was not a “religion hater,” it seems that at least the Haredi parties are not willing to take the bait, which leaves the Likud headed by Netanyahu along with the religious and Haredi parties as the stable bloc.

## Summary

In this article we highlighted two phenomena taking place in parallel in the religious party sphere in Israel over the past decade: the Israelization process of the religious parties, alongside their increasing power as partners in Likud governments headed by Netanyahu. We related these phenomena to intra-sectorial Israelization trends affecting relations between the religious parties and the ruling party, and in each party in its own way. While religious Zionism to a certain extent shifted its main activity to the national level, the Haredi parties took over the role of keepers of the religion-state front in Israeli politics. With the strengthening of Israelization trends, it is not surprising that many choose to vote for secular parties, which was the main reason for the declining political achievements (from 30 to 21 MKs) of the religious parties in the 2015 elections. At the same time, the growing affinity to the state (by the Haredi sector), and the desire to be all-Israeli by Habayit Hayehudi, strengthens the power of the religious parties in Netanyahu-led governments. It seems that now more than ever, the Likud views the religious and Haredi parties as its allies, and as long as the Likud remains in power, this trend may grow stronger.

## Notes

- 1 Shmuel Sandler, Aaron Kampinsky, “Israel’s Religious Parties,” in *Contemporary Israel*, ed. Robert O. Freedman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008), pp. 77–95.
- 2 Don-Yehiya viewed the relations between the religious parties and the historical Labor Movement as the “politics of accommodation.” See: Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *The Politics of Accommodation: Settlement of Religious Disputes in Israel* (Jerusalem: Floersheimer Institute for Policy Research, 1997). The analysis is based on a theory of Arend Lijphart, “Consociational Democracy,” *World Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1969, pp. 207–225; Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968).
- 3 Asher Cohen, “Splintered Camp: Religious Zionist Parties in the 2009 Elections,” in *The Elections in Israel-2009* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2011), pp. 101–130.
- 4 Avi Sagi and Dov Schwartz analyze the decline of the Mafdal over the years, and argue that this was not the result of the dwindling of the national-religious sector, but the fact that the national-religious voters did not feel a need for a political home that would represent them. In their words, “This phenomenon is a distinct expression of the increasingly growing integration in Israeli society, its values and general interests.” See Avi Sagi

- and Dov Schwartz, *From Realism to Messianism: Religious Zionism and the Six-Day War* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2017), pp. 99–100.
- 5 Yoni Garb, “The Mafdal Young Guard and the Ideational Roots of Gush Emunim,” in *Religious Zionism – the Era of Change* (studies in memory of Zvulun Hammer) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2004), pp. 171–200; Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “Stability and Change in a ‘Camp Party’: The NRP and the Youth Revolution,” *Medina, Mimshal Veyachasim Benleumiyyim*, No. 14, 1979, pp. 25–47; Yehuda Azrieli, *The Generation of the Knitted Skullcap – The Political Revolution of the NRP Youngsters* (Tel Aviv: Avivim, 1990), p. 25.
  - 6 Shmuel Sandler, “The National Religious Party: Towards a New Role in Israel’s Political System,” in *Public Life in Israel and the Diaspora*, eds. Sam N. Lehman-Wilzig and Bernard Susser (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1981), pp. 158–170.
  - 7 Asher Cohen, “Something New Is Starting: Jewish Home as an ‘Open Camp Party,’” in *The 2013 Elections* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2017).
  - 8 The structure of the government formed in 2013 was similar to Sharon’s 2003 government: then as well the Mafdal and the Shinui (Change) party were part of the coalition – without the Haredi parties.
  - 9 Regarding the theoretical concepts of the two types of parties and an analysis of their role in Israeli politics, see: Giora Goldberg, *The Parties in Israel: From Mass Parties to Electoral Parties* (Tel Aviv: Ramot, 1992), pp. 53–85.
  - 10 “Bennett: Want to see Three More Secular [individuals] Among the First Ten [party representatives],” *Rotter.net* (Israeli Hebrew website focusing on current affairs, consumer issues and more, including the Haredi world), February 25, 2018.
  - 11 Uzi Baruch, “Bennett: I will run for prime minister,” Israeli television station Channel 7, December 9, 2017.
  - 12 Tamar Herman et al., *Religious? National! The National-Religious Sector in Israel 2014: Research Report* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2014).
  - 13 Yair Sheleg, “Where Has the Religious Left Disappeared To,” *Be’ezrat Hashem – Makor Rishon Magazine*, May 2018, pp. 52–53.
  - 14 Herman, *Religious?* endnote 12, pp. 156–157.
  - 15 Thus it is possible to identify the dramatic change in religious Zionism, which in the age of Moshe Shapira in the Mafdal was identified as a moderate party on foreign and defense issues, but is currently positioned to the right of the Likud. For an expanded discussion see: Eliezer Don-Yehiya, “Leadership and Policy in Religious Zionism – Haim Moshe Shapira, The Mafdal and the Six Day War,” *Hatzionut hadatit – idan hatemurot* [Religious Zionism – the era of change] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2004), pp. 160–163; Aharon (Roni) Kampinski, “The Impact of Political Upheaval on a Party’s Ideational Position: The Mafdal and the 1977 Upheaval,” *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 6 (forthcoming).
  - 16 For an expanded discussion of the historical background of the growth of Haredi society and Haredi politics, see: Menachem Friedman, *Society and Religion: Non-Zionist Orthodox in Eretz Israel* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1977), pp. 334–366; Benjamin Neuberger, *The Political Parties in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Open University, 1977), pp. 135–162; Menachem Friedman, *The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Society* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 1991), pp. 6–20; Joseph Fund, *Separation or Participation – Agudat Israel Confronting Zionism and the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989), pp. 213–241.
  - 17 Haim Zicherman, *Black Blue White – Journey into Haredi Society in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Sfarim, 2014), pp. 214–234.
  - 18 Yahadut Hatorah refused to enter the centrist-left government formed by Kadima, not even the government headed by Tzipi Livni who tried unsuccessfully to expand the government after Olmert’s resignation in 2008.
  - 19 Benjamin Brown, *The Haredim: A Guide to Their Beliefs and Sectors* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: AM-OVED, 2017), pp. 83–97.
  - 20 Shmuel Sandler, *The Jewish Origins of Israeli Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 131.
  - 21 “The Haredi Sector Hopes That the Likud Will Be Successful in Restraining the Bennett-Lapid Alliance,” *Calcalist* (an Israeli daily economic business newspaper and website), March 10, 2013.



- 22 “For the First Time: MK Yaakov Litzman Was Sworn in as Minister of Health,” *Walla*, September 2, 2015.
- 23 “Litzman Resigned: “Disappointed that I did not prevent desecration of the Sabbath,” *Israel Hayom*, November 26, 2017.
- 24 Omri Nehenya, “Final Approval: Litzman Will Serve as Deputy Minister of Health with Authority of a Minister,” *Calcalist* (an Israeli daily economic business newspaper and website), January 10, 2018. The reason Agudat Israel insists that its representatives in the government hold the position of deputy minister rather than minister is that the Ashkenazi Haredim do not want to share in the government’s responsibility for government decisions.
- 25 Noa Landau, “Netanyahu About The mini-market Law: “There Will Not Be a Significant Change in the Status Quo,” *Haaretz*, January 17, 2018.
- 26 Noa Landau, “Netanyahu About The mini-market Law: “There Will Not Be a Significant Change in the Status Quo,” *Haaretz*, January 17, 2018.
- 27 The establishment of Shas and its success have been the focus of extensive writing. Here is a representative sample: Anat Feldman, “Factors in the Growth of a Party – Shas,” (PhD dissertation, Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002); Ricky Tesler, *In the Name of God: Shas and the Religious Revolution* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2013); Asher Cohen, “Shas – Periphery in the Heart of the Center,” in *Shas – Cultural and Ideational Aspects*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006), pp. 327–350.
- 28 Nissim Leon, “Mamlachtiut in Practice – The Shas Party and Its Symbolic Sources,” in *Crossroads of Decisions in Israel*, eds. Dvora Hacohen and Moshe Lissak (Be’er Sheva: Ben Gurion Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, 2010), pp. 132–155; Nissim Leon, *Soft Ultra-Orthodoxy: Religious Renewal in Oriental Jewry in Israel* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2010), pp. 11–54.
- 29 Regarding the leadership of Rabbi Yosef see: Eliav Taub, *Rabbis in Politics: The Leadership Approaches of Rabbis Ovadia Yosef & Elazar Shach* (Jerusalem: Resling, 2013), pp. 161–179.
- 30 Yair Ettinger, “Deri’s Quiet Revolution,” *Haaretz*, November 5, 2012.
- 31 Regarding the condition of Shas after the era of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef see an expanded discussion: Yair Ettinger and Nissim Leon, *A Flock with No Shepherd: Shas Leadership the Day After Rabbi Ovadia Yosef* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2018).
- 32 Ettinger and Leon in their book “A Flock with No Shepherd” (see previous endnote) also address the rift surrounding the question of the inheritor of Rabbi Shlomo Amar as the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel. Rabbi Amar challenged the candidacy of Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, the son of Ovadia Yosef, and selected Rabbi Zion Boaron as the candidate. Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef ultimately won, but the fact that there was not a common front on this issue illustrated the existing rifts in the Sephardi-Haredi sector.
- 33 Ettinger and Leon, *A Flock with No Shepherd*, p. 133.
- 34 Menachem Friedman, “The Chronicle of the Status Quo: Religion and State in Israel,” in *In Transition from “Yishuv” to State, 1947–1949: Continuity and Change*, ed. V. Pilowsky (Haifa: Herzl Institute and Haifa University, 1990), pp. 47–80.  
Menachem Friedman, “The Structural Foundation for Religio-Political Accommodation in Israel: Fallacy and Reality,” in *Israel: The First Decade of Independence*, eds. Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 51–83; Israel Kolatt, “Religion, Society and State During the Period of the National Home,” *Zionism and Religion*, eds. Shmuel Almog, Jehuda Reinharz, and Anita Shapira (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 1994), pp. 329–371.
- 35 Dvora Hacohen, “The Historic Alliance Between Ideology and Politics,” in *Between Tradition and Innovation – Studies in Judaism, Zionism and the State of Israel*, ed. Eliezer Don-Yehiya (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2005), pp. 259–295.
- 36 See for example, Yagil Levi, *The Divine Commander: The Theocratization of the Israeli Military* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2015); Nadav Magal, *Srugim Bakane – The Story of the Religious Zionists Army Integration* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot and Sifrei Hemed, 2016).
- 37 Gil Gertel, “Religionization in Education? Secular Zionism Brought It on Itself,” *Sicha Mekomit* (Local Discussion), +972’s Hebrew language sister site), May 21, 2018.
- 38 Yair Sheleg already pointed to this trend in his book: *The New Religious Jews: Recent Developments Among Observant Jews in Israel* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000), pp. 136–161.



- 39 Haim Zicherman and Lee Cahaner, *Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy – The Emerging Haredi Middle Class in Israel* (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2013), p. 14. For further expansion see: Kimmy Caplan, *In the Secret of the Haredi Discourse* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Institute, 2007), pp. 245–261.
- 40 Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, “Touches of Modernity or Modern Ultra-Orthodoxy? A Numerical Assessment of Modernization Processes in Ultra-Orthodox Society,” *Democratic Culture*, No. 17, 2017, pp. 19–51; Haim Zicherman, “Three Generations of Israeli Ultra-Orthodoxy,” *Democratic Culture*, No. 17 (2017), pp. 131–157.
- 41 Leon, *Soft Ultra-Orthodoxy*, pp. 11–54.
- 42 Nissim Leon, *Mizrachi Ultra-Orthodoxy and Nationalism in Israel* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute Press, 2016), p. 33.
- 43 “Survey: Shas Does Not Pass the Qualifying Threshold,” *Actualic* (Haredi website featuring world news, opinion, music and more), February 21, 2018.
- 44 Asher Arian, “On Mistaking a Dominant Party in a Dealigning System,” in *The Elections in Israel 2003*, eds. Asher Arian and Michal Shamir (Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute, 2004), pp. 27–52.
- 45 Daniel J. Elazar and Shmuel Sandler, “The Two Bloc System – A New Development in Israeli Politics,” in Daniel J. Elazar and Shmuel Sandler eds. *Israel’s Odd Couple, The 1984 Knesset Elections and the National Unity Government* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), pp. 11–24.
- 46 About the term ‘centrist parties’, and their development in Israeli politics, see: Ephrat Knoller, *Center Parties in Israel: Between Right and Left* (Jerusalem: Resling, 2017).

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- . “The Structural Foundation for Religio-Political Accommodation in Israel: Fallacy and Reality,” in *Israel: The First Decade of Independence*, eds. Ilan Troen and Noah Lucas (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 51–83.
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# 5

## NETANYAHU'S POLICIES TOWARD THE ARABS IN ISRAEL

*Elie Rekhess*

Since Benjamin Netanyahu's rise to power in Israel in 1996, his policies toward the Arab population have been characterized by a contradictory, seemingly diametrically opposed dual strategy of exclusion and inclusion of Arabs into Israeli society. On the one hand, Netanyahu's personal disposition toward the Arabs can be characterized as radical and antagonistic. In addition to equating all Arabs to "gun-toting criminals and potential terrorists," after an Arab gunman opened fire in a public marketplace in Tel Aviv in 2016,<sup>1</sup> killing three and wounding ten; he stoked xenophobic fear on election day in 2015 when he warned that Arabs were "coming out in droves"<sup>2</sup> – the underlying assumption being that they would impact the results of the elections in the Arabs' favor, contributing to the Likud's loss.<sup>3</sup> On the national level, overtly hardline, anti-Arab national policies like the Nakba Law of 2011 represent an erasure of Arab cultural and historical memory from Israeli culture. On the other hand – and, perhaps fueled by cynical political calculation on Netanyahu's part – it is undeniable that there has been a significant improvement, economically speaking, for the Arab population in Israel under Netanyahu's reign.

What accounts for this political paradox? Some scholars argue that the Netanyahu's neoliberal economic ideology is foundational to the persistent cognitive dissonance that characterizes Israel's political policies toward the Arabs.<sup>4</sup> As a new player on the global economic stage, Israel's failure to address persistent domestic issues pertaining to income inequality, an inclusive labor market, and discrepancies in educational outcomes between their majority and minority populations has proved a significant barrier in gaining global economic standing. When Israel joined the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in May 2010, the organization noted large socioeconomic disparities between the minority groups – Arabs and Orthodox Haredim – and the rest of Israeli society in terms of labor market participation, income, and poverty rates.<sup>5</sup> To address this, and raise their economic ranking on the global stage, Netanyahu's government

committed ILS\$15 billion (USD\$3.84 billion) and created a five-year-plan aimed at addressing these persistent socioeconomic concerns.<sup>6</sup>

## Downgrading Arabs in Israeli society

Before we address Israel's significant investment into the socioeconomic outcomes of the Arab population, it is first helpful to understand the stark contrast in political tone toward the Arabs that makes these positive economic policies all the more striking in contrast. Prior to Netanyahu's rise in 1996, the Rabin-Peres government made the specific semantic choice to refer to the Arab and Druze population by name in their governmental platforms – a departure from previous, and – arguably more hostile – previous governments who simply referred to this segment of the population as “the minorities.”<sup>7</sup> While perhaps a small semantic difference on the surface, the implication of erasure versus nominal salience cannot be understated in terms of rhetorical strategy for elevating the concerns of the population. Arik Rudnitzky, in a paper published by the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, also notes that in addition to this change in tone, the government acknowledged the specific need to resolve a series of urgent and perpetual problems the Arab and Druze population faced. When Netanyahu came to power in 1996, however, his government's policy made no reference to the urgent problems on the agenda of the Arab population, nor did they address them by name – instead choosing to revert back to the downgraded nominal category “the minorities.”

The government's policy was also characterized by a patronizing attitude for the Arab sector of Israel's population, reflected in statements such as “it would make special efforts to promote the members of the minorities who tied their destiny with the Jewish people and the State of Israel and served in the state's security forces.”<sup>8</sup> Similar to the Rabin-Peres administration, the Barak administration (1999–2001) explicitly acknowledged the existence of disturbing issues such as the recognition of unrecognized Arab villages, expropriation of lands for public needs, the Negev Bedouin issue, the need to expedite approval of framework plans, the need to determine boundaries of disputed zones, solutions to housing problems for young couples and needy individuals, and reinstatement of the displaced residents of the villages of Ikrit and Biram. Yet upon Netanyahu's return to power in 2009, the government's policy once again reverted to an emphasis on its intention to preserve Jewish heritage and the Jewish character of the state, and in the process downgrade Arab concerns. Members of the Arab public were considered “members of other religions,” regarding whom the government would “respect the religions and traditions of all the other religions in Israel according to the values of the Declaration of Independence.”<sup>9</sup> In terms of sociocultural integration, policies that hinge on exclusion of Arabs from Israeli life have marked the last decade of Netanyahu's reign.

## Exclusion of Arabs

In her assessment of Netanyahu's tenure, Dahlia Schendlin highlights an “ongoing stream of hostile rhetoric and legislation – both bills and actual laws passed,” against

Israel's Arab minority.<sup>10</sup> The exclusion, however, has been largely based on policies aimed at minimizing the social and cultural influence of Palestinian culture in Israeli society – particularly where emphasis on Palestinian identity is concerned. As Doron Matza notes, these policies served a strategic goal: to establish a civic domain in which Jewish culture maintained civic dominion over Palestinians.<sup>11</sup> To this end, Matza argues that the inclusion of Arabs in the Israeli government and bureaucracy in the 1970s was replaced by a period beginning in the 1990s in which the exclusion of Arabs from civil government gained traction. Schendlin echoes this argument in her analysis of the political rise of Netanyahu and his protege, Avigdor Lieberman in the 1990s and mid-2000s. Netanyahu's political posturing toward more extremist rhetoric was elevated as Lieberman's party, *Yisrael Beiteinu*, gained political force throughout the early 2000s. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, a clear tilt to the right within parliamentary politics was discernable. The Mossawa Center, a leading Arab advocacy group in Israel, found that in 2009, there had been 21 “discriminatory and racist” bills proposed in the Knesset – 75 percent more than the previous year.<sup>12</sup> Included in these discriminatory bills were major pieces of legislation including the Loyalty Oath, the Nakba Bill, and the initiative to legislate a new Basic Law that would clarify Israeli nationality – an initiative that would eventually become the Nation-State (Nationality) Bill adopted by Knesset in the summer of 2018.

### **Social divisiveness – escalating the anti-Arab rhetoric**

While signs of radicalization have been evident within the Arab population since the early 2000s, Netanyahu's ongoing rhetoric has done little to quell brewing social division. Social unrest ignited in the fall of 2015 illustrated the distinctive national identification of Israel's Palestinian-Arab minority with the fate and destiny of the Palestinian people and their struggle for self-determination. However, unlike the October 2000 riots, after the September–October 2015 events, Palestinian-Arabs in Israel were not fully drawn into the cycle of violence. While there have been occasional lethal attacks by individuals, there has been no open call for mass violence. While the majority of the Israeli Palestinian-Arab political leadership recognized that violence would not achieve their aims, Netanyahu capitalized on the growing social division. On election day in 2015, he warned via livestream video that the Arab voters were “coming out in droves,” to the polls with the help of left-wing activists a comment seen by his critics as a direct attempt to paint the Arab community as distinctly opposed to the best interests of Jewish Israelis.<sup>13</sup> The remarks were particularly divisive in light of the significance of the 2015 election in terms of Arab participation. Politically, the Palestinian-Arabs have been legally integrated into the Israeli political system since 1949, but their representatives in the Knesset were traditionally excluded from government coalitions. The 2015 election raised expectations among Palestinian-Arabs for real political change. Four Arab parties representing a wide range of political convictions – Hadash (communist), Balad (nationalist), United Arab List (Islamist), and Ta'al (secularist) – at times diametrically opposed to each other, were able to unite under the banner

of the Joint List. After years of decline in formal political engagement, the turnout of Arab voters had finally increased. The Joint List won a total of thirteen Knesset seats, becoming the third largest faction (altogether sixteen Palestinian-Arabs and Druze were elected to the Knesset). The importance of parliamentary elections and Arab presence in the Knesset became relevant again, framing Netanyahu's fear-mongering over Arab participation in the election as all the more racist. Though he later issued an apology, clarifying that he encouraged the Arab population to "thrive in droves" within Israeli society, the anti-Arab tone of his public remarks did not go unnoticed – especially since they were part of a pattern of divisive rhetoric, rather than an exception to the rule. Just a few months later, in January 2016, after a deadly shooting in Tel Aviv involving an Arab gunman, Netanyahu's fiery remarks equating *all* Arabs to potential terrorists once again sparked criticism. During Netanyahu's speech at the scene of a shooting in Tel Aviv where three people were killed and ten injured, he delivered what Yossi Verter of *Haaretz* referred to as a "harsh, near-racist diatribe against Israel's Arabs," – the culmination of years-worth of inflammatory remarks.<sup>14</sup> Referring to all Arabs as "gun-toting criminals and potential terrorists," Netanyahu then turned the events political stating, "I will not accept two states within Israel," – and suggested there cannot be a lawful state for some and lawless for others, where "there are enclaves without law enforcement."<sup>15</sup> In addition to the harsh and divisive rhetorical tone adopted by Netanyahu over the years, multiple political policies have deepened the divide between the Arab and Jewish communities in Israel as well.

### Anti-Arab policies

Many Palestinian-Arabs, perhaps justifiably, have been intimidated by the rise of the Jewish right wing in the past decade. Anti-Arab legislation introduced to the Knesset has been a major factor in the Palestinian-Arabs' increased sense of estrangement and fear. This fear was, in large part, stoked by a surge of right-wing policies floated after 2010 that sought to clarify Israeli identity in terms that threatened the democratic plurality that had previously defined cultural norms.

#### *Loyalty Law (2010)*

In 2010, the Yisrael Beiteinu Party proposed an addition to the Citizenship Act, requiring non-Jews who seek Israeli citizenship to take a "loyalty oath" to the state. While the Israeli cabinet overwhelmingly backed the new amendments, critics argued it was "unnecessary, provocative and racist."<sup>16</sup> The initiative was widely interpreted as directed against the Arab citizens of the state of Israel. Because of charges of racism, PM Benjamin Netanyahu ordered Justice Minister Ya'akov Ne'eman to write a proposal requiring Jewish immigrants to take the oath as well. However, although the government endorsed the bill, it was ultimately rejected by the Knesset.

### ***Nakba Law (2011)***

Since the late 1990s, when Israel celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, a trend within the Arab minority community to restore the collective historic memory of the Nakba has emerged. The Nakba, or perceived catastrophic loss of Palestine in the 1948 war, is a foundational event of the national narrative for Palestinian-Arabs. The flip side of the establishment of a “Jewish state” was now conceived as a “Palestinian Nakba.” A new demand for complete symmetry in the national memory of the Jews and the Palestinian-Arabs was raised. “Nakba day” began to be commemorated annually in public rallies and gatherings.<sup>17</sup>

The Nakba Bill, introduced by Yisrael Beiteinu, originally aimed to outlaw remembrance activities for the Nakba on Israel's Independence Day. Defending his party's bill, MK David Rotem announced: “When we are at war against a harsh enemy, we will legislate laws that will prevent him from hurting us.”<sup>18</sup> Critics, however, argued that such a policy was governmental overreach aimed at stifling democratic liberties of free expression.<sup>19</sup> Despite significant public objection, the version that eventually passed in March 2011 enabled the Minister of Finance to meaningfully reduce the governmental funding given to groups or institutions that commemorate the Palestinian Nakba.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Nationality bills (2011–2018)***

One of the most controversial policies aimed at downgrading the status of Arabs in Israeli society to emerge in recent years is the Nation-State (Nationality) Bill, which ultimately passed in the summer of 2018. The law itself will become part of the canon of Basic Laws that form the basis of the Israeli legal system. Since 2011, multiple incarnations of the bill have been proposed – the first by Avi Dichter, the former head of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet). This first bill sought to interpret the phrase “Jewish and democratic state,” based on an interpretation of Jewish law as a basis for the national legal system.<sup>21</sup> Between 2011 and 2014, two additional formulations of the bill were presented to Knesset; each met with the same critique that the language of the bill would threaten the rights of Palestinian-Arabs, as the language of each bill reduced them in some ways to the class of second-class citizens.<sup>22</sup> Prior to its passage in July 2018, a persistent fear had emerged that the language of the bill would further require judges to prioritize Israel's Jewish character over democratic principles.<sup>23</sup> In the final bill, there were three significant changes that validated this concern and that many Arabs took as a political declaration of war. First, Hebrew was named the national language, while Arabic was downgraded to “special status.” Second, self-determination was granted only to Jewish people, threatening the right of return for Palestinian Arabs. Thirdly, the establishment of new Jewish settlements was encouraged. Cementing its legitimacy, the “nationality bill” joined just a handful of Basic Laws intended to provide the foundations of any future constitution.

## Deteriorating Jewish-Arab relationship

The decades-long upswing in far-right rhetoric and exclusionary policies under Netanyahu has not come without a price. The general orientation within the country toward anti-Arab policies can be linked to a marked deterioration of Jewish-Arab relations. In general, Jewish attitudes toward Arabs and Arab attitudes toward Jews have become more radicalized in recent years. A 2010 survey showed that 44 percent of Jews supported a rabbi's call on Jews to avoid granting or selling apartments to Arabs, 53 percent of Jews wanted the state to encourage Arabs to emigrate, and 54 percent thought that the right to vote should be conditional upon the loyalty oath.<sup>24</sup>

From the Arab perspective, Sammy Smooha concluded that between 2003–2012, the attitudes of Palestinian-Arabs in Israel toward the state and the Jewish majority worsened, as was illustrated in the following findings: Only 12.2 percent of the Palestinian-Arabs considered Israeli citizenship as their most important framework of belonging, 45.2 percent considered “religion” as most important and 41.3 percent opted for Palestinian nationalism; 24.5 percent of the Palestinian-Arabs denied Israel's right to exist (compared to 20.5 percent in 1976; 11.2 percent in 2003); 82.2 percent of the Arab respondents accused the Jews of [perpetuating] the Nakba. “Arab attitudes toward the Jews and the Jewish state have become more critical and militant since 1996,” Smooha concluded.<sup>25</sup>

## Law enforcement

Abetting these growing tensions between the Jewish and Arab communities have been a series of law enforcement moves on the part of Netanyahu's government aimed at curtailing the tangle and political spread of the Arab sector's influence. In 2017, for example, there were 2,200 illegal structures demolished in the Bedouin sector compared to 1,100 in 2016.<sup>26</sup> Over 70 percent were dismantled by the owners themselves under threat of heavy financial penalties – and to avoid conflicts with police.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, in an unprecedented move, the Israeli Security Cabinet decided in November 2015 – in the wake of the Paris terror attack that claimed 130 lives – to outlaw the Northern branch of the Islamic Movement. One of the causes for Israel's adopting such a radical step was the government's belief that the northern branch is a separatist organization, “that doesn't recognize the State of Israel and its institutions, rejects its right to exist, and calls for the formation of an Islamic caliphate,” a term not unfamiliar to those who follow ISIS.<sup>28</sup> Indeed in late 2016, Israeli authorities were increasing security measures in Arab communities as a growing number of Muslims were signing up to fight for the Islamic State across Israel's northern border with Syria. The Shin Bet, Israel's security agency, estimated that fifty Israeli Palestinian-Arabs have joined the civil war in Syria or are fighting in Iraq, assessing that more may do so in the future. The Shin Bet's website said discoveries of ISIS cells in Israel “indicate[d] a dangerous trend among Arab Israelis

who support global jihad ideology and see it as a way for realizing their vision for an Islamic caliphate.”<sup>29</sup>

While cultural and political tension between the Jewish and Arab communities in Israel in recent years has intensified, the Arab sector has also experienced socio-economic growth. For the first time, one can identify an emerging middle class that is increasingly integrated and entrenched into the fabric of societal life in Israel.

## The paradox

In addition to the rise of right-wing policies that seek to malign Palestinian-Arabs sociopolitically, vast socioeconomic disparities and structural inequality between the majority Jewish and minority Arab communities persist in Israel as well. While the socioeconomic status of the Orthodox Jewish Haredim population also significantly contributes to Israel's low rating by the OECD, the factors that contribute to their socioeconomic disenfranchisement are politically and socially different from those affecting the minority Arab population. For example, the low rate of employment of Haredim women is rooted in a cultural ethos that women should not work, more so than a lack of opportunity. And, like the Arab population, the Haredim have made gains socioeconomically these past few years;<sup>30</sup> however, it is the persistent hostile political calculations toward the Arab minority community and the government efforts to correct course that is the focus of this chapter. For further information on the socioeconomic status of the Haredi community in Israel, see chapter footnotes.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of socioeconomic disparities between Palestinian Arabs and the majority Jewish population, there are large gaps in average monthly income, and many more Palestinian-Arabs live in poverty than Jews (in 2015, 53.3 percent of Palestinian-Arabs compared to 19.1 percent of Jews).<sup>32</sup> More than twice as many Jewish women are employed as than Arab woman. There are also deep-seated structural obstacles, some pertaining to the Arab sector itself, which impede, obstruct, and delay development.

Yet despite discriminatory policies and persistent structural disadvantages, the Arab community in Israel has managed to substantially improve its economic outlook in recent years. The rise of a new “middle class,” can be attributed in part to the government's significant increase in investments in the Arab sector, evident in the last decade. Larger budgets were earmarked for education, public transportation, and employment.

As Ron Gerlitz noted in his analysis of the burgeoning Arab middle class in Israel, the significant integration of the Arab community into the economy of Israel can be seen as a move to integrate the sector into the epicenter of Israeli social power.<sup>33</sup> It is also significant that despite the harsh rhetoric during his tenure, Netanyahu's government has publicly declared its intention to take action to increase the budgets of local Arab governments in need of improving their basic infrastructures, in order to close the gaps between them and other towns. Noting this paradox of extremities – harsh social policies toward Arabs on the one hand, and financial



investment in the Arab sector other – Ayman Saif, former head of the Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab and Druze Sector noted the irony in receiving a large financial stimulus for the Arab sector from an overtly hostile right-wing government: “This is a continuing contradiction: the nationality and muezzin laws<sup>34</sup> on the one hand, and Cabinet Resolution 922 on the other.”<sup>35</sup>

The Authority for the Economic Development of the Arab and Druze Sector (Hereafter, The Authority), established by the government in 2007 to address numerous acute issues, has noted several obstacles to economic development in the Arab sector including lack of local economic infrastructure, inferior standards in lower levels of education, residence in peripheral areas, lack of supporting financial bodies, lack of knowledge/trust in government institutions, discrimination both on the governmental and business levels, lack of daycare centers, and traditional social values that perpetuate a gender-based division of labor.<sup>36</sup> In his analysis of the sociopolitical and economic contradictions within Israeli society, Mtanes Shehadeh noted that Netanyahu’s aims for addressing these discrepancies came from three central motivations: 1) a commitment to global liberal economic theory, 2) disassociating the economic from the political situation of the Arab population, and 3) harnessing the Arab economy to serve the overall Israeli economy.<sup>37</sup>

These aims are in line with the administration’s broader economic outlook despite persistent economic inequality, as Scheindlin noted: “His (Netanyahu’s) terms have seen generally strong macroeconomic indicators, accompanied by massive socioeconomic inequality, soaring real estate prices, and the high cost of living.”<sup>38</sup> Consistent with this paradoxical cognitive dissonance, it is understandable that Netanyahu’s desire to economically rehabilitate the Arab sector stems from his overall concern with Israel’s global economic standing, and not the Arabs as a people. One possible motivation for Netanyahu is Israel’s recent membership into the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which it joined in May 2010, becoming the thirty-third member of the organization. In its first report, the organization noted similar concerns as The Authority had done, including large socioeconomic disparities between the Arab and Jewish Haredi communities and the rest of Israeli society in terms of labor market participation, income, and poverty rates.<sup>39</sup> In an interview with the OECD Observer a year following their membership, then minister of finance, Yuval Steinitz, outlined his views on the country’s economic challenges. Steinitz noted that key challenges included the rising competition to Israeli exports, the unsatisfactory performances of the education system and relatively high level of income inequality.<sup>40</sup> To address these concerns, numerous actions have been taken including the establishment of a private investment fund for the Arab sector to promote economic advancement in the Arab sector.

## **Government resolution 922**

While a budgetary increase of 2.6 percent in the 2011–2012 budget aimed to improve education, health and social welfare, it wasn’t until Government Resolution

922 was introduced in 2015 that the Arab sector received dedicated fiscal attention.<sup>41</sup> In August 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with four leaders of the newly elected Knesset members of the Joint List and promised to add an additional ILS₪900 million to the budget for the Arab sector. Earlier, in June 2015, the first “120 Days” team of the new government elected in the March 2015 published a report with concrete recommendations on how to remove construction and planning barriers in the Arab sector. For the first time the report explicitly called for the allocation of land to the Arab citizens of Israel.

In late 2015, the government approved a ILS₪15 billion (USD\$3.84 billion) plan to develop Israeli Arab and other minority communities in an effort to bring them up to par with the general population. The five-year economic development plan for the Arab sector, aimed at tackling the major gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israeli society calls for allocations of ILS₪15 billion for the development of Arab communities in fields such as education, transportation, welfare services, employment, and housing. The Plan, which was developed in partnership with Arab leadership, was proposed by the ministry of finance and the ministry for social equality and was supported by Prime Minister Netanyahu. On this investment, Netanyahu stated:

This is a significant addition designed to assist minority populations and reduce societal gaps. The plan will lead to the end of single-family home construction and a transition to high-rise construction as exists throughout the country. At the same time, the plan will strengthen law enforcement in the minority sector with emphasis on illegal construction.<sup>42</sup>

Gila Gamliel, minister for social equality, further asserted that the new budget would

finally give the Arab community its fair share of government funding . . . This is an important and historic step on the way to reducing gaps and advancing social equality in Israel. . . . for the first time, the government of Israel is changing the allocation mechanisms in government ministries so that Israel's Arab citizens will receive their relative share in the state budget.<sup>43</sup>

The 2016–2017 budget proposed an additional ILS₪1.5 billion for economy and employment, ILS₪1.85 billion for physical infrastructure, ILS₪800 million toward primary, secondary, and higher education, and ILS₪410 million toward empowerment and municipalities.<sup>44</sup>

## **Economic outcomes**

While the program has only entered its third year, preliminary reports suggest that the economic stimulus has helped promote a burgeoning Arab middle class in Israel. According to the Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Issues around 6,000 small and medium businesses received assistance from MAOF Centers (capacity-building

centers run by the Ministry of Economy) in the form of consultation hours, training seminars and business assistance through four business centers operating in Arab towns that provide office space and tools to local businesses.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, a high-tech accelerator operated in partnership with the 8,200 Alumni Association has promoted 17 startup initiatives,<sup>46</sup> microloans have been given to around 1,000 Arab women, and 25 percent of the of the entire government budget for daycare centers was set aside under GR-922 to address the childcare shortage in Arab society.<sup>47</sup>

## Improvement in education

One key area of focus for strategic fiscal planning for Israel's long-term growth engine is education and vocational skills-training. In addition to teacher training, including a new Arabic language proficiency exam that sets higher standards for future teachers, preacademic training for future Bedouin teachers (including training for their trainers), enhancement of Arabic language training, pedagogy, and academic support, and additional training components for teachers of all subjects and all grade levels, the Ministry of Education reported that plans for next year include specialized extra support and training for 500 excelling Arab teachers.<sup>48</sup>

Prior to GR-922, only 58.6 percent of Arab students in twelfth grade were eligible for the full Matriculation (*Bagrut*) certificate.<sup>49</sup> In 2017 that number rose to 62 percent. The government set an additional goal of 73 percent of twelfth-graders by 2021. Also prior to 922, only 7.2 percent of Arab students in twelfth grade took the highest level of math ("5 points"), that number has risen to 10 percent by 2017 with a governmental goal of reaching 14 percent by 2021. The Council for Higher Education launched a second five-year plan in 2017, to enhance access to higher education for Arab citizens, which builds and expands on its prior six-year plan (2011–2016) with a total investment of over ILS\$600 million.<sup>50</sup> These efforts have been incorporated into the framework of GR-922, with budgets allocated from both the original 2015 government resolution and updated 2017 plan. Thus far, Arab student integration in Israeli higher education institutions has increased compared to 2015 levels.

Additional gains in the Arab sector include a spike in the Arab proportion of high-tech employees, which increased threefold between 2008–2013. In several professions (such as pharmacy), the jobs are almost entirely held by members of the Arab community. Arabs are also statistically overrepresented in medical and

**TABLE 5.1** Increased Arab Participation in Israeli Higher Education

	2015	2018	2020 Goals
First degree students (BA/BS)	14.3%	16%	17%
Second degree students (MA/MS)	10.3%	13%	12%
PhD students	5.7%	6%	7%

healthcare positions, suggesting a continued focus on civil and public service. Additionally, Arabs have increasingly adopted Israeli cultural norms regarding lifestyle (cultural consumption, vacation, leisure, etc.).

### Persistent cognitive dissonance

While these economic gains are hard to ignore, one question remains: How can a far-right government that has advanced the cultural and political divide between Jews and Arabs in Israel be responsible for such positive economic growth? Festinger's theory of *cognitive dissonance*<sup>51</sup> is an important psychological tool for understanding the tension between the government's political disposition toward the Arab population in Israel and the policies that show a desire for economic integration of the Arab community into broader economic outlook of Israel. If we presume that Netanyahu's long-term goals regarding the Arab population are not in service of cultural and social integration, as laws like the Nation-State Bill and Nakba Law would suggest, but rather a means to an end to ease the economic pains of the country as a whole, his seemingly conflicting policies might be better understood. According to Festinger, cognitive dissonance is defined by two overall hypotheses: 1) that a person, when burdened by psychological discomfort, will work to reduce those factors that cause the discomfort, and 2) when confronted with a dissonant situation, he or she will avoid situations or knowledge that increase that dissonance. According to Festinger, cognitive dissonance works as an antecedent to the ultimate reduction of the discomfort, much the way the pangs of hunger works as a preliminary signal that alerts the human to eat and reduce the tension.

In the context of Netanyahu's far-right government's policies toward the Arab minority in Israel, if we presume that it is the economic woes of the whole country he truly wishes to ease, the economic stimulus in the Arab sector doesn't seem so contradictory. In other words, it is not so much that his government cares about full integration of the Arab into Israeli society – rather, they care just to the point that it affects the economic outlook of the country as a whole. As a new member of the OECD, Netanyahu and his government have a new political impetus to see Israel perform well, economically speaking. Improving economics in the Arab sector is simply a means to an end.

As Carolina Landsmann noted in her op-ed in Haaretz following Netanyahu's infamous "coming out in droves" comment during the 2015 election, when one thinks about it from Netanyahu's perspective, the economic stimulus can be seen as a kind of "hush money" for bad behavior.<sup>52</sup> And, to some extent – she may be right. It appears that large segments of the Arab sector have seemingly endorsed this cognitively dissonant behavioral pattern, as evidenced by the rise of a new middle class of Arabs in Israeli society. Doron Matza echoes this in his analysis of the relative calm in terms of public violence between the Arab Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank and Arabs in Israel in recent years. He argues that a focus on economic development has prevented ferment in the Arab by "offering certain parts of the Arab population compensation in the form of individual self-realization."<sup>53</sup> As the

economic plan continues to come to fruition and gains in educational and economic achievement take root, how such economic self-realization will play a role in easing the cultural and political tensions between Arabs and Jews in Israel remains to be seen. However, the future unfolds, one thing is for sure: Netanyahu's strategy was and is economically self-serving. Perhaps that is not such a bad thing.

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# 6

## THE ISRAELI ECONOMY UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF NETANYAHU

Growth and stability at the cost of  
weakening the welfare state

*Roby Nathanson and Yanai Weiss*

### Introduction

For the past 20 years, the fiscal and policy decisions made by the government of Israel have undoubtedly been influenced by the beliefs and actions of one man above all others: Benjamin Netanyahu. First taking office as prime minister in 1996, he has been involved heavily at the top level of Israeli politics ever since, serving as minister of finance from 2003 to 2005, the Likud party leader and head of opposition from 2005 to 2009, and prime minister from 2009 to the present day.<sup>1</sup> His tenure has been characterized by consistently strong economic growth coupled with a reduction in social services, leading many to compare his policies to those of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan that were enacted more than a quarter century ago.

Netanyahu's economic leadership in Israel can be divided into two main periods. The first period was during the time he served as minister of finance between 2003 and 2005. The second period covers his tenure as prime minister since 2009. During both periods, the steps he took had great influence over the macroeconomic indicators of the Israeli economy – growth, unemployment, government debt, inflation, and trade, as well as an extensive impact on society because of cuts in the welfare system and increasing inequality. Therefore, while many praise the economic success he has achieved, his policy has not passed without social protests. The biggest protest occurred in the summer of 2011 when almost half a million people protested all over Israel against government economic policy in general, and against the housing prices in particular. Throughout this article we wish to address the main achievements and the costs of Netanyahu's economic policy not in chronological order, but by engaging with the main issues that have been affected in the past 20 years. First, we address the main macroeconomic indicators during those years, and, thereafter, we will discuss the social impact of those steps.



When Netanyahu assumed office as Israel's minister of finance in early 2003 under the leadership of the late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel's economy was in the midst of the worst recession it has ever known. Following the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000 as well as the dot-com crisis the same year, the GDP growth that had characterized the Israeli market in the late 1990s came to a halt. GDP shrank by 1 percent per year in the years 2001–2003. By 2003, GDP per capita had eroded by 10 percent compared to 2000. Unemployment rose to 11 percent in 2001. As a result Israel faced an unprecedented tax crisis that caused a budget deficit of ILS\$8–9 billion in 2003 alone, and real interest rates were uncommonly high as a result of the general sense of insecurity and instability that characterized the Israeli economy and security situation as a result of the Second Intifada.<sup>2</sup> Almost a quarter of the Israeli population was in a state of poverty or on the verge of poverty and, therefore, in need of immediate emergency government assistance.<sup>3</sup> Netanyahu inherited an economy in deep crisis.

Only three months after he assumed office as minister of finance, Netanyahu authorized the National Economic Recovery Plan as well as an Emergency Plan and a tax reform. The recovery plan included a net cut of ILS\$12 billion from the budget in addition to the ILS\$16 billion cut previously authorized at the end of 2002. All in all, the 2003 cuts accounted for about 10 percent of the original 2003 budget.

Netanyahu, unlike many other of his predecessors as ministers of finance, possessed a deep understanding of economics and was influenced by the neo-liberal approach that dominated the political and economic arenas in the United States for decades. During the years 2003–2005, Netanyahu's influence on the Israeli economy was at its height, an influence that, even today as prime minister, he does not enjoy. As minister of finance, Netanyahu used the economic crisis as well as his robust knowledge and beliefs about what the Israeli economy should look like, in order to initiate some of the largest structural changes and reforms the Israeli market has ever known.

The reforms included an extensive reduction in the Israeli welfare system and in the allowances provided by the National Insurance Institute of Israel (NII). In addition, cuts were made in the public sector and Netanyahu supported many privatization processes including those of banks and oil refineries and instituted a reform in the capital markets. Although, during the years Netanyahu served as head of opposition, three different ministers served as ministers of finance, none changed the direction he had set for the Israeli economy. Even following the 2011 social uprising in Israel, when leaders of other parties who promised a change in the national economic interests, such as Yair Lapid and Moshe Kahlon, who were Ministers of Finance in Netanyahu's governments, they did not radically change Netanyahu's policies. It would not be an overstatement to assert that Netanyahu was the last influential minister of finance.

## Benjamin Netanyahu

Unlike many of the other influential politicians in Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu spent a large part of his life in the United States. He first moved to the United States

with his family during the late 1950s. Following his military service, Netanyahu moved back to the United States and, in 1976, received a BS in architecture and a MS in business management from MIT. He also studied political science at MIT and at Harvard University. Subsequently, he spent most of the 1980s in the United States serving in the Israeli Embassy in Washington and was later appointed Ambassador of Israel to the United Nations.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the many years he spent in the United States, as he himself has often acknowledged, he is deeply committed to market economics and has been influenced by neo-classical economic ideas. In his view, the main constraints to achieving economic growth and technological leaps stem from the socialist restraints deeply rooted in Israel's society and economy.<sup>5</sup> While he had difficulty implementing his economic ideas during his first tenure as prime minister in 1996–1999, during the time he served as minister of finance he managed to promote market economics and reduction of the deficit, cutting subsidies and promoting privatization processes. When the Israeli economy recovered from the economic crisis it faced at the beginning of the millennium, he also supported lowering tax rates.<sup>6</sup>

## Macroeconomic overview

Following nearly ten years of Netanyahu's incumbency as prime minister and fifteen years after he assumed office as minister of finance, many consider him to be an "economic magician," as some of Israel's most important macroeconomic indices have never been better. As in most Western countries, what might be considered the price for achieving sustainable growth, low unemployment, diminishing debt and a strong and stable currency are the deep cuts in the welfare system, increasing inequality, the weakening of workers' unions, and a split between a modernized, liberated and advanced economy and an economy of overlooked population groups with low productivity and weak economic performances.

### *GDP growth*

In Israel, GDP growth in 2000 had been uncommonly high at 8 percent. Because of the Second Intifada and the dot-com crisis, the Israeli economy collapsed. Netanyahu assumed office as minister of finance at the beginning of 2003, and the economy only started showing signs of recovery in 2004. Between 2004 and 2007 the growth rate in Israel was on average 4.9 percent, higher than both the European Union average and the US growth rate. After the financial crisis of 2008, there was a fall in GDP growth; however, the drop in Israel was not as severe as that in the US and EU and growth remained positive. Since 2010, during the period in which Netanyahu served as prime minister, GDP growth rates in Israel maintained an average of 3.7 percent, again higher compared to the US and the EU (see Figure 6.1).

When Netanyahu assumed office as minister of finance in 2003, Israel's GDP was growing by 0.77 percent per year, significantly below the 2.80 percent and 1.3 percent annual growth experienced by the US and EU at the time. However, Netanyahu quickly began highlighting areas of weakness, and as will be explained,

implementing reforms to foster growth in the Israeli economy. These reforms seemed to take immediate effect, with the Israeli economy growing at 4.6 percent in 2004. Furthermore, the strong effects of Netanyahu's reforms can be shown to have had a lasting effect.

### ***Unemployment***

During the 2001–2003 Israeli economic crisis, the unemployment rate was on the rise, and was much higher than unemployment in the European Union and in the United States. From 2003 to 2017, Israel's unemployment rate plummeted from a rate of 13.5 percent in 2003 to 4.2 percent in 2017, a reduction of over 9 percentage points. For comparison, the US reduced its unemployment rate by 1.6 percent over the same time span, and the EU saw its unemployment rate fall by a mere 0.5 percent. While some of Netanyahu's critics have argued that this reduction is skewed by an increase in informal, part-time, or contract-based work, the extent of this decrease still lends credence to the claim that Netanyahu's policies have been largely successful when it comes to reducing unemployment.

As will be demonstrated, in order to achieve the reduction in the unemployment rate, major cuts were made in supplementary income and income support programs as well as in other allowances provided by the NII. People who used to rely on government allowances, were forced, following Netanyahu's reforms, to find jobs, even if this meant working part time, as government allowances were no longer sufficient (see Figure 6.2).

### ***GDP–debt ratio***

Another emphasis introduced by Netanyahu was on reducing the GDP–debt ratio. During the economic crisis of 2001–2003, the debt grew and, in 2003, reached a peak of 100 percent of the GDP. One of Netanyahu's biggest concerns, first as minister of finance and later as prime minister was to reduce the GDP–debt ratio. As can be shown, from 2003 to 2016 the ratio was reduced to 76 percent, a reduction of 24 percentage points. The trend is impressive, as in many Western countries, following the 2008 world financial crisis, the ratio grew significantly. Conversely, in Israel, the increase was relatively small and insignificant over time (see Figure 6.3).

The Israeli ministry of finance uses a different measurement method, and, according to their data, the GDP–debt ratio was even further reduced to 61 percent in 2017 compared to 75 percent in 2009 when Netanyahu assumed office as prime minister. While the numbers are different, the trend is the same. One of Netanyahu's economic goals in order to increase growth was to reduce the national debt relative to GDP.

### ***Balance of payments***

When Netanyahu assumed office as minister of finance in 2003, he inherited an economy that historically had had a negative balance of payments. During the years

1995–2002, the current account as a percentage of the GDP was negative, and on average stood at  $-2.5$  percent.<sup>7</sup> Ever since 2003, the current account of Israel has been positive, a remarkable achievement, especially in years when leading economies, such as those of the United States and the United Kingdom, showed negative numbers (see Figure 6.4).

During the financial crisis of 2008, the current account as a percentage of the GDP in the US was  $-4.7$  percent and  $-1.6$  percent in the UK. In Israel, on the other hand, it was  $0.8$  percent of the GDP, and was about \$3 billion. In general, the fact that Netanyahu managed to reverse the trend of what used to be a negative balance of payments in Israel, into a positive, strong and long-lasting trend, even in times of world economic crisis, attests to the economic stability that Netanyahu created.

## Taxes

Over the years, Netanyahu publicly supported lowering the tax rate in Israel. One of the most prominent examples is in the constant reduction of the corporate tax rate. In the early 2000s Israel's corporate tax rate was only slightly lower than that of the United States and Germany, at 36 percent. Ever since Netanyahu took office as minister of finance the tax rate had been gradually reduced and is currently 23 percent. When he left that office in 2005, the tax rate was already 34 percent. Again, in recent years a reduction has been made – while in 2015 the tax burden was 26.5 percent, by 2018 it was 23 percent. While both Israel and Germany reduced their tax rate on corporations over the years – in Israel the reduction was gradual and in Germany it was carried out in one stroke following the financial crisis of 2008 – in the United States the corporate tax level remained largely unchanged until 2018. The big cut in the corporate tax burden in the United States in 2018 is a direct result of President Donald Trump's tax reform (see Figure 6.5).

While the corporate tax rate has been reduced, corporate tax revenue as a percentage of GDP did not change dramatically over the years, and except for a few strong and weak years, has been stable at around 3 percent of GDP. This implies that even though the corporate tax rate had been dramatically reduced over the years, the level of income relative to GDP as result of those taxes remained stable. This is another indication of the strength of the Israeli economy in the Netanyahu era.

The trend of reducing direct taxes was not limited to corporate taxes. A similar trend can be seen in direct taxes imposed on individuals. Taxes on income, profits, and capital gains from individuals have gradually made up a smaller percentage of GDP. While in 2000 these taxes consisted of 10.5 percent of GDP, by 2016 the proportion had dropped to only 6 percent of GDP. Another measurement that demonstrates the erosion of direct taxation is that while in 2000 the proportion of direct taxation on individuals consisted of nearly 30 percent of total taxation; by 2016 it constituted only 20 percent (see Figure 6.6).

Even in times of crisis in Israel, as during the 2003 economic recession, when Netanyahu was forced to raise taxes, he chose to raise indirect taxes, such as VAT (which rose by 1 percent), and taxes on diesel fuels. Those steps are considered

regressive, as they inflict more harm on the disadvantaged population. The reduction in direct taxation and raising of indirect taxation puts Israel among OECD countries with a high ratio between direct and indirect taxes, meaning that the level of indirect taxes in Israel is relatively high compared to other OECD countries. This is the result of a very wide system of VAT with few exemptions. To summarize, while Israel reduced the corporate tax rate, the income resulting from this tax has not been reduced. Also the level of indirect taxes is high relative to other OECD countries. All these are indicators of a strong and stable economy, which, however, has a widening regressive tax system that potentially increases inequality.

### **Reduction of the public sector and privatization processes**

Since the mid-1980s, Israel has been going through a deep process of privatization. Netanyahu himself did not start the process; however, during his period as minister of finance he oversaw large privatization processes. During June 2003, El-Al, the flagship Israeli airline, went through a privatization process. The sale of the company shares was conducted through the Israeli stock exchange.<sup>8</sup> Netanyahu also strongly supported the privatization of the ports company and the oil refineries company in Ashdod as well as of Israeli banks, mainly Bank Leumi and Bank Discount through the Israeli stock exchange. Eventually the privatization process of Discount began in 2006 and the controlling interest in the bank was transferred to private hands, though the government continued to hold some of its shares in the bank. The process in Bank Leumi was never finalized, even when Netanyahu regained power as prime minister in 2009. (9) In August 2005, only two weeks after his resignation as minister of finance, the government also decided to sell all its holdings in the Israel Military Industries (a process that is still ongoing) (10).

In addition to privatization processes, Netanyahu promoted steps that would limit the government's role in the economy. Among other measures, he authorized reductions in wages of the public sector, in the number of senior employees in the public sector as well as a reduction in the number of employees in the public sector that are employed by subcontractors. In a conference at which he presented his 2005 economic plan, he even went so far as to state that the size of the public sector was the biggest problem that the Israeli economy was facing:

Today I would like to focus on the main factor. . . . that in my opinion is the biggest problem of Israel's economy. If we fix it, we would be able to save the market and lead it into prosperity and growth. . . . in every economy there's a balance between the public sector and the business sector. . . . In Israel, we reached a situation in which the public sector composes 55% of the GDP and the business sector composes 45% of the GDP. I want you to imagine a person that weighs 45 kg that carries on its back a person that weighs 55kg,

and the one that weighs 55 kg keeps gaining weight, while the person below shrinks and struggles to carry him. . . . so what happens? The thin man carries the fat man, and at one point he can't anymore. First he slows down, then he stops and then he collapses. What we have to do is two things. First, reduce the public sector, and second, increase the private sector. Therefore, we intend to reduce and to optimize the public sector.<sup>1</sup>

During his time as minister of finance, Netanyahu made cuts in the public sector. Cuts amounting to ILS¥2 billion were made mainly in salaries. The 2004 annual budget included an additional reduction in the budgets of all government offices in the sum of ILS¥3.5 billion. Additional cuts were made in the higher education system (ILS¥160 million), and in the health system (ILS¥680 million).

As expected, those steps were not carried out without strong opposition. In 2004, after attempts to promote privatization in the ports, the workers declared a strike – one of the longest port strikes in Israel's history lasting 3.5 weeks. In an agreement between the ministry of finance and the ports it was agreed that the privatization process would continue, but that it would be postponed until a new agreement for the employees could be achieved. In addition, Amir Peretz, then head of the Histadrut, the General Federation of Labor in Israel, announced sanctions in government offices that lasted 90 days, aimed mainly at stopping the reduction in public sector wages.

To summarize the steps taken in terms of reducing the public sector, it seems that Netanyahu continued the trend of his predecessors in terms of privatization, although many of his initiatives are still ongoing or were carried out while he was in the opposition. However, he managed to introduce the size of the public sector into the center of the public discourse, and to reduce its size.

## Reform in the capital market

The problem the Israeli market faced, and in many respects still faces, is that the major banks control the entire capital market in almost every sector of the financial services industry. The high concentration in the banks prevents other organizations from entering the financial sector. Therefore, banks are able to overcharge their clients for a variety of services and a large portion of debt is connected to a small number of big borrowers. In order to contend with those issues, in April 2004, Netanyahu appointed an inter-ministerial committee headed by the director general of the ministry of finance at the time, Dr. Yossi Bachar. The implementation of the *Bachar Committee* recommendations included severing all provident<sup>9</sup> and trust funds from ownership of the banks.

The reform did reduce the level of concentration in the banking system; however it did not shift it completely as close regulation of its operations remained. Many argue that, unlike the situation in the United States, the fact the regulation exists in the system prevented a collapse during the 2008 financial crisis.

## Defense expenditures

Another piece in the puzzle of Netanyahu's economic approach is the defense budget. In keeping with his neoconservative approach, Netanyahu sought to keep the budget of the ministry of defense and other defense organizations high. There is no significant change in the budget as a percentage of the GDP, every year the defense budget in Israel rises. While in 2016, the ministry of defense budget was ILS₪52 billion (USD\$13.54 billion),<sup>10</sup> by 2018 it was already ILS₪73 billion, or USD\$(2016)19.01 billion. As can be shown, ever since Netanyahu was appointed as prime minister in 2009, the budget of the Ministry of Defense has risen significantly; since 2009 the budget has risen by 24 percent.

In August 2018, Netanyahu presented his "Defense Concept" for 2030. While the program is mostly secret, Netanyahu declared that the threats that Israel faces require a budgetary addition to all defense bodies in Israel. The "Defense Concept" 2030 is part of his long-term aspiration to create a strong economy for Israel alongside maintaining a high defense budget to deal with the defense threats that Israel faces. In other words, Netanyahu sees his goal as achieving a strong economy that can support the budgetary burden of the defense threats in Israel.

Netanyahu and any likely successor is unlikely to reduce Israeli defense expenditures in the near future. It is important to note, that even though the defense expenditure as part of the GDP has not changed dramatically over the years, the fact that it is rising in absolute numbers means that the defense budget comes at the expense of other civilian expenditures (see Figure 6.7).

## Support for settlements

While Netanyahu promoted an economic approach that supported small government and little involvement in the economy, during his time as prime minister, the one sector that was excluded from this policy was that of the settlers in the West Bank. The economic benefits that the settlers enjoy is not a policy unique to Netanyahu, as many of his predecessors, including prime ministers who were considered leaders of the left-leaning camp in Israel, such as Ehud Barak, were inclined to provide extra benefits for settlers. Following the 2015 elections in Israel, Netanyahu formed a government that included only parties from the right wing in Israel (as well as religious parties). Therefore, he was inclined as part of the coalition agreements he signed to promote the interests of the settlers in the West Bank.

From an examination of 2015 budgetary expenses, the additional support that the settlers received was about ILS₪500 million (USD\$130 million) per year, resulting in an additional expenditure of ILS₪3,700 (USD\$963.5) per person in the West Bank.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the budgetary support provided by the government of Israel is considerably higher for settlements that are located in rural areas, east of the security fence, compared to settlements that are located within the settlement blocks. While the additional budget per person in settlements east of the security fence is ILS₪4,260 (USD\$1,109.4), the additional support per person in settlements west

of the security fence is ILS₪3,500 (USD\$911.5). The budgetary provisions that provided grants and benefits to the settlements have also remained in the budgets of the coming years.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to direct government support in the settlements, settlers in the West Bank received tax benefits of about ILS₪60 million (USD\$15.6 million) in 2016 and businesses in the West Bank received additional benefits in the sum of ILS₪78 million (USD\$20.3 million) in the same year. All in all, in 2016 the additional budgetary support for the settlements, public and individual benefits (such as lower taxes) was ILS₪1.5 billion (USD\$90 million).<sup>13</sup>

### **Cuts in the Israeli welfare system and its impact on poverty and inequality**

Despite the achievements of the Israeli economy, Netanyahu's policies have not been without their critics. While many of Netanyahu's detractors often focus on his personal flaws, there have also been many who have criticized his policies. Some of the shortcomings of his policies are becoming clearer, and he has been accused of not sufficiently aiding the integration of fringe groups into the Israeli workforce, resulting in many Israelis who have been left by the wayside in his march toward a brighter economic future. Consequently, the distribution of income in Israel is significantly less equal, relative to other OECD countries.

ILS₪6 billion (USD\$1.6 billion) alone was deducted from the transfer payment system, meaning from NII allowances and benefits. Naturally, those types of cuts were extremely regressive and focused on the poorest population in Israel. It is important to note that the reduction in the welfare system was carried out during Israel's worst economic crisis, when people's reliance on this system was at its peak. For example, the NII total expenditure on allowances per capita in 2001 reached an all-time peak of ILS₪8,842 (USD\$2,302).<sup>14</sup> However, by 2004, even though the Israeli economy was far from recovering from the crisis, the NII total expenditure on allowances per capita was reduced to ILS₪7,429 (USD\$1,934.6),<sup>15</sup> a cut of 16 percent per capita in allowances and benefits. Expenditure per capita remained similar until 2010, except for a small increase during the 2008 world financial crisis. However, since then, there has been a small increase in expenditure per capita that, as will be shown further below, is largely attributable to old-age allowances. Other allowances and benefits have remained the same since 2011 (see Figure 6.8).

One of the major cuts derived from increasing the eligibility age for retirement benefits. The retirement age for women rose from 60 to 62 and for men from 65 to 67. The age at which an employee (man or woman) may be required to retire will rise in the future to 67. Raising the retirement age was a harsh step that mainly harmed elderly women, in a time of crisis. Because of low elasticity in the demand for elderly women's labor, they are considered to be very susceptible to decreases in welfare allocations. Even before the cut, women found it hard to maintain a job at the age of 60, and the cuts made it even more difficult, as they no longer benefitted from a social security network at this age. On the other hand, it is important to note



that as the population is aging, the process of raising the retirement age is a necessary step for many Western countries. This step should be accompanied by other steps to support the older age group in the labor market in adapting themselves to the changing labor market. The change in retirement age managed to curb the increase in the expenditure per capita on elderly allowances that characterized the 1990s. Yet, in view of the aging population in Israel, since 2012 there has been an increase in the expenditure per capita on elderly allowances (see Figure 6.9).

While elderly allowances per capita have been on the rise since 2012 (Figure 6.9), that has not been the case for other allowances and benefits. The reduction of welfare expenditures that was initiated during Netanyahu's tenure as minister of finance continues even today when it comes to unemployment benefits, income allowances<sup>16</sup> and child allowances. The expenditure on unemployment benefits is naturally highly correlated with the macroeconomic conditions of the market and more specifically with unemployment rates. Therefore, it is not surprising to see a correlation between unemployment benefits per capita and unemployment rates. For example, during the early 1990s the unemployment rate dropped sharply and so did the unemployment benefits per capita. When, in the late 1990s, the trend reversed and unemployment rose again, so did the unemployment benefits. However, as Figure 6.10 shows, following the cut in the transfer payments made by Netanyahu, even when unemployment remained high, benefits per capita were sharply reduced. Another example that demonstrates the cuts in unemployment benefits can be seen by examining 1997 compared to 2007. Unemployment rates in both years was very similar (7.5 percent in 1997 and 7.3 percent in 2007) however, unemployment benefits per capita in 1997 were ILS₪550 (USD\$143.2);<sup>17</sup> in 2007, unemployment benefits were ILS₪280 (USD\$72.9).<sup>18</sup> This means that expenditure per capita in 2007 was 50 percent lower than in 1997 (see Figure 6.11).

Another focus was in the cuts in income allowances. In keeping with his neo-liberal approach, Netanyahu believes that high income allowances encourage unemployment and that, in order to reduce the unemployment rate in Israel, fewer incentives should be given to being unemployed and more incentives should be given to participation in the labor force. In 2001, income allowances reached their peak of ILS₪693 (USD\$180.5) per capita. By 2004, expenditure per capita was ILS₪520 (USD\$135.4), 25 percent less, even though unemployment was not reduced at the same rate. Expenditure per capita remained low until 2016 (Figure 6.11).

Child allowances per capita in Israel were kept high during the 1990s and reached an all-time high in 2001 – ILS₪1,503 (USD\$391.4) per capita. Following the *National Economic Recovery Plan*, massive cuts were made in those benefits. By 2004, the amount was ILS₪852 (USD\$221.9) per capita, a 43 percent reduction. Up to 2008, the benefit amounts continued to drop. However, since Netanyahu's second term as prime minister in 2009, these rose somewhat in periods in which he formed a coalition with the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties in Israel (ultra-Orthodox Jews tend to have more children than secular Jews), and declined a little in the period in which they were not a part of the government. Nonetheless, they never

returned to anything close to what they used to be before Netanyahu's term as minister of finance (see Figure 6.12).

Netanyahu argued that the cuts would encourage people to go to work and, therefore, would reduce poverty and dependence on the public social welfare. The reality is more complex. While the percentage of people below the poverty line before taxes and transfer payments did not change dramatically between 1999 and 2007, and on average stood at 32.6 percent, the percentage of people below the poverty line after taxes and transfer payments increased following Netanyahu's reforms. While, before the reforms, taxes and transfer payments managed to reduce the proportion of people below the poverty line to about 16 percent, following the reforms taxes and transfer payments managed to reduce poverty only to 23 percent of the Israeli population. Meaning, there has been a decrease in the efficiency of the system of seven percentage points. While many claim that the shift in the Israeli economy is deterministic and inevitable because of globalization forces, this is a clear example of how local policy affected the economic situation of people from the lowest socioeconomic echelons (see Figure 6.13).

As a result, in the 2003 survey conducted by the Senat association, which examined the public attitudes toward the functioning of the government on economic and social issues, 68.5 percent of respondents said that the government's functioning in treating disadvantaged populations was poor, 69.5 percent claimed that the government was doing a bad job in preserving real wages and 81.6 percent thought that it was not doing enough to reduce the unemployment rate. In addition, as a result of the rising retirement age only 13 percent of the population was satisfied with the way the government treated retired people. The results of this survey showed the most negative results the Israeli public had expressed for the steps taken by its government on socioeconomic matters, since the survey was initiated in 1992.

Another way to summarize the shift in priorities of the Israeli economy concerning social welfare programs is the dramatic change in the budget of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services. Deep cuts were made in the 2004 budget of this ministry. The cut from ILS₪5.26 billion (USD\$1.37 billion) in 2003 to ILS₪3.58 billion (USD\$932 million) in 2004 constitutes a cut of 32 percent in the ministry budget. In terms of expenditure per capita it dropped from ILS₪775 (USD\$201.8) to ILS₪520 (USD\$135.4), a reduction of 33 percent per capita. By 2011 there had been no dramatic change in the expenditure of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services. However, since then there has been a small increase, and in 2016 the budget per capita nearly equaled the peak of 2001 reflecting an absolute increase but compared to the total budget expenditure it remain low. This increase can be also explained as resulting from the social protest of 2011 (see Figure 6.14).

## Gini index

One of the most important indicators for measuring inequality is the Gini Index. The Gini Index is one of the most famous and well used indexes to measure inequality.

The index is a statistical tool that examines the inequality in income distribution on a scale of 0 to 1 (0 is a complete equal society and 1 means that all income is concentrated in the hands of one person). During the past 15 years, it seems as if there has been no real change in the coefficient of the Gini Index after direct taxes and transfer payments, which on average was 0.376. However, this figure shows only a partial picture. The Gini Coefficient before direct taxes and transfer payments gradually fell over the years. While in 2002 it was 0.537, by 2015 it was 0.472.<sup>19</sup> According to the estimation of the Macro Center for Political Economics, in 2017 the coefficient was 0.462. The reduction of the Gini Coefficient before direct taxes and transfer payments is most likely due to the strong economy of Israel – low unemployment and stable growth. Nonetheless, the fact that the Gini Coefficient before direct taxes and transfer payments dropped and the coefficient, after direct taxes and transfer payments, is unchanged, means that the policy adopted by the government, in the form of taxes and allowances, is becoming less effective in reducing inequality (see Figure 6.15).

In 2002, direct taxes and transfer payments managed to reduce inequality by 31.5 percent. However, by 2015, it managed to reduce inequality by only 22.5 percent. According to the estimation of the Macro Center for Political Economics, in 2017 it managed to reduce only 21.5 percent of inequality (see Figure 6.16).<sup>20</sup> The largest reduction in the efficiency of direct taxes and transfer payments was carried out during the time Netanyahu served as minister of finance. In light of his policy regarding allowances and benefits provided by the NII and because of the shift toward a taxation system that is based more on indirect taxes rather than direct taxes, this is not surprising.

The Gini coefficient after direct taxation and transfer payments could be considered alarming in light of the international comparison. According to the OECD, in 2015 only two OECD countries have a larger Gini coefficient than Israel – Mexico and the United States (see Figure 6.17).

## The 2011 social uprising

In 2011 as part of a global trend, a social uprising broke out in Israel. During the summer of that year, an unprecedented number of Israelis went out to the streets demanding social justice. In general, protests focused on the cost of living in Israel, particularly the sharp rise in housing prices. The leaders of the uprising were middle-class students as well as young professionals.<sup>21</sup> While in the years 2000–2008 housing prices did not change, between 2008 and 2011 housing prices rose by 52 percent, and by 2018 by 119 percent (see Figure 6.18).<sup>22</sup>

The fact that a social protest of this magnitude could break out, even in times in which Israel enjoys a stable, growing, and strong economy, implies that many Israelis share a feeling of missing out on the growth. Many feel that the prices that the Israeli society had to pay in order to achieve the economic success and gains under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu have been too high. The rising inequality, the weakening of the middle class and the fact that many young adults in Israel feel that their opportunities are not as great as those of their parents, especially when

it comes to buying an apartment, all suggest that many Israelis are crying out for a society that is more equal and in which all people can live in dignity.

As a result of the protest, the economic discourse in Israel gained momentum. Elections that were once exclusively decided on security issues and attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are now more diverse. Both the Yesh Atid party, led by former Minister of Finance Ya'ir Lapid, and the Kulanu party headed by the current Minister of Finance Moshe Kahlon are parties that were established as a result of that protest and aim to ease the economic burden of the middle class in Israel. In addition, many government initiatives were instituted to reduce the cost of living in Israel. Among other reforms, changes were made to reduce the cost of cellular services, other telecommunication services, and aviation services, reductions in customs were instituted, and great efforts were made to halt the rise in housing prices.

Even today, Netanyahu still believes in free market economics, however, in Israel following the social uprising, he understands that introducing stringent steps against the social welfare system or extensive cuts in the government and in social services may cause him widespread electoral damage. Therefore, as long as the Israeli economy continues to flourish, it seems clear that Netanyahu is not in a hurry to take those steps that he promoted while he was minister of finance. While, during his term as minister of finance, the annual budget contained extensive cuts in social services, in recent years, the annual budget tends to preserve the former budget with a few adjustments and changes.

### **The discovery of natural gas off Israel's coast**

One of the most important and essential core issues that the Israeli economy faced during the time Netanyahu served as prime minister was the discovery of natural gas deposits in the territorial waters of Israel. The first important gas discovery in Israel was in 2009 (the Tamar field). More discoveries occurred in 2010 (the Leviathan field) and 2012. As the discoveries changed the position of Israel from a country reliant on energy imports to an independent producer of energy that even enjoys the ability to export natural gas to neighboring countries Jordan and Egypt, the discoveries aroused a widespread public discourse. Among the issues at the heart of the discourse are the level of taxation and the amount of gas that should be exported. The last few years have proven that the discoveries do not only affect the energy market, but also play an important role with geo-strategic, environmental, and social implications.<sup>23</sup>

In 2013 it was decided to adopt the main conclusion of the Tzemach Committee. The committee was tasked with drafting a national policy on Israel's natural gas fields. Among other elements, it promulgated several guiding rules – ensuring the energy needs of Israel by placing limitations on the amount of gas that could be exported, maximizing the economic benefits to the local market, creating conditions for competition and guaranteeing flexibility to policymakers.

The main public debate has been focusing on the amounts of gas that should be exported and the prices that the monopolies that control the natural gas deposits

could charge. A report of the Public Utilities Authority from 2015 stated that the authority believes that

there is high importance in determining prices and suitable conditions for the gas agreements signed in 2014, in accordance with the stance of the Public Utilities Authority, in order to prevent a steady increase in gas prices and in order to facilitate competition in the energy and gas markets.<sup>24</sup>

The strong resistance to the gas agreement that Netanyahu personally supervised, translated into direct criticism of Netanyahu's economic positions. Many believe that he abandoned the national interests of the State of Israel in favor of those of the monopolies that own the gas fields. A high court decision from March 2016 ruled that any part of the agreement that prevents the government from conducting changes in it, especially when it concerns gas prices and the public revenue in the future, cannot be legally justified. Therefore, the government was forced to introduce changes in the agreement, mainly to cancel its commitment not to introduce any changes in the agreement for ten years.<sup>25</sup>

To conclude, while many of Netanyahu's supporters claim that he had the best interests of the Israeli economy in mind when signing the agreements with the gas companies, and that tough sacrifices should have been made in order to make those fields profitable, or the claim that the agreements that were signed provide more profit to the monopolies at the expense of the Israeli public. Economically, this might be the most important decision Netanyahu made during his tenure as prime minister.

## Conclusions

Benjamin Netanyahu has undoubtedly changed the economic, political, and even cultural landscape of Israel over the past two decades. His economic approach, which was profoundly influenced by his long stay in the United States, is considered to be neoliberal. While Netanyahu gained power in the later 1990s when he first assumed office as prime minister, it is customary to consider the economic era in Israel as an era that was influenced by Netanyahu, beginning in 2003, when he was appointed minister of finance.

Netanyahu inherited from his predecessor an economy in ruins. Because of his understanding of economics, Netanyahu managed to extricate the Israeli economy from its crisis. Today, in 2018, 15 years later, some of the macroeconomic indicators in Israel have never been better. Israel enjoys strong and stable growth, low unemployment, a low debt-GDP ratio, and a positive balance of payments, even in times when other countries have suffered from economic recession. In addition, Netanyahu has paid extensive attention to reducing the size of government, both by promoting privatization processes and by conducting cuts in the public sector itself.

Regarding taxation, Netanyahu publicly supports lowering the burden of taxation. During the past fifteen years, the burden of direct taxation was gradually

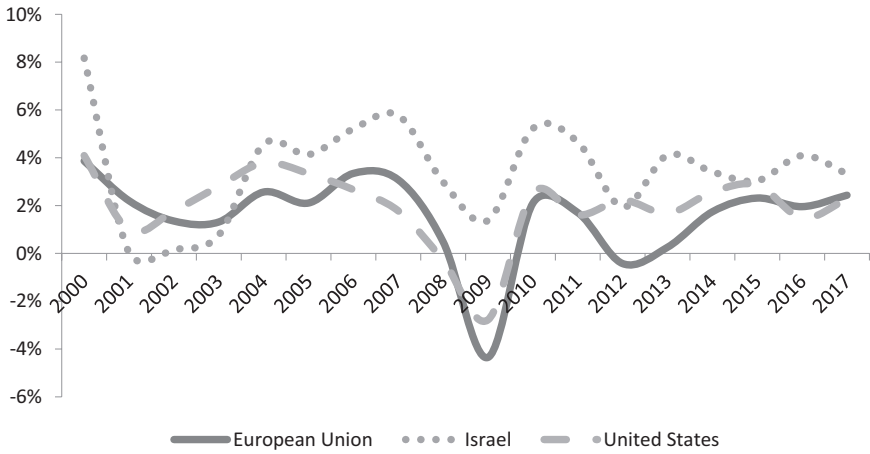
reduced, however the burden of indirect taxes, which are considered to be more regressive, increased. This move, to an economy that is based more on indirect taxation, alongside major cuts in the welfare system in Israel, prompted much criticism. The efficiency of the taxation and the transfer payments to reduce inequality lessened, and inequality in Israel is considered to be one of the highest in the West.

Therefore, while many praise the economic miracle that Netanyahu managed to achieve in the Israeli economy, others criticize him and claim that the social prices that Israeli society has had to pay are severe. As a result, and as a result of a sharp increase in the price of housing in Israel in 2011, the largest social demonstration in the history of Israel took place. The social uprising completely changed the economic discourse in Israel and it is believed that in order to adapt to the new era in Israel, Netanyahu has been leading Israel in the past few years with a more moderate economic approach. Nonetheless, he is considered to be a prime minister whose policies have benefitted strong companies, as, for example, the natural gas agreement he made, which precipitated strong criticism.

## Note

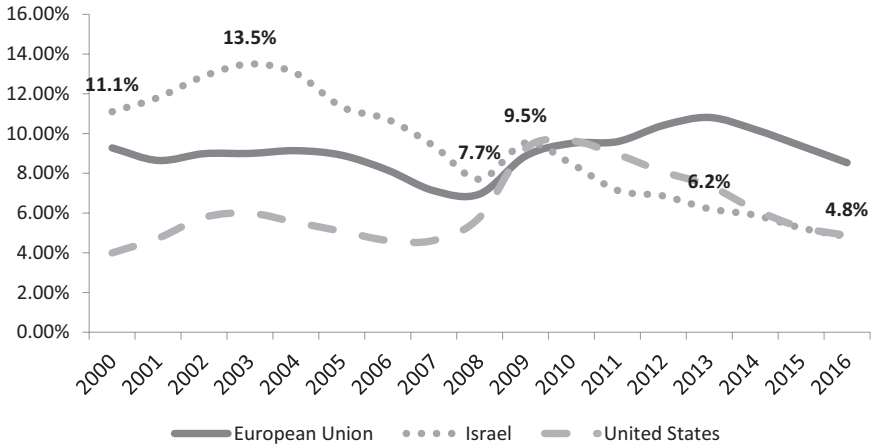
- 1 Gerschenkron, E. "The Fat Man and the Thin Man". Youtube. December 2012. Internet. Accessed August 17, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFnDXXjo594>

# Appendix A – figures and charts



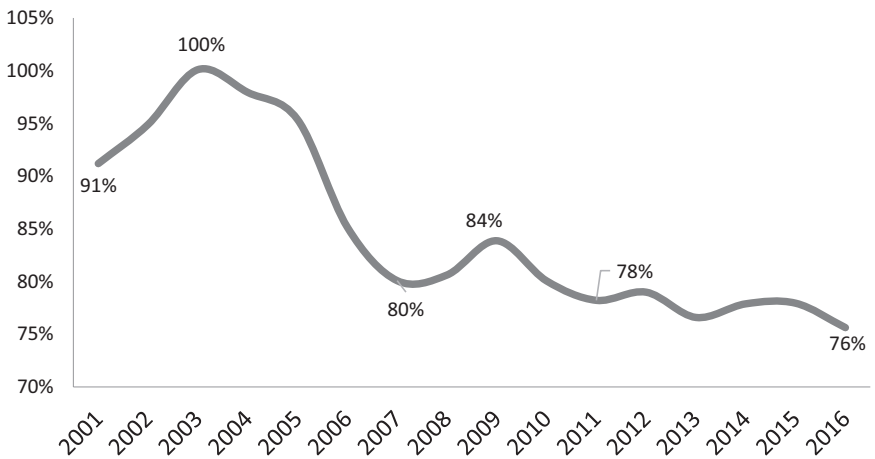
**FIGURE 6.1** GDP Growth Rate (%) in the EU, Israel, and US, 2000–2017<sup>26</sup>

Source: World Bank



**FIGURE 6.2** Unemployment Rate (%) in the EU, Israel, and US, 2000–2017<sup>27</sup>

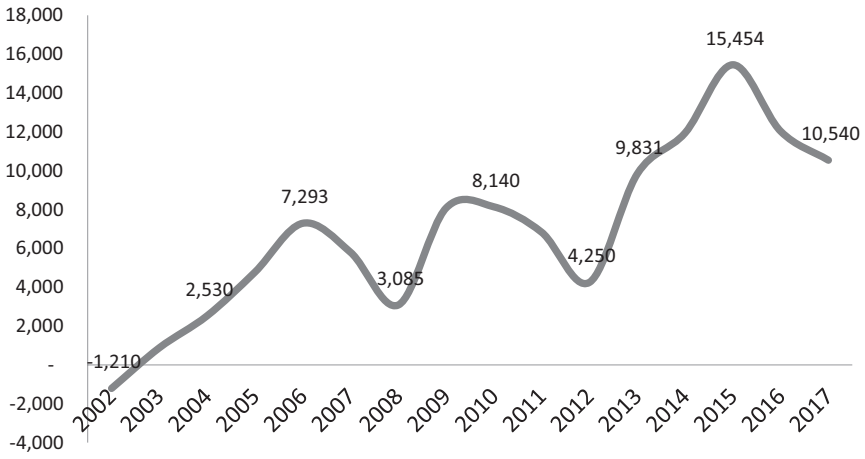
Source: World Bank



**FIGURE 6.3** Debt-GDP Ratio (%), 2001–2016<sup>28</sup>

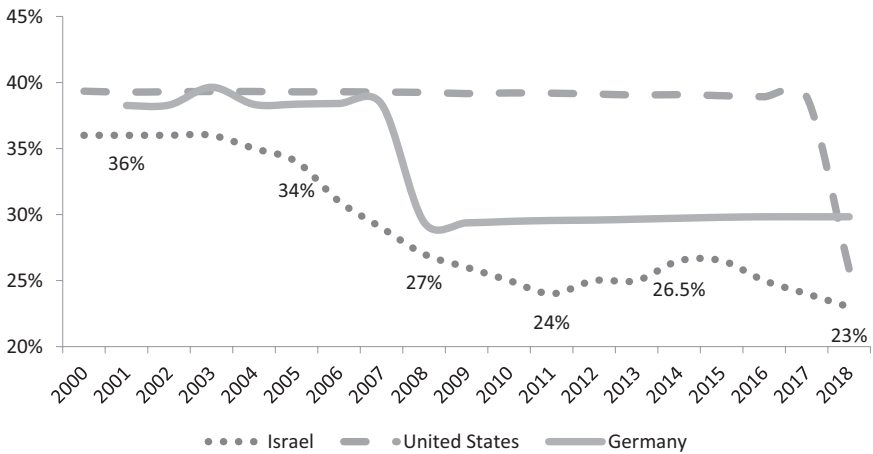
Source: OECD





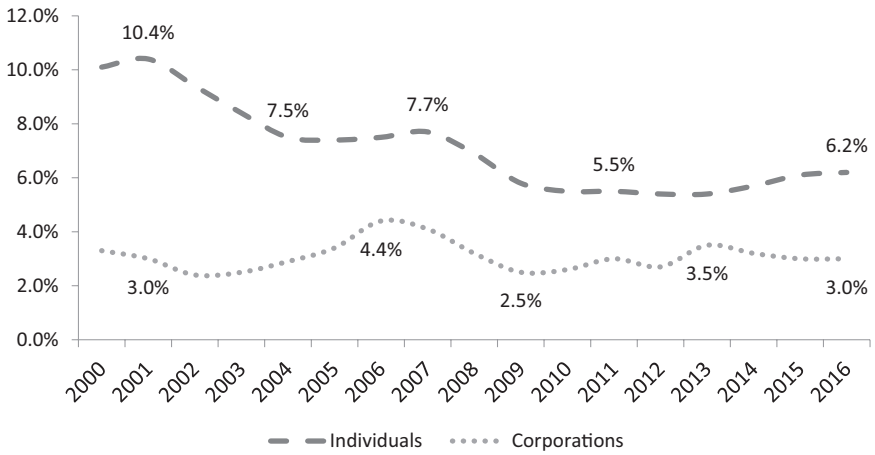
**FIGURE 6.4** Current Account Balance in USD Millions, 2002–2017<sup>29</sup>

Source: Israel Central Bureau of Statistics



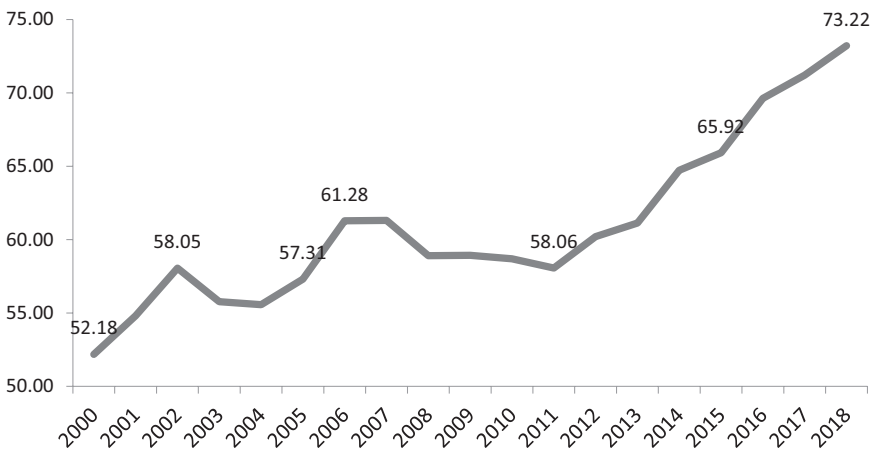
**FIGURE 6.5** Corporate Tax Rate (%) in Israel, US, and Germany, 2000–2018

Source: OECD



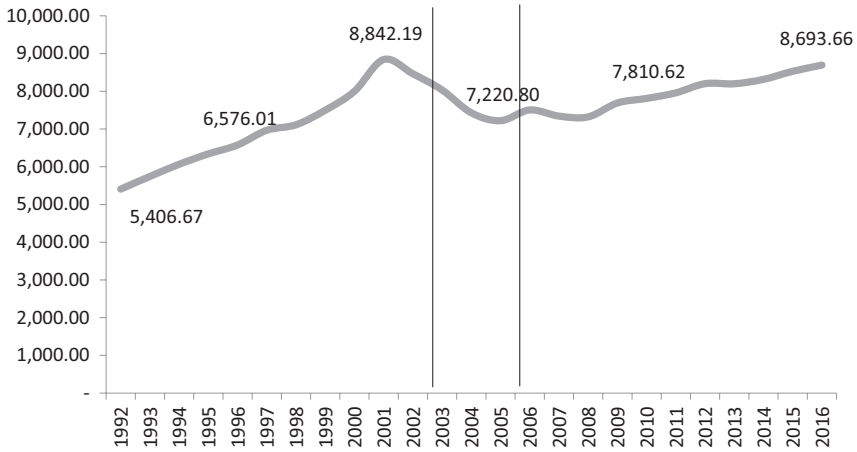
**FIGURE 6.6** Taxes on Income, Profits, and Capital Gains for Individuals and Corporations (% of GDP), 2000–2016

Source: OECD



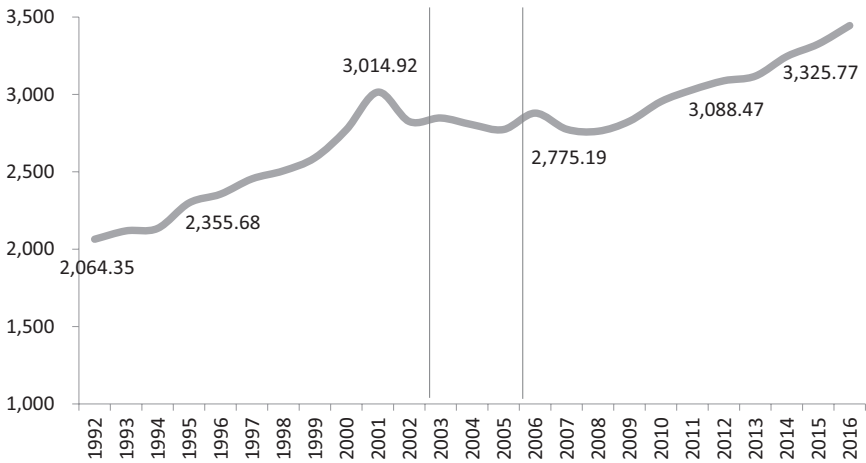
**FIGURE 6.7** Ministry of Defense Budget in ILS (2016) Billions, 2000–2018

Source: Israeli Ministry of Finance



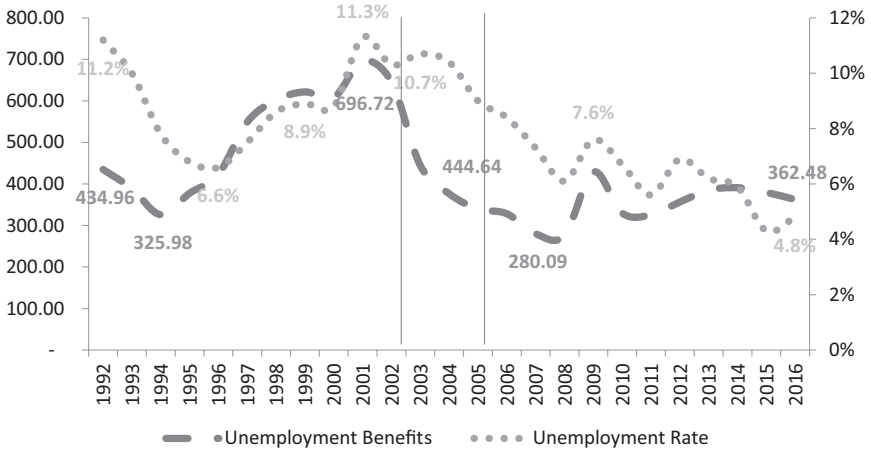
**FIGURE 6.8** NII Expenditure on Allowances per Capita in ILS (2016), 1992–2016

Source: NII of Israel, *Annual Budgetary Report*, processed by the Macro Center for Political Economics



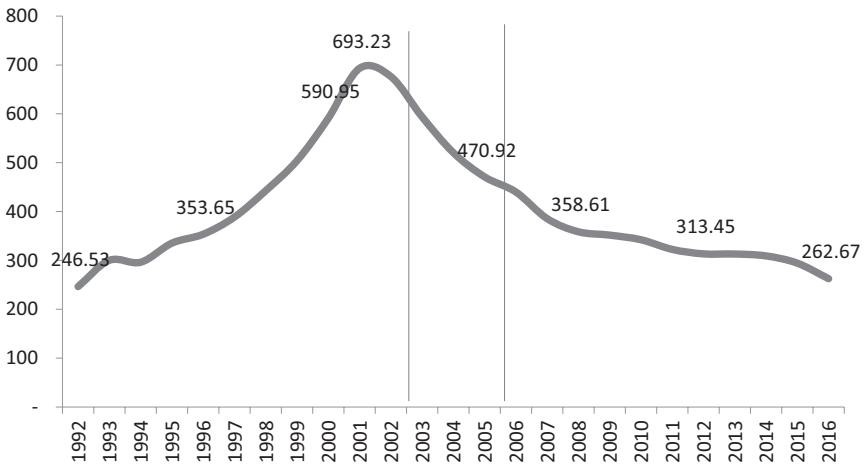
**FIGURE 6.9** NII Expenditure on Elderly Allowances per Capita in ILS (2016), 1992–2016

Source: NII of Israel, *Annual Budgetary Report*, processed by the Macro Center for Political Economics



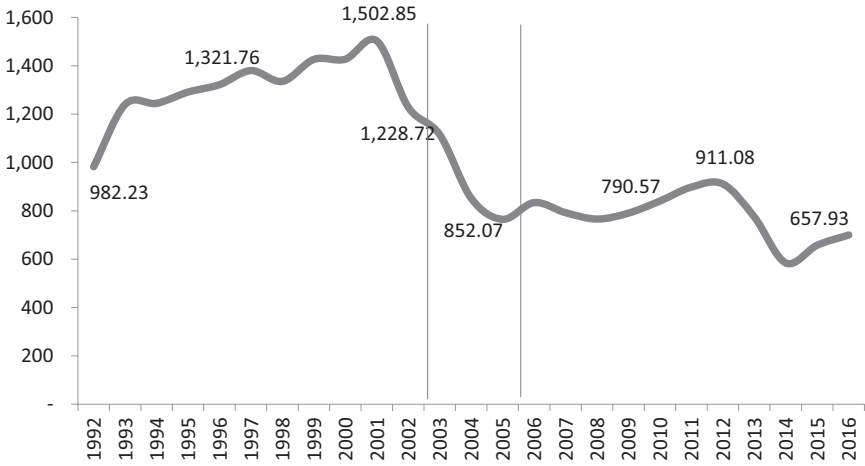
**FIGURE 6.10** NII Expenditure on Unemployment Benefits per Capita in ILS (Using ILS [2016] and 2016 Unemployment Rate), 1992–2016

Source: NII of Israel *Annual Budgetary Report* and Central Bank of Israel, processed by the Macro Center for Political Economics



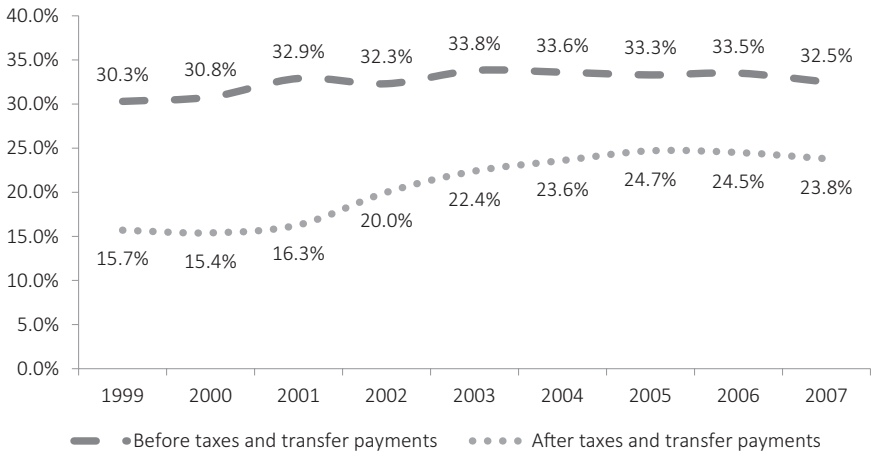
**FIGURE 6.11** NII Expenditure on Income Allowances per Capita in ILS (2016), 1992–2016

Source: NII of Israel, *Annual Budgetary Report*, processed by the Macro Center for Political Economics



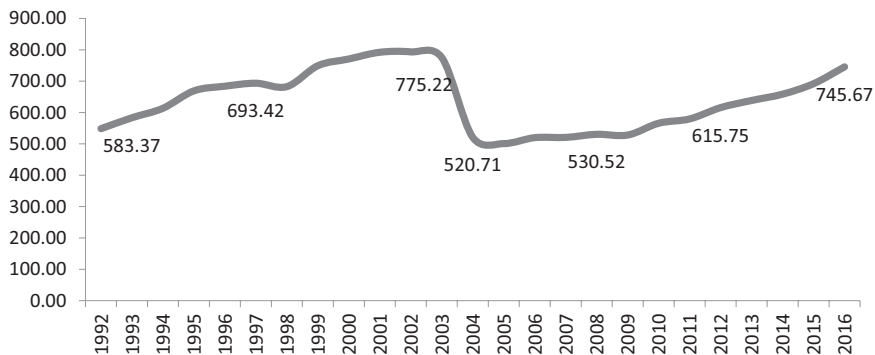
**FIGURE 6.12** NII Expenditure on Child Allowances per Capita in ILS (2016), 1992–2016

Source: NII of Israel, *Annual Budgetary Report*, processed by the Macro Center for Political Economics



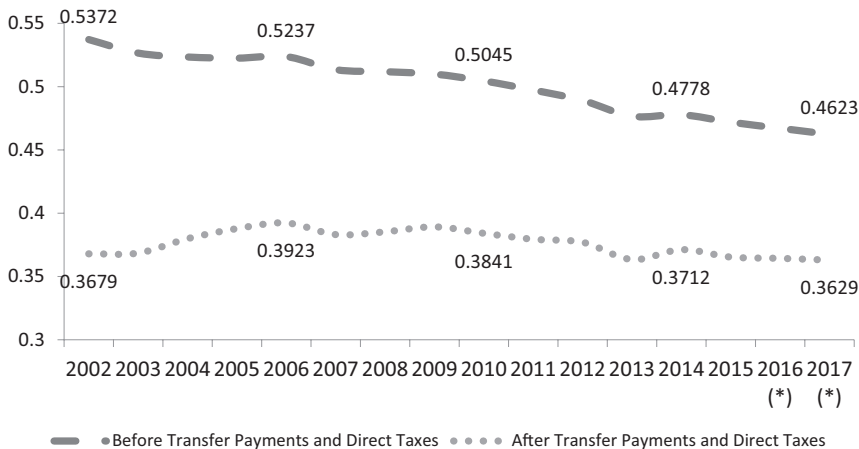
**FIGURE 6.13** People Below the Poverty Line Before and After Taxes and Transfer Payments (%), 1999–2007

Source: National Insurance Institute of Israel, *Annual Reports*.



**FIGURE 6.14** Annual Budget per Capita in ILS (2016), Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, and Social Services, 1992–2016

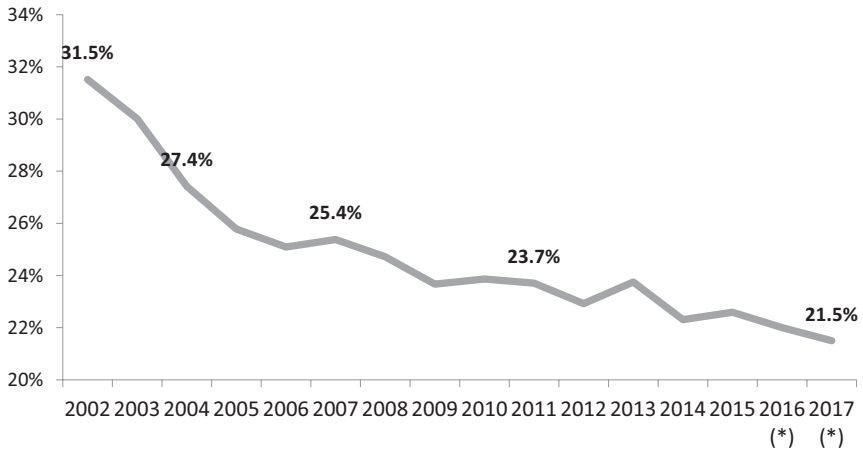
Source: Israeli Ministry of Finance and Central Bureau of Statistics, processed by Macro Center for Political Economics



**FIGURE 6.15** Gini Coefficient Before and After Direct Taxes and Transfer Payments, 2002–2017

Source: National Insurance Institute of Israel, *Annual Reports*.

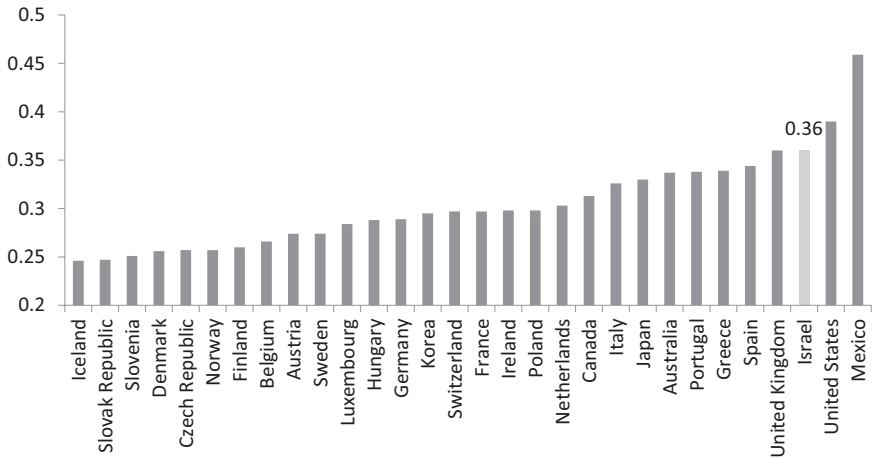
\* An estimation provided by the Macro Center for Political Economics



**FIGURE 6.16** Reduction (%) in Gini Index Resulting from Direct Transfers and Transfer Payments, 2002–2017

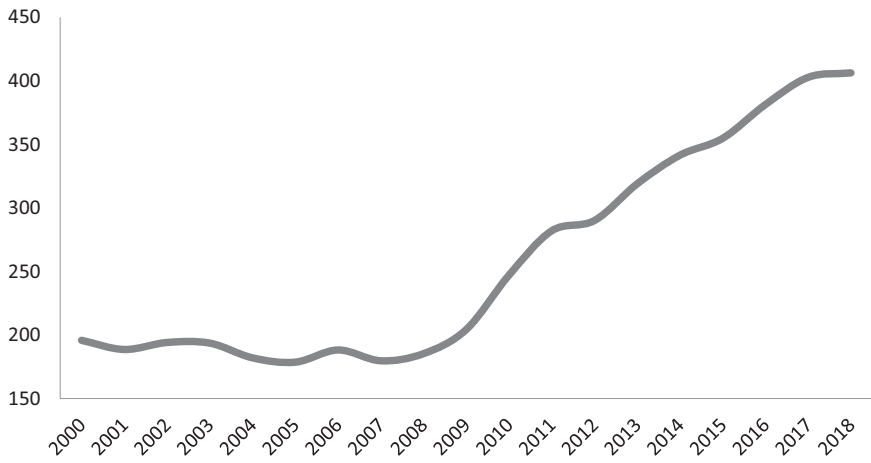
Source: National Insurance Institute of Israel, *Annual Reports*.

\* An estimation provided by the Macro Center for Political Economics



**FIGURE 6.17** Gini Coefficient Among Selected OECD Countries, 2015

Source: OECD



**FIGURE 6.18** Housing Price Index (1993 as Base), 2000–2018

Source: Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics

## Notes

- 1 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister's Office. Accessed August 15, 2018, [www.pmo.gov.il/English/PrimeMinister/Pages/PrimeMinister-CurriculumVitae.aspx](http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/PrimeMinister/Pages/PrimeMinister-CurriculumVitae.aspx).
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- 9 A provident fund is a retirement saving plan which is based on defined contribution system. In Israel provident funds are one of the most popular saving methods.
- 10 Annual average of USD exchange rate according to the Bank of Israel was in 2016 3.84 NIS.
- 11 Accountant General, Israeli Ministry of Finance, *Government Budget Support Website*. Accessed August 20, 2018 [www.tmichot.gov.il](http://www.tmichot.gov.il).



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- 13 Ibid.
- 14 In 2016 prices.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Income allowances are allowances that are being paid to people who are unable to ensure themselves sufficient income from work. Usually, those entitled to income allowances are people with disability, unemployed people or people who are injured and sick. However, income allowances are also paid to people that their income from work is less than a minimal income required for living.
- 17 In 2016 prices.
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- 23 A. Loewenthal, R. Nathanson, and H. Weisman, *Natural Gas in the Eastern Mediterranean: Economic Impacts and Strategic Implications* (Tel Aviv: The Israeli Europe Policy Network (INSS) and the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), 2013).
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## **PART II**

# Israeli foreign policy



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# 7

## ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES

### An uncertain relationship

*Robert O. Freedman*

During Netanyahu's two periods as Israel's prime minister (1996–1999) and 2009–), he has dealt with three American presidents: Bill Clinton (1996–1999), Barack Obama (2009–2017), and Donald Trump (2017–). Two of the three were liberal Democrats (Clinton and Obama), and one was a conservative Republican (Trump). Not surprisingly, Netanyahu, himself a conservative, has had a far better relationship with Trump than he did with the Clinton and Obama, both of whom pressed him to make territorial concessions to the Palestinians for the sake of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, and who took a dim view of Netanyahu's efforts to expand Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Nonetheless, Trump's volatility posed problems for Netanyahu as it raised questions as to the American president's commitment to Israel's security. After a brief analysis of the lessons Netanyahu learned from his experience with Clinton, the chapter will concentrate on Netanyahu's relations with both Obama and Trump.

#### **1 Lessons learned from Netanyahu's dealings with Bill Clinton (1996–1999)**

Unlike his predecessors, Labor Party leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, Likud Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was unwilling to make concessions to the Palestinians to move the Israeli-Palestinian peace process forward. Thus, he resisted an agreement to divide the city of Hebron between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (The other major Palestinian cities had been turned over to the Palestinian Authority under the Oslo II agreement). It was, consequently, only after the hard work of American diplomat Dennis Ross that an agreement was reached. For the US, this marked a major change in policy as the Clinton administration moved from being a diplomatic cheerleader during the Oslo I (1993) and Oslo II (1995) agreements as well as the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty (1994), when almost all

of the diplomatic work had been done by the participants themselves to becoming an active mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, albeit with only mixed success.

Following his election in May 1996, Netanyahu journeyed to Washington. Besides meeting President Clinton, where he reportedly lectured Clinton on the Middle East and how to deal with the Arabs,<sup>1</sup> he also addressed the American Congress in a joint session; and in his speech made assertions that were clearly aimed at winning over the Republican-dominated body. Thus, he announced his plans to privatize state-owned Israeli companies, deregulate the Israeli economy and end US economic (but not military) aid to Israel. The alliances he had made earlier when he was a frequent visitor to Congress as the Likud opposition leader from 1993 to 1996 were reinforced and were intended to greatly aid Netanyahu when he came into conflict with Clinton over the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, as he was soon to do. Indeed, while in his inaugural speech in the Israeli Knesset, Netanyahu offered peace to the Palestinians – in return for “maximum security for Israel in the face of terror and war,”<sup>2</sup> his policy advocacy of expanding settlements on the West Bank greatly angered the Palestinian Arab leaders who saw their hoped-for state slowly disappearing. Israeli-Palestinian relations erupted into a crisis in late September 1996 when after Netanyahu unilaterally ordered the opening of the Hasmonean tunnel near the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif, which was holy to both Moslems and Jews, fighting broke out between Israelis and Palestinians causing the deaths of 70 people. President Clinton, in an effort to defuse the crisis, which took place two months before the 1996 presidential election, invited Netanyahu, Palestinian Authority leader Yasser Arafat, and King Hussein of Jordan to Washington. While the emergency summit achieved little of substance, the crisis was eased. Nonetheless, the degree of trust between Netanyahu and Arafat, never high to begin with, all but evaporated. Consequently, in order to move the peace process ahead the US began to get intensively involved – unlike the situation in the Oslo I and Oslo II negotiations, which were carried out by the Palestinians and Israelis themselves. The first case of this was the Hebron agreement of January 1997, negotiated by US diplomat Dennis Ross, under which Israel agreed to vacate 80 percent of the city and also make three additional withdrawals over the next 18 months.<sup>3</sup> Netanyahu, however, dragged his feet about these withdrawals while also constructing a new neighborhood in East Jerusalem, called Har Homa, which faced the Palestinian controlled city of Bethlehem. Meanwhile, terrorism, had become a very serious problem for Netanyahu as Hamas bombs in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv killed 24 Israelis and wounded hundreds more. This prompted Netanyahu to try to assassinate Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, but he chose a strange place to do it – Amman Jordan, the capital of one of only two Arab states that had made peace with Israel. The assassination was bungled, the Israeli assassins were captured and only the intervention of President Clinton prevented an embarrassed King Hussein from breaking relations with Israel.<sup>4</sup> This would not be the last time that an American president would help Netanyahu out of a very difficult international situation.

Meanwhile, despite US pressure, the Israeli–Palestinian peace process foundered. In part this was due to the Monica Lewinsky affair, which weakened Clinton, and the support of the Republicans in the US Congress, which helped Netanyahu to resist US pressure. Indeed, when Netanyahu visited the United States in January 1998, he met with Republican leaders who were calling for Clinton’s impeachment and attended rallies with Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Christian Evangelical leaders who were highly critical of Clinton.<sup>5</sup> By the fall of 1998, however, Netanyahu apparently decided he had to make some concessions on the peace process. With Arafat threatening to declare a Palestinian State in May 1999 when the five-year Oslo I accords expired, and with an Israeli election on the horizon, Netanyahu agreed to meet with Clinton and Arafat at the Wye Plantation on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. After some intense bargaining, Netanyahu agreed to give up 13 percent of the Israeli controlled West Bank to the Palestinian Authority, and in return Arafat agreed to change the Palestinian National Charter to eliminate the 26 articles calling for Israel’s destruction.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately for Netanyahu, however, the agreement led to the collapse of his government, and he was defeated in the May 1999 Israeli elections. It would be ten years before he returned to power. Nonetheless, Netanyahu appears to have come away with three lessons from his first term in office. First he could play off his friends in a Republican-dominated Congress against a Democratic president to reduce US pressure on Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians. Second, in time of crisis, such as the Hasmonean Tunnel incident and the imbroglio over the abortive assassination of Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, the US would be helpful in smoothing over the situation and helping Israel diplomatically. Finally, perhaps the most important lesson Netanyahu learned was that territorial concessions to the Palestinians would bring down his ruling coalition. It was a lesson he would not forget when he returned to power in February 2009, and encountered a newly – elected US president, Barack Obama, who wanted Israel to make territorial concessions.

## **2 The Obama administration and Israel during Obama’s first term**

One of the Obama administration’s first acts after taking office was to appoint former US senator George Mitchell as special envoy to the Arab–Israeli peace process. Mitchell had previously served as the mediator of the Northern Ireland peace agreement and had also played a role in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This demonstrated Obama’s serious interest in achieving an Arab–Israeli peace settlement. A major challenge to Obama’s peace process efforts, however, came less than a month after he took office. The Israeli elections of February 10, 2009, brought into office a right-of-center Israeli government under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu – the same Netanyahu who had clashed with Obama’s Democratic predecessor, President Bill Clinton, in the 1996–1999 period. It wasn’t long before Netanyahu and Obama clashed, due in part to their different worldviews and in part to their different Middle East priorities.



### *Obama's approach to world affairs*

In all US presidential transitions, especially when the outgoing president of a different political party has been in office for two terms, the new incumbent seeks to demonstrate that his policies are different from his predecessor's. This was the case when George W. Bush replaced Bill Clinton, it was also the case when Barack Obama replaced Bush, and it would again be the case when Donald Trump replaced Barack Obama. Thus, when Obama took office, he made a major effort to show that in foreign policy he would replace the unilateralism of the Bush era with a policy of outreach to countries that had come into sharp conflict with the United States during the Bush administration. These included Iran, Syria, Cuba, Venezuela, Russia, China, North Korea, and Myanmar. The Obama administration apparently assumed that if you meet your opponents halfway, they will reciprocate.<sup>7</sup> While such an assumption appeared to be dangerously naive to many critics, including those in Israel, the administration held fast to this policy during its first year. A second aspect of the administration's approach involved outreach to the Muslim world. In speeches in both Turkey and Egypt, Obama sought to portray the United States as a friend of the Muslim world, despite the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. To emphasize this point, Obama played down the Islamic nature of terrorism, much to the displeasure of conservatives in the United States, who condemned him for giving a free ride to Islamic terrorism.<sup>8</sup> A third aspect of the new policy was a cooling of ties with Israel, after the warm, if not cozy, relationship of the Bush years. Obama appeared to feel that such a cooling would help the United States appear more evenhanded and consequently facilitate US efforts to solve the conflict. Thus, early in his administration, Obama called for a halt in settlement construction, including in Jerusalem, despite the understanding reached by George W. Bush and then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in April 2004 in which Bush had promised Sharon that in the US view, "in light of new realities on the ground, including existing population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949."<sup>9</sup> In addition, despite trips to Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, Obama did not visit Israel, despite being urged to do so by a number of American Jewish organizations, including those affiliated with the liberal J Street movement, as it appeared that Obama was deliberately distancing himself from the Jewish State. Reinforcing the chill in relations was the fact that while Obama was a left-of-center liberal, Netanyahu was a right-of-center conservative. Gone were the days when the conservatives Bush and Sharon could easily relate because they saw the world through the same lens. Indeed, in the very first public meeting between Obama and Netanyahu in May 2009, the tension between the two leaders was clearly visible. It should also be mentioned in this context that two of the Obama administration's key officials, Hilary Clinton, as Secretary of State and Rahm Emanuel, who had been a senior aide to Bill Clinton, and was now Obama's chief of staff had less than pleasant memories of Netanyahu from his first term as Israel's prime minister.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to their different political perspectives, Obama and Netanyahu differed on Middle East priorities. To Netanyahu, Iran was the primary issue. With Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calling for Israel to be wiped off the face of the earth and rapidly developing Iran's nuclear capability, Netanyahu pressed Obama to take action against Iran. For Obama, however, the priority was to try to get the Iranians to change their policies by dialogue, not force, and during his first year in office, Obama made numerous appeals to the Iranian regime for improved relations, only to be continually rebuffed. Obama also saw a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict as the priority in the Middle East, seeing such a solution both as a means of weakening Iran's proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, pulling Syria away from Iran, and rallying the Sunni Arab world against Iran, if it failed to respond to his outreach policy.<sup>11</sup> Here again, the settlement issue was key as Obama felt that by getting Israel to stop settlement building in Jerusalem and the West Bank, the resumption of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations would be facilitated and an overall settlement of the conflict brought closer.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately for Obama, as he would later ruefully admit, he did not understand the changes in Israeli politics that had been caused by the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006 and the Israeli-Hamas war of December 2008 to January 2009.

### ***Israel's move to the right***

The Israeli elections of 2009 reflected a clear move to the right by the Israeli body politic. Netanyahu's right-wing Likud Party jumped from twelve to twenty-seven seats, and the right-of-center Yisrael Beiteinu Party of Avigdor Lieberman rose from eleven to fifteen seats. At the same time, the left-wing Meretz Party dropped from five to three seats and the left-of-center Labor Party fell from nineteen to thirteen seats. In explaining the shift to the right, analysts noted that the policy of unilateral withdrawals had not achieved peace. After Ehud Barak unilaterally withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000, Israel had to endure repeated rocket attacks leading up to a major war with Hezbollah in 2006, which the centrist Kadima Party did not wage effectively. Similarly, after Israel withdrew both settlements and military bases from Gaza in 2005, Israelis experienced increased rocket fire from Gaza, which Hamas had seized in 2007, leading to the major Israeli invasion of Gaza in December 2008. Given these events, the majority of Israelis were wary of further withdrawals, which, as Netanyahu pointed out in the campaign, would bring Tel Aviv and Ben Gurion Airport into rocket range. Also, they were highly suspicious of the Palestinians; the 2007 split between Hamas and Fatah made any final Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement a distant possibility, at best, because even if Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas agreed to concessions, they were certain to be opposed by Hamas, which since 2007 had controlled the Gaza Strip. Making matters worse was a general feeling that Mahmoud Abbas, was well-meaning but weak, and that his prime minister, Salam Fayyad, was honest but had no political base. In addition, the stance of Israel's Arab community (20 percent of the Israeli population) had become problematic to Israel's Jewish majority, as some of the leaders of

the Arab community increasingly sided with Israel's Arab enemies while demanding that Israel as a Jewish state be replaced with Israel "as a state of its peoples."<sup>13</sup> Given this turn to the right, Obama's pressure on Israel was received coldly, and Obama's popularity, as measured in Israeli polls, fell to single digits.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, Netanyahu took a hard line on the Middle East peace process, refusing to agree to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and promoting an active Jewish settlement program in the West Bank. Under heavy US pressure, however, and with the Democrats now in control of both houses of the US Congress, he modified his position. Thus, a month after meeting Obama in Washington; in June 2009, in a speech at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, Netanyahu agreed to a two-state solution, with the important qualification that Jerusalem would remain united under Israeli control. Then in November 2009 Netanyahu also agreed to a ten-month partial settlement construction ban, but one that excluded Jerusalem.

By the beginning of 2010, the split between Obama and Israel seemed to be narrowing. Obama had begun to take a tougher stand on Iran, after the Iranian government, now beset by increasing domestic dissent, continued to rebuff Obama's call for improved ties and rejected international efforts to deal with Iran's nuclear enrichment efforts. In addition, a tougher tone had begun to enter the Obama administration's diplomatic vocabulary, after the apparent failure of outreach efforts toward Venezuela, Cuba, Myanmar, and North Korea. As far as Israel was concerned, Obama had publicly stated in a *Time* magazine interview on February 1, 2010, that he had "overestimated" the US ability to get the Israelis and Palestinians to engage in a "meaningful conversation" because of the domestic political problems both sides faced.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the United States backed off from its calls for a full settlement freeze and accepted the partial freeze proposed by Netanyahu. Nonetheless, despite this apparently improving situation in US-Israeli relations, a crisis erupted in mid-March 2010, when US Vice President Joe Biden was in Israel.

There were several aspects of the crisis. First, after a great deal of effort, the United States had coaxed Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas to agree to resume peace talks with Israel, albeit at the low level of indirect or proximity talks under which the US Middle East special envoy, George Mitchell, would shuttle between the two sides. Biden's trip to Israel was aimed, in part, to add the US imprimatur to the start of the talks that had been endorsed by the Arab League, thus giving Abbas a modicum of legitimization. However, as the date of Biden's visit to Israel approached, the situation in East Jerusalem became more explosive. The Israeli government, either with Netanyahu's active support or with his toleration, had begun to accelerate the construction of Jewish housing in Arab-populated neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, such as Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah, while at the same time destroying Arab-owned housing in these neighborhoods and elsewhere in East Jerusalem because they had been built without the municipal permit, which, under an Israeli catch-22 policy, was almost impossible for East Jerusalem Arabs to obtain. This had inflamed Arab opinion. The Palestinians saw these actions as further attempts by Israel to unilaterally extend its control over

areas they wanted for their future Palestinian state. The Palestinians see control over Arab East Jerusalem as vital because, for both political and religious reasons, they want it as the capital of their long-hoped-for Palestinian state. With the Jewish construction in Arab East Jerusalem, this hope was rapidly slipping away. Thus, the announcement, in the midst of Biden's visit, that Israel was going to construct an additional 1,600 homes in East Jerusalem, even though the construction was to take place in the all-Jewish neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo, was the straw that broke the camel's back as far as the Palestinians were concerned, and they refused to enter into the indirect negotiations to which they had committed. This, in turn, undermined not only the Biden mission but also the months-long diplomacy the Obama administration had been actively pursuing to get the Israeli-Palestinian talks under way. Netanyahu's response that he had been unaware of the announcement before it had been made was seen as specious by the Obama administration, which appeared to lose trust in the Israeli leader.<sup>16</sup> Following the fiasco of the Biden visit, where heated words were exchanged between Netanyahu and high-ranking members of the Obama administration, a debate appeared to break out in the administration as to what to do.<sup>17</sup> One group argued that it was time for the United States to come up with its own plan for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement and in well-placed leaks in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in early April, the Obama administration was portrayed as actively considering coming up with its own peace plan.<sup>18</sup> Advocates of this position cited then CENTCOM commander David Petraeus's argument in a mid-March 2010 policy paper that the Arab-Israeli conflict was damaging the US position in the Middle East, although in the thirty-five-page paper the conflict was mentioned only twice,<sup>19</sup> and Petraeus later claimed that his position had been misunderstood.<sup>20</sup> However, others in the Obama administration argued that the United States could not want a solution more than the parties themselves did. In a news conference at the end of April President Obama appeared to come down midway between the two positions, thereby enabling the United States to keep both options open. Thus, on the one hand Obama stated:

Even if we are applying all of our political capital to that issue [solving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict], the Israeli people through their government, and the Palestinian people through the Palestinian Authority, as well as other Arab States, may say to themselves – we are not prepared to resolve this – these issues – no matter how much pressure the United States brings to bear – and the truth is, in some of these conflicts the United States can't impose solutions unless the participants in these conflicts are willing to break out of old patterns of antagonism. I think it was former Secretary of State James Baker who said, in the context of Middle East peace, we can't want it more than they do.

On the other hand, Obama also noted that an Israeli-Palestinian peace was a "vital national security interest of the United States," and that "what we can make sure of

is that we are constantly present, constantly engaged,” and he also said “I’m going to keep at it.”<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, as discord between the Obama administration and Netanyahu continued, nearly three hundred members of the United States Congress, who were sympathetic to Israel, had made their position clear in a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in late March, in which they expressed “deep concern” over the US-Israeli crisis:

The US and Israel are close allies whose people share a deep and abiding friendship based on a shared commitment to core values including democracy, human rights, and freedom of the press and religion. Our two countries are partners in the fight against terrorism and share an important strategic relationship. A strong Israel is an asset to the national security of the United States and brings stability to the Middle East. We are concerned that the highly publicized tensions in the relationship will not advance the interests the US and Israel share. Above all, we must remain focused on the threat posed by the Iranian nuclear weapons program to Middle East peace and stability.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps heeding the call of Congress, or perhaps realizing that the United States could not move the peace process forward without a good working relationship with Israel, the Obama administration moved in early May to resume its efforts to convene the indirect talks between Israel and the Palestinians and also to improve relations with Israel. The indirect talks were resumed, and the United States made a major gesture to Israel by granting it an additional USD\$225 million in military aid over and above the USD\$3 billion Israel was already getting annually, under a ten-year agreement signed with the George W. Bush administration in 2007, to help it expand its Iron Dome antimissile system that would help protect Israel against rocket attacks from Gaza and Lebanon.<sup>23</sup> Netanyahu appears to have reciprocated by putting a *de facto* freeze on construction in East Jerusalem. At the same time, however, Obama’s effort to eliminate nuclear weapons from the world, an effort that appeared partially aimed at putting additional pressure on Iran to scrap its nuclear enrichment program, came into conflict with Israel’s need for nuclear weapons as a deterrent against a possible attack by its enemies. Consequently, Israel was unhappy with the US decision in late May 2010 at a review session for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to support a call for Israel to join the treaty, a development that would force it to disclose and then give up its nuclear weapons. Israel was further concerned that the conference’s final document did not mention Iran’s failure to comply with IAEA demands to stop the enrichment of uranium. US support for the document contrasted sharply with that of the Bush administration during the 2005 treaty review conference when the United States refused to sign a similar declaration calling for Israel to join the treaty.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this disagreement, US-Israeli relations appeared to be on the upswing by July. The United States had refused to join the Arab and Turkish condemnation of

Israel over the incident of May 31 in which Israel intercepted a Gaza-bound flotilla and killed nine Turkish Islamists who were resisting the Israeli capture of one of the ships in the flotilla (the others surrendered peacefully). Indeed, Obama helped defuse the crisis that had erupted between Netanyahu and the Islamist leader of Turkey, Recep Erdoğan.<sup>25</sup> In July, Netanyahu again visited Washington, and this time his reception was much more cordial than during his previous visit in March. Obama, after meeting Netanyahu, stated, “The US will never ask Israel to do anything that undermines its security” and also emphasized that the bond between Israel and the United States was “unbreakable.”<sup>26</sup>

By early September US diplomacy had scored a minor breakthrough when Abbas, with the backing of the Arab League, had finally agreed to enter into direct negotiations with Israel. The timing was, however, problematic. The end of Israel’s partial settlement freeze was set for September 26, just three weeks after the formal start of the direct negotiations. Despite a great deal of pomp in Washington, little was actually accomplished in the three weeks of direct talks, and when the partial settlement construction freeze ended, Israel resumed construction in the settlements and East Jerusalem, actions that Obama called “unhelpful.” Abbas broke off negotiations.<sup>27</sup>

At this point the United States floated an offer to Netanyahu to get him to extend the settlement building moratorium for an additional ninety days. The hope was that a general border delineation could be worked out by that time so that future Israeli settlement construction would take place only in areas that Abbas and Netanyahu agreed would remain part of Israel under a land swap arrangement. Reportedly, the offer included providing Israel with an additional twenty F-35 Stealth fighter planes (Israeli had already planned to buy twenty), a US-Israeli security treaty, and US pledges to protect Israel against efforts by the Palestinian Authority to get the UN Security Council to vote for the establishment of a Palestinian state, even without an agreement with Israel.<sup>28</sup> Despite this generous offer, Netanyahu refused to accept the US initiative, which was subsequently taken off the bargaining table. Meanwhile the United States and Israel continued to differ over policy toward Iran. In the face of strong urging by Israel, the United States continued to resist calls for an attack on Iran, arguing that the sanctions that the United States, the EU, and the UN Security Council had enacted against Iran were the proper path. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted,

We even have some evidence that [Supreme Religious Leader, the Ayatollah] Khomeini now [is] beginning to wonder if [Iranian President] Ahmadinejad is lying to him about the impact of the sanctions on the economy. And whether he is getting the straight scoop in terms of how much trouble the economy really is in . . . A military solution as far as I am concerned . . . it will bring together a divided nation. It will make them absolutely committed to obtaining nuclear weapons. . . . and they will just go deeper and more covert.<sup>29</sup>

In any case, by December 2010 it appeared that the Obama administration had changed its policy toward the Israel-Palestinian Conflict. In a speech to the Brookings Institution on December 9, 2010 Secretary of State Hilary Clinton downplayed the settlement issue in favor of dealing with all the core issues of the conflict – Jerusalem, refugees, water, borders, and security as well as settlements.<sup>30</sup> This strategy did not prove successful either as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remained frozen. Nonetheless, in February 2011, the US continued to protect Israeli interests at the United Nations as it vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the Israeli settlements – a policy the Obama administration was to change in December 2016.<sup>31</sup> Then, reacting to the Arab Spring, which had burst on the Middle Eastern political scene in December 2010, President Obama gave a major speech in May 2011, a part of which also dealt with the Israel-Palestinian Conflict. In it, he again changed US policy, now calling for the two parties to the conflict to concentrate first on borders and security and only then begin to discuss the “emotional issues” of the refugees and Jerusalem. His call for the borders to be based on the 1967 lines, however, precipitated an angry outburst by Netanyahu despite the fact that in his speech Obama also stressed the need for Israel’s justified security concerns to be taken into account in any settlement.<sup>32</sup>

Following his May 2011 speech, Obama went into reelection mode and for the next year and a half, his speeches, including those at the United Nations, were highly supportive of Israeli positions, especially Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish State and its right to defend itself. In addition, when a crisis erupted between Egypt and Israel in September 2011 when an Egyptian mob attacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo, Obama intervened, warning the then Egyptian leader, Field Marshall Mohammed Tantawi, that US-Egyptian relations were at stake if Tantawi did not protect the Israeli embassy against the mob’s attacks.<sup>33</sup> Despite Obama’s help in the crisis, as the 2012 US election neared, Netanyahu warmly embraced Obama’s opponent, Republican candidate Mitt Romney – a development that accelerated the shift of support in the United States for Israel from one based on the bipartisan support of both Democrats and Republicans to one much more Republican based.<sup>34</sup>

### 3 Obama’s second term

#### *The Obama visit to Israel and its aftermath*

At the beginning of his second term in office, in March 2013, perhaps realizing that his policy of distancing himself from Israel had not facilitated an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, or perhaps hoping to lay the groundwork for the efforts of his new Secretary of State, John Kerry, to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian agreement during a planned nine-month peace effort, Obama decided to finally visit Israel. While in Israel Obama gave a speech that, while calling for a Palestinian State, also closely resembled the Israeli national anthem, “Hatikvah” (The Hope). Thus, he asserted that the Jews had a right to live as a free people in their own state, and to live in peace and security. He also affirmed that the United States would always be there

to back Israel, and Obama uttered the Hebrew words *Atem Lo Levad* (You are not alone).<sup>35</sup> Given all the military aid that the United States had given to Israel and the additional help for Israel's Iron Dome antimissile system, which went beyond George W. Bush's ten-year military assistance agreement with Israel, Obama's words had resonance in Israel.

Unfortunately, despite the Obama visit, relations between Israel and the United States soon foundered. In part, this was due to Obama's perceived failure to live up to his "red line" proclamation in 2012 in which he promised to take action if the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad, now engaged in a bitter war with his domestic opponents, used chemical weapons in the conflict. Netanyahu, and most Israelis, now feared that Obama would not live up to his other "red line" – preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.<sup>36</sup> These fears seemed to be realized when Obama moved ahead in 2013 to reach a partial nuclear agreement with Iran, a country that Israel saw as an existential threat given the Iranian's leadership's frequent calls to destroy Israel. Thus, when the preliminary agreement with Iran was reached in November 2013, Netanyahu called it a "historic mistake," while the Obama administration warmly praised it.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, personal relationships between the Obama administration and the Israeli Coalition Government grew increasingly testy as Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon called Kerry "obsessive and messianic" in his efforts to secure an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, and he openly criticized the Obama administration as "weak" for failing to counter the Russian seizure of the Crimea and its intervention in Eastern Ukraine in February 2014.<sup>38</sup> Further damaging US-Israeli relations in March 2014 was Israel's failure to join the US in a UN General Assembly condemnation of Russia for its annexation of the Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. The comments of a "senior administration official" made the US anger over the Israeli "non-vote" clear:

We have been consulting closely on Ukraine not only with our partners and allies around the world; obviously we are looking to the entire international community to condemn Russia's actions and to support Ukraine, so we were surprised to see that Israel did not join the large number of countries that voted to support Ukraine's territorial integrity at the UN.<sup>39</sup>

Making matters worse was the collapse of the Kerry peace effort in April 2014,<sup>40</sup> for which the Netanyahu Government felt the US had unfairly blamed Israel, even though Abbas had not responded to American ideas for a peace agreement, and also Israel's continued construction of housing in West Bank settlements and in East Jerusalem.

### ***The Gaza war of 2014 and its aftermath***

After a Hamas official in Turkey took credit for the murder of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank, Netanyahu responded by arresting a number of Hamas operatives there, some of whom had been released in the 2011 Gilad Shalit prisoner



exchange. Tension between Hamas-controlled Gaza and Israel rose, and in July 2014 full-scale war broke out, a war that was also to damage US-Israeli ties.

There were a series of disagreements between the United States and Israel during the 2014 Israel-Hamas war. Thus, the Obama administration, while supporting Israel's right to defend itself from Hamas rocket attacks into Israel, was critical of Israeli military actions that took the lives of Palestinian civilians. Israel, in turn, claimed that not only had it done its best to minimize civilian casualties (something Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, confirmed after the war), but that Hamas had often fired rockets from civilian areas. Second the US Federal Aviation Authority's decision to temporarily ban US flights to Israel's Ben Gurion Airport was seen by Israel not only as a gift to Hamas terrorism, but also an effort to pressure Israel into agreeing to a ceasefire. Indeed, during the war, there was a serious disagreement over US efforts to bring about a ceasefire, with Israel taking a dim view of Kerry's involvement of Turkey and Qatar (allies of Hamas but, in 2014, enemies of Israel) in the ceasefire effort.<sup>41</sup> Finally, during the war a dispute arose over US supplies of weapons to Israel, especially Hellfire missiles.<sup>42</sup>

In the aftermath of the war, with Israeli elections a year away, Netanyahu, most likely seeking to bolster his position on the right side of the Israeli political spectrum, which had been damaged because of the inconclusive result of the war, embarked on another round of annexing land on the West Bank and authorizing the construction on additional housing in East Jerusalem and in West Bank settlements. This was met by heavy criticism from the United States, and the US-Israeli conflict peaked when it was revealed that the Israeli Government had approved 2600 additional housing units in East Jerusalem just before Netanyahu's meeting with Obama at the White House at the end of September 2014. The Obama administration severely criticized the housing plan; Netanyahu then denounced the criticism as "against American values"; and the Obama administration responded that it was American values that had funded the Iron Dome antimissile system that had protected Israeli lives during the 2014 Israel-Hamas war.<sup>43</sup>

By the end of October 2014, it appeared as if US-Israeli relations had gone from bad to worse, as the outspoken Israeli defense Minister, Moshe Ya'alon, on a visit to the US was denied meetings with Secretary of State Kerry and Vice-President Joe Biden. An even more telling blow to the relationship came soon thereafter when "Senior Obama Administration officials" were cited in an *Atlantic Monthly* article by Jeffrey Goldberg as calling Netanyahu a "chickenshit" and a "coward."<sup>44</sup>

Even as it appeared that relations between Netanyahu's government and the Obama administration could get no worse, they hit a new low in March 2015 when Netanyahu, without consulting the Obama administration, accepted an invitation from the then Republican Speaker of the US House of Representatives, John Boehner, to address a joint session of the US House of Representatives and Senate (both controlled by Republicans) on the threat from Iran and the dangers of the emerging deal between Iran and the US and the other permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (the P5 plus 1). Since Boehner and a large number of other Republicans were highly critical of the agreement the Obama administration

was negotiating with Iran, as was Netanyahu, the invitation was a clear effort to achieve partisan advantage over the Obama administration. While Netanyahu was able to exploit his speech to Congress to strengthen his domestic position in the run-up to the March 2015 Israeli election, his speech was also a further indication that the once bipartisan support for Israel in the US was eroding, as a number of prominent Democrats boycotted it.

### ***The new ten-year US-Israel arms assistance agreement and the final confrontation over settlements***

As could be expected, relations between the Obama administration and Israel worsened further as a result of the formation of a right-wing, pro-settlement coalition government following the March 2015 Israeli elections, in which Naftali Bennett, leader of the pro-settlement Jewish Home Party, played a prominent role. Indeed, advocacy of settlement expansion was to bedevil US-Israeli relations until the end of the Obama Presidency. However, one bright spot in US-Israeli relations was the signing of a new ten-year, USD\$38 billion military assistance agreement in September 2016. Although it gave Israel more funds per year (USD\$3.8 billion versus USD\$3.0 billion) than the agreement reached with the George W. Bush administration, it also phased out Israel's use of a portion of the funds for its domestic arms industry, and it also prohibited Israel from asking for more than USD\$3.8 billion in any year. Netanyahu's domestic critics seized on these limitations, asserting that had Netanyahu not alienated the Obama administration over the Iran nuclear deal and over the settlements, Israel could have gotten a better agreement.<sup>45</sup>

While Obama may have hoped that the agreement with Israel would have strengthened the position of Hilary Clinton, the Democratic candidate for the US presidency in the 2016 elections among pro-Israeli American voters, Clinton lost the election in the Electoral College to Republican candidate Donald Trump. Trump's election further strengthened the right-wing impulse of Netanyahu's government, particularly after David N. Friedman, a supporter of the settlements, was nominated by Trump to be ambassador to Israel. Led by Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett, Israel's pro-settlement forces pushed to rapidly expand housing construction in the settlements and to legalize hitherto illegal settlement outposts, including those built on privately owned Palestinian land (the owners were promised compensation). This development was evidently too much for the Obama administration. Unlike the situation in February 2011 when the United States vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution critical of Israeli settlements, on December 23, 2016, the US abstained on UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which strongly condemned Israeli settlement activity both in Jerusalem and in the West Bank and demanded that Israel stop constructing housing there. While the resolution also condemned terrorism and incitement, the perpetrators of the terrorism and incitement – the Palestinians – were not mentioned by name in the resolution, adding to Israel's unhappiness with it. Reacting to Israeli criticism of

the failure of the US to veto UNSC 2334,<sup>46</sup> US Secretary of State Kerry, long frustrated by Israeli settlement expansion, stated the following in a speech on December 28th:

I advised the [Israeli] Prime Minister repeatedly that further settlement activities only invited UN action. Yet the settlement activity only increased – including advancing the unprecedented legislation to legalize settler outposts that the [Israeli] Prime minister himself reportedly warned could expose Israel to action at the Security Council, and even international prosecution, before deciding to support it. In the end, we could not in good conscience protect the most extreme elements of the settler movement as it tries to destroy the two-state solution. [Also], we could not in good conscience turn a blind eye to Palestinian actions that foment hatred and violence. It is not in the US interest to help anyone on either side create a unitary state. We may not be able to stop them, but we cannot be expected to defend them, and it is certainly not the role of any country to vote against its own policies. That is why we decided not to block the UN resolution that makes clear both sides [have to] take steps to save the two state solution while there is still time.<sup>47</sup>

By the end of the Obama administration, Netanyahu had not only alienated the US administration by his settlement policy, he had also alienated the vast majority of the American Jewish community who were Conservative and Reform Jews. He did this by reneging on a promise to establish a separate prayer space at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif, Judaism holiest shrine, as well as by acceding to the demands of Israel's Orthodox community, who were represented by Netanyahu's coalition partners, to limit the role of non-Orthodox Jews in Israel.<sup>48</sup> By the end of 2016 it is possible that Netanyahu felt he no longer needed the American Jewish community in the United States, perhaps preferring to rely on Christian Evangelicals as his main base of support in the United States. If so, he shared a feeling with the incoming president of the United States. Donald Trump, whose main base of support was Evangelical Christians. By contrast, only about 30 percent of American Jews voted for Trump.

#### **4 The Trump administration and the State of Israel: the record of the first two years**

Just as Barack Obama sought to demonstrate that his policies were not those of George W. Bush, so too did Donald Trump try to show that his policies differed from those of Barack Obama. This in the Middle East he did not hesitate to denounce what he called “Radical Islamic Terrorism” – a term Obama had never used – and he also walked away from the Obama-negotiated JCPOA Iran nuclear agreement and reimposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic. In addition, while Obama had sought a neutral position between Saudi Arabia and Iran in their competition in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the Middle East, Trump sided strongly with Saudi

Arabia and continued to back the Gulf Arab state even when it was revealed that the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince, Mohamed Bin Salman, had been involved in the murder of the Washington-based Saudi journalist, Jamal Kashoggi. As far as Israel was concerned, Trump, unlike Obama, gave Netanyahu a warm welcome during his first visit to Washington in February 2017 and again unlike Obama, visited Israel during his first year in office (Obama had waited until his fifth year in office). While in Jerusalem Trump had prayed at Israel's holiest Jewish shrine, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif. Furthermore, by the end of 2018, Trump had satisfied many of Netanyahu's wishes. Not only did he re-impose sanctions on Iran, he also moved the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, cut US aid both to UNRWA and to the Palestinian Authority, closed the PLO office in Washington because the Palestinian Authority had broken off formal relations with the US when it moved its embassy to Jerusalem, and exited from both the UN Human Rights Council and from UNESCO because of what he said was their one-sided criticism of Israel (UNESCO, in a resolution, had denied any Jewish connection to the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif). In addition, Trump promised "the Deal of the Century" to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and gave the responsibility for negotiating the agreement to his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, an Orthodox Jew and Jason Greenblatt. Nonetheless, two years into the Trump administration no such deal had been forthcoming. Meanwhile, Israel by the end of 2018 had accelerated its policy of authorizing additional Jewish settlements in the West Bank, a policy that Trump, unlike Obama, seemed by then not to care about.

While these were all positive developments as far as Netanyahu was concerned, he had to be worried by Trump's "America First" rhetoric that smacked of isolationism, let alone its anti-Semitic overtones that dated back to the 1930s America First movement whose spokesman was Charles Lindbergh. Such an isolationist policy would mean that, whatever the US rhetoric, Trump's America was a questionable ally. The Israelis also had to worry about Trump's volatility and his habit of only consulting with himself when important decisions had to be made, such as at the end of December 2018 when he decided to pull US troops out of Syria, a decision that not only complicated Israeli security planning, but also led to the resignation of US Secretary of defense, James Mattis.

While by the end of 2018 Trump had clearly moved to a strongly pro-Israeli position, at the beginning of his administration he was more cautious. Thus, while during the US presidential campaign Trump had talked about moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, early on in his administration, the Israeli Government was told that moving the embassy would have to be "studied" and that the settlement expansion that Netanyahu had been pushing since the 2016 US presidential election "was not helpful" in the pursuit of a peace agreement.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, Netanyahu's visit to the White house in February 2017 clearly reflected the warmth in the relationship between the two leaders, even if its outcome may not have been entirely to Netanyahu's liking. Netanyahu laid out Israel's requirements for peace – Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish State and Israeli security control over the West bank – and he reinforced Trump's denunciation of "Radical

Islamic Terrorism.” Both leaders also condemned Iran and the JCPOA agreement. However, Trump asked Israel to hold back on settlement construction and noted that both Israel and the Palestinians would have to make concessions for peace to be possible. Then, in a clear departure from previous US policy Trump stated a peace agreement could consist of a one-state or two-state solution, whichever one the two sides agreed on. He also said he would try to involve the Arab states in the peace process, which he claimed would facilitate a peace agreement.<sup>50</sup> As administration policy evolved over the next two years it appeared that Trump was seeking to create a coalition of Sunni Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Jordan, backed by Israel, to oppose Iran, and that he hoped the Sunni Arab states would bring pressure on the Palestinians to reach a peace agreement with Israel. Whether the Arab states had sufficient influence with the Palestinians to successfully pressure them, or whether they even had the incentive to do so, remained an open question. In any case, by December 2018 there was little evidence of the success of Trump’s policy although in October 2018 Netanyahu did make a public visit to the Sunni Arab state of Oman.

The cautious policy that the Trump administration had adopted toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the beginning of 2017 had evaporated by the end of the year. Thus, on December 6, 2017, Trump decided to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and then decided to move the US embassy there in May 2018 in time for the seventieth anniversary of the birth of Israel in 1948. The fact that two controversial Christian evangelical ministers, Robert Jeffress and John Hagee, both of whom had said negative things about Judaism, were chosen to give blessings at the opening of the embassy, reflected the importance of evangelicals as an important part of Trump’s political base, however strange it might have appeared to have such Christian Ministers give the blessings in a Jewish state.<sup>51</sup> In moving the US Embassy, Trump implemented the Jerusalem Embassy Act, passed by the US Congress in 1995, that called for the moving of the embassy to Jerusalem but also gave the US president the power to waive the agreement on national security grounds. Every US president from Clinton to Obama used the waiver, as did Trump in June 2017, but by December 2017 Trump had changed his mind. Irrespective of the international condemnation for his move, he went ahead and announced the move of the embassy although the State Department said that the embassy move would not affect final status negotiations and the final borders would also be left for negotiation. The Palestinian Authority did not accept the qualification, however, and broke off negotiations with the United States. This, in turn, angered Trump and in 2018 the US cut its funding to UNRWA, with the US arguing that it perpetuated the refugee status of the Palestinians, with not only the children, but the grandchildren and great grandchildren of the original 1948 refugees getting refugee status. The US also closed the PLO embassy in Washington as Nikki Haley, the US UN ambassador stated “All they’ve done is have their hand out asking for money, badmouth the United States, not come to the table on the peace deal – why would we have a PLO office. Why would we continue to fund the Palestinians?”<sup>52</sup> The US also exited UNESCO and the UN Human Rights Council, claiming they were

biased against Israel.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps most important of all, as far as Israel was concerned, in May 2018, the US, despite the pleadings of France and Germany, which were cosignatories to the agreement, pulled out of the JCPOA nuclear agreement with Iran, and not only reimposed the old sanctions on Iran but added new ones as well as the US argued that the JCPOA agreement neither stopped Iran's development of missiles nor stopped its aid to Hezbollah and Hamas.<sup>54</sup> Consequently, when Netanyahu met Trump in September 2018 he warmly praised the American president for his "strong words and strong actions against Iran" and for Trump's "extraordinary support for Israel at the UN."<sup>55</sup> For his part Trump supported the Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, stating "We are very much in favor"; Israel has "no choice but to be aggressive."<sup>56</sup> All was not harmony, however, during the Trump–Netanyahu meeting as Trump appeared to change his position on a Palestinian–Israeli peace agreement, stating "I like (the) two–state solution. Yeah. That's what I think works best. I don't even have to speak to anybody. That's my feeling. I think (a) two state solution works best." In addition, he said that the US peace plan would be ready in two to three months, that the Palestinians would return to the table 100 percent and that Israel "will have to do something good for the other side." Netanyahu replied that "I would like to see the Palestinians have all the power to govern themselves, but none of the power to threaten us. Israel will not relinquish security control west of the Jordan (River)."<sup>57</sup> How Netanyahu's security plan would coincide with an independent Palestinian state as part of Trump's two-state solution was a very open question. Indeed, two months after the Trump – Netanyahu meeting, one of the more outspoken of Netanyahu's cabinet members, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked stated that the peace plan being prepared by Trump was, in reality, "a waste of time," "but let's wait and see what [the Trump Administration] will offer."<sup>58</sup> While considerably more gentle than Ya'alon's comments about the Obama administration's peace efforts, the meaning was the same – many in the Israeli right-wing leadership had a dim view of any effort to create a two-state solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In any case, when the Israeli government collapsed in late December 2018, and new elections were scheduled for April 9, 2019, it appeared that the long-awaited Trump peace plane might be postponed once again.

While Trump and Netanyahu hit it off personally, they also faced similar political challenges. Trump was under investigation by Independent Counsel Robert Mueller for alleged collusion with Russia during the 2016 presidential election campaign, while Netanyahu was under police investigation for no fewer than three corruption cases, one dealing with gifts Netanyahu received from Israeli–American billionaire Arnon Milchan in return for services rendered, and a second involving alleged efforts by Netanyahu to get better political coverage from the Israeli daily newspaper, *Yediot Ahronot*, in return for Netanyahu getting an American friend (Sheldon Adelson) to reduce support for a rival newspaper *ISRAEL TODAY*. The third case involved a sweetheart deal in which Netanyahu helped a communications conglomerate, Bezek, in return for favorable political coverage on Bezek's Walla website.<sup>59</sup> Both Trump and Netanyahu called the accusations against them

“witch hunts.” Also, as President Trump pushed his efforts to construct a wall on the US border with Mexico, even going so far to endorse a partial government shutdown to try to get the wall built in the face of heavy opposition, he cited the success of the Israeli wall on the Israeli-Egyptian border for stopping infiltration.

Despite the personal compatibility between Trump and Netanyahu, the Israeli leader had to be concerned about some of Trump’s policies. The “America First” strategy threatened an isolationist United States under Trump as did Trump’s negative comments about NATO, long the cornerstone of US alliance policy.<sup>60</sup> Second, the volatility of Trump and his decision-making process, which often excluded his advisers, also had to trouble Netanyahu. Thus, Trump’s switch from endorsing either a one-state or a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, “whichever one the two sides agreed on” in 2017, to a two-state solution in 2018 was certainly not welcome to Netanyahu. However, far more serious was Trump’s decision to pull US troops out of Syria on December 19, 2018. That decision, taken against the advice of virtually all of his advisers after a telephone conversation with Turkish leader Recep Erdoğan<sup>61</sup> alarmed Israel for a number of reasons. First, it removed a key “trip-wire” in Syria limiting Iranian influence there. Second, it would enable Iran to control the Al-Taif region in southeast Syria, which lay on the direct route from Baghdad to Damascus, thus facilitating the “land-bridge” Iran has long wanted to construct to the Mediterranean.<sup>62</sup> Even worse were Trump’s comments that the Iranians “can do what they want” in Syria after the US left.<sup>63</sup> Then came Trump’s comments, after a telephone discussion with Netanyahu that “We give Israel \$4.5 billion a year (sic). And they are doing a good job at defending themselves.”<sup>64</sup> While Netanyahu tried to make the best of the situation, stating that the US withdrawal from Syria “will not change our policy. We are standing steadfast on our red lines in Syria and everywhere else,”<sup>65</sup> the Israeli prime minister had to be worried that the US was beginning the process of pulling out of the Middle East, leaving Israel alone to face its enemies. However much Netanyahu had differed with Obama, that US president always had Israel’s back, and Obama’s comments when in Israel in 2013, *Atem Lo Levad* (You are not alone), may come to be sorely missed as Netanyahu, or his successor, has to deal with the remainder of Trump’s Presidency.

In any case, Trump’s decision to withdraw US troops from Syria is a useful point of departure for analyzing US relations with Israel in the Netanyahu era.

## 5 Conclusions

Perhaps the most important conclusion that can be drawn from this study of US-Israeli relations under Netanyahu, is that while the peace process was central to the first two US presidents Netanyahu dealt with, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, it was less important to Donald Trump, despite his rhetoric about reaching the “Deal of the Century” between Israel and the Palestinians. In addition, while both Clinton and Obama opposed Israeli settlement policy under Netanyahu, Trump appeared to acquiesce in it. Second, while Netanyahu clashed with Obama over Iran policy, he welcomed the much tougher stance of Trump toward the Islamic Republic. Third,



Netanyahu, probably to the long-term detriment of Israel, shifted Israel's base of support from a bipartisan one, in which both Republicans and Democrats supported Israel, to an increasingly partisan one in which most of US Congressional support came from Republicans, who were catering to their Evangelical Christian base. This, in turn, alienated American Jews, the majority of whom were Democrats and who also resented Netanyahu's catering to the Orthodox community in Israel at their expense. Finally, all three presidents were sensitive to Israel's security needs, giving USD billions to Israel annually to help build up its defenses, although Donald Trump with his isolationist impulses and decision to withdraw troops from Syria may prove to be the least sensitive to Israel's security needs

Bill Clinton's approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace making shifted from a cheerleading approach, as it was under Rabin and Peres to an active involvement when Netanyahu became Israel's prime minister because Netanyahu was far more opposed than either Peres or Rabin to concessions to the Palestinians. Thus, the US took the lead in negotiating the Hebron agreement and two years later, after a great deal of difficulty, the Wye Plantation agreement, which, however, brought down Netanyahu's government. Obama, by contrast, although very committed to obtain an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement seemed to constantly revise his strategy. In part Obama's strong emphasis on trying to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement was due to a desire to show he was different from Bush. Thus, while Bush was inactive in pursuing the Arab-Israeli peace process at the start of his presidency, Obama on his second day in office appointed George Mitchell as his special Middle East mediator. Obama also undertook a major outreach effort to the Muslim and Arab worlds with speeches in Turkey and Egypt in an effort to show that despite the fact that the United States was involved in wars in two Muslim countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, it was not at war with Islam. To emphasize this point Obama downplayed the Islamic nature of terrorism – much to the displeasure of US conservatives. At the same time, he appeared to deliberately cool ties with Israel.

Obama's peacemaking strategy had gone through multiple phases through the end of 2016. Through most of 2009, he sought to get Israel to agree to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and stop building in the settlements; the PA under Abbas to return to direct negotiations with Israel; Syria to cut its ties to Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran; and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates to make confidence-building gestures to Israel, such as allowing Israeli civilian overflights of their countries and visits by Israeli businessmen. This ambitious plan, however, did not prove successful. Netanyahu did accept a two-state solution, albeit with conditions, and adopted a ten-month partial settlement freeze (not including East Jerusalem). But Abbas did not agree to direct negotiations; Syria did not cut ties with Hamas, Hezbollah, or Iran; and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Emirates refused to make confidence-building measures with Israel. This led the Obama administration to undertake a reappraisal of its policy at the end of 2009, and by February 2010 the administration had decided on a more modest policy. Obama himself acknowledged in a *Time* magazine interview in February 2010 that the United States had



overestimated its ability to bring about a settlement and now sought to get indirect or proximity talks under way between Israel and the Palestinians. Joe Biden's visit to Israel in mid-March 2010 was supposed to kick off the talks, but instead precipitated a crisis in US-Israeli relations as the Israeli government embarked on plans to add 1,600 housing units in East Jerusalem. The crisis led to another reappraisal of US policy. Obama, however, did not endorse the suggestion to issue his own peace plan, and he employed the tactic of indirect talks between the Israelis and Palestinians. The indirect talks did not bear fruit, however, other than to finally get Abbas's agreement to enter into direct talks with Israel, something that took place in early September 2010 with Obama and Secretary of State Clinton looking on. Yet this appeared to be too little and too late as Netanyahu's partial settlement freeze ended on September 26, and the Netanyahu government then reverted to its old policy of settlement building, leading Abbas to break off negotiations. The United States then made a major offer of security assistance to Israel, including the provision of twenty F-35 fighter aircraft to Israel in return for a 90-day extension of the settlement freeze. Israel declined the offer. Then Secretary of State Clinton appeared to shift US policy in December 2010. In a speech to the Brookings Institution she changed Obama's emphasis on stopping Israeli construction in the settlements by asserting the need to deal with all the final status issues between Israel and the Palestinians (water, security, Jerusalem, borders, refugees, and settlements). Then in May 2011, responding to the emergence of the Arab Spring, Obama changed the emphasis once again, placing priority on borders and security. This approach proved no more successful than his previous policies had been and by late 2011 Obama went into reelection mode, downplaying US efforts to achieve an agreement.

In March 2013, following his reelection, Obama embarked on yet another policy to try to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian agreement – demonstrably drawing closer to Israel. Visiting Israel for the first time in his Presidency, Obama strongly supported Israel's right to exist in the Middle East as a Jewish State and its right to defend itself. Obama also promised that the US would always stand behind Israel, although in his speech he also called for a Palestinian State. Obama's warm words about Israel may have been aimed at creating a positive atmosphere for the peace effort of the new US secretary of state, John Kerry, which began soon after the Obama visit to Israel. Unfortunately, Kerry could not get the two sides to agree, and several months after the end of his nine-month peace effort in April 2014, war broke out between Israel and Hamas – a war that further strained US-Israeli relations as Netanyahu did not take kindly to US criticism and ceasefire efforts during the war. Then, following the March 2015 Israeli elections, a right-wing, pro-settlement coalition government under Netanyahu's leadership took power in Jerusalem and its settlement construction efforts accelerated following the election of Donald Trump. The Obama administration's response to the upsurge in settlement expansion, which the US saw as destroying the chances for a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, was a decision, in late December 2016, not to veto a UN Security Council Resolution (No. 2334) which severely condemned Israeli settlement expansion. That decision was to be the last major move of the

Obama administration on Middle East peacemaking, and it was to leave office less than a month later.

When Donald Trump became president, after initially asking the Israelis to go slow on settlements, by 2018 he appeared to turn a blind eye to Israeli settlement expansion. Similarly, while he asked Netanyahu to make concessions to the Palestinians during Netanyahu's visits to the White House in February 2017 and September 2018, he never spelled out what those concessions were. In addition, Trump seemed to fluctuate between wanting a one-state or a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, suggesting in February 2017 that it could be either one state or two states, depending on what the sides agreed to, although in September 2018 he came down on the side of the two-state solution. Throughout his Presidency Trump promised "the Deal of the Century" to achieve a Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement, and he entrusted the development of the peace plan to his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and his special Middle East peace envoy Jason Greenblatt. However, by the end of December 2018, after Trump had been in office for almost two years, the peace plan had yet to be presented.

If Obama and Trump differed on Netanyahu's settlement policy, they differed more on Iran, with Netanyahu strongly opposing Obama's approach to the Islamic Republic, while strongly endorsing that of Donald Trump. From the start of his Presidency, Obama had carefully cultivated the leadership of Iran, hoping to dissuade it from developing nuclear weapons. After a number of ups and downs in his policy toward Iran, Obama, in 2015, managed to sign the JCPOA nuclear agreement with it that limited, although it did not eliminate, Iran's path toward nuclear weapons. Netanyahu was dead set against Obama's policy, going so far as to lobby in a speech to a joint session of the then Republican-dominated Congress against Obama's policy toward Iran in 2015. By contrast, Trump shared Netanyahu's opposition to the JCPOA and after a year and a half in office, and despite the pleading of European co-signers of the JCPOA like France and Germany, not only walked away from the agreement but also instituted new sanctions against the Islamic Republic as well as reconstituting the old sanctions. Needless to say, Netanyahu was delighted with this change in US policy. Whether it would be more effective than the JCPOA in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, and thus contributing to Israeli security against a country whose leaders pledged to destroy it, however, remained to be seen.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that during his second period as Israel's prime minister, which began in 2009, Netanyahu progressively alienated non-Orthodox American Jews who formed the overwhelming majority of the American Jewish Community. This was especially to be the case following the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Netanyahu not only strongly identified with Trump – whom most American Jews opposed – but he even more strongly sided with the Orthodox political parties in his ruling coalition. His dependence on the Orthodox parties led him to renege on a painfully negotiated agreement that would have allowed Conservative and Reform Jews to get a prayer space of their own at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif, the holiest shrine

in Judaism. Netanyahu also stood by as Israel's Orthodox Rabbinate delegitimized the Rabbis of America's non-Orthodox Jewish movements. In doing so, Netanyahu not only sought to keep his fractious coalition together – although it was to collapse in late December 2018 over the issue of requiring ultra-Orthodox men to serve in the Israeli military – it appears that he also had concluded that Evangelical Christians would be a stronger support group for Israel in the United States than American Jewry, and he went out of his way to cultivate their support, even acquiescing in the choice of evangelical Christian ministers to give blessings at the opening of the US Embassy in Jerusalem in May 2018. Indeed, throughout his period as prime minister, Netanyahu's statements and actions – especially the speech he gave to a joint session of the then Republican-dominated US Congress in 2015 – was a major factor in moving support for Israel, which had been basically bipartisan before Netanyahu returned to power in 2009 into a partisan one with Republicans overwhelmingly supporting Israel and Democrats far less so. Should the Democrats win the US presidency in 2020, having already captured the US House of Representatives in 2018, Israel may find a much less supportive White House. Indeed, by 2021, if the Democrats regain power, Netanyahu, if he is still prime minister, may very much regret his alienation both of the majority of American Jews and the majority of the Democratic Party in the United States.

Finally, there is the question of US support for Israeli security. Despite Obama's differences with Netanyahu, the American president was steadfast in providing for Israel's security needs. Not only did he continue the USD\$3 billion annual defense support begun by the George W. Bush administration, he added to it USD\$.25 billion a year in support of Israel's Iron Dome project that helped protect Israel from rocket fire from Gaza and Lebanon. In addition he signed a new ten-year defense agreement with Israel in 2016 that provided Israel with USD\$3.8 billion in defense support per year. Obama also helped Israel when its embassy in Cairo was beset by a mob in 2011 as he threatened the then Egyptian leader, Field Marshall Tantawi that US-Egyptian relations would suffer if he didn't protect the Embassy. The Obama administration also provided support for Israel at the United Nations although it did abstain on a UN Security Council Resolution condemning Israel for its settlement policy. For its part Israel, on occasion, showed itself less of a good ally of the US as when it chose to abstain, rather than support, a US-backed resolution in the UN General Assembly condemning Russia for its annexation of Crimea.

When Trump took office he continued the Obama defense agreement with Israel and stepped up US support for Israel at the United Nations. Indeed, US UN Ambassador, Nikki Haley, was outspoken in her pro-Israeli statements. In addition, under Trump, the US pulled out of two strongly anti-Israel UN bodies: UNESCO, which, in a resolution had denied any Jewish connection to the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif, and also the UN Human Rights Council. Similarly, while Obama, like Clinton before him, had cultivated the Palestinian leadership in the hope of securing an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, Trump moved the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thus fulfilling one of Netanyahu's long held desires, as well as strengthening him domestically. However, the move of

the embassy greatly angered the Palestinians who broke off formal talks with the Trump administration. Following the Palestinian reaction to the embassy move, Trump closed the PLO office in Washington, cut funds to UNRWA and reduced US aid to the Palestinian Authority – all the while proclaiming he was preparing the “Deal of the Century” to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. While Trump’s anti-Palestinian actions were warmly welcomed by Netanyahu, it is a very open question as to whether Trump’s policies will be any more successful in achieving an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement than Obama’s or Clinton’s had been, although the threat of Iran did bring the Arab Gulf States and Israel closer together and Netanyahu did make a public trip to Oman.

Finally, unlike either the case of Clinton or Obama, Netanyahu faced a volatile US president with clear isolationist tendencies – as his announcement in late December, 2018 of the abrupt departure of US troops from Syria, which complicated Israeli security planning, clearly demonstrated. Under the circumstances, by the beginning of 2019 it had become a very open question as to whether Israel could count on Trump for aid in time of crisis. Indeed, Obama may be sorely missed as Netanyahu or his successor as Israel’s prime minister has to deal with the remaining years of the Trump administration.

## Notes

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- 3 See Robert O. Freedman, “American Policy Toward the Middle East in Clinton’s Second Term,” in *Mediterranean Security in the Coming Millenium*, ed. Stephen Blank (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army, 1999), p. 375.
- 4 Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, p. 283.
- 5 Cited in Anshel Pfeffer, *Bibi: The Turbulent Times of Benjamin Netanyahu* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), p. 261.
- 6 See Freedman, “American Policy Toward the Middle East,” p. 380.
- 7 For an insider’s view of Obama’s approach to world affairs, see Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018) especially pages 45–48.
- 8 A leading critic of the Obama policy on Islam was the conservative newspaper, *The Washington Times*, whose editorials and Op-Eds regularly condemned Obama for being weak on Islam.
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- 26 Cited in Sheryl Stolberg, “Easing Tension with Obama, Israeli Leader Will Push Talks,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2010.
- 27 Cited in Barack Ravid, “Obama: East Jerusalem Building Plan Unhelpful to Peace Efforts,” *Haaretz*, November 9, 2010.
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- 29 *Haaretz* (on-line) “US Defense Chief Says Iran Sanctions Working, Argues Against Military Strike,” November 16, 2010. It should be mentioned in this context, however, that the US and Israel were secretly working on a computer virus, called STUXNET, that disabled Iranian centrifuges.
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- 31 Cited in Martin Indyk, Kenneth Lieberthal, and Michael O’Hanlon, *Bending History* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2012), p. 12. See also Ross, *Doomed to Succeed*, p. 379.
- 32 For the text of the Obama speech, see “Remarks of the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” *White House Office of the Press Secretary*, May 19, 2011.
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# 8

## ISRAEL–DIASPORA RELATIONS IN THE AGE OF NETANYAHU

*Steven Bayme*

Of Israel's 12 prime ministers, perhaps none was better suited to address the country's relations with world Jewry than Benjamin Netanyahu. Raised in the home of a prominent Jewish historian, steeped in Judaic heritage and knowledge, and himself educated largely in the United States, Netanyahu might have been expected to possess a broad appreciation of Jewish life in the diaspora. Moreover, as a stalwart of the Likud, he led a party that had a very strong sense of peoplehood and Jewish unity and that underscored continuity between the State of Israel and Jewish historical experience. Unlike his predecessors, he largely rejected the label of "new Jew" in favor of defining Israel as the fulfillment of Jewish aspirations for returning to the historical homeland. Moreover, he spoke English fluently, built his career in Washington and New York, and enjoyed strong relationships with American Jewry and the American media. The contrast, for example, with the late Yitzchak Rabin was palpable. Rabin once confessed that as a child he learned to see the diaspora Jew as "a bent-over Jew possessed of meagre bodily strength and immense mental powers."<sup>1</sup> As a rising star in the Likud in 1988, Netanyahu witnessed firsthand how then-Prime Minister Yitzchak Shamir opted for a national unity government so as to avoid a rift with American Jewry over "who is a Jew" legislation, what some termed the "most significant secret intervention the Jewish Diaspora had ever conducted in Israeli politics."<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, Netanyahu's vision of diaspora Jewry was filtered through the experience of the Holocaust, an image of vulnerability and powerlessness that a Jewish state was created to rectify and that hardly pointed to an affirmation of diasporic Jewish vitality. Thus, when Netanyahu concluded his visit to Poland during his initial term as prime minister, he reportedly said that while efforts to renew Jewish life in Poland were noteworthy, he awaited Polish Jews coming on Aliyah.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, irrespective of Netanyahu's politics and policies, American Jews in particular



had high expectations that he would strengthen relations between the world's two largest Jewish communities.

Indeed, Netanyahu earned high marks from American Jewish leaders at the onset of his return as prime minister with his June 14, 2009, speech at Bar-Ilan University when he called for a Palestinian state and noted that in the context of a peace agreement some West Bank settlements would have to be dismantled. The message suggested that he was a pragmatic prime minister, one who appreciated America's role and its vision for the Middle East, and who understood the importance of retaining the support of American Jewry that had long been critical in forging the US-Israel special relationship. Moreover, following the Palestinian rejection of the 2008 Olmert plan for a Palestinian state, American Jewry stood in solidarity with Israel, claiming, correctly, that Palestinian rejection of Israel's right to exist and not settlements on the West Bank constituted the fundamental reason why a two-state solution had thus far failed to materialize.

If Israel-diaspora solidarity was the major theme of 2009, why has the ensuing decade of Netanyahu's stewardship witnessed so much strife? Ironically, in May 2018, precisely as Israel was poised to celebrate her seventieth anniversary, reports of a growing divide in Israel's relations with world Jewry were appearing on virtually a daily basis. Once hailed as the greatest force for Jewish unity, Israel now appeared as the most divisive subject on the Jewish communal agenda.<sup>4</sup>

The divide was best symbolized on June 25, 2017, when Netanyahu's government froze implementation of the compromise over the Western Wall that would have allowed egalitarian prayer at its southern extension, and a bill intended to secure a monopoly for the chief rabbinate over conversion to Judaism within Israel passed its first reading in the Knesset. Yet the rift had long preceded that day. One illustration was that notwithstanding Netanyahu's best efforts to oppose the Iranian nuclear agreement (JCPOA), American Jewry supported by a small majority the deal that gave up international sanctions against Iran in exchange for a fifteen-year moratorium on the country's development of nuclear weaponry.<sup>5</sup> More fundamentally, the image of Israel in American Jewish eyes had been gradually shifting from that of a "progressive utopia" in which support for Israel had become a "substitute religion," to a state that appeared to many as too "right wing, religious, unequal and expansionist."<sup>6</sup>

For example, in July 2018, with the Kotel and conversion brouhahas still unresolved, American Jews reacted with incredulity to a series of actions taken in Israel, each of which appeared to fly in the face of traditionally liberal American Jewish values:

First, the Knesset adopted the Nation-State Bill, solidifying through a Basic Law Israel's character as a Jewish state, seemingly an innocuous, albeit unnecessary, bit of legislation, but one that proved deeply offensive to Israel's Arab minority and that elicited protests from some American Jewish organizations. Adding insult to injury, the Knesset prevented gay single men from becoming parents by excluding them from a bill allowing for surrogacy parenting. And, in the most Kafkaesque of actions, Israeli police interrogated a Conservative rabbi for officiating at a wedding

in which the female partner had been defined as a *mamzeret* (offspring of a forbidden union). That all this occurred on the heels of a promise made by Prime Minister Netanyahu to world Jewry that “we hear your concerns” compounded both the irony and the degree of alienation.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, developments within the American Jewish community itself have deepened this divide. Jewish assimilation into the broader American society is all too real, and distancing from matters Jewish connotes distancing from Israel, a point Netanyahu’s many detractors frequently overlook.<sup>8</sup> Yet even among some of the most committed American Jews, the subject of Israel itself has become divisive. Invited to speak recently at a retreat of highly Jewishly educated and committed non-Orthodox young Jews, I suggested a panel discussion on Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The lead organizer agreed with me on the importance of the subject but explained that “Israel is too emotional an issue for us.” Indeed, the decline of civility in American political discourse generally appears now to have spilled over into Jewish communal discussions concerning Israel.

Professor Gil Troy understands this phenomenon somewhat more benignly. In the age of Netanyahu, he notes, new thinking has emerged as to how to recalibrate the Israel-diaspora relationship. Dr. Donniel Hartman, for example, of the Shalom Hartman Institute suggests that we move from a “crisis narrative” regarding Israel to a “values narrative.” Criticism of Israel, which in the crisis narrative amounted to near treason, now could connote loyalty in the values narrative.<sup>9</sup>

In a somewhat different vein, Professor Ted Sasson believes American Jews are no less attached to Israel than ever before, but that their mode of relating to Israel is changing toward more personal, direct, hands-on engagement. Sasson notes that UJA funding for Israel has declined sharply, but that direct philanthropy to “American Friends” organizations has increased remarkably.<sup>10</sup> Sasson’s chapter on philanthropy is compelling, but we must recall that only a small fraction of American Jews donate to Israel at all. Moreover, he acknowledges that intermarriage, denominational fluidity (from Conservative to Reform) and political dissent all may depress over time the degree of attachment to Israel. However, he believes programs like Birthright and other programmed visits to Israel will reverse any potential slippage in attachment.<sup>11</sup>

We face, then, a number of questions: Is the “distancing” debate still unresolved? What are the factors underlying the distancing? Does the prime minister himself bear responsibility for aggravating the divide? Where are we today, and what are the implications looking forward for the Israel-diaspora relationship?

A word should be said, first, about the situation in other diaspora communities. Interestingly, in Europe, there has been virtually no decline in the relationship to Israel during the Netanyahu years. In Germany, Jewish leaders, fearful of incurring charges of dual loyalty, largely abstain from public debate on Israeli policy. Moreover, dissenting voices, unlike their American Jewish counterparts, are not particularly well-organized. To be sure, Netanyahu personally is widely disliked in Germany, but German Jewish leaders generally support Israel as a vibrant democracy.<sup>12</sup>

In France, Jews are more religiously Orthodox and appear less concerned with the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. This may, of course, change if legislation further restricting conversion is adopted by the Knesset. But generally French Jews are pro-Israel and less critical of Israeli public policies. Discontent with the Trump-Netanyahu “bromance” is heard privately, but only rarely in public debate, and an astonishing 90 percent of French Jews believe supporting Israel is either fairly or very important.<sup>13</sup> To be sure, after four Jews were killed in a Paris kosher supermarket in 2015, Netanyahu addressed a Paris synagogue claiming to be representative of the Jewish people. With the exception of Zionist organizations, French Jews largely reacted negatively to the implied dismissal of Jewish life in the diaspora.<sup>14</sup> Although perhaps reticent about voicing public criticism of Israeli policy, French Jewry seemingly rejected Netanyahu’s claims to be their spokesperson.

Britain, by contrast, a country that frequently has nurtured anti-Israel sentiment as well as boycott movements ala pre-Mandela South Africa, has experienced wide public debate on Israeli policies. Moreover, the possibility of an uptick in Aliyah given widespread allegations of anti-Semitism within the Labor Party may in turn engender tensions with the Israeli Chief Rabbinate on matters of personal status.

Yet a recent study of European Jewry generally, prepared in Great Britain, pointed to greater cohesiveness in Israel-diaspora relations. A clear majority of European Jews (54 percent) believe supporting Israel is important to Jewish identity, and 87 percent (nearly double the American percentage) have visited Israel at least once. The study’s author theorizes that the more favorable attitude of the American public toward Israel in turn encourages Jewish dissidents to express their opposition publicly, while European Jews are more defensive about Israel and more restrained about public criticism.<sup>15</sup>

The contrast with US Jewry, in fact, could not be clearer. Almost half of American Jews believe Israel is not sincerely seeking peace. Only a third of millennial Jews consider Israel “essential” to their Jewish identity while a quarter go so far as to argue that the United States government is “too supportive” of Israel. In the San Francisco Bay Area, arguably the most liberal of American Jewish communities, this trend was even more pronounced, only 30 percent of Jews under 35 sympathizing with Israel more than with the Palestinians.<sup>16</sup>

No surprise, then, that Israelis frequently voice disappointment with American Jewry. Former Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren expressed dismay at the relative silence of American Jews during the debate over the Iran Agreement.<sup>17</sup> Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely later caused an enormous stir by claiming that American Jews, who lead comfortable lives with respect to security matters in the States, could not fathom, let alone empathize with, the Israeli reality, a view expressed earlier by Oren in even harsher terms.<sup>18</sup>

American Jews became increasingly outspoken following the June 2017 freezing of the Kotel compromise and the proposed conversion bill. In the heat of emotional battle, some called for extreme measures, including withdrawal of philanthropic contributions from non-pluralistic institutions and boycott of Israeli speakers who failed to embrace pluralism. However, cooler heads quickly prevailed. Most

American Jewish leaders, while aghast at Israel's apparent insensitivity to American Jewish concerns, called for greater engagement with Israel so as to repair the rift rather than disengaging from a relationship so critical to the future of the Jewish people.

Yet one cannot overlook the ominous signs of long-term cleavage. Some noted that Orthodox Jews were beginning to predominate numerically at pro-Israel events, a signal that the cause of Israel was becoming an increasingly Orthodox one.<sup>19</sup> Second, changing Israeli and American Jewish demographics heralded the emergence of a more religious and nationalist Israel while American Jews continued on the road to assimilation. Perhaps most importantly, almost half of American Jews claimed they were political "liberals," a classification shared by only 8 percent of Israelis.<sup>20</sup> The debate over the Iran Agreement illustrated this divide sharply: By a margin of 49–41 percent, American Jews supported the JCPOA. And, surprisingly, nearly one in three American Jews do not consider Israelis to be at all part of their "family."<sup>21</sup>

As might be expected, the divisive issues are largely political and religious. President Donald Trump remains widely unpopular among American Jews, among whom he scores a 77 percent unfavorability rating.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Israelis see Trump as the president who moved the American embassy to Jerusalem and withdrew from an unpopular Iran agreement. For many, he was the perfect antidote to Obama. As Trump and Netanyahu grew closer, the gap between American Jewry and Israel widened. The structure of Israel–diaspora relations has come to resemble a pyramid. At the top, relations between American Jewish leaders and their Israeli counterparts remain strong, but the further down one went on the pyramid the gap between American Jewry and Israel appeared more and more unbridgeable.<sup>23</sup>

Although in some quarters the "distancing debate" may persist over the attachment of millennials to Israel, two key points of consensus ought to be underscored:

- 1 The reality of mixed marriage results in greater distancing of American Jews from Israel. Historically, mixed marriages have scored poorly on measures of Jewish peoplehood, and Israel occupies center stage in that concept. The Jewish identity of mixed marriages tends to be more personal and familial than Jewishly communal. Outreach programs aspire to alter that portrait, but success thus far has been sporadic at best.
- 2 Few deny that during Netanyahu's tenure relations between American Jewry and Israel in fact have deteriorated. A compromise over the Western Wall, carefully worked out and agreed to by all sides has been frozen, signaling a breach of trust and alienating deeply the base of American Jews, who identify largely as Conservative or Reform, notwithstanding, to be sure, repeated governmental promises that the "operational" aspects of the compromise, i.e. an expanded space for egalitarian prayer services at Robinson's Arch, will proceed. The 2018 AJC comparative survey of American Jews and Israelis pointed to wide disparities in perspective on Trump administration policies, West Bank settlements, the two-state solution, and religious pluralism. Over time, an across-the-board

pro-Israel consensus, so prevalent around the time of the '67 and '73 wars, frayed around the edges beginning in the 1990s and actually came apart in the 21st century. Today, sharp criticism of Israeli policies may be heard even among the most committed activist Jews.<sup>24</sup> While 9/11 may have served to bind the two communities together by showing that they confronted identical enemies, the bonds proved to be temporary.<sup>25</sup> A 2004 AJC survey discovered that the percentage of American Jews who chose social justice as defining their Jewish identity equaled the percentages citing religious observance and support for Israel combined!<sup>26</sup> For those identifying their Jewishness with social justice, liberal values clearly “trumped” religion and peoplehood.

Thus, a Frank Luntz poll of Jewish college students found that only 31 percent considered Israel to be a true democracy.<sup>27</sup> In the 2016 election, only 10 percent of Jewish voters said that foreign policy was the most important issue to them, and an additional 12 percent deemed it the second most important issue.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, close to half of American Jews believe the Orthodox monopoly over matters of personal status in Israel weakens Israel-American Jewry ties, and nearly three-quarters desire equality for all the religious movements on such matters.<sup>29</sup> And finally, American Jews are not at all persuaded that Israel is serious about a two-state solution even as they remain quite optimistic that it will come about at some future point.<sup>30</sup> Collective survey findings, then, point to the primacy of liberal values among American Jews coupled with the reality of assimilation, both factors underlying the divide between Israel and American Jewry.

Does Prime Minister Netanyahu himself bear responsibility for the divide? Notwithstanding continued U.S.-Israel security cooperation, it is undeniable that he clashed sharply with President Barack Obama, whose popularity in Israel sank to a record low of 4 percent following his 2009 Cairo speech, which erroneously and unwisely claimed that memory of the Holocaust justified Israel's existence, as if 2000 years of Jewish aspirations for return to homeland and sovereignty did not exist. Nevertheless, American Jewish support for Obama remained high throughout both his terms, a trend historically consistent with American Jewish adherence to the Democratic Party since 1928, but which was now highly dissonant with Israeli perspectives and concerns.<sup>31</sup> American Jewish leaders themselves continued to support the prime minister, claiming that their long-term policy was to ensure as little daylight as possible between Israel and the United States. Similarly, Netanyahu continued to score well among AIPAC supporters. But the list of defectors began to grow. Obama himself went so far as to fault Jewish leaders who backed the prime minister unconditionally, claiming that a “no daylight” policy between Israel and the United States would never bring about a peace agreement.<sup>32</sup> When Obama called for “territorial swaps” that would recognize the settlement blocs as Israeli, Netanyahu responded by lecturing the president on Israel's history.<sup>33</sup> Conversely, the newly established J Street lobby, with its “pro-Israel, pro-peace” platform, gained adherents during Obama's tenure precisely because of American Jewish disappointment with Netanyahu's failure or

inability to advance the peace process. In effect J Street succeeded by tapping into the desire of many American Jews to both love Israel and critique her at the same time.<sup>34</sup>

The rift between Netanyahu and a predominantly pro-Obama American Jewry came into sharp focus when the prime minister chose to address a joint session of Congress on the putative Iran nuclear agreement. He stated explicitly that he was there “not just as prime minister, but as a representative of the entire Jewish people,” – specifically including an American Jewish community that largely favored the deal.<sup>35</sup> His speech was seen by many as constituting an unprecedented public embarrassment of a sitting United States president, pointedly criticizing administration policy, and effectively aligned the prime minister and his government with the Republican Party. Some American Jewish organizations, including AJC, cautioned Netanyahu against delivering the address in Congress, arguing that it might introduce partisanship into the US-Israel relationship, a relationship that had proven so “special” precisely because it rested upon a bipartisan base. Even so, AIPAC followed the prime minister’s lead, and undertook a USD\$ 30 million campaign against the JCPOA, but to no avail.<sup>36</sup>

For Netanyahu, the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 spelled the dawn of a new day. Within a short time after the election, Trump had two-thirds approval rating among Israelis. By October 2018, Trump’s approval rating among Israeli Jews approached 70 percent. Barely a quarter of US Jews, most of them Orthodox, agreed.<sup>37</sup> Netanyahu’s failure to speak out clearly against the racism and anti-Semitism evident at the Charlottesville demonstration coupled with Trump’s equivocation was particularly offensive to American Jews already nervous over what appeared to be a spike in anti-Semitism since the 2016 election.

The divide only grew during the Trump–Netanyahu “bromance.” This was hardly due only to Netanyahu himself. Longer-term trends of assimilation, conflicts over religious pluralism and the peace process, and shifting political values both in Israel and within the American Jewish community pulled Israeli and American Jews in opposite directions. But the divide clearly broadened on Netanyahu’s watch. The prime minister backed away from the two-state solution so favored by American Jews. Many found his comments about Arabs voting “in droves” to be racist. His close ties with American Jewish conservatives, particularly billionaire philanthropists, coupled with his popularity among Orthodox American Jews and Evangelicals, persuaded many that Netanyahu had given up on the liberal base of American Jewry. Reports circulated that the prime minister was dismissive of Conservative and Reform Jews, because he believed he did not need them, and because he was convinced that they were bound to assimilate and disappear, and because he had heard that when liberalism and Zionism clashed, liberalism would always win out.<sup>38</sup>

If these reports are true, the damage to Israel’s relations with American Jewry, not to speak of relations with the United States, is considerable. First, transforming the cause of Israel from a bipartisan to a partisan cause undercuts US-Israel relations. Inevitably, in the American two-party system, the party out of power will eventually

return to power. Israel needs the support of liberal Jews to preserve both her edge within American public opinion and support for her within the Democratic Party.

Second, American Jewry unquestionably faces the challenges of assimilation and erosion. However, notwithstanding formidably high rates of mixed marriage, the two largest liberal movements are not about to disappear anytime soon. Writing them off at this juncture, as many have charged Netanyahu with doing, is at best a premature and faulty conclusion. Israel plays a major role in securing Jewish continuity, notably through Birthright and study programs within Israel. Yet Israel's actions on the religious pluralism front, by presenting an image that Israel is by no means hospitable to non-Orthodox Jewish populations, undercuts its goals of ensuring a vital Jewish diaspora. True enough, Netanyahu hardly initiated the divide between Israel and world Jewry; but he has surely contributed significantly to it.

Where do matters stand right now? For one thing, the divide has become in recent years much more tangible, notwithstanding soothing rhetoric by Israeli and some American Jewish leaders. The comparative 2018 AJC surveys on American Jewish and Israeli Jewish public opinion point to sharp divergences on political and religious questions. Whether the issue be egalitarian prayer at the *Kotel* (Western Wall), the monopoly of the Chief Rabbinate over matters of personal status, the future of West Bank settlements and the two-state solution, assessment of the Trump administration, the appropriateness of American Jewish dissent on questions of Israeli national security, and even whether American Jews and Israelis consider one another as part of their extended families, the chasm between the world's two largest Jewish communities is evident. Moreover, demographic and political currents at work in both societies suggest that the divergence will only increase.

Second, the "distancing debate" among social scientists now appears to have reached consensus. Most if not all observers agree that younger American Jews, even among those most committed Jewishly, find themselves more alienated from or indifferent to Israel than ever before. The San Francisco Bay Area study demonstrated this perhaps most conclusively and, notwithstanding the exceptional liberalism of Bay Area Jews, the trend appears to be national. Some assume that younger Jews will grow closer to Israel as they age, as was the case in prior decades, but that may now constitute little more than wishful thinking since it ignores the impact of assimilation on the American Jewish side and the ongoing rightward drift on the Israeli side. Moreover, both sides to the debate agree that the increasing phenomenon of mixed-marriage results in decreased attachment to Israel.

Third, American Jewish leaders appear comfortable "blaming" Israeli public policies with which they disagree for causing this distance but find themselves uncomfortable in addressing the real toll assimilation takes on the attachment of their own children to the Jewish state. As the late Charles Liebman once suggested, American Jewish leaders enjoy talking about religious pluralism in Israel because it makes them feel reassured in their own Jewish identity; conversely, Israelis enjoy speaking about the assimilation of US Jewry because it enhances their own level of personal satisfaction as Zionists living in Israel.



Indeed, one cannot but be astounded at the degree of *schadenfreude* in which each side focuses on the problems of the other. To take but two examples, statements equating Israel with theocracy routinely ignore the distance between Riyadh, let alone Teheran, and Jerusalem, which in recent years actually has hosted a “gay pride” parade, to say nothing of freedom of the press. Yet the vocabulary of theocracy and Khomeinism is voiced regularly by Israel’s American Jewish critics. Conversely, the specter of mixed marriage in the United States at times evokes more ridicule than sadness among Israelis, who in turn underscore that what has become almost normative within American Jewish circles, e.g. rabbis and priests co-officiating at an interfaith wedding, remains virtually non-existent within Israel.

Fourth, one must acknowledge the importance of Orthodox exceptionalism. Orthodox Jews generally embrace Israel’s settlement policies and by no means lament the eclipse of the two-state solution. They are hardly enamored with the Chief Rabbinate but largely defer to it as the halachic authority for the State of Israel. Moreover, as Modern Orthodoxy becomes more observant and learned, and Haredi Jewry sets aside principled opposition to Zionism, the prospects of a Haredi demographic ascendancy no longer frightens other Orthodox Jews as it once did.<sup>39</sup>

Put simply, the Orthodox look at Israel and like what they see. They invest heavily in visits to Israel, extended study programs in Israeli yeshivas, and, of course, Aliyah. With extensive personal contacts among friends and family members in Israel, American Orthodox Jews prove a significant exception and countervoice to the distancing narrative. As the Orthodox population rises in the United States, this countertrend will become more evident in the precincts of pro-Israel advocacy. Several social scientists demonstrated recently that one hundred Orthodox Jews in their sixties are likely to have 575 grandchildren under the age of ten. The same number of Conservative or Reform Jews in that age cohort likely have but 56 grandchildren. Clearly, the pool of potential pro-Israel activists in the years ahead largely will be Orthodox.<sup>40</sup>

Last, one must return to the role of Israeli public policies in aggravating the divide. As Israel has turned rightward in recent decades, both for demographic and national security reasons, liberal Zionism appears to have faded and gone into eclipse. Issues of gender equality and minority rights constitute core values for liberal-minded American Jews; conversely the vocabulary of “occupation” is anathema. To be sure, liberal Zionism is by no means moribund. Israel has made great strides in extending equality to its minority populations and clearly is the most liberal state in the Middle East in terms of gay and lesbian inclusiveness. Similarly, major advances have been made in the role of women in Israeli society. And a two-state solution remains on the political agenda even as the prospects for its realization appear remote. Without question, however, as the dominant image of Israel grows more conservative and particularistic, attachment to Israel becomes more dissonant with the liberal values of American Jewry, illustrated, for example by the American Jewish reaction to Israel’s Nation-State Bill adopted by the Israeli Knesset on July 19, 2018.



What, then, of the future? One potential danger, as noted, is that an Orthodox ascendancy in pro-Israel advocacy will transform the cause of Israel into a partisan one.<sup>41</sup> The recent event held in Jerusalem marking the opening of the United States embassy there already suggests what is to come: Mostly Republican political leaders attended the event, but few if any Democrats; and the speeches given at the ceremony were by two evangelical ministers otherwise anathema to liberal American Jews. The obvious danger is that when the Democrats return to power, we may witness attenuation of the US-Israel special relationship.

Moreover, the United States itself is undergoing significant demographic change. As minority populations grow, the US is likely to become a “majority minority” society. Some of these minorities have little knowledge of, let alone experience with, the Jewish community and its concerns. Some naturally lean Democratic because of partisan divides over immigration policy. Still others have had extensive experiences with the American Jewish community but find themselves at odds with American Jewish pro-Israel advocacy. American Jewish leaders have the task of engaging these groupings constructively. But if the passion for Israel weakens, that engagement will tend to focus primarily on domestic American political issues rather than foreign policy concerns.<sup>42</sup>

Nonetheless, not all the news is bad. Nearly two-thirds of Israeli Jews regard American Jewry as a strategic asset. Conversely, Israel serves as the glue binding the Jewish people together, and the threats to her security and well-being continue to command the energies and allegiances of American Jewry. These facts are unlikely to change any time soon. Both the Conservative and Reform movements, the “shrinking middles,” will not disappear any time in the near future. On the contrary, while some losses are inevitable, and they surely will be keenly felt, both movements likely will reposition themselves to address a 21st century context. The question is how that repositioning will affect ties with an Israel that seemingly is becoming more Orthodox demographically and more particularistic culturally and politically.

Moreover, long-term Israeli reactions to this divide remain unpredictable. If the Israeli polity reacts to the “shrinking middles” of American Jewish life with indifference, the outlook for future relations with non-Orthodox American Jews becomes quite bleak. Evidence pointing to that future scenario already may be detected in the absence of Israeli passion expressed with respect to the Kotel and personal status issues and statements by Israeli political leaders to the effect that the non-Orthodox movements are doomed in any case. It remains possible, however, that Israeli society may resonate to the questions American Jews are asking about how the country will manifest its identity as a Jewish democracy, its claim to be the center of Jewish peoplehood, and, last but hardly least, whether its national security will be imperiled by diminished American Jewish political support.

Are these trends reversible or are there factors that might retard if not reverse the deterioration of relations? To be sure, some might now look for a *deus ex machina*. Were the Oslo process somehow to be revived and the road to a two-state solution cleared of obstacles, American Jewish identification with Israel likely would

soar. We witnessed an “era of good feelings” during the initial heady days of Oslo. American Jews live in an optimistic country in which it is often assumed that all problems have solutions. A viable solution to the current Middle East impasse would resonate sharply within a Jewish community that wishes to identify with an Israel that is both Jewish and democratic and is forward-looking in terms of attaining peace with each of its neighbors.

A related *deus ex machina* would be a revived liberal Zionism. Irrespective of one’s personal politics, the eclipse of liberal Zionism marks a serious setback for the Jewish people. Can it be reinvigorated? Possibly, since Zionism contains a rich liberal tradition of social justice for all, including Arabs, and continuing advocacy for a two-state solution, whatever its inherent challenges, to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Conversely, however, American Jews must understand what Israel has confronted for over seven decades – implacable enemies determined to destroy her – a confrontation that any democracy would meet with some limitations upon personal freedoms for reasons of national security. Attachment to Israel likely may be enhanced considerably by ongoing engagement with critical and dissenting views concerning Israeli policy inside Jewish communal discourse. To be sure, dissent that denies Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state, e.g. support for BDS, crosses a line from liberal Zionism into anti-Zionism.

Moreover, a revitalized liberal Zionism will resonate greatly with the core values and assumptions of American Jews. Put simply, Zionism and pro-Israelism have been critical components of the identity of American Jews for decades. The near-eclipse of liberal Zionism has broadened the chasm between Israel and American Jewry. But demonstrating that liberal Zionism remains possible in Israel’s future holds out the promise of bridging that gap.

Take, for example, the remarkable success of the Birthright program designed to provide a free visit to Israel for younger adult American Jews. The program has attracted some 650,000 participants since its inception, far exceeding the aspirations of its original founders. Challenges of follow-up are real, lest the trip become a “moment in time” lacking in aftereffects. But the very idea underlying the program, that all Jews, by dint of their heritage as Jews, have a “right” to an encounter with Israel constitutes a powerful statement of Jewish peoplehood and its meaning today.

Taken together, Birthright and a revitalized liberal Zionism may constitute a firm basis for a new vision of peoplehood. American Jews, having visited Israel and having viewed it holistically as a Jewish and democratic society, rightly ought to press Israel on her capacity to preserve the delicate balance between Judaic and democratic norms. The Birthright experience itself ought to imbue participants with the energy and passion for commitment to Israel. What is necessary, simply, is fewer lamentations with respect to Israel’s rightward drift and greater engagement by liberal-minded American Jews with Israel and Israeli society.

To be sure, changes in Israeli demographic patterns present serious challenges to a revitalized liberal Zionism. As the Haredi and national religious sectors increase both in numbers and in influence, the vision of a revitalized liberal Zionism appears in even greater jeopardy. Liberal Zionists must seek broader dialogue with leading

Orthodox intellectuals and liberal-minded rabbis in an effort to find common ground and principles. One notable effort in this regard was the Kinneret Agreement reached by a group Rabbi Ya'akov Meidan and Professor Ruth Gavison convened in 2002.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps most utopian is a reversal of the trends toward assimilation within the American Jewish community. Jewish renewal and awakening of Jewish identity certainly connote enhanced concern with and attachment to Israel as a Jewish state, especially if the freedom to dissent from particular Israeli policies is granted. The hypothesis underlying Birthright remains that encounter with a vibrant and robust Jewish society within Israel will inspire the renewal of Jewish identity in North America. To date, obviously, that hypothesis remains untested, notwithstanding Birthright's impressive and tangible successes.

While the large-scale shifts identified here appear only as remote possibilities, smaller or more limited changes might at least slow down the distancing from one another. Changes in education are paramount. Israelis must understand that the American Jewish narrative comprises far more than anti-Semitism and assimilation. The richness and diversity of American Jewish life, and the narrative of Jewish renewal, coexist alongside that of Jewish assimilation. Moreover, the passion and dedication to Israel, and advocacy on its behalf, have been vital in sustaining the special US-Israel relationship over the decades. Conversely, American Jews understand little of Israeli history, society, and culture, and need to understand the power of tradition within Israeli society as well as Israel's great historical successes in building a new frontier society in a Jewish democracy. Moreover, American Jews often fail to fathom that, irrespective of legitimate grievances concerning the demands of coalition politics, Israel must strive to integrate into Israeli society, rather than alienate, its growing Haredi population.

Second, confounding all the prognostications of its inevitable disappearance, Orthodoxy both in Israel and the US is experiencing significant growth and renewal. The reasons are straightforward: intensive Jewish education; strength of family, including intergenerational ties and positive birth rates; extended study periods and immersive visits to Israel; and, most importantly, passionate commitment to rebuilding Jewish life after the Holocaust rather than surrendering to the tides of history. The implications for liberal and secular Jews ought to be clear: Orthodox Jews look at Israel and like what they see; in turn, they advocate passionately on behalf of an Israel with which they identify. Might the same passion for aspects of Israel with which liberal Jews identify be mounted within the non-Orthodox religious movements?

A generation ago, at the height of the optimism of the Oslo years, then-Justice Minister Yossi Beilin noted that post-Holocaust Jewish unity had been based almost entirely on Jewish vulnerability and threats to the Jewish people. Beilin argued, correctly, that this was an inadequate base on which to construct peoplehood. Although dismissed at the time, Beilin's wisdom remains quite relevant to the current moment in Israel-American Jewish relations. He was correct to underscore that we can no longer bond through trauma. Rather, what is necessary is renewal

of the Zionist vision of Ahad Ha'am that the Jewish people, like individuals, thrives on the basis of common memories and common aspirations for the future.<sup>44</sup> For the Jews, that connotes common historical memories and experiences, a common tradition of Judaic learning and textual study, and common aspirations that the return of the Jews to sovereignty and statehood creates the opportunity, for the first time in the past two millennia of Jewish history, of building a Jewish state upon Judaic principles of justice and equality for all and a center for Judaism that will strengthen Jewish life throughout the diaspora. By the same token, granting greater Israeli recognition for the non-Orthodox religious movements might well reduce the level of toxicity current in both public and private American Jewish conversations about Israel.

## Notes

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- 1 Michael Barnett, *The Star and the Stripes* (Princeton and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 150–151.
- 2 Anshel Pfeffer, *Bibi* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), p. 169.
- 3 Reported by Konstanty Gebert, Remarks, American Jewish Committee (AJC), Global Forum, May 1997.
- 4 Veteran Israeli educator Avraham Infeld, cited in *Haaretz*, December 4, 2017.
- 5 *AJC Survey of American Jewish Public Opinion*, 2015. See also Dov Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 17, 219n.
- 6 Waxman, *Trouble in the Tribe*, p. 41.
- 7 On these respective actions, see “Explainer: What Is the Nation-State Bill? Why Is It a Big Deal?” *The Forward*, July 18, 2018; “Caving to Ultra-Orthodox, Netanyahu About-Faces on Gay Surrogacy Rights,” *Times of Israel*, July 18, 2018; “Israeli Police Question Conservative Rabbi for Performing a Marriage,” *Jewish Telegraphic Association (JTA)*, July 19, 2018; “Bibi to World Jewry: ‘We Hear Your Concerns,’” *Jewish Week/Times of Israel*, July 15, 2018.
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# 9

## THE DEATH OF THE TWO-STATE SOLUTION

Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab world  
in the age of Netanyahu

*Glenn E. Robinson*

This essay constitutes my post-mortem on the death of the two-state solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. I have spent a good deal of time during my professional life examining the prospects for the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel and, indeed, I became a supporter of a two-state solution during my first visit to Israel, the West Bank and Gaza in 1980. I was studying in Cairo at the time on a “junior year abroad,” and our advisor Malcolm Kerr led a group of University of California students to Jerusalem and environs to meet with officials and others from both sides of the divide. It was as clear then to me as it is today: When two national groups don’t want to be married together in a single state, a peaceable divorce into two states is the best available solution.

I subsequently did significant amounts of fieldwork in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as Israel, which focused on these issues and resulted in a number of publications. My doctoral dissertation and then first book examined in a scholarly way how the first Intifada advanced and impacted the possibilities for a Palestinian state.<sup>1</sup> Two coauthored books published by the RAND Corporation assessed the necessary ingredients that would make a two-state solution feasible from a policy vantage point.<sup>2</sup> A slew of my scholarly articles examined various aspects of Palestinian state building.<sup>3</sup> I approached each study with a critical eye; my support for the underlying justice of two states for two peoples did not mean I set aside the scholar’s natural and necessary skepticism with regard to the Palestinian national movement and its leadership.

Throughout the ups and downs of the four decades that have passed since I first visited Israel and Palestine, I remained reasonably optimistic that the obvious, if imperfect, resolution to this conflict would ultimately prevail. The logic was too persuasive. Surely Israel, which as the overwhelming power in the conflict and thus holds most of the decision making “cards,” would not choose to permanently occupy Palestinian lands, keeping Palestinians forever stateless and creating a new

apartheid state that would inevitably lead to international isolation. Nor was it likely that Israel would give up on the Zionist dream of a Jewish state by extending citizenship rights to millions of Palestinians. Thus, divorce, yielding two states, seemed inevitable. However, while that logic is still impeccable, the historical window to create a viable Palestinian state has now, in my judgment, closed. Instead, for a long time to come, the “holy land” will be a new Belfast, a synonym for simmering conflict, constant hate, periodic murder, and unending tension. Israel will try to contain this new Belfast behind walls, but there will be no hiding. The current heady days of Trumpian blank-check support for whatever the Israeli Right desires will eventually give way to growing isolation and international ostracism. The death of the Palestinian national project and the two-state solution will not be a quiet one.

This post-mortem essay makes three broad arguments. First, I argue that the Palestinian national movement around the state building enterprise has been effectively defeated by Israel. Much of the story of this defeat is well known, so I will cover that territory briefly. Second, I argue that while this Palestinian defeat was mostly (and quite deliberately) accomplished by the Likud party and its allies in Israel, the election of Donald Trump and the emergence of new leaders in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have accelerated the process of Palestinian national defeat as a necessary price to pay in their confrontation with Iran. While Likud’s antipathy toward a two-state solution predates the administration of Benjamin Netanyahu since 2009, there is no doubt that policies designed to defeat a Palestinian state intensified under Netanyahu. A third argument, on which I will spend the most time as it is the least studied of these phenomena, revolves around the fragmentation of Palestinian politics in response to national defeat, and specifically the re-emergence of municipal government as a center of Palestinian political life. For supporters of Palestinian statehood, relatively robust local government is not necessarily a good thing, but there are strong reasons to believe the twin trends of national fragmentation and relatively strong municipal governance will continue for a long time to come.

### **Palestinian national defeat: an overview**

The Palestinian national project since the 1970s has centered on building a Palestinian state within the borders of historic Palestine. First implicitly and then explicitly, the Palestinian state was to co-exist beside Israel. This change in Palestinian national goals, from eliminating Israel completely to living side-by-side in two states, was first tentatively adopted by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1974 at the 12th Palestine National Council, made more strongly at the 13th PNC in 1977, and then made explicit by the PLO in 1988.<sup>4</sup> In 1993, the mutual recognition of Israel and the PLO that initiated the Oslo peace process codified two decades of evolving Palestinian national goals, the epicenter of which was the creation of a Palestinian state in historic Palestine in the lands conquered by Israel in the 1967 war: West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem.



Contrary to popular mythology, the various Oslo accords negotiated and signed by Israel and the PLO beginning in 1993 did not explicitly call for the establishment of a Palestinian state. The shortsightedness of not seizing an enormously opportune moment – the Cold War was over, the Soviet Union had collapsed, Iraq was defeated, and the US was the unrivaled superpower in the Middle East – to explicitly adopt a two-state framework to end the conflict was a blunder of historic proportions. Instead, the Oslo peace process of the 1990s overwhelmingly focused on the called-for five-year interim period (which expired in May 1999), leaving the all-important “final status issues” to be dealt with later. Indeed, to this day, Israel has never formally adopted the creation of a Palestinian state as official policy. The closest it came was when Ariel Sharon’s cabinet narrowly adopted the “Roadmap” plan in 2003 that itself explicitly adopted a two-state solution. However, in order for the motion to carry, it was loaded down with 14 reservations that effectively blocked a two-state solution from being implemented.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the lack of a formal adoption of a two-state settlement, Palestinians in both thought and action dove into state building on the ground in the West Bank and Gaza during the 1990s. Indeed, nascent state building activities predated the Oslo Accords.<sup>6</sup> But the opportunity to actually create the institutions of a Palestinian state was unsurpassed in the 1990s. Executive and legislative branches of government were built, mostly from scratch. The long-moribund judicial branch was revitalized, although the challenge of combining two distinct judicial systems – British common law in Gaza, French code in the West Bank – proved difficult.<sup>7</sup> Local taxing systems were constructed, even if most revenues to the Palestinian Authority (PA) either were collected by Israel and transferred, or came in the form of foreign aid (both capital projects and direct budgetary assistance), giving the PA some attributes of a rentier state. The PA was given security responsibilities in Area A in the West Bank,<sup>8</sup> and in much of Gaza, and built institutions of security (preventive security forces) and public safety (regular police). As a form of coup-proofing, Yasser Arafat created or transferred over from the PLO an additional dozen or so security agencies. Ministries of all sorts were established, and ran schools, hospitals, infrastructure projects, media, agricultural extension services, and much more. There was no doubt that a state of Palestine was vigorously emerging in the 1990s, even though the Oslo process never used that actual term.

But that nascent state was never allowed the authority to rule over more than a fraction of the West Bank. Areas A and B together constituted less than 40 percent of the West Bank, and even here, there was only partial Palestinian control, never sovereignty. That 40 percent figure shrinks even further when one recognizes it refers to the Israeli definition of what constitutes the West Bank – so, for example, excluding all of municipal Jerusalem. Still, the primary Palestinian critics of the Oslo process on both the right (e.g., Hamas) and the left (e.g., PFLP) were mostly silenced in the middle years of the 1990s since the peace process was seen to be working, in spite of some hiccups. I happened to be in Nablus, a place I had visited many times during the first Intifada, on the day of its liberation in 1995 when Israeli forces pulled out of the city, it was thought for the last time. The euphoria on

that day in 1995 was real, almost tangible, and based on the belief that Palestinian independence was finally at hand.

Today, few serious analysts believe that a viable Palestinian state can still be created. Three reasons stand out as the basis for this pessimism: settlements, Jerusalem, and the rightward lurch in Israeli politics. These issues are well known, so I will touch on them only briefly. Let's begin with Israel's relentless settlement of Palestinian lands. While there has been much finger pointing as to blame for the failed peace process, and much speculation as to "what if" (e.g., if Rabin had not been assassinated in 1995, would things have turned out differently?), the most important reason for the defeat of the Palestinian national state-building project has been Israel's settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, which have been strongly promoted by Netanyahu since 2009. More than anything else, settlements change facts on the ground. Politicians come and go; acts of terror are despicable, but rarely kill more people in a week than traffic accidents; the maiming of protesters is tragic, but rarely changes the strategic calculation. But settlements are forever. They cover real estate; they generate more roads (which Palestinians are prohibited from using), electrical grids and water connections; they mandate checkpoints and increased IDF patrols. Even removing one illegal building or trailer generates enormous political pressures on any Israeli government. Removing whole settlements would be extraordinarily difficult politically, even if the will existed to do so, although this would be a necessary ingredient in any viable two-state plan, even with land swaps. Throughout the entire period of the 1990s, the settlement drive never stopped. From the Madrid conference in 1991 to the failed Camp David summit in 2000, the number of settlers in the West Bank tripled, to about 300,000. Today, there are over 400,000 settlers living in 130 settlements and 101 outposts.<sup>9</sup> That number increases to 600,000 when East Jerusalem is included.

The preclusion of any serious future withdrawal from the West Bank was the reason why the Likud party put the settlement project on steroids after its 1977 election victory. Today one can't help but conclude that the Likud got its wish: A serious Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank is no longer politically possible for even the most peacenik government that Israel could plausibly elect. The Likud's settlement drive was designed to keep the West Bank under permanent Israeli control and had both political and strategic dimensions.

Politically, the constant drumbeat of land confiscation, settlement construction, and the migration of Jews to the West Bank was planned to demoralize Palestinian hopes for independence and, more important, to generate a growing number of Israelis, both those living in the settlements and their friends and families in Israel proper, who had a vested interest in maintaining Israeli control over the West Bank (which they called "Judea and Samaria"). That has now happened on both counts: A growing number of Palestinians no longer consider a two-state solution to be possible,<sup>10</sup> and the power of the settler political bloc is much greater than the actual number of settlers would suggest. In particular, settlers are now over-represented in the IDF officer corps, particularly at the junior officer level.<sup>11</sup> As those junior

officers replace retiring senior officers, the IDF will become a more conservative and pro-settler institution than it historically has been.

Maps that show the locations of settlements demonstrate that their placement has followed three strategic imperatives that help nullify prospects for a Palestinian state.<sup>12</sup> First, settlements help to “erase” the Green Line, the 1967 line of control that Palestinians mark as their future border with Israel. The Modi’in bloc of settlements, for example, straddles the Green Line, and not accidentally. Second, settlements are spread throughout the West Bank, making contiguity of any Palestinian state problematic.

Third, Israel has used settlement placement to isolate Palestinian East Jerusalem, further undermining a potential Palestinian state. Specifically, Israel has constructed two rings of settlements around Jerusalem, one inside the municipal boundaries (Gilo and Har Homa to the south, circling up to Pisgat Ze’ev and Ramat Allon to the north), and a second ring just outside the municipal boundary (Beitar Illit and the Etzion bloc in the south, Ma’ale Adumim to the east, stretching around to Giva’t Ze’ev to the north). Even the last remaining open area, known as “E-1,” on which the US pressured Israel not to build new settlements that would complete the encirclement of East Jerusalem, is now the site of settlement construction. This double encirclement effectively cuts off Palestinian East Jerusalem from its West Bank hinterland and permanently isolates it from any potential Palestinian state, thus making such a state less likely.

Also with regard to Jerusalem, the US’s recent recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital city has further abetted the defeat of the Palestinian national project. Donald Trump’s formal statement of recognition carefully avoided saying that the US recognized exclusive Israeli sovereignty over the entirety of Jerusalem (as Israel defines it), but subsequent informal statements by Trump seem to confirm that the issue of Jerusalem is “off the table” for Palestinians. Of course, Palestinians rejected this idea, but it means that Israel has until at least 2021 before a subsequent US administration could possibly put any pressure on it to negotiate over Jerusalem. The Likud party under Netanyahu, which controls both the national and Jerusalem municipal governments, is clearly working hard to ensure that there will be little left to negotiate over after the Trump administration leaves office.

The rightward shift in Israel’s domestic politics has also helped to defeat the Palestinian national project. While many of Israel’s founders came out of Europe’s socialist traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Israel had a mostly socialist economy for its first four decades, today Israel is a mostly conservative country. The Likud party first won national elections in 1977, and it has been the dominant political force in Israel for most of the ensuing over four decades, other than a brief period of Labor party rule from 1992 to 1996 (that was partly orchestrated by James Baker and the George H.W. Bush administration over the issue of \$10 billion in loan guarantees). Many explanations have been offered to explain why Israel has made such a glaring transformation over time, including the ethnic basis of its politics (ethnic regimes are rarely liberal over time), the growing demographic weight of Mizrahi and Haredi populations (which typically

vote Likud), and the collapse of the peace process as a result of the second Intifada, which destroyed Israel's peace camp (a bastion of the center-left). Whatever the reason, the end result was a politics that denies Palestinian rights and fundamentally opposes Palestinian statehood. Indeed, there has been a rise of major right-wing Israeli politicians (e.g., Naftali Bennett) who openly call for Israel to formally annex Area C lands (over 60 percent of the West Bank). Prior to the past two decades or so, such a discourse was virtually unheard of from anyone outside of a few fringe politicians. The opposition of the new political center in Israel to Palestinian statehood has made Palestinian national defeat more certain.

These developments represent a defeat of the Palestinian national movement over statehood. In the distant future, there may be some kind of a binational state in what is Israel and the West Bank – and maybe, or maybe not, including Gaza – but a specifically Palestinian state per se in historic Palestine is now no longer a realistic possibility. The primary Palestinian national project for decades has been defeated.

### **The death of the Palestinian national project was not from natural causes**

The second broad argument to be made is that the Palestinian state-building project did not die a natural death but rather was the victim of superior powers with other interests. The primary culprit in the defeat of the Palestinian national movement was the Likud party and its focused and persistent attempts to successfully eliminate the possibility of a Palestinian state in the West Bank. This is an old story, so I will only briefly recount it. What is new to the story is the role that the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have played in helping to apply the coup de grace to a Palestinian state.

The Labor Party in Israel always had mixed feelings about the settlement drive in the West Bank, although it did not extend those reservations to settling East Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Still, it was in the first decade after Israel's conquest of the West Bank in 1967, when Labor led the government that settlements began in the West Bank, mostly driven by religious hardliners.<sup>14</sup> Labor leaders did little to stop such illegal settlements, and usually ended up assisting these settlements after the fact. It was in part Labor's inability to make a decision on settlements (which followed from its strategic indecision about the West Bank) that instead compelled it to mostly respond to facts being created on the ground by others. This paralysis and indecision led Gorenberg to characterize the origins of the settlement drive as an "accidental empire."<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, the Likud party and its allies in Israel had a plan, and that plan focused on keeping the West Bank under permanent Israeli control. According to the Likud position, while the recently conquered Sinai, Gaza, and perhaps even the Golan could be negotiated away for the right strategic price, "Judea and Samaria" were to remain permanently part of Israel. While the exact nature of permanent Israeli control could take different forms – from outright annexation to robust local autonomy to even a "state minus" in the current lexicon – the principle of

permanent, overarching Israeli control of the West Bank was (and is) nonnegotiable for Likud and its allies. The 1979 peace agreement with Egypt was painful for Likud, as it entailed the loss of the Sinai, but it was a boon to Likud's plan to colonize and control the West Bank. No longer would Menachim Begin or other Likud leaders have to worry particularly about Egypt's response to Israeli actions in the West Bank (and elsewhere, such as Lebanon). Israel's most powerful Arab foe had effectively removed itself from the Arab-Israeli conflict to focus on its own economic development. As a result, the settlement drive in the West Bank, now with clear government support, was vastly accelerated in the 1980s.

So while the early settlements in the West Bank following the 1967 war may not have been the result of purposeful policy, the same cannot be said of the settlements built in the aftermath of the 1979 peace agreement with Egypt. The whole point of Likud's settlement drive was to make a withdrawal from the West Bank politically impossible for a peace-oriented future government, thereby prevent a Palestinian state or other form of Arab sovereignty there. After overseeing a doubling of Israeli settlers in the late 1980s, former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir confirmed this strategy of gradual and irreversible demographic conquest of the West Bank in an interview in the Israeli newspaper *Maariv* shortly after he lost the 1992 election:

It pains me greatly that in the coming four years I will not be able to expand the settlements in Judea and Samaria and to complete the demographic revolution in the land of Israel. Without this demographic revolution . . . there is a danger that [the West Bank] will be turned into a Palestinian state. I would have carried on autonomy talks for ten years, and meanwhile we would have reached a half a million people in Judea and Samaria.<sup>16</sup>

My argument here may be misconstrued as blaming Israel, specifically the Likud, for the death of a two-state solution. While that may be true, a normative argument assigning levels of blame will quickly become rather mindless (is it 50–50? 70–30? 90–10?). Rather, my argument is about *agency* and *power*. Revisionist Zionists, led by the Likud and its leaders, such as Benjamin Netanyahu, showed agency in history: They were not merely objects of historical evolution but actively sought to shape an outcome, in this case, permanent Israeli control over the West Bank. They had a vision, they acted upon that vision, and they have succeeded. Whether this is blame-worthy or merit-worthy depends on the eye of the beholder. Not only did the Likud and its allies show agency in history, but they had the power to implement their vision: They won elections, they created facts on the ground, and they influenced international actors enough to not pay a significant price for their actions. This is a story of agency and power; I'll leave the blame game to others.

In the absence of meaningful US pressure to stop the settlement drive during many American presidential administrations, Likud has largely succeeded in its quest for permanent Israeli control over the West Bank. Even the Obama administration was not an exception to this rule. To be sure, Obama often criticized the settlement promotion by Netanyahu, and he did abstain from the 2016 UN Security

Council Resolution 2334 that condemned Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as a “flagrant violation” of international law. Not employing an American veto allowed the resolution to pass 14–0, which included support from close European allies France, Spain and the United Kingdom. Beneath the surface of the often-rocky relationship between Obama and Netanyahu was an expansion of the close security relationship between the US and Israel, including a 10-year agreement for \$38 billion of military aid to Israel.

The arrival of Donald Trump to the White House ushered in a moment of Israeli triumphalism, further sealing the death of the Palestinian national project. The Trump administration ceased any criticism of the settlement project, repeatedly sought to bolster the position of Benjamin Netanyahu, and, most important, recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, moving the US embassy there from Tel Aviv. Trump’s policy on this issue seemed to have little strategic thought behind it, but rather appeared to be an attempt to pander to special interests. In particular, Trump appeared to be following the will of Netanyahu supporter and GOP mega-donor Sheldon Adelson (Trump’s largest financial contributor) and evangelical Christian Zionists such as John Hagee and Robert Jeffress, both of whom spoke at the opening ceremony of the US Embassy in Jerusalem. Trump’s chief strategist in the White House at the time, Steve Bannon, made it clear that Adelson was the primary mover behind Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.<sup>17</sup> In exchange for this huge political victory for Israel, Trump gained no concessions from Netanyahu, nor did he appear to seek any. Israel responded accordingly, by ramping up the number of settlements under construction, according to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics.<sup>18</sup> The move was a political giveaway, not a strategic move forward.

The Trump administration’s eagerness to bury the Palestinian national project was seen in other moves as well, including shuttering the Palestinian “embassy” in Washington, DC (in reality, the PLO office there), dramatically cutting economic assistance to the Palestinian Authority, and ending funding to UNRWA, the primary UN organization providing schooling, medical care and other assistance to Palestinian refugees, and to which the US was the largest donor. Indeed, the Trump administration even applied pressure on Jordan and others to no longer classify most Palestinians as refugees. All of these moves had been pushed by Likud and its supporters in the past, and none came with any political concessions from Israel. Again, these moves appeared to be more about domestic US political favors than any real grand strategy, but their cumulative impact has been to help bury any prospect of an independent Palestinian state.

The third source for the killing off of the Palestinian national project was the rise of new young leaders in Saudi Arabia (Muhammad bin Salman, or MBS) and the United Arab Emirates (Muhammad bin Zayed, or MBZ). These leaders took the view that generating a regional alliance to counter Iran was more important than pressing for Palestinian national rights. Having Israel inside that coalition, along with the US, was an important strategic calculation that likely drove the thinking of MBS and MBZ.<sup>19</sup> Press reports noted a particularly close relationship between MBS and Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and the holder of the administration’s

Arab-Israeli portfolio. MBS apparently told US Jewish leaders that Palestinians should accept whatever proposal Kushner and Trump present to them or “shut up and stop complaining.”<sup>20</sup> MBS also reportedly tried to bribe Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas with a \$10 billion personal line of credit if he would accept the so-called “Deal of the Century” which, if leaked reports were true, would fall far short of legitimate Palestinian statehood. That said, MBS got too far ahead of public opinion in Saudi Arabia, particularly when it came to the politically sensitive issue of ceding Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa mosque to Israeli sovereignty, and spent much of 2018 quietly pulling back from those positions – at least for the time being. MBS has more recently been sidetracked by the political fallout of the assassination of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, a murder that MBS almost certainly ordered personally.

Interestingly, one of the byproducts of this much more aggressive set of regional policies by the young Saudi and Emirati leaders was the bypassing of Jordan as a primary Arab interlocutor with the Palestinians. MBS essentially leapfrogged over King Abdullah of Jordan to directly engage and pressure the Palestinians, leaving Jordan to wonder about its place in the regional order. In its overwrought affinity for MBS and the new Gulf leadership, the Trump administration appeared not to notice how this previously key ally in Amman had been set adrift strategically in the region, an outcome that could have profound consequences.

To sum up this section, the death of the Palestinian national project came at the hands of forces old and new. For decades, Likud had worked assiduously to defeat the possibility of a Palestinian state in the West Bank, to “prevent Palestine,” in Anziska’s provocative phrasing.<sup>21</sup> But the coup de grace was applied by the Trump administration in its pandering to domestic constituencies in the United States, and by the new Gulf leadership in their fevered (but largely unsuccessful) attempts to counter Iranian influence in the region. But the Palestinians have not simply disappeared. This next section deals with Palestinian responses to their national defeat.

## **National defeat, fragmentation, and municipal politics in Palestine**

The third broad argument made in this chapter concerns the Palestinian response to its national defeat. As a general proposition, Palestinian politics has fragmented as a result, with multiple and uncoordinated responses. One interesting response that deserves close attention is the re-emergence of municipalities as a center of Palestinian political life.

Palestinian political responses to its national defeat – leaving aside the uptick in violent responses – can be categorized into four types, with two at the national level and two at the local level. These are uncoordinated responses and do not reflect a broader national strategy, so they should be viewed as forms of political fragmentation. At the national level, the first response has been one of inertia and legacy, where Palestinian leaders continue to advocate for a two-state solution in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas recently



gave a full-throated defense of the creation of “an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital” during his September 2018 speech at the United Nations, with his only alternative a single “racist, apartheid state” in all of Mandatory Palestine.<sup>22</sup> What was particularly striking in Abbas’s remarks was the lack of vision, of a strategy to realistically achieve statehood. Many Palestinian leaders, most especially Abbas, have tied their entire political life and legacy to the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and simply cannot fathom the defeat of their life’s work. This is human and understandable, and that category of Palestinian leaders will go to their graves arguing for the necessity and plausibility of a two-state solution. As someone who has supported a two-state solution for four decades, I am sympathetic to them. But history has moved on, and Likud’s victory is apparent. Abbas’s hopeful but fruitless wait for the Trump administration to deliver justice to the Palestinians clearly pained him, but it was also sad and a bit pathetic.

Although this “stay the course!” approach has been the dominant approach by Abbas and the Palestinian political leadership, it has been accompanied by a second national-level approach: Admit the defeat of the Oslo peace process, dismantle the PA, and “give Israel the keys back,” forcing Israel to resume the full responsibilities of the occupying power. This approach is typically said less as a strategy and more as threat to try to scare Israel into accepting a two-state solution. PA leaders have too much vested in the “peace process” and the continuation of the PA to really relinquish that power and those perks, and to admit that their great national project has failed. Saeb Erekat, the PLO’s chief negotiator in the peace talks and briefly the nominal head of the PLO, has probably made this threat to end the PA more frequently than anyone else. But neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis take Erekat seriously, given all that he would stand to lose by ending the PA.

A more serious variant of the end-the-PA argument is one that Sari Nusseibeh publicly raised in the 1980s: Acknowledge defeat, end the nationalist struggle, and instead seek citizenship and equal rights inside an expanded Israel. In other words, create a single, binational state in all of Mandatory Palestine. While this idea was put on the back burner by the first Intifada and the subsequent Oslo process, public opinion polling done by PSR<sup>23</sup> and others indicates that it has recently been gaining greater acceptance among both Palestinian intellectuals, who accept that the two-state solution has been defeated, and by average Palestinians. To date, however, there has been no movement and no political leadership to carry this idea forward. Some form of a binational state is the likely consequence of Likud’s defeat of an independent Palestinian state, as keeping millions of Palestinians stateless and under military occupation is hardly a viable permanent solution. But we are likely a few generations away from such a reality being accepted by the Israeli body politic.

Two local responses to the Palestinian national defeat have been evident for a number of years. The first response has been the Bil’in model of nonviolent civil disobedience designed to protect Palestinian lands from further confiscation by nearby expanding Jewish settlements.<sup>24</sup> Bil’in is a Palestinian village that sits near the Green Line about 12 miles west of Ramallah in the West Bank. It became famous for its mass civil disobedience and protest march model that focused on



protecting the land. The Bil'in model gained some international and media attention, but it has yet to be fully embraced by Palestinian national leaders, who have rarely participated in the weekly marches and protests. The model was replicated to some degree in 2018 in Gaza during the "great march of return." During this weeks-long protest, thousands of unarmed Palestinians, most of whom were refugees, would gather near the fence separating Gaza from Israel to demand the right to return to their ancestral homes that are now inside Israel. While primarily an act of civil disobedience, some skirmishes ensued, leading to the death of over 100 Palestinians, most killed by Israeli snipers.

### The revival of Palestinian municipalities

The second, and likely more consequential, local response to Palestinian defeat has been the revival of Palestinian municipalities as centers of Palestinian political life. Since this argument is the third of the three broad arguments I make in this chapter, it warrants its own section, separate from the other three responses to the Palestinian defeat. Although Palestinian municipalities continue to face many challenges from both Israel and the PA (detailed below), they emerged as an important locale for Palestinian politics in the wake of the impotence of the national leadership. The revival of Palestinian municipalities was not opposed by any major actor; in fact, it became an area of unwritten agreement by all major actors, with each having its own reasons for doing so.<sup>25</sup>

Palestinian local government predates the creation of the Palestinian Authority (PA) by over a century, a fact that gives municipalities a legitimacy and gravitas that the PA does not necessarily share. Palestinian municipalities date to the late Ottoman era, beginning with the establishment of the Nablus municipality in 1869. The Ottoman Empire's Municipalities Law of 1877 ushered in the creation of new local government units, and by the time that Great Britain's Mandate of Palestine began following World War I, there were 22 municipalities in existence in Palestine (Nablus, Hebron, Jerusalem, Ramallah, Gaza, Acre, Haifa, Safad, Shifa Amr, Nazareth, Tiberius, Bisan, Jenin, Tulkarem, Lydda, Ramleh, Jaffa, Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Bir al-Saba [Beersheva], al-Majdal [Ashkelon], and Khan Yunis).<sup>26</sup> Britain's Municipalities Law of 1934 replaced the Ottoman Empire's version.

The creation of Israel in 1948 placed the West Bank and Gaza Strip on different trajectories in terms of local government. Jordan annexed the West Bank,<sup>27</sup> and increased the number of municipalities there to 25. Jordan also passed a series of its own municipalities laws (1951, 1954, and 1955), which established legal equality for municipalities on both banks of the Jordan River. By contrast, Egypt only administered the Gaza Strip and did not seek to annex it into Egypt legally. The laws of the British Mandate were mostly kept in place by Cairo. Egypt did increase the number of municipalities in the Gaza Strip, largely to help accommodate the vastly increased population caused by the refugee flows in 1948, and passed a basic law dealing with local government in 1955. When Israel conquered both territories during the 1967 war, it kept most existing municipal laws in place, although it

added a layer of military laws that it used from time to time to expel mayors, place limits on building and development, and otherwise control the broad outlines of municipal life.

By the time the PA was created in 1994, there were 139 local government units (LGUs) in the West Bank and Gaza (WBG), which included village councils; by 2007, there were 513 LGUs in the same territory, including 132 municipalities. The PA's rapid expansion of LGUs was widely seen to have gone too far, and the PA began to consolidate them, which decreased the number substantially. Although national elections for president and the legislative council (PLC) were held in 1996, LGU elections were not held until 2005. Hamas scored very well in those local elections, and also in the legislative elections in the following year. Local elections in 2012 were boycotted by Hamas and other opposition parties. However flawed they may have been, the 2012 local elections in the West Bank (and, to a lesser degree, the more limited elections of 2017) gave a sense of electoral legitimacy to local mayors and councils that the PA could not match.

### ***Fragmentation of WBG lands***

As part of the Oslo Accords, the Gaza-Jericho Agreement (1994) and full Interim Agreement (1995) split Palestinian lands in WBG into a jigsaw puzzle of control during an "interim period" that was supposed to expire in May 1999. Land on the Palestinian side of the Green Line, (the 1967 border that delineated the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, from Israel) was placed under one of five different types of control. Area A lands constituted just under 20 percent of the West Bank, and were considered under full PA civil and security control, although Israeli forces continued to routinely enter Area A lands on various security missions.<sup>28</sup> With the exception of parts of Hebron (H2) and East Jerusalem, all major Palestinian urban areas were defined as Area A. Area B lands constituted a bit over 20 percent of the West Bank and were subject to divided responsibilities, with Israel controlling security matters and the PA in charge of civil matters. Most Palestinian villages were contained in Area B. Area C lands constituted about 60 percent of the West Bank and were under full Israeli civil and security control (but not sovereignty). The Gaza Strip had a similar land configuration from 1994 to 2005, but without the use of the A-B-C metric. Jewish settlements in Gaza, along with some specified roads, were for the exclusive use of Israel and Israelis, while the PA had security and civil control over the majority of the territory. Israel's prime minister Ariel Sharon withdrew settlements and the IDF from Gaza in 2005, although border lands, sea, and airspace around and over Gaza were still controlled by Israel, with the Rafah border controlled by Egypt.<sup>29</sup>

A fourth land category under the Oslo accords was East Jerusalem with its large Palestinian majority population. East Jerusalem remained under exclusive Israeli control pending final status negotiations (still pending), although Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem (1981) is yet to be recognized by major countries. A fifth, unofficial and complex land category was created by Israel's security wall, which was not built on the 1967 border. In many parts of the West Bank, the Wall cut off

Palestinian lands from the rest of the West Bank, creating something of a no-man's-land for Palestinians. Israel has not annexed this "seam zone" but is widely expected to take such a step eventually. Conversely, in the Jerusalem area, the Wall in places falls short of the territory Israel has claimed was part of municipal Jerusalem. Thus, there are areas in al-Ram and elsewhere where Palestinians who hold Israeli ID cards and live in what is claimed by Israel to be part of Jerusalem are actually on the West Bank side of the Wall. This reality has created extra burdens on the al-Ram municipality and others, because they must as a practical matter provide services to the Palestinians living in these areas but have no taxing or legal authority over them.

The fragmentation of Palestinian lands in the West Bank has created considerable problems for LGUs, particularly with regard to Area C lands. Almost all Palestinian cities and villages have lands within their borders that are Area C lands. With few exceptions, Israel does not allow Palestinian LGUs to develop on Area C lands. Typically, any structure built on Area C lands, even those approved or built by appropriate Palestinian juridical officials, will be torn down by Israel. The inability to develop Area C lands within their boundaries has created significant inefficiencies in municipal development. As one example, the Municipality of Ramallah had to truck its trash to Jenin for disposal because the area Ramallah had identified for its municipal dump site is in Area C, and Israel did not grant use permits. Every municipality in the West Bank butts up against Area C lands, artificially driving up land prices within the LGUs; this has been especially true in the high-demand areas of Ramallah and Bethlehem. For municipal governments to function efficiently in their long-range planning for population growth and service delivery, they must have full control over Area C lands currently within their boundaries, as well as adjacent Area C lands needed for orderly growth and development.

That the large majority of the West Bank land was Area C not only hindered Palestinian LGUs from proper planning, it also made the PA's Ministry of Planning more and more irrelevant given the dearth of lands available for planning purposes.

A secondary problem emerged in some Area B lands, which held the large majority of Palestinian villages. In Area B, the PA had civil control, which included the authority to impose fees and taxes to pay for various services. However, the PA had no security authority in these areas, meaning LGUs had no legal-coercive means to ensure compliance. Whether Israel would object to the use of PA police and security forces in Area B lands appears to vary over time and space. In more sensitive areas, such as near Jerusalem, Israel has been adamant in its refusal to allow Palestinian police and security forces to operate to enforce civil authority by municipalities.<sup>30</sup> Thus, in at least some Area B lands of the West Bank, Palestinians could simply refuse to pay legal taxes and assessments, knowing Israel would likely prevent enforcement by municipal governments.

### ***Weakness of PA institutions***

PA institutions, particularly when compared to those of the larger Palestinian municipalities, are weak, often dysfunctional, and widely seen to be increasingly lacking political legitimacy. The PA suffers from five core problem areas in this regard:

### ***Legitimacy deficit***

The PA has no duly elected officials since all office terms have long since expired. Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen), elected president in 2005 following Yasir Arafat's death in November 2004, had a four-year term that expired in 2009. His term was simply extended by unilateral decree with no legal basis. Similarly, the Palestinian Legislative Council, or PLC, representatives elected to four-year terms in 2006 have not met in years. Hamas won 43 percent of the national vote in 2006, which was parlayed into a super majority of parliamentary seats by the odd hybrid system the PA had created for that election alone. Many elected Hamas representatives were subsequently arrested by Israel, and the brief civil war fought between Fatah and Hamas in 2007 further undermined any prospect for the PLC to function. Hamas subsequently created its own parallel government in Gaza, which is equally devoid of democratic legitimacy today.

Of course, a further sap on PA legitimacy comes from the dearth of progress, indeed, backsliding, on Fatah's and the PA's attempts to create a Palestinian state. Fatah, the main political faction behind the PA, banked its credibility and future on the state building project that began in 1991. Fatah's project failed, with no serious prospect of future success.

A third element that undermined PA institutional legitimacy was the split with Hamas and the loss of Gaza. The PA's inability to hold together the Palestinian body politic undermined its perceived usefulness. Some loss of political legitimacy can always be expected after the passing of 'charismatic authority' – in this case, the death of Arafat and his replacement by the more technocratic Abbas<sup>31</sup> – but the legitimacy challenge faced by the PA and its leadership was substantial.

### ***A sense of defeat***

My interviews with top PA officials during fieldwork in 2014 demonstrated a pervasive sense of defeat after two decades of the Oslo process. This was in stark contrast to the PA's early years in the 1990s, when the sense of state-building purpose was strong and widespread, particularly among top leaders (even if its institutions and policies were too often problematic). To be fair, one can hardly be surprised by such a sense of defeat, as the PA was pummeled for years: Israel under Netanyahu continued to do what it could to undermine the national project; the events of the Arab spring focused Arab attention and resources on other problems at the expense of Palestine; Hamas and its allies often sought to delegitimize the PA, even after routing Fatah forces from Gaza in 2007; and the US took the lead in trying to prevent Palestinian statehood via the United Nations. The pervasive listlessness among top PA officials contrasted with a greater sense of dynamism and energy at the local government level.

### ***PA institutional problems***

PA institutions were generally weak, with low levels of capacity. After working with and studying the PA in the 1990s, I would certainly have expected greater

institutional capacity two decades later than I actually found during fieldwork. There were exceptions, of course. For example, line ministries were more active in providing local services at the district level than had been the case previously (thanks in large part to donor assistance). To simplify a complex problem, I would argue that the biggest source of institutional weakness in the PA came from what has been called elsewhere the 'Big Man syndrome.' Specifically, PA institutions appeared to have very little institutional carry-over when a new minister, director or governor – whomever the Big Man might be – took over. 'Out with the old, in with the new' seemed to be the institutional motto, accompanied by new sets of institutional rules, processes and procedures whenever there was a change at the top. Some of these problems were dynamic and synergistic. For example, as PA legitimacy receded, it appeared there was a stronger motivation at the top to circle the wagons, institutionally speaking, further weakening institutional capacity and effectiveness.

### ***PA as net drag on municipalities***

The top-down, heavy-handed approach that the national PA institutions took toward municipalities was apparent in every municipality I studied, and was the most consistent complaint I heard from mayors and council members throughout the West Bank. Put concisely, PA ministries, and particularly the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG), treated elected municipal officials as employees of the ministry, rather than as the independent officials they legally were. The MoLG should play an enabling and coordinating role for Palestinian municipalities, but often did not.

### ***Lack of elite circulation***

PA institutions were seen by many Palestinians inside and out of government as suffering from political sclerosis. The leadership of the PA today has hardly changed over the past 25 years (except through death), with little new blood and energy infused into political leadership circles. The PA's failure to develop younger leadership has been noted for years, with Khalil Shikaki famously referring to it as the conflict between the Old Guard and the Young Guard.<sup>32</sup> The Young Guard has started to get old itself, but is still on the outside looking in. This rotation of the 'same old guys' has contributed to the lack of institutional development within the PA.

### ***Current state of municipalities***

Compared to the PA, the state of municipal institutions is generally better, with more legitimacy and energy, albeit with significant weaknesses as well. To summarize:

#### ***Greater legitimacy***

Municipalities, and in particular the older and larger ones, have enjoyed significantly higher rates of political legitimacy than does the PA. There have been three

underlying causes for this higher level of political legitimacy. First, the mayors and council members of West Bank municipalities were generally elected much more recently than PA officials, primarily in 2012 and some more recently in 2017, so they have enjoyed an electoral legitimacy that the unelected – or expired elected – officials of the PA have not. Elections have consequences, including bestowing political legitimacy upon the victors. Critics of both the 2012 and 2017 local elections point to the fact that they were boycotted by Hamas and other opposition groups, and often had a single list or slate of candidates. This is true. However, the community process that debated, compromised and put together that slate of candidates often practiced a more traditional form of consensual democracy (as opposed to contested democracy). Warts and all, there is no question that the electoral process that brought these candidates to power also brought them a greater level of political legitimacy for the legal duration of their terms of office.

A second source of municipal legitimacy, particularly for the larger municipalities, has been their long history. As noted earlier, most of the largest municipalities in both the West Bank and Gaza date back to Ottoman rule in Palestine, and many had a rich history under subsequent British, Jordanian/Egyptian, and Israeli rule, well before the PA was created. The mayors of Nablus, Hebron and Ramallah have a legitimacy and gravitas that come with an office that has represented Palestinian interests for many decades.

### ***Energy***

The mayors, council members and municipal administrators with whom I interacted consistently had higher levels of energy and motivation than national PA leaders and administrators, born of their electoral victories and the need to deliver services, help development along, and generally get stuff done at the local level. As well, while local officials certainly must live with the impacts of the conflict with Israel (Area C problems, for example), they are not caught up in the national-level ebb and flow of peace negotiations, UN drama, responding to the newest Israeli offensive against Gaza, and dealing with the challenge of Hamas. Rather, municipal officials can focus their energy on service delivery and good governance issues.

### ***Weaknesses and variability***

Still, there is no question that Palestinian municipalities have had their share of institutional weaknesses and problems. There has been significant variation in outcomes between larger and smaller municipalities. The bigger the municipality, the more likely it is to have effective institutions; the opposite is true for the smaller municipalities. As well, municipalities are not immune from the Big Man syndrome, when a new mayor may not be particularly interested in adopting extant institutional processes. But by far the biggest source of weakness for municipalities has been the lack of control over resources, both land and money. I have already noted some of the problems that arise from the lack of municipal control over Area C

lands that fall within their boundaries. Municipalities also have only partial control over revenues that rightfully belong to them, not the PA. For example, a common municipal complaint was that property taxes did not get returned to the municipalities, in whole or in part, by the PA's Ministry of Finance. Property taxes generally make up 40 to 50 percent of municipal revenues, so this was not a trivial matter.<sup>33</sup> As well, there is little transparency in the Ministry of Finance's property tax records, nor regularity in the schedule of disbursements.

### ***Most common and important themes among municipalities***

The following list summarizes the most important challenges currently facing Palestinian municipalities:

- 1 **Hampered by the PA/MoLG.** Palestinian municipalities consistently viewed the PA, and especially the MoLG, as obstacles to good and effective governance, and resented the patronizing view taken by unelected ministry officials toward elected local representatives.
- 2 **Lack of legal clarity.** There has been a lack of legal clarity on the roles and responsibilities at every level of the PA for municipal officials. This complaint has been present since the very beginning of the PA in the 1990s, was not made significantly clearer by the 1997 LGU law and has remained a perpetual complaint without resolution. The PA may even have had a political reason for not clarifying roles and responsibilities and may benefit politically from such ambiguity.
- 3 **Area C.** Total Israeli control over Area C lands – 60 percent of the West Bank – impedes planning for growth and development in virtually every LGU on the West Bank and creates multiple dysfunctions in local government. The inability of municipalities to enforce civil decisions in Area B lands has also been problematic, but not on the same level as the Area C issue.
- 4 **Control over revenues.** All municipalities complain about insufficient revenues – this is a common and unfixable theme around the world – and Palestinian local governments are no different. Palestinian municipalities rarely received the 90 percent of the property taxes they were supposed to get back from the PA, rarely got the money in a fixed and timely manner, and rarely had a full and transparent accounting of the property taxes.

The dichotomy between the political lethargy found at national Palestinian levels and the relative energy and problem-solving focus found at the municipal level in the West Bank is striking. An obvious question follows: why have Palestinian political institutions enjoyed more success and dynamism at the local level than at the national level?

### ***Between Niccolo Machiavelli and the goddess Necessitas***

The short answer to why Palestinian municipalities have enjoyed relative success in spite of all their challenges while Palestinian national institutions have largely failed

is this: While Likud and its allies have consistently tried to defeat the Palestinian national project (successfully so), there is a long history of Likud (and larger Israeli) support for the idea of relatively capable Palestinian local government. Strong Palestinian local government in the absence of strong national leadership provides a route for Likud to exercise control over the West Bank without the necessity of providing local services to Palestinians or extending citizenship rights to them. Indeed, this was the cornerstone vision for Menachem Begin in Israel's 1979 peace treaty with Egypt: Palestinians could have relatively robust local-level autonomy to provide necessary social services (health care, education, trash collection, road maintenance, etc.) while Israel would maintain overall control over the land and its resources. In large measure, Begin's approach was not too different from Jordan's approach to the West Bank for the two decades prior to the 1967 war: Robust municipal governance was encouraged, but no Palestinian nationalist organizing was tolerated.<sup>34</sup>

While Israel's ideological acceptance of Palestinian municipal governance is clear, in practice, it has been more complicated. The first rounds of Palestinian municipal elections in 1974 and 1976 produced mayors with a strong pro-PLO inclination, leading Israel to take steps to partly nullify those results, including the deportation of some mayors. The 'Village Leagues' program of the 1980s was Likud's ineffectual attempt to create an alternative to municipal leaders. The overriding problem for Israel was to find effective Palestinian municipal leaders who were not overly nationalist in their ideological orientation. Jordan was rather effective at doing so in the 1950s and 1960s, but Palestinian society was significantly different then. Thus far, Israel's ideological predilection for good Palestinian municipal leaders who are mostly uninterested in national politics has not born much fruit. But when Netanyahu speaks about Palestinian leadership in a "state minus," this is what he likely has in mind, as it has a long history and is consistent, in a Machiavellian sort of way, with Likud goals for a permanent "solution" to the status of the West Bank.

Palestinian social support for effective municipal government is much more straightforward: People have lives to lead, families to care for, and need various social services at the local level. Such support for local, face-to-face government is universal, and Palestinians have practiced it within the institutional construct of municipalities for 150 years. However, the national movement waxed and waned historically, Palestinian support for good local government remained constant. But since Palestinian municipalities have a history and a legitimacy that predate the Palestinian Authority, it has been easier for Palestinians to rely on such local government without reference to or concern about what is happening at the national level. The challenge for Palestinians is how to find a political path forward that allows for robust municipal governance without falling into the Machiavellian designs of Netanyahu and Likud.

Because Palestinian municipal governance is supported by all major actors – Israeli, Palestinian, and international – it will likely continue to be promoted in any political talks that might occur around a Trump proposal for the so-called "Deal of the Century." While such a deal is almost certainly stillborn, the idea that Palestinian national governance could be replaced by local government entities inside the



West Bank will likely continue as long as Netanyahu and the Trump administration are in power, and Gulf leadership prefers to focus on Iran as the primary regional problem. Palestinian municipal government is no substitute for a national solution to this conflict, and the American termination of aid to the Palestinians will put even more pressure on already strained municipal budgets in Palestine. Still, given their broadly accepted status, expect this revival of Palestinian municipalities to continue well into the future.

The death of the Palestinian state building project likely means we will witness persistent low intensity conflict in the 'holy land' for many years to come, a new Belfast in the Middle East, with continuing cycles of violence. Netanyahu appears prepared to continue to take advantage of this situation, confiscating more lands, building more settlements, encouraging Palestinian emigration, perhaps even formally annexing parts of the West Bank. Encouraging relatively functional Palestinian municipal government is consistent with such plans as it tries to substitute local autonomy for national independence. Palestinians, by contrast, appear to have no current coherent response, no strategy for the end of the state building enterprise. Hence, Palestinian politics have fragmented, and will likely stay that way for a long period to come. But relatively strong municipal government is also consistent with such fragmentation; people need services and planning to live decent lives, even in the absence of national independence. International donors will find local actors a good target for investment, be it municipal government, community civil society organizations, or local infrastructure projects. All signs point to the continued growth of municipal governance in the West Bank. Keeping millions of people stateless but with decent local services is no substitute for a real resolution to the conflict but is the most likely outcome in the years ahead.

## Notes

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- 5 To read these conditions, see "Israel's Road Map Reservations," *Haaretz*, May 27, 2003, [www.haaretz.com/1.5471994](http://www.haaretz.com/1.5471994).
- 6 See my *Building a Palestinian State*; Yezid Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State: The Palestinian National Movement, 1949–1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

- 7 See my “The Politics of Legal Reform in Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Autumn 1997).
- 8 A more detailed discussion of Areas A, B, and C can be found under the subheading “Fragmentation of WBG Lands,” in the section entitled “The Revival of Palestinian Municipalities.”
- 9 Peace Now, 2018, found at <http://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population>.
- 10 See the polling data gathered by Khalil Shikaki at the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research. Shikaki has recently summarized these data in “Do Palestinians Still Support the Two-State Solution? Why Israeli Settlements Are the Greatest Obstacle to Peace,” *Foreign Affairs* (online), September 12, 2018 (behind a paywall).
- 11 Amos Harel, “Has the IDF Become an Army of Settlers?” *Haaretz*, May 9, 2010. For more scholarly treatment on the changing social background of flag officers in the IDF (where the settler presence is less pronounced), see work done by Oren Barak and Eyal Tsur, including “Continuity and Change in the Social Background of Israel’s Military Elite,” *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Spring 2012).
- 12 A 2014 map of settlements by B’tselem can be found here, [www.btselem.org/download/201411\\_btselem\\_map\\_of\\_wb\\_eng.pdf](http://www.btselem.org/download/201411_btselem_map_of_wb_eng.pdf).
- 13 The Labor party was formed in 1968 through a merger of two smaller parties with Mapai, the ideological forerunner of Labor. For simplicity’s sake, I use the term Labor throughout, instead of bouncing back and forth between Mapai and Labor.
- 14 For solid histories of the settlement movement, see Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land: The War Over Israel’s Settlements in the Occupied Territories, 1967–2007* (New York: Nation Books, 2007); Gershom Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire: Israel and the Birth of the Settlements, 1967–1977* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007). On how Israel was seen to have distorted law to justify settlements on occupied territory, see Raja Shehadeh, *Occupier’s Law: Israel and the West Bank* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1988).
- 15 Gorenberg, *The Accidental Empire*.
- 16 Cited in Seth Anziska’s excellent new book, *Preventing Palestine: A Political History from Camp David to Oslo* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 250.
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- 20 “MBS: Palestinians should ‘accept Trump proposals or shut up’” at [www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/mbs-palestinians-accept-trump-proposals-shut-180430065228281.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/mbs-palestinians-accept-trump-proposals-shut-180430065228281.html).
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- 23 The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, founded and run by Khalil Shikaki, regularly polls Palestinians on their support for a two-state solution, including most recently in Public Opinion Poll No. 73, 22 September 2019, found at <http://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/775>. For an essay that draws on PSR survey data to argue for the dissolution of the PA, see Hamada Jaber, “Dissolve the PA and Embrace a One-State Solution Strategy Now”, PSR Strategic Analysis Unit, September 2019, found at: [http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/5%20One%20state%20solution\\_Hamada%20Jaber%20in%20design%20English%20transl.pdf](http://www.pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/5%20One%20state%20solution_Hamada%20Jaber%20in%20design%20English%20transl.pdf)
- 24 For an overview of this effort see *al-Jazeera*, February 19, 2016, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2016/bilin-israeli-occupation-separation-wall/index.html>.
- 25 Much of the information in this section was gathered during three weeks of fieldwork in the West Bank in October 2014 for a USAID project and subsequent report on Palestinian local government.

- 26 Riyada Consulting, *Towards Supporting the Relationship Between the MoLG and LGUs in the West Bank* (August 2009), p. 9, [www.molg.pna.ps/studies/TowardSupportingRel.Bet.MoLG%26LGUs-Final-English.pdf](http://www.molg.pna.ps/studies/TowardSupportingRel.Bet.MoLG%26LGUs-Final-English.pdf).
- 27 Only Great Britain and Pakistan formally recognized Jordan's annexation of the West Bank.
- 28 Calculating percentages of territory of the West Bank is fraught with peril. When Palestinians calculate percentages, they typically include all areas occupied during the 1967 war, which would include East Jerusalem, the Latrun area, and the northwest quadrant of the Dead Sea (which is attached to the West Bank under international law). Israeli calculations do not include these areas, making for a smaller overall pie, and thus giving higher percentages for lands under Palestinian control (or offered during the peace process for a Palestinian state). Conversely, Palestinian figures are lower by comparison. The figures used in this report follow the standard representation, which are the Israeli figures.
- 29 Sharon's close confidant, Dov Weisglass, famously laid out the logic of Israel's 2005 Gaza disengagement plan – to freeze the broader peace process – in an interview with Ari Shavit in *Haaretz*, October 7, 2004, [www.haaretz.com/1.4710587](http://www.haaretz.com/1.4710587).
- 30 Interview with Mayor of al-Ram, October 2014.
- 31 Ali Jarbawi and Wendy Pearlman, "Struggle in a Post-Charisma Transition: Rethinking Palestinian Politics after Arafat," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2007).
- 32 See for example Khalil Shikaki, "Palestinians Divided," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 1 (January–February 2002). I looked at this issue extensively, noting the tension between the outside 'Oslo elite' and the inside 'Intifada elite'. See my *Building a Palestinian State*.
- 33 PA officials respond by noting that Israel deducts any outstanding electricity and water bills owed by Palestinian customers from money transfers to the PA; thus, the PA keeps property taxes to make up for the deductions. The problem with this argument is that there is no transparency in the PA records, so the LGUs have no way to know exactly what was collected, what was deducted and thus the amount of property tax to be returned.
- 34 Moshe Ma'oz, *Palestinian Leadership on the West Bank: The Changing Role of the Mayors Under Jordan and Israel* (Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 1984).

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# 10

## COPING WITH AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT

### Israel and Iran under Netanyahu

*Steven R. David*

Benjamin Netanyahu has consistently viewed Iran as the greatest threat to Israeli security. This belief emerged during his first tenure as prime minister, from 1996 to 1999, and intensified during his second stint as Israel's leader beginning in 2009. Not only did Netanyahu view Iran as Israel's primary adversary, he also saw Iran as challenging the very existence of Israel, often comparing the danger it presented to the Holocaust. It would be difficult to conceive of any major foreign policy initiative under Netanyahu that did not take into account its impact on the challenge posed by Iran. By all indications, Netanyahu's relentless focus on Iran was not a tactical move to gain advantages elsewhere, but reflected a deeply held conviction that for Israel, no issue was more critical than responding to the Iranian threat.

This chapter examines the relationship between Iran and Israel under Netanyahu. Of particular importance will be a consideration of whether and how Iran posed an existential threat to Israel, and if Netanyahu's policies proved effective in meeting that threat. The chapter unfolds in four parts. I first present a brief historical background of Israeli-Iranian relations. I then consider Israeli policy under Netanyahu with special attention given to his efforts to derail the Iran nuclear agreement. An examination of why Iran is said to endanger Israel's existence, both through conventional and nuclear arms, follows. I conclude with an overall assessment of Netanyahu's approach toward Iran.

#### **Historical background**

Given the level of enmity between Iran and Israel during Netanyahu's tenure, it is easy to believe that relations have always been toxic, but that is hardly the case. As befits two countries that are both outliers in their region, share no border and have no territorial designs on each other, Israel and Iran have enjoyed a long history of cordial relations. The relatively recent enmity between the two states, therefore, is more of an anomaly than is often appreciated.<sup>1</sup>

The history of Israeli-Iranian relations can be traced to the Bible, where the Book of Ezra describes how the Persian king, Cyrus the Great, allowed the Jewish exiles in Babylonia to return to their homeland of Judea and rebuild their destroyed Temple. Despite Cyrus's edict, many of the exiles remained in what was then Persia, continuing a tradition of a Jewish community in Iran that has persisted for over 2,700 years. At the United Nations in 1947, Iran opposed the creation of Israel (preferring a federal state composed of Jews and Arabs) but quickly warmed up to the Jewish state once it became a reality. Under the Shah, Iran provided *de facto* recognition of Israel in March 1950, becoming only the second Muslim majority country (after Turkey) to do so. Relations developed over time with Israel eventually establishing an "interests" section in Tehran that functioned as an embassy while Iran maintained a consulate general in Jerusalem. Although the Shah never formally recognized Israel, the two states engaged in extensive, albeit quiet cooperation. Israel eagerly embraced Iran as a friendly country in an otherwise hostile region. Developing close ties to Iran was an outgrowth of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion's "Periphery Doctrine," which maintained that if Israel could not make friends with its Arab neighbors, it would endeavor to establish cordial relations with the neighbors of its neighbors.<sup>2</sup> As a non-Arab, Shiite country, Iran was a natural ally of Israel against the mostly Sunni Arab world. For the Shah, closer ties with Israel meant gaining a powerful supporter in his fight against Iran's Arab adversaries. While Israel would have welcomed an open relationship, the Shah believed that overtly cooperating with Israel would engender Arab hostility, and so kept their ties private (although their existence was well known by others in the region).<sup>3</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s, Israel and Iran worked together on several fronts. Iran sold Israel much needed oil at a time when few other suppliers were willing to do so. Israel gave Iran critical help to improve its lagging agricultural sector, provided key assistance to the Iranian military and – especially controversial – enhanced the effectiveness of its secret police (the notorious Savak).<sup>4</sup> Relations cooled after the 1967 War, with the Shah becoming a vocal critic of Israel's occupation of Arab land. As the Arab world united in anger against Israel, maintaining close economic and security ties became increasingly difficult to justify for Tehran. Relations between the two states worsened further during the 1973 War as the Shah supported Egypt and Syria at a time when Israel's very existence was called into question. Making matters worse, the 1975 Algiers Accord between Iraq and Iran in which the Shah ended support for the Iraqi Kurds in order to conclude a deal with Saddam Hussein was seen in Israel (and elsewhere) as a brutal betrayal of the Kurds who had long received Israeli support. The accord also seemingly moved Iran closer to Saddam, who made no secret of his desire to destroy Israel. Nevertheless, the common threat presented by the Arab world ensured that Israel and Iran would continue to cooperate, sometimes quietly (as in the security sphere) and sometimes (as in Iran's refusal to join the Arab oil embargo) openly. These ties even included efforts in the late 1970s to jointly produce a ballistic missile that may have been capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.<sup>5</sup>

In one sense, all changed in February 1979 with the toppling of the Shah by the Ayatollah Khomeini, creating the Islamic Republic of Iran. Everything the Shah did was suspect, with no policy held more in contempt than Iran's cozy relationship with Israel. Instead of a sometime secret friend, Israel was now seen as an enemy of Islam, as the "little Satan" that must be destroyed. Anti-Israel fervor morphed into anti-Semitism, as the Jewish community of Iran that numbered 80,000 to 100,000 eventually shrunk to between 25,000 and 30,000.<sup>6</sup> Khomeini severed all official relations with Israel, turning over its interest section to the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Iran began actively supporting extremist anti-Israeli organizations, including playing a major role in the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon in the early 1980s, which gave Tehran for the first time the ability to militarily strike Israel.<sup>7</sup> The intense enmity between the two states proved short lived, however, following Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980. Demonstrating the power of geopolitics over ideology, the Iranian regime, fighting for its life, turned to the hated Israelis for support. Israel, seeing Saddam Hussein's Iraq as the greater danger, proved happy to oblige. It provided critical military assistance, including advisers and spare parts that enabled Iran to keep its tanks running and planes flying. It is not an exaggeration to assert that without Israeli help, the Khomeini regime might well have been toppled by the Iraqi onslaught.<sup>8</sup>

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 1991 restored the Israeli-Iranian discord. The Iranians no longer needed Israeli help against a weakened Saddam who had just suffered a humiliating defeat and could no longer turn to the USSR for help. Israel too looked at Iran with different eyes. With Iraq no longer posing much of a threat, and a cold peace holding with Egypt, Israeli political and military leaders viewed Iran as the country most likely to endanger its security. Unlike in the 1980s, when ideology and interest conflicted, now they acted in lockstep. Two countries whose world views stood in opposition also threatened one another, creating a perfect storm for renewed antagonism. Neither leadership wasted any time in turning against the other. In Yitzhak Rabin's final term as prime minister (1992–1995) he made it clear that the Periphery Doctrine had ended, with Israel's principal threat no longer coming from the Arab world, but from Iran.<sup>9</sup> For its part, Iran and its proxies launched a mini war against Israel and Jewish interests to include increased support for Hezbollah and other rejectionist groups, while backing attacks such as those against the Israeli embassy and Jewish community center in Argentina in the early 1990s.

## Israel under Netanyahu

Upon assuming the leadership of Israel in 1996, Netanyahu ordered a fresh assessment of relations with Iran. The Israeli military reaffirmed Rabin's contention that Iran had replaced Iraq as Israel's chief enemy, given its growing capabilities (especially in the development of ballistic missiles) and its repeated statements calling for Israel's destruction. The military leadership also invoked

Iran's developing nuclear program as a potential existential threat. In contrast, Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, argued that Iran's growing military capabilities were largely defensive and directed at Iraq, which should be restored as Israel's main adversary. Netanyahu initially accepted Mossad's assessment and reached out to Iran in an effort to reestablish warm relations. The mullahs, however, continued their anti-Israel stance, motivated both by their hatred of the Jewish state and their desire to curry favor with the Arab world. By 1997, Netanyahu's brief fling with Iran ended, and the mutual hatred, name calling and hostile actions on both sides resumed.<sup>10</sup> Netanyahu would never again seek a detente with Iran, whose Islamist regime he was convinced sought nothing less than the destruction of Israel.

Netanyahu regained the leadership of Israel in February 2009, at a time when Iran was rapidly developing its nuclear capabilities. Despite avowing never to build a nuclear weapon, the Iranian regime constructed thousands of centrifuges whose purified uranium could serve as a fuel for a nuclear bomb and a nuclear reactor at Arak whose production of plutonium could do the same. Netanyahu lost no time in making it clear that his second administration would be focused on dealing with the threat posed by Iran, especially its acquisition of nuclear capabilities. In his inaugural speech, he noted that Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's threats to destroy Israel

are accepted by the world without firm condemnation, almost as routine. The Jewish people have learned their lesson not to dismiss megalomaniac dictators threatening to exterminate us. Unlike the Holocaust, when we had no salvation, today we are not without a shield. We have a state and we know how to defend it.<sup>11</sup>

Virtually every meeting with a foreign leader and in nearly every major foreign policy speech, Netanyahu highlighted the Iranian threat and the world's seeming indifference to it.

Netanyahu's stance placed him in direct opposition to America's president, Barack Obama. American and Israeli policy both maintained that Iran should not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons but agreed on little else. Netanyahu saw Iran as an implacable existential threat whose possession of a nuclear capability would give it the means to carry out its many promises to destroy Israel. As such, any and all efforts had to be employed to prevent Iran from gaining the ability to produce nuclear weapons, while at the same time, international sanctions and other means needed to be applied to try to topple the Iranian leadership. Obama, on the other hand, saw the possibility of Iran emerging as a responsible and moderate stakeholder in the region, if only it was not isolated and threatened. By reaching out to Iran, there was a hope that its moderate and pro-Western population would come to the fore, producing policies that would ensure peace and stability for the region. Iran's nuclear developments were troubling, to be sure, but the way to deal with the nuclear threat and bring Iran back into the community of nations was to



conclude an agreement that would curb its nuclear ambitions while granting the respect it craved.<sup>12</sup>

These views clashed at their first meeting as leaders of their countries in May 2009 and continued until Obama's presidency ended in 2017. Throughout this time, Israel urgently requested that in any agreement Iran should not be allowed to enrich any uranium or, at worst, token amounts, that the US intensify global sanctions against Iran and that the threat of an American military attack be made more credible.<sup>13</sup> Obama followed through on some of these demands. The US pushed Iran to constrain its uranium enrichment capabilities. American financial might penalized countries trading and investing in Iran, denying them access to the international financial system, thus causing US allies to join in what became a nearly worldwide effort causing Iran tremendous economic pain. Obama repeatedly emphasized that "all options were on the table," keeping alive the prospect of an American military attack.

Nevertheless, the American actions did nothing to mollify Netanyahu. The Israeli prime minister wanted to eliminate Iranian enrichment, not simply reduce it. Most observers saw this as unachievable, given Iran's view of enrichment as symbolizing its very independence to say little of providing it with fuel for its allegedly peaceful program. The economic sanctions did indeed bite Iran, but they were never enough for Netanyahu who believed even more forceful sanctions would drive the Iranian regime to its knees, and perhaps topple it. Nor was Netanyahu impressed by Obama's hints at military action. After America's debacle in Iraq, few believed the United States would go to war against another Middle Eastern country. When Obama retreated from his self-declared red line in Syria in the summer of 2013, refraining from punishing Assad's use of chemical weapons after promising to do so, what little credibility that Washington would use force against Iran vanished.<sup>14</sup>

Recognizing that the United States would not stop Iran, Netanyahu embarked on a two-track strategy. First, he threatened to attack Iran on his own. He quietly issued several warnings to Washington that he was going to strike Iranian nuclear facilities, with the most likely times occurring between 2010–2012. Nevertheless, he did not attack. The reason may have been the opposition of his security chiefs including Meir Dagan, the head of Mossad, Yuval Diskin, the director of Shin Bet, and the IDF Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi, some of whom may have leaked plans to launch an attack to the Obama administration in order to derail it.<sup>15</sup> Whether Netanyahu would have struck the Iranian facilities on his own, or whether he was just threatening to do so to gain leverage with the United States is not known. What is clear is that a strike would have been a risky proposition. To be successful, Israel would have had to destroy multiple, hidden, and hardened targets over a thousand miles away only to have to repeat the attack every few years if Iran chose to rebuild. The international reaction and Iranian response would have been devastating. Such an attack would certainly have been far more daunting and costly than Israel's previous destructions of nuclear facilities in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007).<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Netanyahu had the right equipment at his disposal (mostly supplied by the US) to have a reasonable chance of setting back Iran's program.



Perhaps most important, the mere threat of an attack did much to spur the US to intensify sanctions and push Iran toward making greater nuclear concessions than otherwise would have been the case.

At the same time that the prospect of an attack was pending, Netanyahu acted to slow Iranian nuclear progress by other means. Israel and the United States working together launched a computer worm, code named Stuxnet, to undermine Iranian centrifuges. The worm succeeded in disabling over a thousand centrifuges, but in time, Iran was able to do a work around and continue its march toward a nuclear weapons capability.<sup>17</sup> Israel is also believed to have killed key members of the Iranian nuclear team. In an action reminiscent of an Israeli operation in the 1960s that crippled Nasser's missile program by targeting German scientists, Mossad reportedly killed several Iranian nuclear scientists by attaching bombs to their cars. Unlike the operation against the Germans, however, the killing of the Iranians delayed, but did not stop Tehran's nuclear program.<sup>18</sup>

Netanyahu also launched a diplomatic offensive against the Iran nuclear deal. In September 2012, at the height of Israeli preparations for an attack, Netanyahu gave a speech at the UN, complete with a cartoon drawing of a bomb with a red line showing when Iran would have enough 90 percent enriched uranium for a nuclear bomb. It was an open invitation for Obama to act, with the threat that Israel would attack if the United States did not.<sup>19</sup> Less than six months later, in January 2013, Netanyahu won his third term as prime minister, campaigning against the Iranian threat. Netanyahu's efforts to undermine the Iran deal would hit new obstacles, however. In June 2013, Hassan Rouhani became president of Iran. In direct contrast to his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Rouhani projected a much more moderate image, making opposition to the Iran deal all the more difficult. Complicating matters still further, despite Netanyahu's vociferous objections, an interim agreement was concluded with Iran, the US, the other permanent members of the Security Council and Germany (P5 + 1) that laid the basis for a more permanent agreement. Netanyahu appeared to be losing his war against the Iran deal.

In a desperate attempt to stop the Iran agreement from moving forward, Netanyahu accepted an invitation from Speaker of the House John Boehner to address a joint session of Congress in March 2015. In an unprecedented move, the invitation was extended without notifying either the Democrats or President Obama. It is difficult to exaggerate the extraordinary nature of this event. A foreign leader had been invited to Congress against the wishes of the president with the express purpose of attacking that president's policies. Netanyahu did not disappoint. He issued a blistering attack on the Iran deal asserting that "(the deal) doesn't block Iran's path to the bomb; it paves Iran's path to the bomb." He went on to argue that sanctions needed to be kept on Iran until a better deal was reached with provisions that included forcing Iran to change its behavior in the Middle East – a major departure from negotiations that had focused solely on Iran's nuclear developments.<sup>20</sup> Netanyahu essentially argued that Obama was selling out the security not only of Israel but of the United States. Underscoring the partisan nature of Netanyahu's speech,

58 Democratic senators and representatives chose not to attend, an astonishing number given the traditional pro-Israeli stance of the Democratic Party.

In the short term, Netanyahu's speech accomplished little more than exacerbating already tense relations with an Obama administration that had provided unprecedented military and diplomatic support for Israel.<sup>21</sup> Congress could still stop the deal if more than 34 senators voted to oppose it. Instead, 42 senators, voted to support the agreement guaranteeing that Obama did not even have to exercise a veto to preserve the agreement. Netanyahu had seemingly suffered a major setback. Not only had he lost a major diplomatic initiative, he worsened relations with the United States while calling into question the bipartisan nature of American support for Israel. It all appeared for nothing as four months after Netanyahu's speech, the nuclear deal was concluded. The country that had threatened Israel's very existence had achieved, in Netanyahu's view, the means to wreak the destruction it had long promised.

As many have learned, however, counting Netanyahu out before the dust fully settles is a fool's errand. The surprise election of Donald Trump, an avowed opponent of the Iran deal, transformed what looked like a major defeat for Netanyahu into a stunning victory. At first, Trump merely decertified the Iran deal, but kept the agreement intact. That changed following a daring raid by Israeli agents into an Iranian warehouse that uncovered thousands of documents revealing a major covert Iranian effort to develop nuclear weapons. Although these efforts apparently ended in 2003, this did not change the realization that Iran had blatantly lied about its past activities to weaponize its nuclear program while keeping the blueprints available to restart it should it decide to do so. Netanyahu briefed Trump on the raid and, a few days later, the president pulled out of the agreement.<sup>22</sup> Although Iran and the other signatories agreed to keep the deal alive, the threat of continued American sanctions against countries doing business with Iran deprived Tehran of any significant economic benefits to the agreement, raising the possibility of bringing about its eventual demise.

Even though Netanyahu's efforts against Iran centered on the nuclear deal, Tehran's aggressive expansion throughout the Middle East also drew his attention. During the years of Netanyahu's tenure, Iran expanded its influence in the Middle East to the point where it dominated or at least had a major say in the policies of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Civil wars in Syria and Iraq gave Iran the opportunity to project its power through the deployment of its elite Quds force (in Syria) to protect the beleaguered regime of Bashar Al Assad from multiple threats, and its support of Shia militias in Iraq proved critical in ensuring the survival of its regime from the threat mounted by ISIS.<sup>23</sup> Iran's longstanding backing of Hezbollah in Lebanon paid dividends as the group came to dominate Lebanese politics. In Yemen, Iran's backing of the Houthis gave it a foothold in a strategically located state with close ties to Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Iran's continuing development of ballistic missiles (many with the range to hit Israel), growing cyber-capabilities, and increased naval presence raised the specter of an Iranian dominated Middle East.

Netanyahu saw Iran's increasing reach as posing an unacceptable threat to Israel. Hezbollah and its tens of thousands of missiles trained on Israel had already become an established fact and Netanyahu did not want to see that threat duplicated elsewhere, most pointedly in Syria where Iran had established a military presence complete with drones, surface to air missiles and rockets. As such, under Netanyahu's leadership, a proxy war began with Iran, that lasted throughout his time in office. Israel launched over 150 air strikes in Syria, many of them designed to frustrate Iran's desire for a permanent military presence. These attacks killed hundreds of Syrian and Iranian troops, including an Iranian general. For the most part, the Israeli strikes went unanswered, but that changed in May 2018 when the Quds force fired some 20 Fajr-5 rockets toward Israel, doing little harm but dramatically raising tensions. Israel retaliated with surface to surface missiles and air attacks, marking the first time that Iranian and Israeli forces directly clashed.<sup>24</sup> Netanyahu's goal of limiting Tehran's footprint in Syria had been met for the time being, but only at the risk of one day plunging Israel and Iran into a full blown war.

As Netanyahu's third term in office continued, he could look on his policies toward Iran with some satisfaction. The future of the despised Iran nuclear deal seemed very much in doubt. The election of Donald Trump gave Netanyahu a powerful partner that, like him, sought to confront Iran rather than engage it. From Netanyahu's perspective, with America at his side, the Iranian threat had been contained, seemingly justifying his alarmist posture.

### **Was Netanyahu justified in labeling Iran as an existential threat?**

Netanyahu's focus – some would say obsession – with Iran stemmed from his conviction that it presented an existential threat toward Israel. Netanyahu's assessment of the Iranian threat raises two questions. First, did he have good reason to consider Iran a threat to Israel's very survival? Second, were the policies he followed, particularly his relentless opposition to the Iran nuclear deal, the best way to meet the threat posed by Iran? As will be seen, while there is much to support Netanyahu's assessment of the Iranian threat, his efforts to meet that threat by working to undermine the Iran nuclear deal are on far shakier ground.

Netanyahu's view that Iran posed an existential threat to Israel stemmed from the statements of its leaders and their capabilities to carry out their intentions. Since the Islamic revolution, Iranian leaders have continually called for the destruction of Israel. At a speech delivered at the 2005 "World Without Zionism Conference" (the title of which tells much) the then Iranian President Ahmadinejad declared that the "occupying regime [Israel] must be wiped off the map."<sup>25</sup> Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei, demonstrated his hatred of Israel (and ease with modern technology) by tweeting in 2018, "Our stance against Israel is the same stance we have always taken. Israel is a malignant cancerous tumor in the West Asian region that has to be removed and eradicated: It is possible and it will happen."<sup>26</sup> These remarks and many like them, along with crowds routinely chanting "Death

to Israel” (along with “Death to America”), suggest that many in Iran do indeed wish to eradicate Israel from the face of the earth.

The declarations of Iranian leaders are indeed alarming, but there is some question as to whether they mean what they say. Iranian threats may stem from a desire to whip up domestic support rather than an actual intention to destroy Israel. It may also reflect an effort to gain leadership in the Arab world by championing the Palestinian cause. Moreover, Iranian rhetoric has cooled over the years. President Rouhani, in marked contrast to his predecessor, tweeted a Happy New Year’s greeting to Jews on Rosh Hashana, referring to their “shared Abrahamic roots.”<sup>27</sup> Even Khamenei toned down his words, claiming that he never wished to throw the Jews into the sea and that Israel’s fate should be determined by a popular referendum to be held (with only those whose ancestors lived in Israel 100 years ago participating) to decide its future.<sup>28</sup> Not the most charitable of offers, to be sure, but one that at least does not call for the violent destruction of Israel.

More important, even if the statements from Iran’s leadership are taken at face value, many question whether it has the *capability* to destroy Israel. On the conventional side, Iran is hardly a regional superpower. According to the Military Balance, Iran’s active military forces are 523,000, which includes 125,000 of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, and 200,000 conscripts, supported by a defense budget of USD\$16 billion.<sup>29</sup> These figures do not take into account that its conscripts are poorly trained, its air force is a mess, most of its equipment is old, and it lacks spare parts to maintain what it has. As such, it is unable to project power much beyond its own country.<sup>30</sup> Compare this to Israel with a defense budget of USD\$18.5 billion, top-of-the-line equipment, superbly trained and motivated soldiers, and an active force of 176,500 and a reserve of 465,000.<sup>31</sup> That Israel is more than a thousand miles away from Iran further diminishes the threat from Tehran. When one compares Iran not only to Israel, but to its other regional adversaries, the notion of Iran conquering the region and disposing of states it does not like becomes even more fanciful. As the political scientist Stephen Walt notes, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and the UAE together have defense budgets that are more than five times that of Iran, which has the added handicap of being a Persian Shi’ite power confronting a hostile Middle East that is 90 percent Sunni.<sup>32</sup> It is true that Iran’s proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza wield tens of thousands of rockets and missiles that could inflict grievous harm on Israel. Iran’s control of these forces (with the exception of Hezbollah), however, is far from absolute. If they do attack, Israel’s Iron Dome defensive system combined with vigorous counter strikes could limit any damage to tolerable levels especially given that the militants know that pushing Israel too far will bring about their destruction.

It is of course the nuclear threat that has most animated Netanyahu and it is easy to see why. Israel’s small size and concentrated population – almost half of its people live in the three cities of Haifa, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv – means that even a handful of nuclear weapons would end Israel as a state. Given Iran’s repeated declarations that it seeks to destroy Israel, and its robust nuclear program that the

Mossad operation revealed had been intended to develop nuclear weapons, any Israeli leader would have to be concerned.

A case can be made, however, that while a certain wariness is warranted, Netanyahu's preoccupation with the Iranian nuclear threat is overblown. First, Iran does not have any nuclear weapons. Assuming the nuclear deal holds, it would take Iran at least a year to "break out" and produce nuclear arms. This would give the United States and/or Israel ample warning to take military action to prevent Iran from producing nuclear weapons.<sup>33</sup>

Even more important, if Iran somehow develops nuclear weapons, it would not, in the view of many, use them against Israel. The Iranian leadership knows full well that Israel has a nuclear arsenal of between 80 and 100 nuclear weapons deployed in aircraft, ballistic missiles and submarines making them invulnerable to a first strike.<sup>34</sup> Attacking Israel would be suicidal, and there is no evidence that the Iranian leaders want to see their country destroyed and their own lives ended. Just as deterrence kept the nuclear peace between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, according to some, so too will it keep nuclear weapons from being used by Iran and Israel.<sup>35</sup>

The notion that Iranians are fanatical and thus undeterrable is not convincing. Its revolutionary rhetoric notwithstanding, Iran has followed a pragmatic policy that places power and survival over ideology.<sup>36</sup> Iran purchased weapons from Israel during the Iran-Iraq war, stood on the sidelines while Israel pummeled its Shi'ite allies in the 2006 Lebanese war, and has showed remarkable restraint in the face of Israeli attacks on its personnel in Syria. One would be hard put to name a single policy that Iran has pursued since the 1979 revolution that could not be explained in rational, power politics terms. A prudent, cost calculating leadership, is also one that is deterrable.<sup>37</sup> Nor is it likely that Iran would transfer nuclear weapons to one of its proxies, such as Hezbollah. Doing so would place the survival of Iran in the hands of others who it could not control. It is absurd to believe that Israel would somehow withhold attacking Iran because the source of a nuclear strike came from one of Iran's proxies. Iran has not given chemical or biological weapons to any of its proxies for fear of crossing Israel's red lines, making it all the more unlikely that it would act differently with the far more provocative action of transferring nuclear weapons.<sup>38</sup>

Seen in this light, Netanyahu has dramatically exaggerated the threat from Iran. He would have better served Israel's interests by toning down his warnings about Iran, refraining from risky plans to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, and staying out of American domestic politics. He should have treated Iran as a regional rival warranting some attention, but not the near hysterical fear that he has consistently invoked. This more benign view would have been consistent with the assessments of senior Israeli security officials such as former Mossad Director Ephraim Halevy, who declared (in 2012) that "ultimately it is not in the power of Iran to destroy the state of Israel," and former IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, who (also in 2012) stated flatly that "Iran poses a serious threat, but not an existential one."<sup>39</sup>

As persuasive as these arguments may be, there is much to support Netanyahu's view of Iran as an existential threat, justifying the extraordinary attention he has pursued in response. The Iranian leadership may mean exactly what they have been saying since the 1979 revolution when they call for Israel's destruction. Both Ayatollahs, numerous presidents, and countless military leaders have made it clear that Israel – or the “Zionist enemy” – is illegitimate and needs to be eradicated. It would be difficult for any Israeli leader, especially given the lessons of Jewish history, to ignore those who openly and consistently threaten its annihilation. Although it is true that Iran's direct military capability measured in troops, tanks, and aircraft is no match for Israel, much less other states in the region, such an argument ignores Iran's indirect power. As a revolutionary, Shi'ite state, Iran has been able to extend its influence well beyond what one would expect from a country with its capabilities. This is especially true with regards to its proxies. Hezbollah alone is estimated to have around 100,000 missiles and rockets capable of attacking Israel and Hamas has thousands more. It is estimated that Israel can absorb up to 1,200 rockets per day.<sup>40</sup> Whether Israeli missile defenses and counter battery capabilities can limit a determined attack to these levels is unknown. What is clear is that while Iran's proxies may not be able to totally destroy Israel, and while Iran does not exercise total control over all of them, they are capable of inflicting horrendous harm. Seen in this light, Netanyahu has been right in focusing so much attention on Iran.

Much more important, Iranian nuclear developments can be seen as posing an existential threat to Israel, justifying Netanyahu's vigorous response. Simply because deterrence appeared to work during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union does not mean that it would be effective in preventing an Iranian nuclear attack against Israel. The Iranian leadership may not be fanatics, but Netanyahu is right to worry about whether their religiously driven hatred of Israel and Jews might drive them to act recklessly with nuclear weapons.<sup>41</sup> Of special concern would be a situation in which the Iranian leadership faced losing power and, not so incidentally, their lives. Confronting such a dire predicament, even “rational” Iranian leaders with nothing to lose, might consider launching a nuclear strike against Israel as one last shot for posterity.<sup>42</sup>

Other factors also call into question the power of deterrence to ensure nuclear peace. Deterrence will not prevent nuclear accidents, which proved all too common during the Cold War. Despite having the most advanced equipment available, the United States and the USSR experienced false missile alerts, nuclear bombs engulfed in flames, and the inadvertent dropping of nuclear weapons from aircraft. With far less sophisticated technology, the possibility of an Iranian nuclear accident is much greater. Should a nuclear bomb go off in Iran, or a flock of birds thought to be missiles appear on Iranian radar, it could easily be mistaken for an Israeli attack, prompting an Iranian strike and nuclear war.<sup>43</sup> Problems with command and control is another way that may lead to nuclear conflict between Israel and Iran. Especially at a time of crisis, Iran is likely to guard against its leadership being killed in an Israeli first strike (thus preventing an order to retaliate) by delegating the decision to strike to lower level subordinates. The more fingers on the nuclear trigger,

the more likely one will be pulled, either by accident or design.<sup>44</sup> Miscalculation can also lead to nuclear war. The superpowers almost blundered into nuclear war at several points during the Cold War, with the Cuban Missile Crisis an especially frightening example. A confrontation between Israel and Iran would be far more dangerous given the absence of diplomatic recognition and clear communication channels enjoyed by the United States and the Soviet Union. Finally, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would increase the chances of others in the Middle East, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, getting their own nuclear arms. A Middle East bristling with nuclear weapons makes deterrence much more difficult, while increasing the chances of an accident, miscalculation or terrorist seizure.<sup>45</sup> The Cold War experience, far from reassuring, reinforces the belief that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons would indeed pose an existential threat to Israel.

### Assessing Netanyahu's policies toward Iran

There is compelling evidence that an Iran armed with nuclear weapons would pose a threat to Israel's survival. No Israeli leader, much less Netanyahu, could rely on deterrence knowing that if proved wrong, Israel would cease to exist. As such, Netanyahu has been right to view Iran through the prism of a country that will destroy Israel if allowed to do so.

Netanyahu, however, can be correct in assessing the magnitude of the Iranian threat, but misguided in how he chose to respond to that threat. In particular, his fervent opposition to the Iran nuclear deal warrants scrutiny. There is little question that Netanyahu was right to point out the many flaws in the nuclear agreement. The deal legitimizes Iran's nuclear program, including its right to enrich uranium. Some of its key provisions regarding the production of centrifuges and highly enriched uranium expire in ten to fifteen years at which point Iran could become a threshold nuclear state. The inspection procedures outside of the two declared nuclear sites allow up to a 24-day delay, raising concerns about whether Iran can conceal nuclear activities. The deal does not constrain Iran's missile development, nor does it put limits on Iran's aggressive expansion throughout the region. To the contrary, by eliminating many international sanctions and freeing up some USD\$100 billion in accounts frozen since the Iranian Revolution, the agreement helps fund Iran's mischief. Perhaps most important, the deal legitimizes Iran. Instead of being a pariah state, a member of the "axis of evil," the agreement signals that Iran should once again be treated as a responsible member of the international community.<sup>46</sup>

Netanyahu also had reason to believe that destroying the deal could produce good outcomes for Israel. An intensification of harsh economic sanctions could force Iran back to the negotiating table in which a better deal would be achieved. Indeed, fear of a collapse of the deal in the wake of the American withdrawal produced economic problems and street protests as Iran's currency, the rial, lost record amounts against the dollar.<sup>47</sup> An economically fragile Iran might agree to a deal that is more in Israel's interests. The terms of such a deal have already been spelled out by US Secretary of State Pompeo and included ending the sunset provisions



on enrichment, placing stringent limits on Iran's ballistic missile development, and demanding that Iran agree to end its hostile activities in the Middle East, such as support for Hezbollah and threatening posture toward Israel.<sup>48</sup> Netanyahu had long argued that he was not against any deal with Iran, but wanted a better deal. With the election of Donald Trump, his strategy may yet work.

An even better outcome for Israel is regime change in Iran. Iran has the most pro-Western population in the Middle East besides Israel. Many have suffered under the existing regime. If American sanctions continue to disrupt the economy of Iran, especially secondary sanctions that discourage investment from other countries, the discontent of the Iranian people may grow. Antigovernment protests and efforts to replace the regime could well develop. It is true that Iran has powerful internal security forces that have quashed internal dissent before, but then again, so did the Shah (although the Savak was not as effective as the Revolutionary Guard). The replacement of the mullahs with another leadership that is not religiously driven, such as the military, would dramatically lessen the Iranian threat toward Israel, even if that regime subsequently developed nuclear weapons.

Finally, Netanyahu's efforts to kill the nuclear deal helped perpetuate Iran's pariah status. Netanyahu's opposition to the deal stemmed not primarily from its provisions, but rather its effect of reintegrating Iran as a respectable citizen in the world community. The Iran agreement, endorsed by the United Nations, was a major step in normalizing the Iranian regime and opening it to the world economy. The respect and added wealth the deal would produce would, in Netanyahu's view, not moderate Iran, but empower it to increase its aggressive expansion in the Middle East, endangering Israeli friends (Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States) and eventually Israel itself. Without the deal, Iran remains an outlier, at odds with the United States and without the funds to pursue its aggressive activities throughout the Middle East.

Although these arguments have merit, the collapse of the Iran deal is likely not to be in Israel's interests and instead, Netanyahu's efforts to bring about its collapse may go down as the biggest blunder of his career. Netanyahu is correct that Iran is indeed an existential threat to Israel because of its nuclear developments. It is precisely because of this, that supporting the Iran deal made sense. Despite its shortcomings, the agreement makes it virtually impossible for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons for the next 10–15 years. That is not everything, but it is a lot. If Iran leaves the deal, it will almost certainly enhance its nuclear capabilities, probably gradually so as not to provoke an Israeli or American strike. Iran might reinstall the thousands of centrifuges it mothballed, while building new and more advanced models. It could choose to expand its stockpile of low enriched uranium and develop a supply of uranium enriched to 20 percent, thus putting it very close to bomb quality. The nuclear reactor at Arak could be brought back online, producing the plutonium that could also be used for nuclear weapons. The constant surveillance of Iranian nuclear facilities would be ended to be replaced with a less intrusive effort. All of these steps would place Iran that much closer to developing a nuclear bomb, and all are consistent with the non-Proliferation Treaty of which Iran is a signatory.<sup>49</sup>



Even if Iran remains in the deal, problems will increase for Israel. Iran has already announced that it will increase its enrichment capability while remaining within the limits of the agreement.<sup>50</sup> Making matters worse is Israel's weakened ability to verify Iranian activities. So long as the United States was a party to the deal, Washington insisted on strict inspection conditions necessary to monitor Iranian compliance, sharing what it learned with Israel. Once the US left the deal, however, it no longer was in a position to demand thorough inspections, which will hurt Israel's ability to keep tabs on Iranian developments. The withdrawal of the United States from the agreement also means that it will be more difficult to punish Iran for alleged violations. Where the Israel and the United States see cheating, the other parties to the agreement may see legitimate activities, with Washington being in no position to demand Iranian compliance to a deal that it has abandoned.

The increased Iranian nuclear activity that will come about whether Iran remains in the deal or not, will complicate life for Israeli political and military leaders. It places them essentially in the position that began in earnest in 2010, when the decision as to whether to launch a military strike dominated Israeli concerns. Israeli leaders will once again have to focus on which Iranian activities would provoke an attack. How many extra centrifuges would Iran have to place in operation? What level of interference toward inspections? How large a stockpile of enriched uranium can Israel tolerate? If an attack is decided upon, Israel would confront the overwhelming military and diplomatic challenges that stayed its hand in the past. The Iran deal at least postponed the day of reckoning for a decade or more, with the hope that Iran's leadership may have changed when the key provisions expired. With the Netanyahu-encouraged US withdrawal from the agreement, that day of reckoning has returned, as Israeli decision makers will again have to give priority to how to respond to a nuclearizing Iran.

The benefits of the deal's weakening or collapse often invoked by Netanyahu are likely to prove illusory. It is difficult to imagine the Iranian leadership agreeing to renegotiate the nuclear deal. They have declared in no uncertain terms that they would not do so, and to go back on their commitment would incur major political costs. Moreover, even if they somehow agreed to reconsider the deal, the notion that they would accept the onerous terms demanded by the Trump administration and Netanyahu defies belief. Nor is it likely that tougher economic sanctions would produce regime change. If the Iranian government could survive eight years of a murderous war with Iraq, enduring hundreds of thousands of casualties and economic deprivation, it can cope with American sanctions. To be sure, protests periodically arise, but they have been swiftly quashed before any serious threat to the government has emerged. Making regime change even less likely is Trump's often stated desire to not get entangled in the Middle East and to withdraw the few American troops remaining there, removing a potential pressure point on Iran. Nor will economic sanctions cause Iran to restrain its activities in the Middle East. Tehran sees spreading its influence as central to its security and revolutionary ideology. The belief that it would give that up in order to avoid some belt tightening is

fanciful. Netanyahu's proclamation that the alternative to a bad deal is a better deal is certainly true, but it assumes a better deal is possible to achieve. In all probability, The Israeli supported American withdrawal from the Iran deal will not yield a better agreement, regime change or improved behavior by Iran. Instead, it is likely that the outcome will be increased tensions between Israel and Iran, raising the chances of war.

## Conclusions

Few would dispute the notion that Iran poses a dire threat to Israel. Its leaders say they want to destroy Israel and their nuclear build up gives them the ability to do what they threaten. The reassuring power of deterrence may work for Iran, but then again, it may not. At the end of the day, deterrence relies on an Iranian decision not to strike, placing Israel's fate in the hands of individuals whose restraint is uncertain. No Israeli leader, much less Netanyahu, could be expected to ignore this looming, existential challenge.

Just because disregarding the Iranian threat was not an option, does not mean that Netanyahu's approach served Israeli interests. He could have sought to minimize the dangers posed by Iran while seeking to engage its leadership. Indeed, he briefly adopted this posture at the beginning of his first term in office, but it went nowhere and he dropped it. Perhaps he would have reached the same dead end if he attempted to renew these efforts in his later terms in office. We will never know as he did not try.

Of all Netanyahu's policies to counter Iran, the one that will define his legacy has been his relentless opposition to the nuclear deal, which almost certainly contributed to President Trump's decision to abandon the agreement. If the deal collapses under the pressure of American sanctions, it is possible that future events will vindicate Netanyahu's stance. A renegotiated agreement or, even better from Israel's perspective, the replacement of the Iranian regime with a more moderate leadership, would ensure Netanyahu's place in history as a leader who successfully eliminated the Iranian menace.

More likely, the undermining of the Iran deal will not benefit Israel. With all of its flaws, the nuclear agreement virtually ensured that Iran would not develop nuclear weapons for the next 10–15 years. In such time, there was at least the possibility a different Iran would emerge, one that traded its aggressive expansionism and confrontation with Israel for the benefits of becoming part of a globalized international order. Even if Iran maintained its threatening posture, it would do so without the means to develop nuclear arms. With the deal weakened, perhaps fatally, Iran will be free to resume its nefarious nuclear activities, placing it ever closer to achieving nuclear weapons. Coping with this impending threat, deciding whether and how to strike, and preparing for the horrendous Iranian retaliation should Israel attack, once again will dominate an already crowded Israeli security agenda. Be careful for what you wish for – you may just get it, goes the old saying. It could well serve as Netanyahu's legacy.

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# 11

## THE RISE AND FALL OF THE TURKISH–ISRAELI ALLIANCE

*Mark L. Haas*

Israel's relations with Turkey during the two periods in which Benjamin Netanyahu was prime minister are a tale of two extremes. His first term, from June 1996 to July 1999, marked the highpoint in Turkish–Israeli security cooperation and the creation of an alliance between the two countries. Netanyahu's second era as prime minister began in March 2009. It coincided with the end of the alliance and the shift from partners to rivals.

The key to understanding this stunning transformation in foreign policies is found in the domestic politics in both countries, particularly Turkey.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the post-Cold War era, Turkey and Israel confronted substantial power-based incentives pushing them to align based on a number of important common interests, especially mutual rivalry with Iran and Syria. Domestic developments in Turkey over the course of the 2000s worked against these incentives, ultimately overwhelming them and dissolving the alliance. In 2002, an Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP in Turkish) came to power in Turkey. Its leaders were highly critical of Israel's treatment of Muslims, especially Palestinians. These criticisms were not, however, sufficiently important to end cooperative relations with Israel. This change occurred only after threats to AKP leaders' core domestic interests became extreme as domestic rivals in the late 2000s threatened to remove the party from power, either by military force or judicial ruling. AKP leaders responded to these domestic threats by engaging in an Islamic mobilization campaign designed to rally supporters. Anti-Israeli policies were a centerpiece of this campaign, and they ultimately ended the alliance. Although Turkish policymakers bear the primary responsibility for breaking the alignment, Israel's frequently harsh treatment of Palestinians provided emotive rallying points for Turkish elites' mobilization efforts.

In what follows, I describe the origins of the Turkish–Israeli alliance, its destruction despite substantial power-based incentives pushing for its continuation, and

various alternative explanations for this outcome and their problems. The heart of my analysis explores how major threats to Turkish leaders' domestic interests pushed them to stress Islamic identity and interests, which included anti-Israeli policies, to the point where preserving the alliance became impossible. Because Turkish officials were primarily responsible for the end of the alignment, I concentrate on their decision-making processes.

## The origins of the Turkish-Israeli alliance

Turkey and Israel in the 1990s shared major security interests that brought them into alignment. The most important of these interests were mutual enmity to Syria, Iran, and Iraq and a shared concern about terrorism.<sup>2</sup> As Turkey's Deputy Chief of the General Staff, General Cevik Bir, who was one of the principal architects of the coalition, asserted in 1996: "The circumstances in the region dictate an inevitable cooperation between the two countries."<sup>3</sup> Or as Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz stated in August 1997, Turkish-Israeli security cooperation was "necessary to the balance of power." Israeli leaders agreed with these views. Prime Minister Netanyahu asserted in 1998 that the alignment helped to "induce stability where instability prevails." Israel's defense minister, Yitzhak Mordechai, similarly asserted that "when we lock hands, we form a powerful fist. . . . Our relationship is a strategic one."<sup>4</sup>

The Turkish-Israeli alignment became formalized in 1996 when Turkish and Israeli officials signed two military agreements in February and August.<sup>5</sup> These accords committed the two states to joint military training, the sale of weaponry, exchanges of military personnel, military staff-to-staff coordination, visits to one another's military bases, cooperation against terrorist groups, and intelligence gathering and sharing. Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, Israel and Turkey concluded deals for military equipment totaling at least USD\$2 billion. Among the items Israel provided were combat aircraft radars that modernized Turkey's F-4 Phantom fighters, cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, and upgrades for Turkey's tanks.<sup>6</sup> Frequent high-level military and government contacts throughout the 1990s and 2000s constituted another important component of the alignment.<sup>7</sup> The coercive value of the alliance was clearly on display in 1998 when Syria, under threat from both its northern and southern neighbors, expelled Marxist Kurdistan Workers' Party (or PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan and committed to end support for this group (the PKK was a designated terrorist organization dedicated to Kurdish independence).<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in 1998, the two countries, along with the United States, also participated in recurring naval military exercises, named Reliant Mermaid, in the eastern Mediterranean. Three years later, the air forces from these three states began participating in recurring training exercises, named Anatolian Eagle, over Turkish airspace. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, Turkey and Israel affirmed their cooperation with each other and with the United States against terrorism in general and Islamist-based terrorism in particular.<sup>9</sup>



Although some of the security-based incentives pushing Turkey into an alliance with Israel diminished in intensity over the course of the 2000s, many remained from a balance-of-power perspective at least as powerful, if not more so, at the end of the decade. Yet it was at this time that Turkish elites ended the alignment.

Major increases in Iran's relative capabilities throughout the 2000s created many of the strongest incentives for the continuation of the Turkish-Israeli alliance based on the insights of realist balance-of-power theories. By most indices of power, Turkey and Iran were two of the dominant states in the Middle East in this period, with Turkey at the beginning of the decade clearly superior to Iran. This dominance, however, eroded over the course of the AKP's time in power. The principal areas of power advancement for Iran in the 2000s were in two areas: major improvements in the development of nuclear and ballistic missile technologies and an enhanced ability to wage asymmetrical warfare. These changes resulted in a significant leap forward in Iran's power-projection capacity, which created, according weapons experts Alexander Wilner and Anthony Cordesman,

a powerful capability to intimidate its neighbors . . . Iran's asymmetric capabilities interacted with its nuclear weapons development efforts to compensate for the limitations to its conventional forces. Going nuclear provides a level of intimidation that Iran can use as both a form of terrorism and to deter conventional responses to its use of asymmetric warfare.<sup>10</sup>

Iranian nuclear technology and others' awareness of these developments increased steadily over the 2000s. In 2002, it became publicly known that Iran had invested USD billions to build two previously unaccounted for nuclear facilities that could potentially help manufacture nuclear weapons, as a report issued by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concluded. Fear of Iranian intentions over the nuclear issue led the United Nations Security Council to impose sanctions on Iran in December 2006, March 2007, and March 2008.<sup>11</sup> Israeli leaders shared these fears, as did Turkey's. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed Turkey's growing concern over Iranian power in January 2006 when he called on Iran to develop more "moderate and amenable" negotiations over its nuclear program. Six months later, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül asserted that Iran's nuclear program "disturbs Turkey" and created "suspicions about Iran's intentions." AKP leaders repeatedly called for Iran to satisfy international worries that it was weaponizing its nuclear program. In response to the growing threat from Iran, Ankara in 2006 accelerated the development of its own nuclear program.<sup>12</sup>

The progress Iran achieved in its ballistic missile program in the 2000s was even more clearly on display than the development of nuclear technology, as Tehran both tested and deployed missiles throughout the decade. In July 2003, Tehran announced that it was distributing the Shahab-3 missile to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and variants of these missiles continued to be developed and tested over the course of the decade. In December 2008, Western intelligence agencies reported that Iran over the previous year had more than tripled the number of

operational Shahab-3 missiles, with over 100 delivered to the IRGC. Many of Iran's missiles had a range of over 1,000 miles.<sup>13</sup>

Iran's ability to wage asymmetrical and proxy warfare, which were largely offensive tactics, also grew considerably in the 2000s because of the enhanced political power and resources dedicated to the IRGC and al Quds Force. The IRGC is a highly ideological branch of the armed forces dedicated to preserving the Islamic nature of the regime. It possessed in the 2000s over 125,000 members and could draw on a pool of over one million in the Basij Resistance Force, which is a volunteer paramilitary organization under control of the IRGC.<sup>14</sup> The al Quds Force is a specialized branch of the IRGC that is dedicated to unconventional warfare, often working with other state and nonstate actors. The effectiveness of the IRGC and al Quds Force in waging asymmetrical warfare was clearly on display over the course of the 2000s based on the successful support of Shia militias against US forces in Iraq and of Hezbollah against the Israeli military during the 2006 war in Lebanon. Iran's increasing and demonstrated capacity to wage asymmetrical and proxy warfare also had the ability to exploit a key vulnerability in Turkey that resulted from Ankara's ongoing struggle with Kurdish secessionist movements, especially the PKK. Iran in the 1980s and 1990s had been one of the main supporters of this group (as well as Turkish Hezbollah).

Other important regional developments also contributed to Iran's relative power rise – and thus a growing threat from a balance-of-power perspective. The United States between 2001 and 2003 removed from power two bitter enemies to the east and west of the Islamic Republic: the Taliban government in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. The result was that Turkey and Israel were less able to rely on other regional actors to contain Iran. The US invasion of Iraq was particularly beneficial for Iran's geopolitical position. As a result of the invasion and its aftermath, not only was a fierce rival and a long-time barrier to Iran's expansion removed, but it was replaced with a Shia-dominated government in Baghdad that was much more cooperative with Iran.

America's projection of power in the Iraq war also resulted in a renewal of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, as the two countries, in Fred Lawson's judgment became by 2006 "more closely tied to one another than at any time since the late 1980s."<sup>15</sup> Syria and Iran committed to a "strategic cooperation" agreement in 2004 and a mutual defense treaty in 2006. Another agreement signed in March 2007 further enhanced military cooperation, including increasing missile sales to Syria, providing enhanced training of Syrian forces, and augmenting intelligence cooperation.<sup>16</sup> Iran and Syria also cooperated extensively to support Hezbollah's largely successful guerilla war against Israeli forces in the 2006 conflict in Lebanon. Because of developments in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq over the course of the 2000s, Iran had alliances or friendly relations with the countries along Turkey's entire southern flank and along Israel's to the north and northeast.

Israel's hostility toward Iran and Syria remained intense throughout the 2000s. Turkey's, however, did not as there was over the course of the decade a significant improvement in relations with both countries.<sup>17</sup> This improvement occurred

despite Iran's expanding power. This rapprochement did not, though, survive into the 2010s. Beginning in 2011, there was a rapid deterioration in Turkey's relations with Syria and Iran to the point of open hostilities. The precipitating events that led to a resurgence of hostilities between Turkey and Syria and Iran in 2011 were the large-scale protests for political change that swept across much of the Arab world beginning at the end of 2010. Syria was no exception to this trend, with mass protests beginning in the spring of 2011. By the fall, Turkey's leaders openly supported the protestors and were some of the most forceful proponents of the overthrow of the Syrian regime.<sup>18</sup> AKP policymakers forcefully condemned the Syrian government's brutality, cut off dialogue with it, and supported the creation of punishing international sanctions. Ankara even hosted an armed opposition group that was dedicated to the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad government and allowed it to initiate attacks across the border into Syria from a camp that was guarded by the Turkish military.<sup>19</sup> In April 2012, Syrian leaders stated that Turkey's level of support for the demonstrators was "considered to be declaring war" on Syria. The government followed this statement by shelling refugee camps located inside Turkey and shooting down a Turkish military jet that had briefly flown into Syrian airspace.<sup>20</sup>

Turkey's actions that were designed to help topple the Assad regime meant enmity not only with Syria, but with Iran as well as Iranian leaders remained committed to aiding their long-time ally. Iranian officials threatened Turkey with "adverse consequences" if they continued to work for Assad's downfall, and warned that Turkey should learn the "lessons from the bitter historical experiences of other countries" that opposed Iran.<sup>21</sup> Both Syria and Iran at this time apparently renewed support of the PKK in order to coerce Turkey to change its policies.<sup>22</sup>

The renewal of enmity with Syria and Iran created powerful incentives for reestablishing Turkey's alignment with Israel, which had ended by the end of 2010 as I detail in the next section. These incentives included increasing the country's deterrent and intelligence gathering capabilities (the latter of which were particularly important to try to ensure that Syria's chemical and advanced weapons did not as a result of the civil war fall into other enemies' hands, such as the PKK, Hezbollah, or the Islamic State). Turkey's and Israel's leaders, though, did not act on these incentives. Indeed, it took Turkish and Israeli leaders almost five years after Turkey's enmity with Syria and Iran was renewed to restore mere diplomatic relations (these relations were severed in September 2011 and restored in the summer of 2016). Major security cooperation at the time of this writing (Fall 2019) has not been reestablished.

The renewal of the PKK insurgency in Turkey in 2004 created another important reason for Turkey to preserve its alignment with Israel in the 2000s. This conflict resumed after a five-year ceasefire when PKK rebels attacked Turkish security forces in June 2004. Between 2004 and 2010, the conflict resulted in the deaths of 742 Turkish security force members and 1,045 civilians.<sup>23</sup> In May 2010, the PKK announced the renewal of large-scale war to be fought in Turkey.<sup>24</sup>

The alliance with Israel provided important aid to Turkey in countering the insurgency. In the first place, Israel in the 2000s sold Turkey military equipment,

most notably Heron unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that provided critical intelligence in the fight against the PKK. Although Turkey owned the UAVs, it remained reliant on Israel to service and repair them. This was not a problem as long as Turkey and Israel remained allies, but it predictably became one after relations deteriorated beginning in 2009. In 2011, Israel cancelled a USD\$141 million contract to sell Turkey additional aerial surveillance equipment.<sup>25</sup> Israel also frequently delayed or refused to service and repair Turkey's existing drones, leaving Turkey without a full complement of working machines. By January 2016, Turkey was able to operate only three Herons at the same time, which compromised its ability to defeat Kurdish rebels.<sup>26</sup>

Another advantage for Turkey created by the alliance with Israel was that it helped limit cooperation between Israel and Kurdish independence groups, possibly including the PKK. Israel has had a long-standing interest in establishing ties with Kurdish groups in order to create alliances with non-Arabs, thereby reducing its regional isolation. As part of the efforts to realize this interest, Israel may have provided clandestine assistance to Kurdish independence groups in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 war.

Despite Israel's interest in cooperating with Kurdish parties, the alliance with Turkey took precedence. Israeli leaders thus remained attuned to Turkish sensitivities on the subject, including by joining with Turkey in condemning the PKK.<sup>27</sup> Israel's willingness to be mostly supportive of Turkey's concerns on the Kurdish issue was, however, likely to last only as long as the two countries remained allied. Indeed, the more hostile Turkish-Israeli relations became, the greater the incentives pushing Israel to reach out to Kurdish independence groups both to replace Turkey as an ally and to balance the new threat. Thus, it is not surprising that when the Turkish-Israeli alliance ended, Turkey's ability to prevent increased cooperation between Israel and Kurdish groups, including the PKK, weakened considerably. Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, for example, was reported to have indicated in September 2011 that Israel might support the PKK against Turkey, and Turkish intelligence by 2012 accused Israel of doing just that by sharing intelligence with the separatist group.<sup>28</sup>

Hasan Kosebalaban in August 2016 summarized the forces pushing for a Turkish-Israeli security alignment:

The growing regional influence of Iran since 2003, the failure of the Arab democratization process, the projection of Russian military power in the Middle East, the possibility of a unified Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq and Syria, and the transformation of US strategic calculations in the region, have all altered the basic foreign policy paradigms of regional powers. For Turkey, all these factors have led to a strategic re-interpretation that . . . not only compels Turkish leaders to normalize the country's diplomatic relations with Israel, but also to deepen it to a status of a new regional alliance.<sup>29</sup>

Nevertheless, the alignment ended in 2010 and has yet to be renewed. The next section details the events that led to this outcome.

## The end of the alliance

The Turkish-Israeli alliance effectively ended over the course of 2009 and 2010. Not only did the two states in these years stop almost all of the security cooperation that were the hallmarks of the alignment, but they at times treated one another as enemies, including threatening each other with military force.

There were two major events that preceded this reversal. The first was Israel's three-week invasion of Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009 that resulted in the deaths of over 1400 Palestinians (Israel claimed that it launched the invasion in response to rocket fire from Gaza). The second was Israel's raid on May 31, 2010 on a six-ship flotilla off the shores of Gaza. The flotilla had set sail from Istanbul, and its purpose was to break Israel's blockade of Gaza. The attack on the lead ship, the Turkish vessel *Mavi Marmara*, resulted in the deaths of eight Turkish citizens.<sup>30</sup>

The most powerful leaders in the AKP fiercely condemned Israel after these developments. In January 2009, Turkey's Justice Minister, Mehmet Ali Sahin, described Israel as "the biggest provocateur of global terrorism."<sup>31</sup> During the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in the same month, Prime Minister Erdoğan walked out of a debate that included Israeli President Shimon Peres after accusing him of knowing "very well how to kill. I know well how you hit and kill children on beaches."<sup>32</sup> Two months later, Erdoğan stated that Israel was a "cursed" state and a "stain on humanity" for killing "children and defenseless women." The following October, Erdoğan called Israel "unjust" and a "persecutor."<sup>33</sup> After the flotilla incident, Turkey's prime minister equated Zionism and Nazism, stating that "some saw the Star of David and Nazi swastika in the same light."<sup>34</sup> Erdoğan described Israel's actions at this time as "state terrorism" and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu labeled them as examples of "barbarism."<sup>35</sup>

Turkish leaders backed these condemnations with actions. They excluded Israel from participating in the Anatolian Eagle military exercises that were held in October 2009. The exchange of military intelligence between the two countries was also greatly curtailed. Indeed, in December 2009, Erdoğan threatened Israel if it used Turkish airspace to acquire intelligence on Iran (this had been one of the main benefits for Israel since the alliance's creation). Turkey's prime minister declared that "in case Israel uses the Turkish airspace for intelligence gathering on Iran, then Turkey's response will be like an earthquake."<sup>36</sup> This was not the first time Turkey's leaders had threatened Israel. The previous April, Erdoğan referred to Israel on Turkish state television as the main threat in the region and declared that "Turkey would not remain with its arms folded in the face of another attack by Israel against Gaza."<sup>37</sup>

After Israel's attack on the flotilla in May 2010, Turkey recalled its ambassador and demanded as conditions for restoring full relations that Israel apologize for the loss of life, provide reparations to the victims' families, and end the blockade of Gaza. Ankara also cancelled indefinitely military operations (including withdrawing from the Reliant Mermaid exercises that took place in June 2010) and closed down its airspace and military airports to the use of Israeli military aircraft.<sup>38</sup> Erdoğan declared after the attack that Israel's leaders "have once again showed to the world

that they know how good they are at killing people,” and he made a vague threat, warning Israel that “Turkey’s hostility is as strong as its friendship is valuable.”<sup>39</sup> In September 2011, Erdoğan argued that Turkey would have been justified going to war with Israel after the flotilla incident, and that only Turkey’s “grandeur and patience” had prevented it from doing so.<sup>40</sup>

The two countries also began in 2009 to significantly curtail their weapons and military equipment deals, which had been a central benefit of the alliance for Turkey. Between 2009 and 2011, overall arms transfers between the two countries plummeted. In 2009, Israel was Turkey’s second largest supplier of military armaments (after the United States). Over the next two years, Israel reduced its arms transfers to Turkey by over 93 percent as USD hundreds of millions of military contracts were cancelled or frozen. By 2012, these transfers had been reduced to almost zero.<sup>41</sup> The frozen or cancelled projects included ones to upgrade Turkey’s tanks, combat aircraft, missiles, missile warning systems, and sophisticated air surveillance equipment.<sup>42</sup> The result of the preceding developments was that by 2011, none of the hallmarks of the alliance established in the 1990s and continued by AKP leaders throughout the 2000s – intelligence gathering and sharing, military exchanges and training, sales of weaponry, and military coordination to enhance international deterrence – were in effect to a significant degree. When responding to a question asked in December 2010 if friendship between Turkey and Israel had ended, President Gul responded: “Absolutely. Israel has lost the friendship of Turkey and of Turkish citizens.”<sup>43</sup>

Time has done little to abate this hostility, though Turkish and Israeli leaders have periodically endeavored to thaw relations. In February 2013, Israel agreed to supply Turkey with advanced electronic surveillance systems that upgraded the early-warning ability of Turkey’s air force.<sup>44</sup> The next month, Netanyahu phoned Erdoğan to apologize for the loss of life during the *Mavi Marmara* incident, which was a key Turkish demand for reconciliation. Netanyahu also pointed to international threats shared with Turkey, especially concerns over the custody of Syria’s chemical weapons during the country’s civil war, as a reason to renew cooperation.<sup>45</sup> Erdoğan had made similar assertions in other contexts.<sup>46</sup>

In December 2015, reports surfaced that Turkish leaders were looking to renew military cooperation with Israel, especially the purchase of advanced UAVs and reconnaissance and surveillance systems.<sup>47</sup> The next month, Erdoğan asserted that Turkey and Israel “needed” each other in order to deal with shared threats.<sup>48</sup> After becoming prime minister in May 2016, Binali Yıldırım told the AKP parliamentary group meeting that improved relations with Israel were necessary in order to “reduce the number of [Turkey’s] enemies and increase the number of its friends.”<sup>49</sup> In June, the two countries agreed to normalize relations after Israel, in addition to apologizing for the loss of life during the *Mavi Marmara* incident, committed to providing a USD\$20 million compensation fund to victims’ families while allowing Turkey to send humanitarian aid to Gaza. The last was a compromise by both parties as Israel committed to relaxing the blockade of Gaza but not its end, as Turkey had long insisted.

For every step forward in the relationship, however, there was at least another step back. The result was continued hostility and not the renewal of sustained, substantial security cooperation. In January 2013, for example, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu ridiculed Syria for not militarily retaliating against Israel after the latter's air force had struck targets within Syria. Davutoglu asserted that Turkey would not make the same mistake if Israel attacked another Muslim-majority country.<sup>50</sup> The Erdoğan government from 2013 to 2015 repeatedly accused Israel (with no evidence) of endeavoring to overthrow it, either directly by allegedly financing widespread protests in Turkey (most notably the “Gezi Park” protests, which were demonstrations in Turkey by millions of people throughout the summer of 2013 that protested AKP policies and attacks on civil liberties) or indirectly by supposedly helping in 2013 to overthrow in a military coup the Muslim-Brotherhood led government in Egypt.<sup>51</sup> On the latter, AKP elites were concerned that the toppling of an ideologically similar regime abroad could facilitate similar outcomes at home. In response to these accusations, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman in the summer of 2013 compared Erdoğan to Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels. Israel also canceled the sale of USD\$100 million in sophisticated air surveillance equipment because of a fear that the technology would fall into the hands of Israel's enemies.<sup>52</sup> In the fall of 2013, Israeli officials told the *Washington Post* of their belief that Turkey had already passed sensitive Israeli intelligence to Iran.<sup>53</sup> Israel exported no military equipment Turkey in 2013, 2016 or 2017 and only minimal amounts of equipment in 2014 (USD\$15 million) and 2015 (USD\$17 million).<sup>54</sup>

In March 2014, Erdoğan described the very existence of Israel as a “crime against humanity.”<sup>55</sup> Following Israeli attacks on Gaza in the summer of 2014, Erdoğan claimed that Israel had surpassed Hitler in terms of its level of barbarism and he asserted that there was no chance of reconciliation as long as he was Turkey's leader.<sup>56</sup> In November 2016, which was five months after Israel and Turkey normalized relations, Erdoğan once again equated Israel and Nazi Germany, claiming that he could not say whether “Israel [because of its Gaza policies] or Hitler is more barbarous.”<sup>57</sup> The following May, he compared Israel to the apartheid regime in South Africa.<sup>58</sup> In April 2018, Erdoğan again called Israel a “terrorist state” and Netanyahu a “terrorist.” Netanyahu responded in kind and asserted that Turkey's president should get “used” to such condemnations.<sup>59</sup> After Israeli forces killed 60 Palestinians in May 2018 after a large number of protestors were nearing the Israeli-Gaza border, Erdoğan labeled Israel's Palestinian policies as ones of “genocide.”<sup>60</sup> Both countries recalled their ambassadors after this event. Turkish-Israeli relations, in sum, have continued to be laden with hostility and intense recriminations regardless of incentives to cooperate.

### Why the rupture in the alliance? alternative explanations

If Turkish leaders continued to confront substantial power-based incentives to ally with Israel, what caused them to terminate the alignment? Some analysts attribute the split to the ideological effects created by the rise to power beginning in 2002



of the Islamist Justice and Development Party.<sup>61</sup> This position is not unreasonable. The AKP was established by former members of Islamist parties (Welfare and Virtue) that had been banned from political activity by Turkey's Constitutional Court in 1998 and 2001, respectively. AKP leaders asserted that their ideological principles were best described as ones of "conservative democracy."<sup>62</sup> Two sets of principles defined this ideology. The first, not surprisingly given AKP leaders' political ancestry, was a dedication to Islamic identity and interests. As Hakan Yavuz explains:

Most ministers, advisors and parliamentarians of the AKP stress Islam as their core identity and define national interests within an Islamic framework. . . . The leadership of the AKP believes that Turkey in general and the AKP in particular represent Islamic civilization.<sup>63</sup>

AKP elites stressed the importance of religion in defining the good life and the values people should possess and believed that Islam should hold a central role in shaping Turkish society. On these points, AKP leaders were fiercely opposed by their main political opponents, known as Kemalists, whose "main concern" since 1980 "has been to defend the secular nature of the Turkish Republic against the rise of political Islam."<sup>64</sup>

The promotion of liberal institutions and values constituted the second set of principles that defined the AKP's "conservative-democratic" ideology. The religiosity and liberalism of the AKP were, in fact, closely connected. Party leaders claimed that the only way that religion could flourish in Turkey was if basic political rights – including religious freedom – were better protected. These politicians – especially during their first term in office from 2002 to 2007 – thus came to be some of the most forceful advocates of political liberalization in Turkey's history. AKP policymakers, for example, adopted the UN Charter of Human Rights and the European Charter for the Protection of Human Rights and Basic Liberties as core ideological references for the party.<sup>65</sup> This was not just rhetoric. AKP politicians passed major liberalizing reforms after coming to power, including laws that better protected minority rights and freedoms of expression, association, assembly, and religion.<sup>66</sup> Many of these liberalizing reforms were designed to change Turkish domestic politics in order to meet the criteria necessary for Turkey to join the European Union (EU).

The AKP's hybrid ideology that stressed both Islamic identity and political liberalization created forces for ideology-based attraction and repulsion with other Middle Eastern countries, including Israel.<sup>67</sup> AKP leaders' commitment to liberalization in Turkey meant that there was some ideological affinity with Israel, the Middle East's other democracy. In a 2004 speech delivered in the United States, for example, Foreign Minister Gul stated that he wanted to

underscore the importance we attach to our relationship with Israel. Our ties with Israel are traditional, special, and strong. Indeed cooperation between



Turkey and Israel, the two democracies in the region, has important implications for the peace and stability of the entire region.<sup>68</sup>

AKP leaders, however, stressed much more frequently ideological differences with Israel because of the importance they placed on protecting Islamic identity than they did ideological similarities based on a shared commitment to democracy. This emphasis occurred from the time the AKP came to power in 2002 and remained throughout the decade, even when security cooperation with Israel continued.

AKP leaders were particularly critical of Israel in response to its oppression of Muslims, often ascribing to it a hostile core identity because of its actions. In April 2002, Erdoğan stated that because of the Second Intifada (a Palestinian uprising against Israel that lasted from 2000 to 2005) and Israel's toughening policies toward Palestinians, "the [Ariel] Sharon government is in fact moving in the direction of state terrorism." In the same month, Bulent Arinc (who became speaker of the parliament in November) asserted that "recent developments [in Israel resulting from the Intifada] have revealed there to be no difference between Adolf Hitler and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon." In May 2004, Erdoğan accused Israel of engaging in "state terror" and also asked: "What is the difference between a terrorist who kills civilians and Israel, which kills civilians?" The next month, Turkey's prime minister compared Israel to Spain during the Inquisition and claimed that it was engaging in "individual, institutional and state terrorism."<sup>69</sup>

Many of these sentiments were repeated in response to Israel's attack on Hezbollah in Lebanon beginning in July 2006, which was in response to Hezbollah's cross-border raid into northern Israel that captured several Israeli soldiers. Erdoğan described Israel's actions as "inhuman." Mehmet Elkatmis, an AKP leader and Chairman of the Parliament Human Rights Inquiry Commission and frequent spokesman for the government on the war, accused Israel of committing "crimes against humanity" and "state terrorism" and "oppressing people of the region unmercifully." For its actions, Elkatmis asserted Israel "should be judged in International War Crimes Tribunal."<sup>70</sup> As the preceding quotations indicate, AKP elites condemned Israel with similar, and often identical, vitriol for its treatment of Muslims during the Second Intifada and War in Lebanon as they did during the Gaza war and the crisis over the *Mavi Marmara* incident.

Given the importance of Islamic identity and interests to AKP leaders' core ideological beliefs, it is not surprising that Israel's harsh treatment of Muslim populations resulted in frequent recriminations. AKP elites' ideology-based antipathy toward Israel was, however, clearly not a sufficient cause of the end of the Turkish-Israeli alliance because of the fact that AKP officials maintained the alignment for roughly their first six years in office. Although these elites were often fierce in their denunciations of Israeli policies throughout their time in power, until 2008 negative statements about Israel were invariably followed by reconciliation efforts.<sup>71</sup> For example, shortly after Erdoğan in the spring of 2004 compared Israel to Spain during the Inquisition and described it as a terrorist state, he sent four members of parliament

to Israel to try to repair relations. Erdoğan, Foreign Minister Gul, and Minister of Justice Cemil Cicek all made separate state visits to Israel in 2005, during which they praised the value of continued cooperation between the two countries.<sup>72</sup> Erdoğan also granted Israeli President Shimon Peres a rare honor when he invited Peres to address Turkey's parliament in November 2007, which was fifteen months after the war in Lebanon ended. Sales of weapons from Israel to Turkey also continued in the 2000s, as did intelligence sharing and the highly visible Anatolian Eagle and Reliant Mermaid military exercises. If AKP leaders' ideological animosity toward Israel was the key cause of the break in the alliance after 2008, why was it not before?

The same criticism can be made of those explanations that attribute the end of the alliance to Israeli policies in 2009 and 2010 that resulted in the deaths of Muslims. Because of the close timing between the Gaza war and the *Mavi Marmara* incident, on the one hand, and the end of the Turkish-Israeli alliance on the other, it is plausible that there is a causal relationship between these events. If, however, outrage over Israel's killing of Muslims after 2008 was sufficient to push Turkey's leaders to end security cooperation, why did these elites not make this choice in response to similar behavior earlier in the decade? The results of the Gaza war were not qualitatively different from previous Israeli conflicts that happened just a few years earlier. During the three-week Gaza war in December 2008 and January 2009, Israeli security forces killed roughly 1,400 Palestinians. This number was comparable, in terms of number of casualties and the rate of killing, to the July–August 2006 war in Lebanon. This conflict lasted 34 days and resulted in the deaths of over 1,100 Lebanese, many of which, according to Human Rights Watch, were due to Israel's "indiscriminate" attacks on civilians. Although the rate of casualties during the Second Intifada was not nearly as high as it was in the Gazan or Lebanese wars, the absolute number of casualties was much greater. Between the years 2000 and 2005, over 3,000 Palestinians were killed in the uprising. The years that witnessed the greatest numbers of deaths occurred when the AKP held power (in 2002, over 1,000 Palestinians died in the conflict; in 2004, roughly 800 died, and in 2003 this number was roughly 600).<sup>73</sup> Although AKP leaders often condemned the killings during the Second Intifada and war in Lebanon with equal vigor as they did those that occurred during the Gaza war, they nevertheless chose to preserve security cooperation with Israel. Why did mass casualties during the 2008–09 conflict push AKP elites to end the alliance with Israel when a similar number of deaths during hostilities a few years earlier did not?

Israel's attack on the flotilla potentially provides a more convincing explanation for the end of the alliance with Israel because this could be seen as qualitatively different as other crises with Israel (though much of the security cooperation between the two countries had already ended before this event). The flotilla incident involved foreign soldiers killing Turkish citizens, which was both highly provocative and a first in the history of the republic. Even this event, though, need not have ended in the end of the alliance. AKP leaders could have adhered to the pattern they

followed throughout the decade: fiercely criticizing Israeli policies while preserving security cooperation in order to advance Turkey's international interests.

In support of this last claim is the fact that AKP elites' main domestic rivals, Kemalists in the Republican People's Party (CHP in Turkish), advocated for maintaining the alignment despite Israel's actions in the flotilla incident. Although CHP leaders criticized Israel for the loss of life during the raid, they also condemned Erdoğan for his hostility toward Israel after this event. As CHP official Merve Petek Gurbuz asserted after the *Mavi Marmara* incident:

At times, we [the CHP] bitterly criticize Israel about the settlements, the roadblocks, the suffering of the Palestinians. But that's an international matter. It doesn't mean the Turks have a problem with Israel. Reasonable people can mend relations between the two countries.<sup>74</sup>

CHP leaders' criticisms of their government's policies continued to intensify the more relations with Israel deteriorated. After Turkey severed diplomatic relations in September 2011, the chairman of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, condemned the government, stating "No good can come of it and there is no need for us to risk our interest with petty action."<sup>75</sup> A week later, Kılıçdaroğlu wrote on his Twitter account: "Iran and Syria were enemies of Israel. Now Iran, Syria and Israel are enemies of Turkey. Is this successful foreign policy? Does success mean winning more enemies than friends?"<sup>76</sup> Faruk Logoglu, a deputy chairman of the CHP, similarly rebuked Erdoğan at this time, stated that "the probability that [the Justice and Development] party has carried Turkey to the brink of a hot conflict [with Israel] is saddening and unacceptable."<sup>77</sup> In a July 2012 interview with *Today's Zaman*, Kılıçdaroğlu described Turkey's hostility with Israel as "utterly wrong. We need to improve our ties with Israel, as was the case in the past."<sup>78</sup> The following September, Kılıçdaroğlu condemned the AKP for "allowing relations with Israel to deteriorate." The result was that "we lost a very important advantage we had once had vis-à-vis Iran."<sup>79</sup> In the CHP's 2015 election manifesto, the party vowed to mend ties with Israel if it won the next election.<sup>80</sup> CHP officials also described in the summer of 2015 foreign policy disagreements with the AKP, including differences over policies toward Israel, as one of the five major disputes dividing the two parties. The CHP advocated the abandonment of the AKP's hostile policies in favor of reconciliation with Israel.<sup>81</sup>

The more elites' foreign policy preferences vary along partisan ideological lines, the less likely it is that variables that are identical for all members of the same country – including other states' actions, such as Israel's attack on the flotilla and the Gaza war – are the key determinants of outcomes. When different ideological groups have vastly different foreign policy preferences, the ideological differences that separate them are most likely the primary cause of the variation. The key question thus once again becomes why were ideological calculations much more determinative of AKP elites' policies toward Israel at the end of the decade but not before?

## Major threats to AKP leaders' domestic interests and the end of the alliance with Israel

AKP leaders' ideological beliefs had always resulted in intense criticisms of Israel when oppressing Muslims. Ideology-based hostility, however, resulted in the end of the alliance only when it was combined with another factor that amplified the importance of ideologies to policymaking: high levels of threat to AKP elites' core domestic interests. Because of a perceived threat to secularism, Kemalists beginning in 2007 endeavored to oust the AKP from power through military and judicial means. However, the more Kemalists attacked the AKP because of its Islamic identity, the more salient this identity became as AKP leaders engaged in an Islamic mobilization campaign against their secular rivals. Anti-Israeli statements and policies were central to these efforts.

The sustained period of crisis for the AKP began in April 2007, when Prime Minister Erdoğan announced that the party was nominating Foreign Minister Gul to be the next president. Kemalists intensely opposed the nomination "on the grounds that it prepared for the abolition of secularism and the very principles of the Republic."<sup>82</sup> The key reason for this fear resulted from the fact that Gul would be replacing Ahmet Sezer, a staunch secularist who as president had the power to veto legislation that he deemed violated this principle. Kemalists thus believed that Gul's presidency would remove an important check against their ideological enemies. President Sezer expressed secularists' fears in an April 14 statement at the Military Academy: "The regime has never experienced an era under this much threat."<sup>83</sup>

On April 27, parliament voted Gul president, with the CHP boycotting the proceeding. The decision to boycott was not just a symbolic one, but strategic. After the vote, the CHP petitioned the Constitutional Court to overturn the election, arguing that it was illegal because fewer than two-thirds of parliamentary members were present for it. The Turkish constitution required that in the first two rounds of a presidential election, two-thirds of deputies must vote for a candidate in order to be elected. The CHP argued that this meant that a quorum of two-thirds was necessary for an election to be valid. The Constitutional Court, in a highly contentious ruling issued on May 1, agreed, and thereby nullifying Gul's election.<sup>84</sup>

On the same day that the CHP filed its petition with the Constitutional Court, the military's general staff posted on its website a memorandum that threatened the AKP in the name of defending state secularism. The memo stated that

there is part of society that is in an ongoing struggle to undermine the basic values of the Turkish Republic, secularism being at the forefront, and those activities have increased in the recent period. . . . In recent days, the outstanding problem in the Presidential elections has been the discussion of secularism. This situation is observed with concern by the Turkish Armed Forces. It should not be forgotten that the Turkish Armed Forces is not neutral in these discussions and is the absolute defender of secularism.<sup>85</sup>

The memorandum was a clear threat to the AKP, with some labeling it an attempted “e-coup.”<sup>86</sup>

The AKP responded forcefully to this period of crisis, most directly by calling for early parliamentary elections, which were held in July. The party did well in them, winning almost 47 percent of the vote. The elections also resolved the crisis over Gul’s nomination for president. The elections resulted in the AKP possessing a sufficient number of votes to elect Gul president regardless of another CHP boycott.<sup>87</sup>

Although the July 2007 elections resolved the crisis over Gul’s nomination for president, the overall hostility level between Kemalists and the AKP did not abate. To the contrary, hostilities between the two groups continued to intensify. They reached a boiling point in February 2008 when the AKP passed two constitutional amendments to lift the headscarf ban in universities.<sup>88</sup> Given the high symbolic value of the covering, these proposals exacerbated Kemalists’ fears that AKP leaders wanted to overthrow state secularism and replace it with an Islamist system.

Kemalist elites went to great lengths to defeat this ideological threat. Before the amendments were voted on in parliament, the chief public prosecutor of the High Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yalçinkaya, warned the AKP that “political parties cannot aim at changing the Republic’s principle of secularism and they cannot initiate activities and make statements as such.” When AKP members did not heed this warning and instead proceeded with the votes, the CHP in February asked the Constitutional Court to annul the amendments, and the following month Yalçinkaya petitioned the Constitutional Court to dissolve the AKP on the grounds that it had become “the center of anti-secular activities” that threatened to overthrow the core ideological principles of the Republic.<sup>89</sup> The appeals court also asked the high court to ban for five years 71 AKP members, including President Gul, from serving in an elected office.<sup>90</sup>

The Constitutional Court issued rulings on these indictments in June and July. These decisions not only thwarted the AKP’s legislative agenda but also threatened to outlaw the AKP. On June 5, the Court annulled the two amendments regarding the wearing of headscarves on the grounds that the measures violated the unamendable articles of the Constitution specifically that Turkey was a “democratic, secular and social state governed by the rule of law.”<sup>91</sup> The next month, the court ruled on the request to have the party banned for its alleged antisecular behavior. Ten out of eleven of the judges agreed that the AKP had indeed become a focus of antisecular activities, and they voted to deprive it of half of its previous level of financial assistance from the state.<sup>92</sup> Most alarmingly from the AKP’s perspective, the court came within one vote of the necessary seven of banning the party.

By this point in time, the degree of ideological polarization in the country was extraordinarily high, as was the level of domestic vulnerability for the AKP: The very existence of the party and the ideological objectives it embodied were in grave jeopardy. The Constitutional Court’s July 2008 ruling hung like the Sword of Damocles over the party. Because of this judgment, as Ersin Kalaycıoğlu summarizes, the AKP “was branded as a political party with dubious secular credentials

and constitutional legitimacy.” The inevitable result was movement “toward a deepening political legitimacy crisis.”<sup>93</sup> Although the party had narrowly escaped being outlawed, ten out of eleven judges had agreed that it was a center of antiseccular activities. Key reasons why five of these judges nevertheless voted against banning the AKP were that its leaders had not resorted to violence and that they were attempting to gain for Turkey admission to the EU.<sup>94</sup> If these tactics and preferences changed – and they could – the court would very likely have the votes necessary to ban the party in a new closure case.

The more Kemalists attacked AKP elites because of their Islamic identity, the more important Islam became to their policies. As is often the case, threatening a particular identity only served to increase its political saliency. The result was that AKP leaders responded to the political crisis that began in 2007 and culminated with the party’s near closure in July of 2008 with, as Banu Eligur puts it, an “Islamist mobilization against the secular–democratic state.”<sup>95</sup> As the domestic threats to AKP elites grew, the more these leaders appealed to Islam to rally supporters against ideological enemies. Kalaycioglu expresses similar analysis, writing that after the series of political crises in Turkey beginning in 2007 that threatened a military or judicial coup, it was clear that “Turkish political elites had become deeply divided around the secular–religious fault line.” A core political objective of AKP leaders after these crises began, and especially after the near-banning of their party, was “to undermine the secular elites and their alien ideas” by mobilizing against the Kemalist “state – i.e., the military, bureaucrats and judges.”<sup>96</sup>

Anti-Israeli rhetoric and policies were a cornerstone of AKP leaders’ growing emphasis after 2007 on Islamic identity as part of a mobilization against the secular establishment. These actions made sense for the AKP’s electoral interests. Taking an aggressive stance toward Israel not only in words (as AKP leaders had done throughout their time in power) but deeds over violations of Palestinian rights, thereby appearing as forceful protectors of fellow Muslims from Jewish oppressors, tied into core legitimating principles of the AKP. Such actions, as a result, were likely to rally the party’s base.<sup>97</sup>

AKP leaders’ efforts to consistently use anti-Israeli statements and actions for Islamic mobilization purposes began in response to Israel’s invasion of Gaza in December 2008, with Erdoğan asserting in mid-January 2009 that he was adopting a “Muslim approach” to the crisis.<sup>98</sup> As part of this approach, AKP leaders organized massive anti-Israel rallies, some with hundreds of thousands of participants and with the frequent involvement of Islamist civil society associations. These rallies, which were frequently based on explicit pro-Islamic and/or anti-Jewish slogans, were the very definition of an Islamic mobilization effort. As Eligur recounts, the

rhetoric of mass demonstrations was designed to evoke Islamist sentiments; slogans of hundreds of thousands were the same: ‘Damn Israel,’ [and] ‘Jews are cursed.’ . . . Demonstrations were successful in creating anti-Jewish sentiments among the Turkish public. For the first time, the Turkish Jewish community issued a public statement expressing their concern regarding its physical safety.<sup>99</sup>

Building on this last point, leaders of Jewish organizations in Turkey explicitly connected the AKP's Islamic mobilization campaign to their feelings of growing vulnerability. These individuals, according to Malike Bileydi Koc's summary of interviews and statements, believed that Turkey's relations with Israel were "being sacrificed for the [AKP's] domestic party base" in order "to mobilize radical factions in the society."<sup>100</sup>

Because high levels of political vulnerability for the AKP continued throughout 2009 and beyond, the domestic forces pushing party elites to adopt increasingly hostile policies toward Israel remained. The possibility of the Constitutional Court banning the AKP remained the greatest danger to the party's core interests, and there were rumors circulated in the Turkish media in 2009 about a potential new appeal by the Public Prosecutor to the Supreme Court demanding the AKP's closure.<sup>101</sup> The results from the March 2009 local elections created additional major concerns for the AKP. The party had steadily increased its vote share in previous elections, from 34 percent in the 2002 general elections, to nearly 42 percent in the 2004 local elections, to nearly 47 percent in the 2007 general elections. In 2009, however, the party received nearly one million fewer votes than in 2007 and only 38 percent of the total.<sup>102</sup>

Given the very high levels of domestic vulnerability for the AKP in 2009, it is not surprising that AKP leaders' hostility with Israel continued to escalate rather than abate when the Gaza war ended. Thus, when the crisis with Israel that resulted from the *Mavi Marmara* incident in May 2010 created another major opportunity for Islamic mobilization, AKP leaders took advantage of it.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, there is evidence indicating that these elites' electoral interests played an important role in the very origins of the mission.<sup>104</sup> The flotilla that set sail from Istanbul was led by the Islamist charity, the Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH). This organization was banned in Israel because of its ties to Hamas, which is dedicated by its charter as well as by comments of its leaders, to Israel's destruction (other Western countries, including the United States and Germany, have condemned the IHH for supporting terrorism). The IHH, according to a summary in the *New York Times* based on interviews with Turkish diplomats and government officials, possessed "extensive connections with Turkey's political elite, and the group's efforts to challenge Israel's blockade of Gaza received support at the top levels of the governing party [the AKP]."<sup>105</sup> This aid included both material and moral dimensions. Many of the 21 people who sat on the IHH's board had close links to the AKP, and as many as ten AKP parliamentarians said they were considering participating in the flotilla (though none ended up doing so). The most concrete help the AKP provided to the IHH occurred when government officials facilitated the sale of the *Mavi Marmara* from the Istanbul municipality, which the AKP controlled.<sup>106</sup> Erdoğan also publicly proclaimed support for the IHH's efforts to "break the oppressive siege on the Gaza strip."<sup>107</sup> For all this aid, the leader of the IHH explicitly thanked the AKP shortly before the flotilla set sail.<sup>108</sup>

Although AKP leaders remained "closely attuned to the details of the flotilla's mission before its departure," and although the mission was highly likely to result in



a crisis with Israel, these elites did not prevent its sailing. It is probable that domestic calculations played a major role in this decision. Aiding the IHH in its objectives, especially with such a dramatic and bold event as the flotilla, benefited the AKP's Islamic mobilization campaign. As reporters for the *New York Times* put it, support of the IHH and its efforts in Gaza had helped "Erdoğan shore up support from conservative Muslims ahead of critical elections next year and improve Turkey's standing and influence in the Arab world." Or as the scholar Ercan Citlioglu asserted, Turkey's government "could have stopped the ship if it wanted to, but the mission to Gaza served both the I.H.H. and the government by making both heroes at home and in the Arab world."<sup>109</sup>

AKP leaders may not have anticipated that the flotilla would result in the deaths of Turkish citizens. They responded to the flotilla tragedy, though, in ways that were clearly designed to tap into and activate Islamist sentiments (CHP leaders subscribed to this interpretation of events; within days of the incident, opposition leaders alleged "that Erdoğan hope[d] to capitalize on the dispute with Israel to galvanize strong Islamist support").<sup>110</sup> After the Turkish citizens were killed, the government officially sanctioned demonstrations that combined protests of Israel with the widespread use of Islamic symbols and phrases. Thousands of people, for example, greeted participants in the flotilla with a hero's welcome upon returning to Turkey, and among the first to do so was Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc. Shouts of "Damn Israel" and *Allahu akbar* (God is great) were frequently heard at the rally, and many participants were draped in the flags of Palestine or Hamas.<sup>111</sup> Erdoğan after the flotilla tragedy also repeatedly used harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric to rouse party supporters, and the latter frequently responded with chants of "Mujahid Premier," which is the term for Islamic holy warrior.<sup>112</sup> The prime minister backed these statements with actions by canceling indefinitely military operations with Israel, freezing many of the arms deals Turkey had with Israel, and closing down its airspace and military airports to the use of Israeli military aircraft. Erdoğan on multiple occasions also publicly threatened Israel with military force. By this point in time, the Turkish-Israeli alliance was effectively over.

The end of the alliance with Israel did not, however, result in the end of domestic threats to the AKP, which continued to incentivize anti-Israeli policies. Between 2010 and the time of this writing, there were four major developments that endangered the party's core domestic interests. These events were a military coup in Egypt in July 2013 that ousted a Muslim-Brotherhood led government that was ideologically similar to Turkey's (this threatened the AKP's domestic interests because of the frequently held belief that the demise of co-ideologues abroad will increase the likelihood of similar developments at home);<sup>113</sup> demonstrations in Turkey by millions of people throughout the summer of 2013 that protested AKP policies and attacks on civil liberties (the "Gezi Park" protests); a large-scale criminal investigation in 2013 and 2014 in which dozens of government officials and/or people connected with the AKP, including Erdoğan and his sons, were implicated in scandals involving corruption, fraud, and other crimes; and an attempted military coup in July 2016.



The greater the threats to AKP leaders' domestic interests, the greater the incentives to continue to engage in an Islamic mobilization campaign in order to energize supporters. Thus, it is not surprising that AKP leaders have continued to be extremely critical of Israel in the 2010s, despite increased incentives to cooperate because of Turkey's renewed enmity with Syria and Iran beginning in 2011 and the resumption of the PKK insurgency in 2010. Such criticisms continued to play well with the AKP's Islamic base.

Analysts, including leaders in Turkey's main opposition party, have commented on AKP leaders' efforts to counter threats to their domestic interests by increasing hostility to Israel (Israeli officials have made the same observation<sup>114</sup>). As the scholar Ihsan Dagi explains (writing in 2015):

The problem for the party [AKP] is that it has to keep winning [elections]. The ruling party cannot afford to lose any single elections and has to win all the upcoming elections and maintain popular support in order to prevent legal charges of corruption against its leader.

In this high-threat environment, the incentives pushing for rallying the base by whatever means necessary, including condemning Israel, were powerful. Thus,

on two occasions, the AKP government chose to turn a domestic issue into an international one. These are the Gezi protests of the summer 2013 and the corruption scandal of December 2013, both of which were explained by the government as being plots of "dark international forces." . . . Here, Israel comes up as a handy "dark force with collaborators at home."<sup>115</sup>

Leaders in the opposition Republican People's Party have also frequently accused Erdoğan of using hostility to Israel to try to rally his political base. As Faruk Logoğlu, deputy chairman of the CHP summarized in March 2014 interview:

On the eve of the upcoming local elections, Erdoğan is in deep trouble, facing an unavoidable downturn in his political fortune. As expected, whenever he panics, he resorts to his usual suspects and accuses outside forces of conjuring up conspiracies against him. His favorite scapegoats are the West, the US, Israel and their extensions, especially the "interest lobby."<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

Recognizing that Turkey's leaders were primarily responsible for the end of the Turkish-Israeli alliance does not absolve Israeli politicians of blame. Israel's policies toward Palestinians, especially under Netanyahu's leadership, have frequently provided an easy target for AKP elites' Islamic mobilization campaigns. Israeli leaders have also frequently adopted "tit-for-tat" tactics toward Turkey, in which Turkey's hostile policies have been matched by such actions as canceling military contracts,

recalling Israel's ambassador, and supporting Kurdish groups. Nevertheless, Israeli officials and citizens have tended to be pragmatic on the issue of cooperating with Turkey in the pursuit of common interests.<sup>117</sup> When Turkey is willing to cooperate with Israel, Israelis have been willing to reciprocate. Relations with Turkey also tend not to be a divisive issue in Israeli electoral politics, which will facilitate renewing cooperation with Turkey if the opportunity arises.<sup>118</sup>

Major improvements in AKP elites' domestic position have also reduced the need to use anti-Israeli policies as part of an Islamic mobilization campaign. Erdoğan and the AKP have consolidated their domestic power in the aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt. Within the first year after the coup, the AKP jailed over 40,000 political opponents, fired, or suspended over 140,000 individuals, shut down 1,500 civil groups and 150 news outlets, and arrested scores of journalists. After Erdoğan was reelected president in June 2018, he was able to create a very strong presidential system that granted the institution virtually unchecked power across a wide spectrum of domains, including changes that brought the military under firmer civilian control and granted the president the abilities to dismiss parliament and call new elections at will, to draft the budget, and to choose judges and many political and military leaders, almost all without requiring a confirmation process.<sup>119</sup>

Nevertheless, for as long as Turkey remains a democracy, AKP leaders will continue to confront incentives to use anti-Israeli rhetoric to energize their base. This will be especially true the more Erdoğan believes that Turkey's Islamist regime remains under attack from hostile domestic and international forces. With such a view, permanent Islamic mobilization – likely with anti-Israeli statements and policies at its heart – is likely to become an enduring feature of Turkish politics.

## Notes

- 1 For a much more detailed development of the argument presented in this chapter, see Chapter 4 in Mark L. Haas, "Frenemies: When Do Ideological Enemies Ally?" *Working Manuscript*, Duquesne University, 2019.
- 2 For details on the preceding, see Cevik Bir and Martin Sherman, "Formula for Stability: Turkey Plus Israel," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall 2002), pp. 2–3, 7 (on line pagination); Ilan Berman, "Israel, India, and Turkey: Triple Entente?," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Fall 2002), p. 3 (on line pagination); Banu Eligur, "Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations (December 2008–June 2011)," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (May 2012), pp. 430; Mark L. Haas, *The Clash of Ideologies: Middle Eastern Politics and American Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 181–194.
- 3 Quoted in Ali Balci and Tuncay Kardas, "The Changing Dynamics of Turkey's Relations with Israel: An Analysis of 'Securitization'," *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Spring 2012), pp. 104–105; see also p. 106.
- 4 All quotations from Bir and Sherman, "Formula for Stability," pp. 4, 7.
- 5 For details, see Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991–2000* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001), pp. 260–263; Binnur Ozkececi-Taner, "The Role of Ideas in Coalition Foreign Policymaking: Turkey as an Example, 1991–2002" (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2004), pp. 240–242; Ozlem Tur, "Turkey and Israel in the 2000s – From Cooperation to Conflict," *Israel Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Fall 2012), p. 48.
- 6 Aaron Stein, "Israel: Turkey's Former Hi-Tech Weapons Supplier," November 5, 2012, <https://turkeywonk.wordpress.com/2012/11/05/israel-turkeys-former-hi-tech-weapons-supplier/>

- 7 For details, see Bir and Sherman, "Formula for Stability," p. 4.
- 8 The Marxist Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, was a designated terrorist organization dedicated to Kurdish independence.
- 9 Berman, "Israel, India, and Turkey," pp. 4, 5.
- 10 Alexander Wilner and Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), p. 44.
- 11 Daphne McCurdy, "Turkish-Iranian Relations: When Opposites Attract," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 2008), p. 100.
- 12 Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 6 (November 2006), p. 960 (quotation); Mustafa Kibaroglu and Baris Caglar, "Implications of Nuclear Iran for Turkey," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Winter 2008), p. 65 (quotation).
- 13 On the preceding, see Steven A. Hildreth, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Programs: An Overview," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, July 21, 2008; Iran Watch, "Iran Missile Milestones: 1985–2016," [www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/weapon-program-background-report/iran-missile-milestones-1985-2016](http://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/weapon-program-background-report/iran-missile-milestones-1985-2016); Farhad Rezaei, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program: A New Case for Engaging Iran?" *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Fall 2016), pp. 187–190.
- 14 For details on the preceding, see Wilner and Cordesman, *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance*, pp. 42–55, 57.
- 15 Fred H. Lawson, "Syria's Relations with Iran: Managing the Dilemmas of an Alliance," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (Winter 2007), p. 8, online pagination.
- 16 For details, see Ozden Zeynep Oktav, "The Syrian Uprising and the Iran-Turkey-Syria Quasi Alliance: A View from Turkey," in *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch and Ozlem Tur (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 195–196.
- 17 For details, see Marwan Kaban, "Syrian-Turkish Relations: Geopolitical Explanations for the Move from Conflict to Cooperation," in *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch and Ozlem Tur (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 27–38; Sabrina Tavernise, "For Turkey, an Embrace of Iran is a Matter of Building Bridges," *New York Times*, June 12, 2010.
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- 25 Ozlem Demirtas-Bagdonas, "Politics of National Honor in Turkish-Israeli Relations: An Alternative Account of the Recent Tensions," *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 10, No. 38 (Summer 2013), p. 119.

- 26 “Egypt Turns Out to Be Key in Turkish-Israeli Rapprochement,” *Today’s Zaman*, January 4, 2016.
- 27 For details on the preceding, see Ofra Bengio, “Surprising Ties Between Israel and the Kurds,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Summer 2014), pp. 1–12.
- 28 Barak Ravid, “Turkey FM Condemns Israeli ‘Plan’ to Support PKK,” *Haaretz*, September 11, 2011; Bengio, “Surprising Ties Between Israel and the Kurds,” p. 10.
- 29 Hasan Kosebalaban, “Towards a New Strategic Alliance Between Turkey and Israel?” *Alsharq Forum*, August 2016, p. 1.
- 30 These events were not the only sources of tension between the two countries in the period, though they were the most important. Another occurred in January 2010 when Israel’s deputy foreign minister symbolically humiliated Turkey’s ambassador on television after placing him in a lower seat and berating him. Israel issued a formal apology for the offense.
- 31 Quoted in Eligur, “Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations,” p. 437.
- 32 Quoted in Sami Moubayed, “‘Milking the Male Goat’ and Syrian-Turkish Relations,” in *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity*, eds. Raymond Hinnebusch and Ozlem Tur (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 71–72.
- 33 Quotations from Eligur, “Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations,” pp. 437, 444.
- 34 Quoted in Henri Barkey, “The Broken Triangle: How the U.S.-Israeli-Turkish Relationship Got Unglued,” in *Troubled Triangle: The United States, Turkey, and Israel in the New Middle East*, ed. William B. Quandt (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Publishing, 2011), p. 97.
- 35 Quotations from Eligur, “Crisis in Turkish-Israeli Relations,” p. 447.
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- 41 SIPRI measures the volume of arms transfers not by sales prices, but by the known unit production costs of the weapons. In 2009, this value of arms transfers from Israel to Turkey was \$320 million (in constant 1990 prices). In 2010, it was \$69 million, in 2011 it was \$22 million, and in 2012 it was \$9 million. Calculated from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “Importer/Exporter TIV Tables,” <http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/values.php>. The tables measure the volume of international transfers of major conventional weapons using a common unit, the trend-indicator value (TIV).
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- 45 “Israel-Turkey Relations Sink to Low.”
- 46 Arbell, “The U.S.-Turkey-Israel Triangle,” p. 28.
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# 12

## ISRAEL'S PIVOT FROM EUROPE TO ASIA<sup>1</sup>

*Efraim Inbar*

### Introduction

Israel is geographically in West Asia (the Middle East) – a region populated by Arabs and Muslims that are generally hostile to Jewish national aspirations. The rest of the continent was largely insignificant for the initial Zionist diplomatic efforts and for Israel's diplomacy following Israel's independence in 1948. Many Asian countries, including in West Asia, were under colonial rule. Asian states played a minor role in the international arena, Japan being an exception. Moreover, in contrast to Europe and the US, the Jewish communities on the Asian continent were small and had little political clout.

The decolonization process (Israel's birth was an early part of it) led to the emergence of many new Asian states. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's prime minister, lent importance to Israel's relationship with Asia. In 1953, he discussed the Arab world, Persia, Turkey (all in the Middle East / West Asia), Japan and particularly China and India. Ben-Gurion presciently noted “the waning hegemony of Europe and the rise of Asia,” as two great and ancient nations, India and China, stride out into independence.”<sup>2</sup> He ascribed importance to China and India not only because of their political and numerical importance, “but because of their intrinsic quality and the spiritual links that are being forged in modern Asia, [China and India] are pregnant with a destiny no less great and fruitful than Europe once knew.”<sup>3</sup>

Yet small states such as Israel inevitably have a short-term perspective in their foreign policy. Facing Arab hostility and a politicide campaign, Israel had to focus on the capitals that that could provide diplomatic and military assistance in the conflict with the Arab world. Asian countries were not on that list.<sup>4</sup> The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 forced Israel to take sides in the superpower confrontation,<sup>5</sup> and it became correctly viewed as being part of the Western bloc.

Some diplomatic efforts were directed to Asia primarily to overcome the Arab attempts to isolate Israel. The primary tool was developmental aid. Burma, Nepal, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Ceylon, South Korea, and the Philippines benefited from Israeli expertise. In the case of Singapore, the focus was building and training the military.<sup>6</sup> Israel's diplomatic network in Asia suffered a setback because of the growing political power of the Arabs, particularly following the energy crisis after the 1973 War. Asian members of the Non-Aligned Movement, such as Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Vietnam severed diplomatic relations with Israel.

At the end of the Cold War, Israel's position in Asia changed drastically as the two Asian giants, China and India, overcame their reluctance to have formal interactions with Israel and established full diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Similarly, Japan, an economic powerhouse decided to remove barriers on economic interactions with Israel.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Israel gradually became more active in courting Asian countries as the Indo-Pacific region acquired greater international and economic importance. While the US has remained the focus of Israel's diplomatic efforts, Asia became more important in Israel's foreign calculations.

Often personalities play an important role in devising a strategic course. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the dominant political figure in Israeli politics for most of the period since 1996, steered Israel's foreign policy toward Asia for strategic, diplomatic and economic reasons.<sup>8</sup> He served as foreign minister from 2002 to 2003; as a formative finance minister from 2003 to 2005, and as prime minister from 1996 to 1999 and since 2007. Asia was a clear priority. Indeed, Netanyahu emphasized during a trip to Singapore in January 2017 that Israel's foreign policy is pivoting toward Asia in a "very clear and purposeful way."<sup>9</sup>

This article analyzes the reasons for the change in Israel's diplomatic orientation and reviews bilateral relations between Israel and India and China that are the two largest Asian powers, which were clearly addresses for Israel's diplomats. The breakthrough happened in the post-Cold war period. These two countries serve as the case studies for this chapter.

## **The Asian reorientation in Israel's foreign policy**

The Asian reorientation in Israel's foreign policy was result of several factors: the opportunities presented by the end of the Cold War, the pragmatic Israeli response to the rise of Asia, and the decline and the growing hostility of Europe.

## **The Israeli engagement with Asia**

The greater Israeli engagement with Asia is a post-Cold War phenomenon. Then Israel became a more acceptable partner in the international arena.<sup>10</sup> This was partly related to the emergence of the US as a hegemonic global power. Israel enjoyed the fact that its superpower ally was the winner of the Cold War. The decision to upgrade relations with Israel on the part of many states was motivated by the desire

to potentially profit from Jerusalem's good links with Washington. Israel and its American lobbying organizations were seen as a gate to the US.

For Israel, the upgrading of relations with Russia, India, China, Turkey, Nigeria and additional Afro-Asian states in the early 1990s was an end to its relative international isolation. This post-Cold War trend allowed for a gradual increase in emphasis on nourishing good relations with states in Asia, a continent of rising importance.

In addition, Israel's greater acceptance was the result of the disappearance of several inhibiting factors. First, a change in the trends in the political economy of energy sources lessened the political leverage of the Arab bloc in world politics and of the oil-producing states in particular. Already by the end of the 1980s the fears of energy crises had subsided substantially, with the oil market becoming a buyers' market, diminishing the weight of Arab objections to the enhancement of relations with Israel. Second, the Arab-Israeli peace process, reactivated by the Americans with great fanfare in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, further marginalized the objections of Israel's regional enemies to third-party ties with Jerusalem. The October 1991 peace conference in Madrid, a formal gathering with Israel to which almost all Arab countries sent senior diplomatic delegations, served as a convenient pretext for hitherto reluctant states to develop a closer relationship with Israel. The Oslo Accords signed in 1993 and 1995 further diminished opposition to ties with Israel. In addition, the Non-Aligned Movement, an international forum with an anti-Israeli agenda that had many Asian members, lost much of its rationale and significance with the end of the bipolar system.

An important factor encouraging states to seek cooperation with Israel was the challenge of terrorism and/or radical Islam, mostly a post-9/11 phenomenon. The Arab Spring brought about enhanced influence for Islamist groups increasing threat perception in many quarters. The Jewish state had much to offer in areas such as intelligence, tactical, and doctrinal counterterrorism. Because of the growing Islamist threat, the number of states seeking security relations with the Jewish state rose. Many countries that fall in this category are not deterred from conducting useful interactions with Israel by the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Israel has also emerged as a great success story in the post-Cold War era, augmenting the attraction of pursuing good relations with her. This is due to Israel's economic reforms and its effective adaptation to a globalized economy. Moreover, its high-tech sector turned Israel into a global actor.<sup>11</sup> Beyond its well-established reputation for producing first-rate military equipment, Israel has also excelled in agriculture, medicine, communications, and a variety of other fields. All these accomplishments have created international admiration and keen interest in bilateral exchanges.

### **The greater weight of Asia in the global system**

The greater role of Asia in global affairs, which was captured by Kishore Mahbubani as "The Pacific Impulse,"<sup>12</sup> also emerged after the end of the Cold War. Jerusalem sensed the systemic change and adjusted policies accordingly.

The economic rise of Asia, championed by China's rapid growth, is unprecedented in both speed and scale. The four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan) also played a role in the impressive expansion of the Asian economy. Asia has become the largest market in the world and its largest manufacturer.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, six of the top ten countries in terms of foreign reserves come from Asia.<sup>14</sup> Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, Shanghai, and Mumbai have risen to the status of international financial centers. Asia has become a net capital exporter, while it also remains the largest recipient of foreign investment.

Rapidly increasing economic strength and prowess have enabled Asian countries, especially China and India, to expand their clout in world affairs, resulting in a shift of power from the West to the East. This shift of power has raised serious concerns and anxiety particularly over China's trajectory.<sup>15</sup> Chinese behavior in recent years has been quite aggressive. Beijing's policy of creating facts in the South China Sea that bolsters its capability to project military power, particularly, has increased threat perception in the region and elsewhere. Such apprehensions increased further after the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China held in October 2017. At the Party Congress the country's leader, Xi Jinping, emphasized China's desire to play a more substantial role internationally.

The growing fears of China in Asia, the tensions in the Korean Peninsula and the India-Pakistan nexus have benefited Israel's arms trade. Israeli arms exports are tilting East. Israel's arms industry, whose \$5.7 billion in sales in 2016 was dominated by Asia's 40.1 percent share, well ahead of Europe's 27.5 percent and North America's 19.3 percent.<sup>16</sup> Israel enjoys the reputation of having edge technology, battle-proven military products and of being a reliable provider. Israel also has a more liberal policy concerning technology transfer than other countries. In addition, Israeli defense companies also invest in on-site production; in recent years, arms factories have been launched in India and Vietnam. Cyber-security also emerged as an important area of cooperation. Israel signed agreements in this sector with Japan, China, and South Korea. Moreover, Israel, a small state, does not threaten the customer states as big powers do. This was a clear advantage for India's massive weapons purchases from the Jewish state. It probably played a similar role for Singapore and, more recently, Vietnam.

The main attraction for Israel in Asia is of course its market magnitude. Israel, like many small states with small domestic markets, is export oriented. About 40 percent of its GNP is generated by exports. Israel adapted to the globalization processes by opening up its mixed economy and reducing government regulation. The development of the very successful high-tech sector was one corollary of the free market ideology that Netanyahu has been advocating for years. His stint as finance minister in Ariel Sharon's government (2003–2005) had a formative effect on the impressive growth of Israel's economy and its ability to tap new markets.

At the end of the previous century Israeli trade with Asia was very small. In 2013, the EU bloc was Israel's largest group trading partner (it still holds this position). In 2013, 32 percent of Israeli exports went to Europe, and 28 percent went to

the US, making that country Israel's largest single-country trading partner.<sup>17</sup> Asian markets accounted for 21 percent of Israeli exports in 2013. By 2015, Israel saw that its exports to Asia – which less than a quarter-century earlier were negligible – had eclipsed exports to America, comprising a quarter of overall Israeli exports, and nearly equaling exports to Europe, which stood that year at 28 percent. Israel's largest trading partners in Asia are China and India. By 2018, more than a third of Israel's trade and investment was coming from Asia.

The change in Israel's trade patterns was result of change in Israel's priorities. For example, Israel's Economics and Commerce Minister Naftali Bennett (a former high-tech CEO and once a Netanyahu protégé), coined in 2013 the “Go East” catchphrase. This described his initiative to shift Israel's trade focus away from its traditional Western European orientation toward Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Oceania.<sup>18</sup> He stressed that Israel was redirecting funds from trade missions in Western Europe in favor of strengthening existing economic offices and opening new ones in Asia.<sup>19</sup> He added that his ministry was prepared to assist exporters to reach their target markets in Asia. Israeli companies have increasingly turned to Asia as the government urges them to diversify export markets in response to Europe's rising anti-Semitism and potential trade sanctions.

In cultural terms, Israel and its various agents are welcome in Asia as representatives of an ancient Jewish culture/civilization. The Chinese and Indians, particularly, see themselves as descendants of an ancient civilization, thereby according Jews great respect. In contrast to the Christian West that is beleaguered by ingrained anti-Semitism, nonbiblical Asian societies are not contaminated by the Christian myth of Deicide. Therefore, interactions with Jews lack any prejudice, and are mostly instrumental, often imbued with a modicum of admiration for Jewish (Israeli) scientific and military accomplishments.

Furthermore, Israel's strategic culture displays many similarities to how Asians think about international affairs. Many Asian countries are characterized by high threat perception and are willing to seriously consider the option of using force in the pursuit of national interests. Indeed, Asia has become the most important weapons market in the 21st century. The framework of analysis of the Asian elites is *realpolitik*. In dealing with strategic issues in closed rooms, Israeli and Asian leaders speak the same language. Moreover, Israel does not engage in spreading democracy, which is resented by most Asian states, and human rights is not on Netanyahu's foreign policy agenda. At open multilateral fora Asians often conform to current political correctness and vote with the Arab states (and European). The dissonance is usually explained away to their Israeli counterparts by pointing out that such fora are of no consequence.

A quarter-century's worth of commercial activity was underscored by a slew of high-profile diplomatic visits that in Israel's first decades were unthinkable. For example, PM Netanyahu went to China in May 1998. The Chinese president Jiang Zemin's five-day state visit to Israel in 2000 was followed by five visits to China by Israeli presidents and prime ministers, the last of whom were the late Shimon Peres in April 2014 and Netanyahu in May 2013 and in March 2017.

Netanyahu visited Japan in May 2014 and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Israel in January 2015 and in May 2018; President Ezer Weizman and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visited India, respectively, in December 1996 and in September 2003. Indian president Pranab Mukherjee visited Israel in October 2015, and Israel's President Reuven Rivlin went to India in November 2016. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Israel in July 2017, and Netanyahu visited the subcontinent in January 2018, accompanied by 130 businessmen. Netanyahu's marketing skills were lauded everywhere. Netanyahu went also to Singapore and Australia in February 2017, while Israeli President Reuven Rivlin made an official visit to Vietnam in March 2017.

The gradual pivot to Asia that all this diplomatic traffic reflects was also expressed in the Foreign Ministry's recasting of its outposts worldwide, having decided to close its consulates in Minsk, Marseilles, Philadelphia and San Salvador, and open new ones in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Bangalore.

## The decline of Europe

West Europe was for many decades the most important political and economic address for Israel. In the 1970s it was replaced by the US that has remained the center for Israel's diplomatic activity because of its superpower status. In the 21st century, we are witnessing the decline of Europe and its estrangement from Israel.<sup>20</sup> This has accentuated Israel's impetus for going to Asia.

The Europe Union (EU) has emerged as a strong economic actor, albeit with limited strategic power. Following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, it expanded primarily eastward losing some of its cohesion. In Eastern Europe democracy is fragile and there are greater fears of Russian aggression. In recent years, Brussels generated opposition in a number of countries because of its bloated bureaucracy, its immigration policy, and the seeming loss of sovereignty. Several states, such as Greece, Spain, and Italy, displayed a lack of budgetary discipline causing additional burdens on the EU. Economic crises followed, putting additional stress on the eurozone.<sup>21</sup> In addition, waves of immigrants from Africa and particularly from Muslim countries, generated domestic social tensions, augmenting the political appeal of right-wing parties that were generally critical of Brussels. In June 2016, the UK decided on "Brexit," further weakening the EU. Nowadays, Europe is struggling economically and politically. For Israel, the decline of Europe meant that it was imperative to increase exports to other regions of the world.

Israel also followed with concern the growing anti-Semitism in many of the European states. For centuries, Europe has never been a friendly host for Jews who suffered prejudice, discrimination, pogroms, expulsions, and finally – and worst of all – genocide. Unfortunately, Europe was not successful in purging itself of the anti-Semitic malaise. After the Holocaust attitudes toward the Jews improved. But as the memory of the Holocaust fades away, traditional anti-Semitism that has turned into anti-Israel attitudes has resurfaced. The Muslim immigration only

added another layer of anti-Semitism. A Jew wearing a *kipah* (skullcap) or displaying a Magen David is not safe on the streets of most West European capitals.

Another angle that places Israel in an unfavorable light for many Europeans is its alliance with the US. The gap between Europe and the US is gradually widening, particularly since Donald Trump became president. The strategic culture of the US is very different from the European and is much closer to Israeli strategic thinking. This inevitably reflects badly on Israel.

European feelings of guilt for their colonial past also put Israel at disadvantage as the colonial prism is applied to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Viewing Israel as European colonists displacing native Palestinians, however, disregards the historical connection of the Jews to their ancient homeland. Moreover, it fosters a forgiving attitude to the Palestinian Authority and Hamas-ruled Gaza, corrupt and dictatorial entities systematically violating human rights.

Above all, Europeans hardly have the intellectual capability to grasp the grim realities of the Middle East that lives in a different time zone. In contrast to peaceful Europe, the Middle East is a conflict-ridden region. In the Middle East, states go to war to attain political goals. The use of force is part and parcel of the rules of the game and of the toolbox available to heads of state. While in Europe, particularly in its western parts, use of force is viewed as anachronistic, in the Middle East military actions are popular. It is now hard to envision any European military action without some anti-war demonstrations at home.

After the Soviet threat disappeared at the end of the Cold War, Europeans had difficulties grasping the high levels of threat perception of all Middle East states. They are not ready to spend money on defense, taking a ride on the American security umbrella. In contrast, Middle Eastern states devote large chunks of their GDP to defense. Moreover, all states are suspicious of and fear their neighbors. In contrast, The EU states do not experience any challenges to the legitimacy of their borders. They do not face transnational violent movements undermining statist structures, such as Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islam.

Religion is also a poorly understood political factor in a mostly secular Europe. In contrast to a post-Reformation Europe, the separation of church and state is an alien concept in the Middle East. Most Middle Easterners – Arabs, Turks, Persians and Jews – are to some degree religious and their identity is shaped by holy texts. The tremendous power of religious conviction in motivating people for action and for willingness to sustain great pain is incomprehensible for the average European. Europeans are ill-equipped to understand the zealots of the Muslim world.

While there are islands of support for Israel in the old continent, life in today's Europe does not prepare one for understanding Middle East realities. The biased European attitudes against Israeli policies and its use of force are a result of a hostile cultural baggage and an entirely different set of attitudes toward defense and foreign policy issues.

Bilateral relations with most European states are cordial, but the EU's foreign policy causes many tensions. Israel dislikes criticism from Europe on issues of human rights or violations of international law, such as the construction of settlements in

the West Bank. Israel has been particularly concerned about the involvement of many European institutions and the public in the pro-Palestinian “Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions” (BDS) movement, which is practically absent in Asia-Pacific states. European funds for radical Israeli and Palestinian nongovernmental organizations have angered many Israelis.

This European behavior is another factor pushing Israel toward Asia. Asians do not preach democracy to others and do not threaten Israel with boycotts and sanctions. Israel joined Horizons 2020, the EU's flagship R&D program only after a bruising battle over the implementation of the EU's strict guidelines governing the ban of EU grants, prizes or financial instruments to any Israeli entities over the Green Line, including East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Subsequently, Bennett emphasized the need to diversify, and to have a much broader set of arrangements. He even advocated severing relations with the EU.<sup>22</sup> In 2018, the Israeli government focused on three major export markets the US, China and India.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, several important Asian countries changed their policies toward Israel in the aftermath of the end to the bipolar world. At the same time, Israel has become a more desirable partner in world politics. Jerusalem also realized the growing importance of Asia and invested efforts in developing better economic and political relations. Relations with India and China illustrate this trend.

## India

India and Israel represent two ancient civilizations. The two share a British colonial past and were the first to become independent (in 1947 and 1948, respectively) in the post-WWII decolonization wave. Both were born as the result of messy partitions and have maintained democratic regimes under adverse conditions ever since. While Israel has always been interested in having good relations with India, Delhi was reluctant to have full diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. Indian leaders had an anti-Zionist perspective.<sup>24</sup> After independence they showed great sensitivity to the Arab bloc and to the large Muslim minority at home (15–18 percent of the population). It took over four decades for India to overcome its reluctance and to establish a fruitful bilateral relationship.

For India, better relations with Israel represent a departure from the well-established Indian foreign policy that emphasized the Third World leadership role and that identified the Jewish State as part of the Western bloc. For Israel, better relations with India reflects awareness that the center of gravity in the international system is moving to Asia and the Pacific Rim. India is an extremely important protagonist that requires Israel's utmost attention.

The end of the Cold War provided an opportunity to change Indian policy toward Israel.<sup>25</sup> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been India's main diplomatic and strategic ally during the Cold War, India was “forced to reorient its foreign policy to accommodate the changing international milieu.”<sup>26</sup> Its relations with Israel were reevaluated in light of the possible benefits to be accrued by becoming closer to Jerusalem. Support for the Palestinian cause also became less



important.<sup>27</sup> The disappearance of several inhibiting factors, as mentioned earlier, facilitated taking the decision to upgrade relations with Israel.

As India signaled to Israel its willingness to gradually upgrade its relations, Israel rejected incremental steps and insisted on full diplomatic relations, particularly before India could participate in the multilateral framework initiated at the Madrid Peace conference. New Delhi had many interests in the Middle East (oil, foreign workers, radical Islam) and showed a desire to participate in the multilateral tracks of the Madrid Conference, particularly in the Arms Control and Regional Security committee. China had decided to upgrade relations with Israel to secure its presence at the process generated by American diplomacy and India did not want to fall behind.

Domestic political dynamics also played a role in the upgrading of Indo-Israeli relations. The decline in the fortunes of the Congress party and the ascendance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Indian political system helped remove hesitations about Israel. The BJP's nationalist and Hindu outlook made the Jewish state not so much of a diplomatic burden, but rather as a potential ally against Pakistan and radical Islam. Normalization was also the result of economic liberalization initiated by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao of the Congress Party, which depended heavily on economic and technological interactions with the West. Israel was perceived as a well-integrated part of the new globalized economy that India wished to join.<sup>28</sup>

India was also sensitized to the political power of the Jewish organizations in Washington. As India attempted to secure a USD multi-billion loan from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Washington became very important. In fact, some of the Indian interlocutors that favored better relations with Israel invited pressure from the US on the issue of the upgrading of diplomatic relations to help them overcome the diplomatic inertia of their country.<sup>29</sup> New Delhi believed that announcing full diplomatic relations with Israel on January 29, 1992, was conducive to a better atmosphere in the US because of the closeness between Washington and Jerusalem. New Delhi soon realized that there was little cost to establishing full diplomatic relations with Jerusalem, neither at home nor abroad.

Moreover, the two countries learned that they shared a similar outlook on their regional disputes and a common strategic agenda. India and Israel have high levels of threat perception and share a common strategic agenda. Both have waged several major conventional wars against their neighbors and have experienced low-intensity conflict and terror, as they are both involved in protracted conflicts characterized by complex ethnic and religious components not always well understood by outsiders. Both face rival states armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and both fear Islamic extremism.

India has gradually overcome its inhibitions and engaged in security cooperation with Israel. The cooperation on counterterrorism, involving the exchange of information on the finances, recruitment patterns, and training of terrorist groups, preceded the establishment of diplomatic relations. The November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks elicited even greater cooperation with Israeli agencies.

Arms supply and technology transfer have become important components in the bilateral relationship. Initially, Russian failure to deliver promised weapons at expected prices and/or schedules led India to turn to Israeli companies to upgrade some of its aging Soviet platforms, such as its Mig-21s and T-72 tank fleet.

Difficulties in the development of weapons systems at home have led to the purchase of Israeli products and to partnership in developing advanced military technology. New Delhi purchased Israeli advanced radar and communications equipment, and turned also to Israel for portable battlefield radars, hand-held thermals, night warfare vision equipment, and electronic fences to improve border monitoring. A long list of Israeli military items, such as ammunition, UAV parts, and even Israeli missiles (Spike anti-armor, the Python-4 air-to-air, and naval Barak-8 surface-to-air) are being produced in India.

The airborne Phalcon radar (mounted on the Russian IL-76 transport aircraft), Airborne Early Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), and the long-range Green Pine radar are examples of high-end items. The sale of the Phalcon by Israel to India required American approval, which was finally secured in May 2003. India signed a contract for the purchase of two additional Phalcon/IL-76 AWACS valued at USD\$1 billion during the November 2016 visit of Israel's President Rivlin to India. Israel was the third-largest arms supplier to India in the three years ending March 2016.

In April 2017, India signed a contract worth about USD\$2 billion to procure anti-tank missiles and air defense systems from the Israel Aerospace Industry (IAI). This was the largest order in Israel's history. One month later, the IAI secured another contract for USD\$630 million to supply Barak-8 missiles for the Indian Navy. Both deals involve technology transfer and production in India. These deals are part of PM Narendra Modi's USD\$250 billion plan to modernize the armed forces by 2025 amid tensions with neighbors China and Pakistan. An even more recent example of cooperation is the USD\$777 million signed by the IAI to supply the naval versions of the Barak-8 missile system that took place in October 2018.<sup>30</sup>

While India, a major player in the international system, has improved relations with Washington, New Delhi's links with Jerusalem have the potential to smooth over some of the remaining difficulties in dealing with the US. The Jewish and Indian lobbies in the US worked together to gain the Bush administration's approval for Israel's sale of the Phalcon to India. Moreover, in July 2003, they were successful in adding an amendment to a bill giving aid to Pakistan that called on Islamabad to stop Islamic militants from crossing into India and to prevent the spread of WMD. In the fall of 2008, Jewish support was important in passing through the US Congress the US-India nuclear deal, which allowed India access to nuclear technology for civilian use despite its not being a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Working with Israel also fits into the plan of PM Narendra Modi to deepen relations with the US given the US-Israel friendship.

A new era in Indo-Israeli relations emerged with Modi and the BJP coming to power in May 2014. His government has shed its predecessors' reservations about interactions with Israel. Indeed, Modi arrived for a first ever Indian PM visit to

Israel at the beginning of July 2017. This first trip to Israel by an Indian prime minister reflected the significant expansion in relations between the two countries that has taken place since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992. The burgeoning relationship is based on a similar strategic agenda, buttressed by extensive defense ties.

It is worthy of note that Modi's trip to Israel was not "balanced" with a visit to the Palestinian Authority, indicating that India has freed its relations with Israel from its historical commitment to the Palestinian issue. (He visited the PA on a separate trip in February 2018.) Indeed, India has occasionally modified its voting pattern at international organizations by refraining from joining the automatic majority against Israel.

Israel went out of its way to extend a most warm welcome, underscoring the good personal chemistry between Modi and Netanyahu. The manner Israel managed the visit was well appreciated by Indians. "Israel is a real friend and I have really felt that feeling of kinship. I feel absolutely at home here," Modi said during a meeting with President Rivlin in Jerusalem. He emphasized the very warm reception was "a mark of respect to the entire Indian nation comprising 1.25 billion people."<sup>31</sup>

Recognizing that there is a shift in the distribution of power in the international system and that the Asia-Pacific region is gradually becoming the center of gravity for international interactions, Israel has paid greater attention to Asia. Within such a perspective, Israel courted India, a rising global power located in that region. India, for its own reasons, responded positively, turning into a very important market for Israel's defense exports.

Israel's export policy is flexible, meeting Indian demands for technological transfer and offsets. The India-Israel Joint Statement at the end of Modi's visit in Israel hailed the defense cooperation, noting that India and Israel agreed that "future developments in this sphere should focus on joint development of defense products, including transfer of technology from Israel, with a special emphasis on the 'Make in India' initiative."<sup>32</sup>

Beyond the USD billions in defense deals, India and Israel share a common strategic agenda. Indeed, the first paragraph of the India-Israel joint statement states that the friendship between the two states has been raised to "a strategic partnership." This is a significant definition. Modi explained "Israel and India live in complex geographies. . . . We are aware of strategic threats to regional peace and stability. . . . Prime Minister Netanyahu and I agreed to do much more together to protect our strategic interests."

In the joint statement, both prime ministers reiterated their strong commitment to combat global terror. "They stressed that there can be no justification of acts of terror on any grounds whatsoever." The Working Groups of the two states on Homeland and Public security were encouraged to implement the agreements in an efficient and effective manner. Similarly, cyber-security was recognized as an important area for enhanced cooperation. Indeed, in October 2018, an IAI-Elta's consortium joined forces with Indian leading firm Tech Mahindra's to combat rising cyber-threats around the world.<sup>33</sup>

While national security issues, including defense contracts, are an important facet of the bilateral relations, it is only one component. The joint statement mentions a myriad of items of mutual interest in the civilian sphere. Looking to deepen ties the two PMs presented a series of agreements between India and Israel for cooperation in the fields of space, water management, agriculture, science and technology. In addition, the two countries decided to create a USD\$40 million innovation fund to allow Indian and Israeli enterprises to develop innovative technologies and products with commercial applications.

The Modi visit was extremely well covered by the Indian and the international media. It was a great opportunity for Israel not to be seen through the prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but as a technological superpower able to attract the attention of rising global powers such as India. Modi's warmth toward Israel was a great public relations benefit for Israel, and a welcome promotion for Israeli products.

Since 1992 the evolution of the economic ties between Israel and India has also been significant. In 1992 bilateral trade consisted primarily of diamonds and associated jewelry-related items that equated to approximately USD\$200 million in total. By 2017, bilateral trade has increased twenty times and currently represents over USD\$4 billion. Israel exports to India electronic equipment, medical and technical equipment, iron and steel products, fertilizers, machinery, organic and other chemical goods and plastics, as well as military equipment. Conversely, India primarily exports to Israel precious stones and metals, chemical products, textile and textile articles, plants and vegetable products, mineral products, rubber and plastic products, base metals and machinery. Israeli Minister of Economy and Industry, Eli Cohen said June 2017 "India is a major and important export destination" for Israeli products.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, India looms large as a destination for Israeli companies, perhaps even more so than China. While China's economy was growing more quickly than India's, there was more opportunity for growth in areas such as infrastructure, health, and education in India than in China. In the coming decades, growth in India is expected significantly outpace growth in China, as India's young population continues to grow while China's relatively older population begins to die off.

Netanyahu touted Israel's growing ties with the second-most populous country in the world. The Modi visit serves him well in refuting the accusations from the opposition that his foreign policy leads to the isolation of Israel in the international arena. He could convincingly argue that Israel has become a preferred partner in the international community because it has many things to offer in the defense and civilian spheres.

Netanyahu accepted an invitation from his Indian counterpart to visit Delhi, which took place in January 2018. Accompanied by a 130-member business delegation, Netanyahu attempted to further deepen ties in trade and defense. This visit was also an opportunity check the progress made, to identify the problems hindering the implementation of the agreements and to further solidify the ties between the two countries.

The Indian-Israeli burgeoning relationship is a post-Cold war development. It reflects complementary interests. Israel was successful in capitalizing on specific

Indian needs to establish itself as an important defense partner. The huge Indian civilian market had a significant potential for Israeli firms specializing in agriculture, communications, and health services. This remains to be effectively tapped by Israeli businessmen. Interestingly, Modi's visit to Israel coincided with a rise in Sino-Indian tensions in the Sikkim border area, underscoring India's threat perceptions and military needs. Israel, on a different scale, is also concerned about Chinese behavior that challenges its main ally – the US. Indeed, two strategic developments of the 21st century are likely to strengthen the strategic glue between India and Israel: the decline of the US and the rise of China. In the Middle East, the Obama administration projected weakness and encouraged Iran's quest for hegemony. US weakness inevitably has ripple effects in other parts of the globe. Indeed, Asian states view the declining American role with concern. It is not clear yet whether President Donald Trump will adopt a more assertive foreign policy than his predecessor or how he will confront China, as he displayed isolationist impulses during his election campaign and afterwards. India and Israel, located in different parts of the globe, share similar concerns about global developments and about threats that originate in the Middle East.

## China

Israel was the first Middle Eastern country to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) in January 1950. This was followed by a series of contacts intended to establish diplomatic relations.<sup>35</sup> Yet, the breakout of the Korean War and the sensitivity to American anti-Chinese policy dictated to Israel caution on this issue. In the 1960s, Israel tried to approach China several times, but China did not respond. Unlike India, the Chinese communists never entertained hostility to the Zionist enterprise. However, the PRC adopted an anti-Israel position, equating Zionism with Imperialism, when it aspired to be the champion of the Third World.<sup>36</sup> Its relations with Israel were primarily a function of its relations with Moscow and Washington, as well as with the Arab world.

When the US changed its China policy, Washington asked Jerusalem to vote at the UN to accept the PRC and expel Taiwan. Israel went reluctantly along in October 1971, fearing that this could be a dangerous precedent for Israel. This vote did not affect Chinese opposition to normalization of relations with Israel, although the tone of Chinese statements on Israel became softer than before.<sup>37</sup> As the Soviet-Chinese global competition grew in the 1970s, the PRC started to view Israel in that context, meaning that Israel was useful in curbing Soviet encroachment in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it preferred to side automatically with the Arabs, delaying recognition of Israel until the end of the Cold War.

A change in relations with Israel occurred as result of domestic developments in China. After Chairman Mao Zedong's death (1976), Deng Xiaoping rose to the leadership position in 1978 and led his country through far-reaching market-economy reforms. The new emphasis on agriculture, industry, science and technology and national security brought about a more pragmatic approach in Beijing.

The initial contacts with Israel were informal and indirect, aiming to capitalize on Israeli expertise in agriculture. Limited industrial ties started in 1979. China was also interested in hosting Israeli scientists, but only after 1982 were invitees with Israeli passports allowed in.<sup>38</sup>

At that time, China developed an interest in Israel's arms industries in its quest to modernize its military forces. China used the services of an Israeli businessman, Shaul Eisenberg to approach Israel's arms industries. The Israeli companies were ready to upgrade Russian weapon systems, sell Israeli arms and even to transfer technology for modernizing the Chinese army. The discreet weapon sales to China included communications equipment, 105 mm guns for Chinese tanks, missile ships, sea to sea missiles and other items. They were rumors that Israel also transferred key technology from its canceled Lavi project for building Chinese jet fighters (the J-10). There are no reliable figures for the magnitude of Israeli weapon transactions with China in this period, only informal estimates of several USD billions. Israel realized the sensitivity of this dimension in the China-Israel relationship to Washington and has continued to be careful in its arms sales policy, mindful of the US position.

As is the case with other countries, the excellence of the Israeli weapon manufacturers and their ability to compete on the international market was very attractive even for countries that for political reasons refrained from formal diplomatic relations with Israel. Jerusalem usually responded pragmatically by not linking business interactions even in sensitive areas such as weapon sales to having formal diplomatic relations.<sup>39</sup>

Israel's "arms diplomacy" *vis-à-vis* China was only partly successful. During the 1980s China's pronouncements on Israel were less hostile than before, but it continued its pro-Arab foreign policy and sold weapons to Arab states, including missiles that threatened Israel. Moreover, it signed with the Iranian Islamic Republic an agreement for nuclear cooperation in 1990. Iran, a state intent on destroying the Jewish state, benefited from technology transfers from Pakistan and North Korea. It is hard to believe that North Korea could engage in such activities without Beijing turning a blind eye. Some of the Chinese actions and inactions have been inimical to Israel's national security. Nonetheless, Jerusalem preferred to focus on the economic advantages of the relationship and to ignore aspects of Chinese behavior that probably it could not do much about.

An important step in bilateral relations was the opening of the Israeli consulate in Hong Kong in August 1985 (a step planned already in 1983). The decision capitalized on the UK-China agreement to transfer Hong Kong to China (December 1984) that allowed the presence of consulates of states lacking diplomatic relations with the PRC. Israel sent Reuven Merhav, an ex-Mossad senior agent, to Hong Kong, which became Israel's outpost in China. His background and diplomatic skills appealed to the Chinese leadership and prepared the path to full diplomatic relations.

Israel and China established official diplomatic relations in January 1992. The Chinese decision was result of a systemic change in world politics. The dissolution

of the Soviet Union provided a new opportunity for the PRC to play a greater international role. The international conference the US convened to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict – an idea China had supported for years – was an event the Chinese did not want to miss. At that time, the price of recognizing Israel and establishing full diplomatic relations was no longer too high to pay. Moreover, Israel seemed a good partner for the Chinese need to further modernize its economy.<sup>40</sup> In addition, its military needs required an intake of modern technology.

As was the case with India, there were an American angle involved. China, after the Tiananmen Square protests (April–June 1989) wanted to improve its image in the US. Israel and American Jewry was seen as useful in limiting criticism of communist China in the American Congress and public opinion.<sup>41</sup>

After the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992 economic relations have expanded. Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin (1992–1995), Benjamin Netanyahu (1996–1999), and Ehud Barak (1999–2001) all sought to build a special relationship with China for both commercial and strategic reasons. Rabin was the first ever Israeli PM to visit China in October 1993. The trip was about business, but he also urged the Chinese leadership to stop supplying surface-to-surface missiles and nonconventional weapons to Iran. Netanyahu went to Beijing in May 1998, leading a 100-strong delegation of officials and business executives. It was agreed to set up four committees to promote exchanges in the areas of Israeli strength; electronics, agriculture, health, and communications. The bilateral nonmilitary trade (China and Hong Kong) more than doubled during the 1992–1999 period from USD\$909 million to USD\$2.276 billion, with Israeli exports slightly exceeding its imports.

In the 1990s, China showed interest in cooperating with Israel against radical Islam. China faced Islamic extremism in its western Xinjiang region. Turkic-speaking Uighur separatists had attacked Chinese officials since 1996 as their growing aspirations for independence were encouraged when the Turkic republics of the former Soviet Union gained independence in 1991. In addition, Saudi-financed religious Muslim extremism (Wahhabism) penetrated into Xinjiang. Both China and Israel also feared the rise of radical Islam in the new republics of Central Asia. The fight against Islamic extremism is a recurring motif in strengthening Israel's bilateral relations with many countries.

One component of the relationship was arms sales by Israel. Sales reached over USD\$500 million by 2000.<sup>42</sup> The crowning achievement of the closer military ties between the two countries was the plan to supply China with four Russian Ilyushin IL-76 airplanes equipped with the Israeli Phalcon early warning system (AWACS) able to simultaneously track many airplanes and ships within a several hundred miles radius. Contacts for this defense contract had begun in 1994 and was finalized during PM Netanyahu's visit to China in 1998. The deal was worth about USD\$1 billion and included an option for four more AWACS.<sup>43</sup>

Israel informed the US of the impending deal early in the process, foreseeing no problem. Yet, the Sino-American relationship rapidly deteriorated in 1999 and the first half of 2000, leading to American strong objections to the deal because the



advanced aerial technology “could endanger United States forces in case of a Chinese confrontation with Taiwan.”<sup>44</sup> As accusations of Israel transferring American technologies to China surfaced in the press, the US also expressed concerns about the developing defense relationship between Israel and China. Israel vehemently denied the truth in any of the accusations. Israel also claimed Israeli arms deals with China were not new and that the Phalcon system did not contain American technology. The force of American objections to the sale were increasingly more pronounced, but Jerusalem wrongly assumed it could overcome American reservations. In parallel, it calmed the Chinese buyers. This only reinforced the myth (not only in China) of Israel's omnipotent clout in Washington.

China sent a delegation headed by its defense minister, General Chi Haotian to Israel in October 1999. They met PM Barak and President Ezer Weizman. They went also to the Israel Aircraft Industries, the organization responsible for manufacturing the Phalcon.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately for Israel, the US strongly demanded Israel cancel the very lucrative deal putting Israel in an awkward position between its superpower patron and a rising Asian power. Probably not suspecting the depth of the crisis in the Sino-Israel relationship, President Jiang Zemin came to Israel on a historic six-day visit in April 2000. In July, Prime Minister Ehud Barak abruptly canceled the deal, leaving Beijing insulted and indignant after its expectations were raised by three consecutive PMs over the course of six years.<sup>46</sup> This was the end of the first chapter of the Sino-Israeli relationship, and a financial compensation package of USD\$350 million organized by PM Ariel Sharon in 2002 did little to mend the extensive damage that was dealt by the Phalcon cancellation. Israel has since faced further Pentagon ire after providing maintenance service for a fleet of Israeli-made drones that it sold to China in the 1990s.

Jerusalem had received a humbling reminder that exports of military or dual use equipment must be cleared with Washington, its most important ally. Thereafter, sensitivity to American concerns became a constant feature in Israel's outreach to the many countries in the world, particularly in Asia. Subsequently, Israel sought to pursue a relationship with China along the diplomatic, economic, technological, and cultural/educational paths only.

It took some time to put Sino-Israel relations back on track. China had to overcome the aftershocks of the Phalcon fiasco. Yet the technological prowess of Israel remained attractive, and both states accepted the necessity of more limited political and security cooperation while harvesting the benefits of an expanded economic partnership. The January 2007 visit by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to China represented a new stage of Sino-Israeli relations.<sup>47</sup> There have since been many state visits on both sides. Officials from both countries have expressed their unreserved enthusiasm for this burgeoning bond.

When Netanyahu formed his government in 2013, he encouraged his ministers to go to only one place – China, urging them to cement the relationship. In Netanyahu's view Israel's high-tech capabilities and innovation, and China's production capacity, was a “winning combination.”<sup>48</sup> A year later, Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong said that “our two peoples are rooted in a tradition of friendship. The



Jewish and the Chinese peoples are peoples of great wisdom. . . . (we) agreed that we should expand our cooperation.”<sup>49</sup> In April 2015, PM Netanyahu signed a letter of application for Israel to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, despite American misgivings.

On his second trip to China (March 2017), Netanyahu took with him four ministers and one hundred businessmen. In his view “this is a marriage made in heaven.”<sup>50</sup> Trade and investment was at the top of the agenda. A joint statement listed several fields for increased cooperation, including “air pollution control, waste management, environmental monitoring, water conservation and purification, as well as hi-tech fields.” China and Israel also planned to establish “innovation parks and an innovative cooperation center.”<sup>51</sup>

The October 2018 visit to Israel by the Chinese Vice-President Wang Qishan, the most senior Beijing official to visit Israel in 18 years, signaled the desire of the two countries to bolster further their growing business ties.

Chinese investment in Israel has soared since 2010, much of it in high-tech. But Chinese investment has run up into opposition from many inside Israel who are concerned about Chinese intentions and corporate governance. By the end of 2017 bilateral trade (China and Hong Kong) had reached \$16.8 billion.

The biggest Chinese universities are opening innovation centers in cooperation with Israeli universities (for instance, the innovation center of Tsinghua – China’s leading university – that was established at Tel Aviv University). The Technion chose to open a branch – only its second branch outside Israel – in the city of Shantou in South China.

In addition to the El Al direct flights to Beijing (started in September 1992), Hainan Airlines, China’s leading airline, had operated since 2017 direct flights on the same route. This is part of the reason why tourism from China to Israel has increased exponentially since 2005. While global tourism to Israel has increased less than threefold since then, almost 23 times as many Chinese tourists came to visit in 2017 as they did twelve years earlier.<sup>52</sup> In 2018, Sichuan Airlines decided to open direct flights to additional destinations in China.

Chinese rhetoric on the Palestinian issue is a minor irritant. Lip service is paid to the role of China in international affairs, particularly when Chinese aspirations for mediation the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are voiced. Beijing’s position on Iran is not acceptable in Jerusalem, but not much can be done about it. China’s Belt and Road project and its attempts to build its influence in the Middle East and Africa are not viewed in Jerusalem as a threat to Israel’s vital interests. The construction of China’s first overseas military base in Djibouti is viewed with nonchalance. Despite its growing ties with China Jerusalem is continuing its lucrative business relations with Taiwan.

## Conclusion

While Israel faces a diplomatic and economic threat from potential European boycotts, its pivot to Asia is an attempt at diversifying markets and exploiting its

opportunities in East Asia. Israel benefits from the enormous Chinese and Indian markets. Israel is currently at different stages of negotiating foreign trade agreements with South Korea, Vietnam, China, and India, which may take years. Once signed, this will represent another sign of an upgrade in Israel-Asia economic relations.

India, like small Singapore and the Philippines (not discussed here), has also developed strategic relations with Israel that reflects their geo-political predicament. Israel seems to serve as a reliable strategic partner.

Its rich experience in military affairs and counterterrorism is highly valued in Asian capitals and the Palestinian issue not a hindering factor in the bilateral relations. This reflects the realpolitik lens of the Asian leaders.

Netanyahu is clearly identified with the Asian emphasis in Israel foreign policy. His long presence at the helm, accompanied by keen interest in diplomatic and economic issues leaves a clear mark on Israel's breakthroughs in Asia. His strategic foresight, deep economic understanding, as well as political need to demonstrate that the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict is hardly affecting Israel international status, has made Netanyahu an important factor in promoting Israel's overtures toward Asia. He was not the only Israeli to demand that Israel pay greater attention to Asian capitals and markets, but he was in a position to make it happen.

Israel is a small state and in its dealings with Asian countries it needs to remember that it cannot ignore American sensitivities. Nonetheless, this leaves many avenues open for Israel to pursue its ties with Asian states.

## Notes

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# 13

## RUSSIA AND ISRAEL

*Ambassador Zvi Magen*

### **1 The Russian-Israeli relationship: an analysis of the pluses and minuses in relations between Moscow and Jerusalem**

Russia and Israel have one of the more peculiar relationships in international relations. Indeed, one scholar of Russian policy in the Middle East has called Russia and Israel “The Odd Couple.”<sup>1</sup> This is due to the fact that, while bilateral relations between Russia and Israel are, on the whole, excellent, Russia has been a major supporter of Israel’s enemies of Israel in the Middle East. Thus, in the bilateral relationship, trade between Israel and Russia currently exceeds USD\$3.5 billion, with Israel supplying Russia with agricultural and high-tech goods as well as nanotechnology, and Russia supplying Israel with oil and precious metals. Russia has put Israeli satellites into space, and the two countries have cooperated in the export of military equipment, including an AWACS air battle command airplane to India with Russia supplying the airframe and Israel the avionics. There is also a visa-free tourist arrangement between Israel and Russia with hundreds of thousands of Russians visiting Israel annually where they can read Russian language newspapers, watch Russian language television and visit Christian religious shrines in Israel (Israel had returned the Saint Sergius religious complex in Jerusalem to Russia in 2008, thus aiding Putin who gets some of his political legitimacy in Russia from the support of Russia’s Orthodox Church). In addition, party to party relations had been established between Putin’s United Russia Party and Ehud Olmert’s (now defunct) Kadima Party, Israel sold military drones to Russia, after the poor performance of Russia’s own drones in its war against Georgia in 2008, and Russia continued to allow the free emigration of Russian Jews to Israel, with an estimated 10,500 Russian Jews emigrating to Israel in 2018, joining the more than one million Jews from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) already living in Israel.<sup>2</sup> Since Putin

appears to cherish the role of Moscow being the center of the Russian-speaking world, the sizeable Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel – the largest such diaspora outside the Former Soviet Union – is seen by Putin as an important asset and the close Russian cultural ties between the Russian community in Israel and Russia is another important link between the two communities. Indeed, in 2009, Putin declared that Israel's sizeable Russian community "was something that unites us with you like no other country."<sup>3</sup> One should also note the ease of communication between the Russian and Israeli leaderships when a Russian-speaking immigrant from the FSU serves in a key position in the Israel government, such as Avigdor Lieberman, who has served both as Israel's foreign minister and its defense minister and can communicate with his Russian counterparts without the need for an interpreter. Finally, Russian leaders, who have historically viewed Jews as a powerful worldwide force, have also regarded Israel as a possible bridge between Russia and the United States, in light of the special relationship between Israel and the United States that has become even closer since Donald Trump became the US president.<sup>4</sup>

While all of these elements underline the strength of the Russian-Israeli bilateral relationship, one cannot minimize the problems that Russia poses to Israel by its regional policies in the Middle East. Thus, in 2006 when Hamas – a Palestinian organization dedicated to the destruction of Israel – won the Palestinian legislative elections; and the Diplomatic Quartet of the US, Russia, the European Union and the UN, which was working to achieve a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, stated that it would have no dealings with Hamas unless it recognized Israel and accepted all previous Palestinian-Israeli agreements, such as Oslo I and Oslo II; Russia broke with the diplomatic consensus only a few weeks later when it invited a Hamas delegation to visit Moscow, thus bestowing on it a measure of diplomatic legitimacy. It should be noted in this context that Russia, unlike the United States and the European Union, does not consider Hamas a terrorist organization but as an important Palestinian political organization with which Moscow has to maintain relations so it can talk to all sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the Palestinian Authority under Mahmoud Abbas, its rival Hamas, and Israel.<sup>5</sup>

Russia also has close relations with Iran, a country that also calls for Israel's destruction. Missiles paraded in Tehran are painted with slogans like "Death to Israel" (as well as "Death to the United States"), as Iranian leaders regularly call for wiping Israel off the map.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Russia, has supplied Iran with nuclear reactors and also sold it tanks, fighter planes and the SAM-300 missile system while also using its veto at the UN Security Council to protect Iran from anti-Iranian resolutions. To be sure, in 2010 Russian-Iranian relations chilled when Russia's then-president, Dmitri Medvedev, agreed to strong sanctions against Iran because of its nuclear program, and also suspended the planned sale of the SAM-300 missile system to Iran. However, when Putin returned to Russia's presidency in 2012, Russian – Iranian relations improved and Moscow was a very strong supporter of the 2015 JCPOA nuclear agreement with Iran, with Putin sending the SAM-300 missile system to Iran even before the JCPOA agreement was signed. Relations between Iran and Russia have recently grown even closer, given the Russian-Syrian

military cooperation in Syria since 2015, and the Trump administration's efforts to pressure Iran with increased sanctions.

Third, Russia has maintained close relations with Syria, another enemy of Israel, especially since Putin's visit to Damascus in 2005. Prior to its entry into the Syrian civil war in a major way in September 2015, Russia maintained a naval facility at Tartus in Syria that consisted of several warehouses and floating docks, the only such Russian naval facility in the Middle East. Throughout the Cold War Syria had been the most reliable Arab ally of the Soviet Union, and, after a chill in relations during the late Gorbachev and Yeltsin years (1987–1999) Putin sought to restore the relationship. During his visit to Syria in 2005, he wiped out a large amount of Syria's debt to the Former Soviet Union, and sold it advanced weapons although, reportedly because of Israeli objections, not the SAM-300 missile system that the regime of Bashar Assad had wanted,<sup>7</sup> until 2018. Another problem Israel had with the Russian relationship with Syria was the Syrian regime's transfer of Russian weapons to Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia organization, very closely tied to Iran, which was also dedicated to the destruction of Israel and which used the weapons against Israel in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war.<sup>8</sup>

Finally Russia has voted for almost all the anti-Israeli resolutions in the United Nations, including a UNESCO resolution that denied any Jewish connection to the Temple Mount / Haram Al-Sharif in Jerusalem, in an effort to solicit support from the Arab and Moslem worlds. This, together with Moscow's support of Iran, Syria, Hamas, and Hezbollah demonstrated to the Israeli leadership, even before the Russian military intervention in Syria, that major obstacles to a closer Russian-Israeli relationship remained.

## 2 Russia and the civil war in Syria

### *On the eve of the Russian military intervention in Syria*

Having seen one erstwhile ally in the Middle East, Muammar Kaddafi, overthrown and then executed, Putin had no desire to see another ally, Bashar Assad of Syria, meet the same fate. Consequently, once the Syria Civil War erupted, Putin strongly backed the Syrian leader, providing both military equipment and diplomatic support at the United Nations despite Assad's use of barrel bombs and poison gas against his opponents. Putin was helped in his strategy by the uncertain response to the events in Syria by US President Barack Obama who first promised to enforce a "red line" against Syria if it used poison gas and then backed off from that pledge when Putin promised to get Syria to destroy all of its chemical weapons – a promise that was not kept as Assad's subsequent use of poison gas indicated.<sup>9</sup> Six months after Obama backed off from his red-line threat, Putin invaded the Crimea and sent troops to aid rebels in Eastern Ukraine. When the US sought to rally support from the UN General Assembly to condemn the Russian actions, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu chose to abstain on the vote using as an excuse the fact that the Israeli Foreign Ministry, including its UN representative was on strike.<sup>10</sup> The real reason

for the Israeli abstention could be seen in the words of then Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who stated, “We have good and trusting relations with the Americans and the Russians, and our experience has been very positive with both sides. So I don’t understand the idea that Israel has to get mired in this.”<sup>11</sup> Russia reciprocated the Israeli action by muting its criticism of Israel during the Israeli– Hamas war of 2014 several months later.<sup>12</sup> Then, following the war, Israel’s Minister of Agriculture, Yair Shamir, speaking to a Russian news agency, stated that the Russian countersanctions on the European Union that stopped all agricultural imports from the EU (the EU had placed sanctions on Russia following its seizure of the Crimea) provided an opportunity for Israel, which was prepared to triple its annual agricultural exports to Russia from USD\$375 million per year to USD\$1 billion.<sup>13</sup> These Israeli actions demonstrated that Jerusalem was seeking to improve its relationship with Moscow, despite the aid it was giving to Israel’s enemies. The real test of the Israeli–Russian relationship, however, was to come with the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015.

### ***The Russian military intervention in Syria: causes and consequences***

When Putin sent his air force to Syria in September 2015, he justified it by claiming that Russia had intervened to fight “terrorism,” although the vast majority of Russian airstrikes were against the non-jihadi Syrian opposition as Russian officials initially argued that any armed opposition to the Assad regime was by definition a “terrorist.”<sup>14</sup> In reality, Putin had numerous goals for his military intervention. First, it was to save his client, the Assad regime, which by the summer of 2015 was in danger of losing the war to the Syrian opposition, which by then was composed of both jihadi and non-jihadi elements. In doing so, Putin was able to show that Russia stood by its Middle Eastern ally – in sharp contrast to the failure of the United States to stand by then Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at a similar time of crisis. Second, it demonstrated that Russia had the power to prevent a regime change by force, orchestrated by the United States, as had happened in Libya. Third it moved Russia out of the position of relative diplomatic isolation to which it had been cast after its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine, because Moscow was now to dominate the diplomatic process in trying to secure an end to the war in Syria even as it was strengthening both the military and diplomatic position of the Assad regime in any diplomatic talks – all this without the deployment of large numbers of Russian ground troops. Fourth, Putin has long sought to demonstrate that Russia was again a world power, and the intervention in Syria gave Moscow the opportunity to demonstrate its military power, not only bombing Assad’s opponents from the new Russian airbase in Syria, but also firing cruise missiles at them from the Caspian Sea and from the Mediterranean as well. Fifth, Russia acquired a major airbase in Syria (Hmeinin) and, using the SAM-400 anti-aircraft missiles it installed in the base, now controls a considerable amount of airspace in the center of the Middle East. In addition it succeeded in greatly



expanding its naval facility in Tartus to a full-fledged naval base, one now protected by the SAM-300 missile system. Finally, Russia's military cooperation with Iran and its ally Hezbollah helped strengthen Russian-Iranian relations.

There was also a good bit of speculation, especially in diplomatic circles, that Moscow sought to use its intervention in Syria as a diplomatic ploy to get EU and US sanctions against it lifted in return for an agreement on Syria. If this was indeed Putin's aim, it has not been successful. While it is true that Moscow has transformed the diplomacy of the Syrian diplomatic process from the US and UN sponsored Geneva process to the Russia-Turkey-Iran jointly sponsored Astana process, and by September 2018 had enabled the Syrian regime to reconquer almost all of Syria except for the Turkish occupied areas of Northwestern Syria, the Idlib area of Northern Syria, which was the last refuge of the Syrian rebels, and the US-Kurdish controlled Northeastern Syria; Russia still faces serious problems in Syria. First Turkey and Syria are opposed to each other, with Syria denouncing Turkey's occupation of Syrian territory, which occurred with Moscow's blessing as Putin sought to pull Turkey, a NATO ally of the United States, away from the US.<sup>15</sup> Second, rebuilding Syria will cost upward of USD\$500 billion, money that Russia doesn't have. Although Russia has improved relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, there is as yet no indication that the two Gulf states will pay for Syria's reconstruction and it is unlikely that the US or the European Union will pay for Syria's reconstruction unless Assad is ousted as the Syrian leader, while China, which is now heavily invested in its Belt and Road project, while facing a weakening economy, has not shown any serious interest in helping to rebuild Syria.<sup>16</sup> Finally, Russia is at odds with both Syria and Iran as to the future of Syria, with Russia pushing for a quasifederal solution while Iran and Syria want to restore Assad's centralized control over all of the country.

Meanwhile, as Russia stepped up its military support for the Assad regime, Israel became increasingly concerned. The next section of the paper will discuss how Israel reacted to the Russian military intervention.

### ***The Israeli reaction to the Russian military intervention in Syria, September 2015 to September 2018***

Russia's military involvement in Syria created a new strategic reality for Israel as Israel saw that it had to live side by side with a Russian military presence in Syria for the foreseeable future. Strategically Russian involvement in Syria had a major negative implication for Israel – the provision of Russian assistance to the Iranian-led Shia axis, which could help Iranian and Hezbollah forces increase their threat capability against Israel. Israel was concerned both about the possible establishment of Iranian bases near Israel's borders and Iran's transfer of sophisticated arms to Hezbollah. In a worst-case scenario Hezbollah, with battlefield experience in Syria, and with tens of thousands of Shia allies from Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East, and with sophisticated arms supplied by Iran, could pose a potent

danger to Israel on its eastern border the same way it posed a threat to Israel on its northern border, with Tehran consolidating its “Shia Axis” from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Consequently, Netanyahu has sought to prevent the establishment of Iranian bases near Israel’s borders and the supply of sophisticated arms to Hezbollah, goals that needed at least the acquiescence of Russia and, hopefully, some help from the United States as well.

In seeking to deal with the strategic challenge posed by the Russian deployment near its borders, in coalition with Israel’s bitter enemies, Netanyahu sought to maintain proper relations with Russia and to coordinate Israeli attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets with the Russian air defense command. Netanyahu traveled to Russia to meet with Putin soon after Russia sent its forces to Syria, the first of nine trips he was to make between October, 2015 and September 2018. Following the first Netanyahu-Putin meeting, Russia and Israel established a military coordination system, including a “hot line” that enabled Israel to fly through Russian-controlled airspace in Syria, after giving advanced warning to the Russians, to attack Hezbollah and Iranian targets. In return Israel agreed not to interfere in the Syrian civil war. Moscow also agreed, until September 2018, not to provide Syria with the SAM-300 missile system it had long wanted. Meanwhile, Russia faced several problems with its ally Iran, which, together with Hezbollah and its Shia allies and Syrian government forces, and with the critical help of Russian air strikes, had recaptured most of the Syrian government’s lost territories by early 2018. Mention has already been made of the different Iranian and Russian plans for the endgame in Syria – a quasifederal system, which Moscow wanted, and a centralized unitary system preferred by Tehran. Second, competition between Iran and Russia to be the dominant influence in Syria had already begun to grow in 2018, and to a certain extent at least to Putin, if not to the Russian defense establishment, Israel served as a useful check on Iranian ambitions. In addition, from the Russian point of view, avoiding a war between Iran and Israel was a priority. If war were to break out, Moscow would have to choose one side, and since Russia wanted to pursue good relations with both Iran and Israel, avoiding a war was a priority, especially after a major Israeli-Iranian clash in early May 2018. Indeed, soon after the clash, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov suggested that as part of a final settlement in Iran all foreign forces (not including Russia, which had been invited into Syria by the Assad government, but including Iran) would have to be withdrawn from Syria. Lavrov was quickly overruled and had to retract his statement, but in July 2018 Russia and Israel reportedly reached an agreement whereby Iranian and Hezbollah forces would come no closer to the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights than 80 kilometers (50 miles).<sup>17</sup> Whether Russia would be able to follow through on its promise, however, was an open question. In any case the agreement reflected continued Israeli-Russian cooperation in Syria, a cooperation that was called into question in September 2018 when a Russian plane was shot down by Syrian anti-aircraft missiles but the Russian Defense Ministry blamed the incident on Israel.

### *The downing of the Russian plane and its consequences*

The downing of the Russian reconnaissance IL-20 plane by the Syrians on the night of September 17, 2018 has become one of the most complex incidents in the framework of Russian-Israeli relations, at least since the start of the Russian military intervention in Syria in September 2015. Following an Israeli attack in the Latakia region of Syria (not far from the Russian air base at Hmeimim), a Syrian S-200 anti-aircraft battery struck the Russian reconnaissance plane, which crashed into the sea, killing all 15 crew members.<sup>18</sup> Although it was Syrian forces that failed to identify the Russian plane, the Russian Defense Ministry blamed Israel for the incident. It formulated an official version for the media in which it accused Israel of “irresponsibility” and “provocation” and of “hiding” Israeli F-16 planes behind the Russian IL-20. According to the Israeli Air Force, Russian-Israeli coordination was maintained before and during the Israeli attack and the attacking Israeli planes were already back in Israel when the Russian plane was shot down. Although Putin softened the Russian response and called the incident “a chain of tragic errors” and confirmed that Syria had shot down the plane, he nonetheless supported the official position of the Russian Defense Ministry. The issue was widely covered in Russia’s government-controlled media outlets and evoked sweeping anti-Israeli commentary and calls for revenge, punishment, and sanctions.<sup>19</sup>

The Israeli government responded by expressing regret at the loss of life, but placed blame on Syria, which had shot down the plane and on Iran. Israeli Air Force Commander Major General Amikam Norkin flew to Moscow to give the Russians the data supporting the Israeli position, but shortly after his visit, the Russian Defense Ministry repeated its version of events, this time with a video presentation. The Russian government then announced that because of the shooting down of the plane it had agreed to send the SAM-300 missile system to Syria – something Assad had long wanted. The Russian Defense Ministry, in blaming Israel, was clearly seeking to shift blame from its own forces in Syria, which had the responsibility of training the Syrians in IFF (identify friend from foe) procedures. Indeed, according to Dmitri Treinin, a well-informed Russian analyst (and former military officer), Russia had integrated the Syrian and Russian air defense systems in Syria under a single command back in 2015 when Russia had begun its air strikes on Assad’s enemies.<sup>20</sup> The question, of course, was what impact the shooting down of the IL-20 would have on Israeli policy in Syria. From the purely military point of view, the impact would not be that significant as Israel had been preparing for more than a decade for the transfer of the SAM-300s to Syria, preparing weapons to deal with the SAM-300 threat and carrying out joint exercises with Greece, which has a version of the SAM-300. The more important question was the political one – had the political position of Putin, described by Treinin as “the most pro-Israel, pro-Jewish leader Russia had ever seen,”<sup>21</sup> been significantly weakened by Western sanctions and by his unpopular raising of the retirement age for Russian workers? If this were the case, and more anti-Israeli forces, particularly in the Russian defense ministry, had increased their influence, Russian-Israeli relations could be in trouble.

However, at the time of writing (December 2018), it is too early to make such a judgment. In any case the Israeli air attack in the Damascus area in late December indicated that Israel had not been deterred either by the SAM-300s or by the negative Russian reaction to the IL-20 incident, although it should also be pointed out that unlike the Israeli attack that took place in September, the December strike was far away from Latakia and the Russian air base of Hmeinin, which is located near there.<sup>22</sup> Still, the Russian response to the Israeli strike was more subdued than after the September incident. In any case, the Israeli air strike is a good point of departure to review Russian-Israeli relations under Netanyahu.

### 3 Conclusions

In looking at Russian-Israeli relations under Netanyahu, one can draw several conclusions. First, Netanyahu inherited a situation where bilateral relations between Russia and Israel were already very good, and Netanyahu sought to improve Russian-Israeli relations still further. Thus, under Netanyahu Russian-Israeli trade rose to USD\$3.5 billion per year, with Israel providing Russia with high-tech goods and nanotechnology – very much needed by the Russian economy, especially since US and EU sanctions were imposed on Russia in 2014 after its annexation of the Crimea. For its part Russia provided Israel with oil and precious metals. In addition, the strong cultural relations between the two countries that had begun before Netanyahu took office continued to develop, Moscow also continued to allow its Jews to emigrate to Israel, and Netanyahu agreed to sell military drones to Russia following the poor performance of Russian drones in the 2008 Russian-Georgian war. Possibly in reciprocation, Russia delayed a promised sale of the SAM-300 missile system to Syria. Netanyahu also made a major gesture to Russia by abstaining, in 2014, on a US-backed UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia for annexing the Crimea.

On the other hand, Russia's military and diplomatic aid to Israel's Middle Eastern enemies also continued. Russia provided increased military aid to the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. It also continued to provide military aid to Iran, although in 2010, when Dmitri Medvedev was Russia's president, Medvedev supported tougher sanctions on Iran because of its nuclear program and postponed a proposed sale of SAM-300 missile systems to Iran, something that would be of benefit to Israel in case of an Israeli attack on Iran. The situation changed, however, when Putin returned to Russia's presidency in 2012, and in 2015 Russia sent the SAM-300 to Iran, and Russian-Iranian relations began to improve. Relations improved further later in 2015 when the two countries became partners in providing military support to Syria.

There was a major change in the Russian-Israeli relationship when Moscow decided to intervene militarily in Syria in the fall of 2015 when the Assad regime was faltering in the face of attacks by the Syrian opposition. Given the fact that the Assad regime's main allies at the time were Iran and Hezbollah – both sworn to the destruction of Israel – Israel became concerned that Iran would seize the

opportunity of the Russian intervention and the subsequent defeat of most of the Syrian opposition to construct bases near Israel and also transfer sophisticated weapons to Hezbollah that could be used against Israel. Consequently, Netanyahu flew to Russia immediately after the Russian military intervention began – the first of nine trips over the next three years – to work out a military coordination system, including a “hotline” that enabled Israel to fly through Russian-controlled air space to attack Iranian and Hezbollah targets. Russia appeared to tolerate Israeli attacks, in part to maintain its relationship with Israel, and in part to curb Iran’s influence in Syria as, despite their military cooperation, Russia saw Iran as a potential rival for influence in Syria. Russia also sought to prevent a war between Iran and Israel, which would have posed a difficult problem of choice for Russia as it had an interest in maintaining good ties with both countries. Consequently, after a serious clash between Israel and Iran in May 2018, Moscow worked out an agreement whereby Iran would stay 80 kilometers (50 Miles) from Israel’s borders. Whether Russia would be able to enforce such an agreement, however, remained to be seen.

The working relationship between Israel and Russia appeared to change in September 2018 when a Russian plane was shot down by Syrian missiles in the aftermath of an Israeli strike on an Iranian military position near Latakia, but Russia blamed the incident on Israel. It appeared for a time that the Russian condemnation of Israel, which was accompanied by a decision to send a SAM-300 missile system to Syria, might do serious damage to Russian-Israeli relationship, especially since the position of President Vladimir Putin, who was the most pro-Israeli member of the Russian leadership, appeared to be weakening. Nonetheless, several months later Israel launched another attack on Iranian positions in Syria, demonstrating that it was neither deterred by the Russian criticism nor by the new SAM-300s in the hands of the Syrians. It also appeared that the working relationship between Israel and Russia was back on track, although given the volatility of the situation in Syria at the end of 2018, there was no guarantee that it would remain so.

A second conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the Russian-Israeli relationship is an unequal one. Clearly, if one examines Israeli behavior, Russia has the upper hand in the relationship, as despite extensive Russian aid to Israel’s enemies, and its consistent voting against Israel at the United Nations, even on issues that are central to the Israeli identity, such as the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount / Haram Al-Sharif, Netanyahu continues to try to cultivate Russia, even at the expense of Israel’s ties to the United States, as in Israel’s abstention over the US-sponsored UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia for its annexation of the Crimea. While Netanyahu has done his best to cultivate Russia, and has been at least partially rewarded by Russia’s delay in sending the SAM-300 missile system to Syria, and Moscow’s permission to fly through Russian-controlled airspace to attack Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria; should there be a change in leadership in Russia, with the pro-Israeli Putin stepping down, Russian-Israeli

relations may well suffer as the benefits that Putin sees in Russia's ties to Israel may not be seen in the same way by another Russian leader.

## Notes

- 1 See Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and Israel: The Odd Couple," *The Forward*, June 12, 2014.
- 2 See Judy Maltz, "Number of Russians Moving to Israel Sees Dramatic Rise, American Aliyah Figures Drop," *Haaretz* (on-line), December 27, 2018.
- 3 Cited in Evan Gottesman, "The Decline and Fall of Putin's Favorite Politician," *Haaretz* (on-line) January 3, 2019.
- 4 For a description of the Russian-Israeli relationship prior to the Russian military intervention in Syria, see Robert O. Freedman, "Israel and Russia: Jerusalem and Its Relations with Moscow Under Putin," in *Israel and the World Powers*, ed. Colin Shindler (London: I. B. Taurus, 2014), pp. 129–154.
- 5 See Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Moscow Up to in the Middle East?* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018).
- 6 See the chapter on Israel's relations with Iran in this volume.
- 7 Freedman, "Israel and Russia," p. 145.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 9 For a detailed analysis of Russian policy in Syria, see Robert O. Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," in *The Arab Spring*, 2nd edition, eds. Mark Haas and David Lesch (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), pp. 241–271.
- 10 For the American response to the Israeli abstention, see the chapter on Israel's relations with the United States in this volume.
- 11 Cited in Barak Ravid, "Defense Official on Ukraine Policy: Israeli Policy Needn't Be Identical to the US," *Haaretz* (on-Line), April 13, 2014.
- 12 See Hillel Frish, "Why Russia Needs Israel," *BESA Center Perspective Report No. 895*, July 16, 2018.
- 13 Cited in Barak Ravid, "Agricultural Minister: Exports to Russia Will Continue Regardless of Sanctions," *Haaretz* (on-line), September 22, 2014.
- 14 For a discussion of the Russian military intervention, see Trenin, *What Is Moscow Up to in the Middle East?* pp. 53–85. For a historical perspective on the role of the Russian air force in Syria, see A. B. Shirokorad, *Rossiskaya Aviatzia B Boiakh Za Siritiu* (Russian Aviation in the Battle for Syria) (Moscow: Veche, 2016).
- 15 There were numerous US-Turkish conflicts, including US aid for the Syrian Kurds whom Turkish leader Recep Erdoğan viewed as terrorists, and the refusal of the US to extradite Fetullah Gulen, whom Erdoğan claimed had organized the July 2016 coup attempt against him.
- 16 See Martin Wolf, "The Future Might Not Belong to China," *Financial Times*, January 2, 2019. For an alternative view on China's readiness to aid in Syria's reconstruction, see Chloe Cornish and Archie Zhang, "Lebanese Port Seeks to Position Itself as Hub for Chinese Investment in Rebuilding Syria," *Financial Times*, January 4, 2019.
- 17 See Robert G. Rabil, "Tending to Israel's Relationship with Russia," *BESA Center Perspective Report No. 1, 047*, December 26, 2018.
- 18 See Anna Borshchevskaya, "Some Russian Commentators Holding Putin and Assad Responsible for Plane Downing," *The Hill*, September 29, 2018.
- 19 See Andrei Meinikov, "Nationalist Ugrazhayut Evreyam, Rossii Mestiyu Za Sbitiy Sirtsami IL-20 (Nationalists Threaten the Jews of Russia over Syrian IL-20 Incident)," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 9, 2018.
- 20 Trenin, *What Is Moscow Up to in the Middle East?* p. 72.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
- 22 See Amos Harel, "Israel's Extensive Syria Strike Signals Business as Usual Despite Trump and Putin," *Haaretz* (on-Line), December 26, 2018.

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- . "Russia and Israel: The Odd Couple," *The Forward*, June 12, 2014.
- . "Russia and the Arab Spring," in *The Arab Spring*, eds. Mark Haas and David Lesch (Second Edition) (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), pp. 241–271.
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# 14

## ISRAEL AND TERRORISM

### Assessing the effectiveness of Netanyahu's "combating terrorism strategy" (CBT)

*Joshua Sinai*

#### **Defining "combating terrorism" (CBT)**

To analyze these issues, this framework utilizes CBT as an umbrella concept, with counterterrorism (CT) defined as a CBT campaign's offensive components (e.g., the military, that is, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); and intelligence/security services, that is, the Israel Security Agency [Shabak], the Mossad, and the Border Police). Antiterrorism (AT) is defined as a campaign's defensive components (e.g., political, diplomatic, law enforcement, judiciary, and financial measures, with organizations such as the Israel police and other agencies under the Interior, Justice, and Foreign Ministries). Combating terrorism, thus, consists of the comprehensive application of offensive and defensive components of a nation's power and influence that in the best of circumstances operate in an integrated manner under a government's political leadership to defeat a terrorist adversary.

#### **Measures of effectiveness in CBT**

The end state of a combating terrorism campaign is to protect a country and its population by terminating the threat of terrorism and restoring normalcy and resiliency in everyday life. As an operational formula, a CBT campaign aims to terminate a terrorist adversary's threat by eliminating its hostile intention, operational capability, and local presence to conduct attacks. In terms of operational capability, this is accomplished by implementing measures to disrupt and prevent a terrorist adversary's ability to conduct attacks, with its local presence eliminated by depriving it of safe havens to operate and survive. Hostile intention is eliminated either by completely defeating it militarily or by resolving a terrorist insurgency's underlying drivers to such an extent that it will disengage from such warfare and enter into peaceful relations with the formerly attacked state. Ineffectiveness in CBT is



defined as a continuum, on one end, of a military defeat of government forces by a terrorist adversary, or, on another end of a continuum, for a terrorist insurgency to continue with the targeted government accepting a high level of fatalities and physical damage as a “normalcy” to be lived with because, for a variety of reasons, pursuing self-interested public policies that may exacerbate a conflict with one’s adversary is more important than terminating it.

To assess the effectiveness of Israel’s CBT campaign, a Mission Area Analysis (MAA) is utilized to provide a roadmap of how a campaign’s strategic objectives are aligned via its operational and tactical measures, whether on the ground or in cyberspace, including overcoming internal and external hurdles that might constrain the achievement of its desired end states. In this chapter, the MAA of Israel’s CBT metrics of effectiveness against its terrorist adversaries are outlined and scored along 13 fronts (see Table 14.1).

## Overview

To analyze the effectiveness of Israel’s CBT campaign during 2009–2019, it is important to note that a successful peaceful end-state against its Palestinian terrorist adversaries was expected to be achieved through the 1993 and 1995 Oslo Accords. At the time, the Yitzhak Rabin–led Israeli government entered into a peace process with the Yasir Arafat–led Palestinian Authority (PA), with parts of the West Bank handed to the PA to administer (Area A), with Area B administered by both Israel and the PA, and Area C, which contains Jewish settlements and the Jordan Valley, administered by Israel. The final status disposition of these areas was expected to be finalized following confidence-building measures between the two sides. Because of a number of factors explained by other chapters in this volume, the peace process soon broke down, exacerbated by the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by a far-right Jewish terrorist on November 4, 1995, which later was followed by the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada from September 2000 to February 2005.

In a milestone that positively affected Israel’s CBT campaign, in September 2005, under Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s initiative, Israel unilaterally disengaged its military forces and settlers from the Gaza Strip, which, while ultimately enabling Hamas to gain power, Israel no longer had to commit its military forces to endanger themselves by occupying such a violent area. In another effective CBT development, the upgrading of the Israeli security barrier along the Gaza border during this period substantially reduced the number of Palestinian terrorist attacks emanating from Gaza. In a related development that negatively impacted Israel’s CBT campaign along this front, however, Hamas’s responded to the upgraded security barrier by bypassing it through the launching of rockets and mortars, especially after 2006, and which led to the 2008–2009 war, and ushered in a different type of terrorist threat challenging the country’s CBT campaign planners.

Following the second intifada, with the PA governing its respective areas in the West Bank, Fatah’s military wing, the primary Palestinian terrorist group prior to the Oslo Accords, now largely transformed itself into a regular police and security

force in the PA – and even maintained close relations with Israel’s security services “behind the scenes”<sup>1</sup> – which is another successful endpoint of an effective CBT campaign.

Following the downfall of the Ehud Olmert–led government (May 2006 to early 2009), which had attempted to reach a final status peace agreement with the PA (a conciliatory political component of an effective CBT campaign), the victory of the Benjamin Netanyahu–led Likud coalition government in the March 2009 Knesset elections ushered in a new negative period in Israel’s CBT campaign in which the right-wing political echelon ordered the military and intelligence/security components (which, reportedly, were more moderate politically<sup>2</sup>) to predominate over the previous governments’ conciliatory political measures, with no serious Israeli-initiated attempt to reach a territorial compromise with the PA over the territorial future of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

## **CBT fronts**

With the Netanyahu–led coalition governments ruling Israel from 2009 to 2019, Israel’s CBT campaigns’ areas of operations consisted of 13 fronts, each one representing a distinct geographical area of operational responsibility, although a few intersected and one was located in cyberspace. These fronts consisted of the following 13 areas: Eastern (West Bank: Palestinians), Eastern (West Bank: Jewish extremists), Jerusalem (Palestinians), Southern (Gaza: Palestinians), Southwestern (Sinai Peninsula: Islamic State[IS]), Northern (Lebanon: Hezbollah), Northeastern (Golan Heights: Syria), Home Front (Israeli Arabs), Home Front (General), Coastal (Maritime: Hamas/Hezbollah), Aviation (Hamas/Hezbollah/IS), Global (Israeli diplomats / economic interests: Hezbollah, Hamas), and “Cyberspace” (Hamas/Hezbollah/Iran/IS).

Of these fronts, the Eastern Front’s West Bank is Israel’s most problematic security area of operations because its CT and AT forces are tasked not only with protecting Israel ‘proper’ (inside the pre-1967 War’s Green Line) from attacks by Palestinian terrorists in the West Bank, but they also have to defend the Jewish settlements in the West Bank against violent attacks emanating from the local Palestinian inhabitants. Moreover, Israeli security forces also have to keep watch over the West Bank’s extremist Jewish settlers who are waging their own terrorist campaign against the West Bank’s Palestinian inhabitants, whom they wish to displace. Complicating matters even further, Israeli security services also have to closely monitor Jewish extremists, primarily from the West Bank, who threaten Israelis living in Israel ‘proper’ who advocate territorial compromise with the Palestinians.

### **1 The Eastern Front (West Bank: Palestinians)**

To counteract Palestinian terrorism, which primarily emanates from the West Bank against Israelis whether in the West Bank or Israel “proper,” Israel employs primarily military and intelligence/security measures. The military measures include

deploying quick reaction special forces to thwart attacks or arrest suspects, the establishment of a 440-mile-long security barrier (whether concrete walls or electrified security fences along the Green Line, but also stretching at points into the West Bank itself), with some portions of the barrier still under construction, and manning security check points from the West Bank into Israel “proper.”

The intelligence measures include the deployment of an extensive intelligence gathering network consisting of undercover agents, paid informants, and monitoring Palestinians’ social media accounts through various algorithm-based data-mining tools, in order to identify, disrupt and thwart their operations at the earliest phases of an impending attack.

According to some incident metrics, as a result of Israel’s countermeasures, there had been a decline in the magnitude and impact of Palestinian terrorism from the West Bank. In one metric, in 2002, there were 57 terror attacks causing 452 fatalities, with each attack killing an average of ten people, while in 2015 the number of attacks declined to 29, causing 28 fatalities, and with each attack killing an average of one person.<sup>3</sup> During this period, the number of attacks, thus, declined by 50 percent, with the number of fatalities dropping by 94 percent.<sup>4</sup> In a related metric, of the overall number of prevented terrorist attacks in 2017 (the exact number is unknown), Israel reportedly foiled 400 terror attacks, of which 148 were planned by Hamas.<sup>5</sup>

In parallel, the character of attacks also changed in response to Israeli countermeasures. Whereas during the earlier period, most terrorist attacks used the tactic of suicide bombings, the effectiveness of Israeli countermeasures, including making it difficult to for groups to organize attacks, including acquiring and constructing bombs, forced the terrorist adversaries to carry out attacks by lone actors. Such actors were difficult to identify beforehand, with some having family links to organized groups, such as Hamas, who used easily available tactics, such as handguns, knives, and vehicles to conduct their attacks, as opposed to more sophisticated firearms or explosives, which are more difficult to acquire and cause more casualties.

While Israel was relatively successful in thwarting organized group attacks, it was less successful in preventing lone actor attacks. In a high-visibility lone actor attack, on September 16, 2018 a Palestinian teenager fatally stabbed Ari Fuld, a right-wing activist and resident of Efrat at the Gush Etzion shopping center. Several of the lone actor attacks, in fact, were conducted by Palestinian employees who exploited their ‘insider’ presence to attack their Jewish fellow employees with a mix of terrorism and workplace violence. These included a September 26, 2017, shooting attack by a Palestinian laborer at security guards at the entrance gate of Har Adar, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank, killing three Israeli security guards, with a fourth wounded. The gunman, from the neighboring village of Beit Surik, held a license to work in Israeli settlements, and had previously worked as a laborer for several of Har Adar’s residents. In another insider attack, on October 7, 2018, a Palestinian employee shot two Israeli coworkers, with a third wounded, in an Israeli-run factory near the settlements of Barkan and Ariel in the central West Bank.

In other lone actor type attacks, Palestinians from neighboring villages breached security fences to attack residents of Jewish settlements, with others conducting drive-by shootings at Jewish settlers who were standing at bus or hitchhiking stops.

A few Palestinian terrorists succeeded in carrying out attacks in Israel “proper,” with one of the most visible being the attack by two Palestinian gunmen on June 8, 2016, at a restaurant at Sarona Market in Tel Aviv, in which four people were killed and seven others wounded. The two gunmen, who were cousins, had made their way to Tel Aviv from the Palestinian town of Yatta in the Hebron area of the West Bank

## **2 West Bank: (Jewish Extremists)**

The second type of terrorist threat emanating from the West Bank is by ultra-right-wing Jewish religious extremists. Known as the “Hilltop Youth,” these extremists, many of whom are in their mid-twenties and married, direct their violent activities against West Bank Palestinians, Israeli left-of-center activists, and IDF forces tasked with dismantling the state-declared illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Prior to 2009, the four most prominent attacks by West Bank-based Jewish terrorists were 1) the Gush Emunim Underground’s car bombings against Palestinian mayors, on June 2, 1980, in which two of them were severely wounded; 2) Baruch Goldstein’s February 25, 1994, shooting of Palestinian worshippers at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, killing 29 Muslims and wounding 125 others (the shooter killed himself); 3) Yigal Amir’s assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995 (in an attempt to sabotage the Oslo II Accord’s compromise over the West Bank); and 4) a pipe bomb attack by Jewish militant Jack Teitel against Professor Zeev Sternhell, a Peace Now activist, outside his home in Jerusalem on September 25, 2008, which injured his leg.

Since then, other incidents included what are termed ‘price tag’ attacks, in which, for example, such extremists vandalized in early October 2011, the home in Jerusalem of a prominent Israeli Peace Now activist; the July 2, 2014, killing by three Jewish extremists of Mohammed Abu Khdeir after kidnapping him on an East Jerusalem street; the late July 2015 arson attack on a Palestinian family home in the village of Duma, which killed three of the family members, and numerous attacks involving arson and vandalism against the homes of Palestinian Arabs, churches and the destruction of Palestinian olive trees.

To counter Jewish terrorism, the Israel Security Agency’s (ISA) Jewish Division is the primary organization tasked with monitoring their extremist activities in the West Bank. It investigates potential plots by deploying undercover agents to patrol areas where extremists are active, conducts electronic surveillance against them, including recruiting informers, and interrogates suspects for information about their networks. Israel’s CBT campaign against such Jewish extremists, however, has been largely ineffective because despite arresting many of their leaders and activists the frequency of their militant attacks has not substantially

declined, and their local presence has continued to be tolerated by the Israeli settlement movement in the West Bank.<sup>6</sup>

### **3 Jerusalem (Palestinian)**

As Israel's capital, Jerusalem presents a significant CBT challenge because, as the home to holy sites of three of the world's religions, attacks that take place in such a combustible environment, especially near the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif, generate worldwide publicity. A large part of Israel's CBT preventive activities take place in East Jerusalem because its final status is still in dispute and because of the presence of approximately 300,000 potentially hostile Palestinians who live within the Jerusalem municipality, in neighborhoods such as Jabel Mukaber, Shu'afat, and Silwan, as well as in the Old City. Because of these and other factors, numerous terrorist incidents involving Palestinians from these neighborhoods have increased in recent years, involving shootings, stabbings, vehicular ramming, and an attempted assassination of a prominent right-wing activist.

Jerusalem also presents a nightmare scenario for Israeli CBT planners, with a terrorist incident in the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif area, whether instigated by Palestinian or Jewish extremists, triggering large-scale violent riots by Palestinians not only in East Jerusalem, but in the West Bank, and, occasionally, among Israeli Arabs as well. With both Palestinian and Jewish extremists aware of the explosive impact of attacks in the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif area, the ISA and the Jerusalem and border police forces have taken preventive measures against such threats. As part of these protective measures an estimated 125 miles of Israel's West Bank Security Barrier run through the separated areas of Greater Jerusalem, with numerous security checkpoints for pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Other protective measures in East Jerusalem include the deployment of hundreds of surveillance cameras and border guard patrols.

### **4 Southern (Palestinian Gaza)**

Israel's CBT campaign along the Gaza Strip border consists of several measures. First, following its unilateral disengagement from Gaza in 2005, to protect against the infiltration of Hamas operatives from the Gaza Strip, Israel constructed a security fence along the 40-mile-long border, with several border crossing points. The security fence was completed in 1996, with several upgrades added since then. The barrier's effectiveness in preventing Palestinian terrorists from entering Israel through Gaza prompted a shift in the Palestinians' tactics, as, learning from Hezbollah's example, they began to fire Qassam rockets and mortars over the security fence. Moreover, with Israel deploying defensive measures such as the Iron Dome to intercept rockets, which succeeded in blowing up many of these rockets in mid-air, Hamas further responded by constructing a series of underground tunnels to infiltrate its operatives under the security fence to kidnap IDF soldiers and attack nearby Jewish communities. This led the IDF to develop new countermeasures in the form of an underground barrier with sophisticated technological sensors to

detect and block the construction of new tunnels. As of March 2019, an estimated 17 miles of this barrier were completed along the 40-mile-long border.<sup>7</sup> Finally, in response to the threat of Palestinian terrorist incursions along the Gaza coastline, Israel constructed a 650-foot sea barrier along the Gaza Strip.

As of May 2019, two other types of Palestinian threats from Gaza had yet to be successfully countered. In the first, in late March 2018, Hamas inaugurated a series of mass demonstrations and riots along the border fence called the “Great Return March,” with Hamas activists and fighters attempting to breach the fence and provoke an overreaction by the Israeli forces. In response, the Israeli forces deployed at the border have been using a variety of anti-riot measures, including live fire to prevent the rioters from breaking into Israeli territory.

In a second type of threat termed “arson terror,” Palestinian militants have attached incendiary devices to helium balloons and kites and flown them over the border to the Israeli side. As of the end of March 2019, an estimated 800 of such helium balloons and kites were launched (with an estimated 600 of them intercepted), resulting in more than 450 fires that damaged more than 2,600 hectares of agricultural fields and forests.<sup>8</sup>

In a final type of conflagration, several wars of varying intensity were waged between Israel and Hamas during this period. In late October 2012, an Israeli air strike killed Ahmed Jabari, chief of Hamas’s military wing in Gaza. More than 170 Palestinians were also killed during the air strike, with most of them militants. In early July 2014, a full-scale 50-day war broke out in response to Hamas rocket attacks, with the IDF launching Operation Protective Edge in response. Additional conflagrations broke out in November 2018, March 2019, and early May 2019.

With Israel challenged by a protracted stalemate with Hamas, opposition Knesset members charged that the Netanyahu governing coalition’s response measures were ineffective because they refused to consider long-term solutions to the Gaza crisis. MK Ofer Shelah, a Yesh Atid faction head and member of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee (at the time), warned that the failure to formulate an effective policy regarding Gaza meant that Israel was “rolling from one incident to the next” with no end-state.<sup>9</sup> He proposed, instead, that effective counterterrorism is waged by “driving a wedge” between a terrorist group and the “population in which it lives” and that by promoting

measures that will improve the economic and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, [this] will also make clear to the population that Hamas aggression has a price. We must move forward with the only possible solution: Rehabilitating the Gaza Strip while preventing Hamas from strengthening and stopping its aggression.<sup>10</sup>

He concluded that

the Prime Minister prevents any discussion of measures to alleviate the distress in Gaza, even though the professional [military and intelligence] echelon

is convinced of their necessity. All the Netanyahu government has to offer is flowery rhetoric about the collapse of Hamas, and a policy that doesn't lead but reacts, all the way to the next war.<sup>11</sup>

### ***5 Southwestern (Sinai Peninsula: Islamic State)***

The Sinai Peninsula borders both Israel and Gaza, bridging Africa and Asia. To secure the 152-mile-long border with Egypt along the Sinai Peninsula, in December 2013 Israel completed a security barrier. It was originally intended to step the influx of illegal migrants primarily from the African countries of Eritrea and Sudan, but an escalation in terrorist incursions by groups affiliated initially with al Qaida and later the Islamic State, including militant local Bedouins, led to upgrading the steel barrier with surveillance cameras, radar, and motion detectors. Until the barrier was completed, major incidents included the launching by Gaza-based Hamas operatives of two rockets from Sinai against Eilat in 2010,<sup>12</sup> and on August 18, 2011, in an attack north of Eilat, Gazan gunmen killed eight Israelis along the Egyptian border. Since then, terrorist attacks and the influx of illegal migrants from Africa substantially decreased following the installation of the electronic security fence.

An important component of Israel's CBT cooperation with Egypt takes place in the Sinai, with Israel, under Egyptian consent, conducting clandestine airstrikes against the jihadist groups operating in northern Sinai.<sup>13</sup> In these strikes, the IDF has used unmarked drones, attack helicopters and fighter aircraft to attack the jihadists, with Israel also likely sharing intelligence information with their Egyptian counterparts on these threats.<sup>14</sup>

### ***6 The Northern Front (Lebanon)***

In 2018, Israel began building a massive concrete wall along the 80-mile long border with Lebanon to protect itself against potential Hezbollah incursions. As of mid-2019, an estimated seven miles of the barrier had been constructed.<sup>15</sup> One of the reasons is that in mid-2006 Hezbollah operatives crossed the border to kidnap several Israeli soldiers (who were subsequently executed), which was one of the reasons for Israel's war with Hezbollah that summer. Since then Hezbollah has waged low-level warfare against Israel along the border, for example, the killing of an Israeli soldier by a Lebanese Army sniper along the Rosh Hanikra border on December 15, 2013, and the firing on January 28, 2015, by Hezbollah of an anti-tank missile at an Israeli military convoy in the Shebaa Farms area, in which two soldiers were killed and seven others wounded. In response, Israel fired more than 50 artillery shells across the border into Southern Lebanon in what has become a low-level war of attrition between the two sides.

Israel has several concerns about Hezbollah. One concern is the possibility of a surprise Hezbollah attack across the Lebanese border that could quickly escalate into a full-fledged war. Such an attack could begin with the entrance into Israel by Hezbollah fighters via the several dozen cross-border underground tunnels it had

constructed across the border, with several discovered and destroyed in late 2018.<sup>16</sup> This would be accompanied by Hezbollah's launching of a massive aerial bombardment by its estimated 150,000 rockets and missiles, which are hidden in the hills of South Lebanon,<sup>17</sup> including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that potentially could be fitted with unconventional warheads. Another concern is Hezbollah's link to Iran, its state sponsor, particularly the possibility that Israel would be deterred from attacking Iran over its nuclear weapons program because of the threat of Hezbollah's rocket and missile retaliation against Israel's home front.

## ***7 Northeastern Front (Golan Heights)***

The border along the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria constitutes a second component of the Northern Front. Following mass demonstrations by several thousand Syrian-based Palestinians on Nakba Day in May 2011, in which many broke through a security fence, a new and upgraded security fence was constructed along the approximately 68-mile-long border.<sup>18</sup> In 2011, at the beginning of the uprising against the Syrian government by its Sunni majority (accompanied by a jihadist insurgency), the besieged Syrian government promoted the storming by Palestinian refugees of the border fence along the Golan in order to deflect attention from its domestic problems. However, the IDF successfully defended against this ploy.

In a new development that concerned Israeli CBT campaign planners, Hezbollah operatives, backed by Iranian forces, began deploying along the Golan border. In what was termed Hezbollah's "Golan Project," which began in summer 2018 following the reconquest of the Syrian Golan by regime troops, the Hezbollah operatives reportedly gathered intelligence on Israel and the border area, while operating from observation posts and military positions near the border.<sup>19</sup>

## ***8 Home Front***

The Home Front Command (HFC) is responsible for protecting the population from a spectrum of terrorist attacks, including the launching of missile and rocket attacks by terrorist adversaries such as Hamas and Hezbollah. The HFC, as well as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), the Israel Police, and the emergency medical services (EMS), are the primary emergency response services in managing such threats and attacks. The HFC was established in 1992 as a component command of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), under the Ministry of Defense. As a military organization, which employs an estimated 65,000 soldiers (with about 90 percent of them reservists),<sup>20</sup> it is responsible for all aspects of civil defense, population guidance, and large-scale military-type operational responses in emergency situations, with future scenarios regularly exercised throughout the country in the course of a year. The NEMA, which is also under the Ministry of Defense, was established in September 2007. Comparable to FEMA, its American counterpart, it operates alongside the HFC to manage civilian response during a state of



emergency, a war, or a natural disaster. The Israel Police, a national agency under the Ministry of Public Security, also plays a role in managing the consequences of an incident, including working with the Israel Security Agency (ISA) in thwarting and arresting potential terrorists.

The Home Front consists of a multilayered defensive infrastructure. At the inner layer, a spectrum of defensive measures are deployed to disrupt and thwart attempts by terrorist groups to carry out operations against Israeli targets, in Israel 'proper' (within the general boundaries of the 'Green Line'). Once a 'conventional' terrorist attack occurs (with the majority of Palestinian operations thwarted), responding to such incidents is the responsibility of the country's disaster rescue services, which usually arrive on the scene only minutes after an attack. These include the special security elements, police crowd control and forensic units, bomb disposal experts, "body handlers," and highly trained paramedics who tend to the wounded.

To prepare for the potential of attacks employing rockets and missiles, which could cause catastrophic casualties, the Home Front Command (HFC) is the predominant organization in civil defense and is integrated into every aspect of society because all citizens have to be continually on the lookout for emergencies of all sorts. This is the case whether such attacks are launched by adversary states, such as the Scud rocket attacks by Saddam Hussein's former regime in Iraq in January 1991; Hezbollah's firing of rockets against Israel's northern towns and cities in July 2006; Hamas's launching of an estimated 4,000 rockets and 30 mortars against Israel's southern border towns and cities (which included a rocket attack near Ben Gurion Airport) during the 50-day July to August 2014 war; and the two-day conflagration in early May 2019 in which Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad launched an estimated 700 rockets and mortars into those communities.

The worst-case scenario for Israel is the possibility of a weapon of mass destruction (WMD) attack, whether in the form of rockets or other unconventional dispersal devices. In response to the latter type of threat, it is generally assumed that Israel's defense planners are considering the likelihood of such unconventional agents being released against its population by terrorist groups, whether Palestinian or the Islamic State.

## **9 Home Front (Israeli Arabs)**

Israel's Arab community constitutes an estimated 21 percent of the country's population, with 83 percent of them Muslim. Israeli Arabs have equal voting rights, and in the 21st Knesset, their two parties held ten seats. While the majority of Israeli Arabs are law abiding citizens, a minority are so disgruntled because of feelings of discrimination, marginalization, and other factors that they reject affiliation as Israelis and identify themselves with Palestinian terrorist groups and carry out terrorist attacks against Israeli Jews. In a new development, some Israeli Arabs affiliate themselves with pan-Islamic Jihadi groups, such as the Islamic State (IS), with several joining the IS's cause in conflict countries such as Syria.

High-visibility terrorist attacks by Israeli Arabs include the January 1, 2016, shooting rampage on Dizengoff Street in Tel Aviv, by Nasha'at Melheman, from Ar'ara in northern Israel, in which he killed two people and wounded seven others. During his escape, he also killed the taxi driver who had picked him up. He was finally killed on January 8, 2016, by Israeli special forces. In another incident, on July 14, 2017, three Israeli Arabs from Umm al-Fahm opened fire on two Israeli Druze border police officers near the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. No Israelis were killed, and the three attackers were subsequently killed by the Israeli police.

Some Israeli Arabs have become radicalized by the Islamic State (IS). In 2015, 36 Israeli Arabs attempted to join the IS, with ten reportedly fighting in its ranks in early 2016.<sup>21</sup> By April 2019, 60 Israeli Arabs became foreign fighters on behalf of IS, with ten returning to Israel.<sup>22</sup> During this period, dozens of IS supporters were arrested. In July 2015, six residents of the Hura Bedouin village were arrested for promoting IS propaganda and attempting to recruit relatives to join IS. On February 7, 2017 the ISA arrested Valentin Vladimir Mazalevsky (a Jewish convert to Islam after immigrating to Israel from Belarus), who lived in Shibli, an Arab village, for supporting the Islamic State and attempting to travel to Syria to join the terrorist group (he was subsequently convicted and sentenced to 32 months in prison).

In mid-April 2019, two Israeli Arab women, from southern Israel, who were cousins, were sentenced to four to five years in prison for conspiring with IS to carry out an attack on Ben Gurion University.<sup>23</sup>

## **10 Aviation Front**

The aviation front presents one of Israel's most significant threats, with the country's aircraft and airports among the world's primary targets of terrorist attacks. Following a wave of terrorism by Palestinian groups against Israeli aircraft and airports in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Israel instituted a series of defensive measures to prevent hijackings, bombings, or firings of heat seeking surface-to-air rockets at its aircraft.

During the post-2009 period, there was one aviation-related attack, with a Hezbollah operative conducting a suicide bombing attack, on July 18, 2012, on a passenger bus transporting Israeli tourists at the Burgas Airport, Bulgaria, after arriving on a flight from Tel Aviv. With 42 Israelis on board the bus, the explosion killed the Bulgarian bus driver and five Israelis, with 32 other Israelis wounded. Otherwise, Hezbollah's aviation-related threats were limited to an early 2019 threat by Hezbollah video to attack Israeli passenger flights in retaliation for the assassination by Israel of Hezbollah's military commander Imad Mughniyeh, who was killed on February 12, 2008 by a car bomb blast in the Kafr Sousa neighborhood of Damascus. The video's footage included images of El Al Israel Airline planes, as well as pictures of Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv.

During the 2014 Gaza War, there was concern about the potential threat posed by the launching of rocket attacks against Ben Gurion Airport from Gaza, and

Eilat Airport from the Sinai Peninsula. In response, in early January 2019, the Eilat Airport was moved further inland with the opening of a new international airport, which also has the world's tallest and longest antimissile security fence as a barrier against shoulder-fired missile attacks from nearby Jordan. It is also intended to provide an alternative during times of conflict to Israel's main airport near Tel Aviv. This was one of the lessons of the 2014 Gaza war when foreign carriers briefly halted flights because of Palestinian rocket fire. Israel is also concerned that that Ben Gurion Airport could be targeted by Hezbollah rockets from the north.

## 11 Coastal Front

Maritime terrorism involves the employment of violence for political ends against a ship, whether civilian or military, its passengers or crew, cargo, or a port facility. This definition excludes attacks against vessels for criminal ends, although maritime terrorism also involves hijacking a ship's personnel by terrorist groups for ransom purposes. This definition also includes the use of a maritime transportation system to smuggle terrorists and their materiel into a targeted country to carry out an operation.

Any maritime terrorist threat facing Israel would emanate from the eastern Mediterranean, off the Lebanese, Israeli, and Gaza Strip coastlines, and the Red Sea region, off the country's southern edge. Although no major maritime terrorist operations have been conducted against Israeli shipping interests or coastal areas since the 1980s, Hezbollah and Palestinian groups have used the Mediterranean and the Red Sea to transport shiploads of weapons intended for Palestinian groups in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Several of these shipments had been successfully intercepted by the Israeli navy, most notably the May 6, 2001, interception of the *Santorini*, a Lebanese fishing vessel that was ferrying weapons, including Katyushas, antiaircraft rockets, mortars and ammunition en route from Lebanon to the Gaza Strip, and the January 2002 interception of the much larger *Karina A* ship in the Red Sea. During the post-2009 period, in November 2009 the Israeli Navy intercepted the *Francop* vessel near Cyprus, which was sent from Iran and bound for Hezbollah in Lebanon, that was carrying a large shipment of arms.<sup>24</sup>

The Israeli navy also had to contend with the challenge of psychological warfare represented by a flotilla of vessels used by Hamas sympathizers to break the Israeli-Egyptian blockade against Gaza. On May 31, 2010, six ships of the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla" were boarded by Israeli naval commandos in the Mediterranean's international waters, forcing the ships to the Israeli port of Ashdod for inspection, with all the passengers detained and then deported. The flotilla, organized by the Free Gaza Movement and the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (İHH), an extremist Muslim group linked to Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, was transporting humanitarian aid for Gaza.

In another maritime threat, Hezbollah possesses advanced Russian-made Yak-hont antiship cruise missiles, with a range of 186 miles, capable of striking Israel's

offshore gas production platforms in the Mediterranean Sea, including naval and commercial vessels operating in the area.<sup>25</sup> In response, Israel reportedly installed maritime versions of the Iron Dome missile defense system on naval vessels securing the natural gas fields.<sup>26</sup>

## **12 Cyberspace**

Israel's CBT campaign regards cyberspace as a major front, with the country's government networks among the most highly attacked in the world by its adversary "cyber-jihadis" and hostile hacktivists. Israel is concerned about attempts by hackers to break into and sabotage the computer systems that manage the country's vital national infrastructures, such as the train system, electricity grid, and financial systems. The overwhelming majority of such cyber-attacks have failed, with those that succeeded quickly neutralized.<sup>27</sup> Examples of such attacks include the early September 2011 hacking by Turkish hackers of some 350 Israeli websites.

To defend against such cyber-attacks, in early 2011 Israel implemented a new strategy, with a national cybernetic taskforce was set in May of that year.<sup>28</sup> The Mossad, the ISA, the military and other agencies have established counter-cyber departments, with Unit 8200 of Military Intelligence, which is comparable to the US National Security Agency, serving as one of the leads in countering cyber-warfare. Israeli counter-cyber-terrorism is also offensively oriented. US and Israeli intelligence services reportedly collaborated in developing the Stuxnet computer worm to sabotage and delay Iran's efforts to manufacture a nuclear bomb.<sup>29</sup>

## **13 Diplomatic**

On the diplomatic front, several types of events can trigger attacks on Israeli diplomatic personnel and facilities overseas. These include escalations on the Gaza border, riots on the Temple Mount, fighting in Israel's north (including the Golan), Israeli assassinations of Palestinian terrorist and political leaders, and announcements of expansions of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem. In addition, "Boycott, Divest, Sanction" (BDS) movement demonstrations outside Israeli diplomatic facilities can also potentially get out of hand, leading to violent outbreaks.

Examples of violent attacks against Israeli diplomatic facilities during the 2009 to 2018 period include the September 9, 2011, forcible entry by several thousand Egyptian protesters in Cairo Egypt into the Israeli Embassy in Cairo and the ransacking of the Embassy's offices, an action only stopped by the direct intervention of President Obama on the Egyptian Government (see Chapter 7). In 2012 there were three attacks, with a February 13 bomb explosion on an Israeli diplomatic car in New Delhi, India, which wounded an embassy staff member, a local employee, and two passers-by; an attempt, also on February 13 in Bangkok Thailand, which led to the wounding of four people; and a February 14 planting of a bomb in a car in Tbilisi, Georgia, which failed to detonate and was defused by Georgian police.

The Security Division of the Foreign Ministry manages the protection of Israeli diplomats and officials against such terrorist attacks overseas. This is done through the deployment of armed security guards that protect the diplomatic missions, with the guards trained by the Shin Bet. The Shin Bet and the Mossad also cooperate with local security services to prevent such attacks.

### Assessing the effectiveness of Israel’s CBT campaign

To assess the effectiveness of Israel’s CBT campaign along the 13 fronts, the following table provides their MAA effectiveness scores.

**TABLE 14.1** Effectiveness in Applying MAA in CBT

<i>CBT Fronts</i>	<i>Terrorist Adversary</i>	<i>CT Military/ Intelligence/ Law Enforcement Response Measures</i>	<i>AT Political/ Diplomatic, Judicial Response Measures</i>	<i>Internal Pol/Mil CBT Hurdles</i>	<i>Pol/Mil MAA Consensus</i>	<i>CBT Effectiveness</i>
<b>1 Eastern (West Bank: Palestinian)</b>	Fatah, Hamas, IS	High	Low	High	Low	Medium
<b>2 Eastern (West Bank: Jewish Extremists)</b>	Hilltop Youth, Kach	High	Low	High	Low	Low
<b>3 Jerusalem (Palestinian)</b>	Hamas, IS	High	Low	High	Low	Medium
<b>4 Southern (Gaza)</b>	Hamas, PIJ	High	Low	High	Low	Low
<b>5 Southern (Sinai Peninsula)</b>	IS	High	High	Low	High	High
<b>6 Northern (Lebanon)</b>	Hezbollah	High	High	Low	High	High
<b>7 Northern (Golan Heights)</b>	Hezbollah, Palestinian Refugees	High	High	Low	High	High
<b>8 Home Front (Israeli Arabs)</b>	Hamas, IS, Hezbollah	High	Low	High	Low	Medium
<b>9 Home Front (General)</b>	Hamas, Hezbollah	High	High	Low	High	High
<b>10 Coastal (Maritime)</b>	Hezbollah, Hamas, Iran	High	High	Low	High	High
<b>11 Aviation (Global)</b>	Hamas, Hezbollah, IS	High	High	Low	High	High

<i>CBT Fronts</i>	<i>Terrorist Adversary</i>	<i>CT Military/ Intelligence/ Law Enforcement Response Measures</i>	<i>AT Political/ Diplomatic, Judicial Response Measures</i>	<i>Internal Pol/Mil CBT Hurdles</i>	<i>Pol/ Mil MAA Consensus</i>	<i>CBT Effectiveness</i>
<b>12 Global (Diplomatic/ Commercial Interests)</b>	Hamas, Hezbollah, IS	High	High	Low	High	High
<b>13 Cyberspace</b>	Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran	High	High	Low	High	High

As demonstrated by this table, Israel's CBT campaigns are given high scores in eight fronts: Southwestern (Sinai Peninsula), Northern (Lebanon), Northeastern (Golan Heights), Home Front (General), Coastal (Maritime), Aviation (Global), Global (Diplomatic / Commercial Interests), and Cyberspace. All of these fronts are characterized by high effectiveness of their CT and AT measures, low internal hurdles, and high national consensus over their strategic, operational, and tactical implementation. Medium scores, however, are given to the CBT campaigns' effectiveness in three fronts: Eastern (West Bank: Palestinian), Jerusalem (Palestinian), and Home Front (Israeli Arabs), with low scores given to the CBT campaigns on the Eastern (West Bank: Jewish Extremists) and Southern (Gaza) Fronts.

In the five fronts given medium or low scores, while their CT measures are given high marks, their AT measures, particularly their political responses, are considered of medium or low effectiveness because they have not succeeded in resolving those threats to an acceptable level of national security. As a result, in terms of the CBT effectiveness's operational formula, they managed to minimize, but not defeat or terminate their terrorist adversaries' intentions, operational capability, and local presence. This is due to the fact that these CBT campaigns were limited in attaining political/military MAA consensus over their strategic, operational, and tactical implementation. In the case of the Home Front (Israeli Arabs), for example, the passage by the Knesset in mid-July 2018 of the governing coalition's Nation-State Bill, in which Israel is defined as a Jewish state – as opposed to a democratic state for all its citizens – ended up further alienating the country's Arab minority (and its Druze minority as well), as opposed to an AT campaign's aim to further integrate potentially hostile minority communities into society. In one CBT effectiveness indicator, for example, the rates of radicalization into extremism by a minority of Israeli Arabs, particularly the youth, showed no signs of diminishing. In another CBT indicator, the call by Prime Minister Netanyahu during the 2019 Israeli election campaign to annex the West Bank and expand Jewish settlements was also bound to sabotage any peace initiatives with the Palestinian Authority,

thereby further inflaming the conflict and escalating terrorist attacks by Palestinian groups against Israel. This also damages Israel's image abroad, especially in Europe, as does the ongoing Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank. Finally, the Netanyahu government was unwilling to resolve Gaza's socioeconomic humanitarian disaster, which served to perpetuate the conflict between Israel and Hamas. This was likely to lead to additional rounds of rocket and mortar launches by Hamas from Gaza into Israel, followed by inconclusive and temporary ceasefire arrangements, which also strained the daily lives of Israelis living in the border towns.

For Israel's military and security/intelligence services, in particular, the absence of political MAA consensus in five of the 13 fronts made it difficult for them to effectively execute their CT response measures. Despite their excellent CT capabilities in these areas, without proper political solutions, their military and intelligence campaigns could only achieve "partial and temporary" victories<sup>30</sup> over their terrorist adversaries. While it is the mission of the military, police, and security/intelligence services to provide a degree of security and stability to a country that is threatened by terrorist adversaries so that the political echelon can govern in an environment that is "free of pressure and threats,"<sup>31</sup> in this sense, these Israeli military and security/intelligence agencies were effective to a large extent. They were constrained, however, because of the absence of political initiatives to resolve the underlying issues that drive the various terrorist conflicts challenging Israel, and the hurting stalemate, particularly between Israel and Hamas showed no signs of easing. Given the fact that the Netanyahu-led coalition government unwilling to implement a strategic political-military plan to resolve the conflict with Hamas in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, Jewish extremists in the West Bank, Palestinians in the outskirts of Jerusalem, and Israel's Arab population, Israel's CBT campaigns in these fronts showed no sign of achieving long-term success, with the cycles of terrorism challenging Israel from these fronts expected to persist.

In conclusion, the CBT MAA framework presented in this chapter is intended to serve as a template for assessing the effectiveness of other countries' combating terrorism campaigns, as well. This applies to other democratic societies in Western Europe, Australia, and particularly Asian countries, such as India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, that face growing terrorist threats from a variety of terrorist actors along multiple fronts and in which the combating terrorism campaigns, like Israel, are subject to competing approaches by contending political parties. By utilizing this framework, it is hoped that analysts and decision-makers will have objective and structured criteria that can be used to assess CBT effectiveness along multiple fronts in order to identify strengths, as well as weaknesses that may need to be addressed for future improvement.

## Notes

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# EPILOGUE TO ISRAEL UNDER NETANYAHU

*Dr. Robert O. Freedman*

PART ONE: FROM THE COLLAPSE OF THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT IN DECEMBER 2018 TO THE FAILURE OF NETANYAHU TO FORM A NEW COALITION GOVERNMENT IN MAY 2019

## **A) Israeli domestic politics**

Two and a half months after the conference from which this book emerged, in late December 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided to call for new elections. Netanyahu's reasoning in doing so appeared to rest on three factors. First, his government had been severely weakened in November when Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's Defense Minister and leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu Party resigned his post and pulled his five-person Knesset faction out of the government he had joined in 2016, claiming that Israel had not taken strong enough action against rocket and incendiary bomb attacks from Gaza by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Yisrael Beiteinu originally had six Knesset seats after the 2015 elections, but one member, Orly Levy-Abekasis, had left the party in 2017 to join the opposition. Compounding Netanyahu's problems was that the Israeli Supreme Court (the Israeli High Court of Justice) had required his coalition government to comply with a law that mandated military service for Haredi males. The two Haredi parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, strongly opposed this law and threatened to pull out of the government if the law was implemented, a development that would have brought down Netanyahu's government. (Ironically, the same issue was to prevent the formation of a Netanyahu-led government coalition in May 2019.) Another factor that may well have influenced Netanyahu's decision to dissolve the Knesset and move to new elections was the fact that Israel's attorney general, Avishai Mandelblit, was nearing a decision as to whether or not to indict Netanyahu on the three police corruption charges that had been brought against him, which included (1) taking bribes in the form of liquor and expensive cigars in return for political

favors, (2) trying to get less hostile political coverage from Israel's main newspaper, *Yediot Ahronot*, in return for getting the American financier of a rival newspaper, *Israel Today*, to cut his support for that paper, and (3) trying to get favorable political coverage from a cable station in return for favors to its owner. Netanyahu may have hoped, incorrectly as it turned out, that scheduling a snap election for April 9 would cause Mandelblit to delay his decision on indictment until a new government was formed, a government, Netanyahu appeared to hope, that would pass legislation to prevent a sitting prime minister from being indicted.

Whatever the motivation of Netanyahu's move to new elections, his decision was to lead to a major shake-up in Israeli politics as many parties split and others amalgamated. Thus, Orly Levy-Abekasis, who had left the Yisrael Beiteinu Party in 2017 announced she was forming a new party, Gesher (Bridge), which emphasized socioeconomic issues during the election campaign. Gesher was, however, unable to attract enough voters to cross the 3.25 percent electoral threshold required for seats in the Knesset, and socioeconomic issues did not play a major role in the campaign. The Joint (Arab) List Party, which had run as an amalgam of the Hadash (Communist), Ta'al (Secularist), Balad (Nationalist) and United Arab List (Islamist) Arab parties split, in large part because Ahmed Tibi's Ta'al Party did not get enough "safe seats" on the list to ensure a large representation of the party in the Knesset. The end result was that Tibi's Ta'al Party joined the Hadash Party and ran together in the 2019 elections, gaining six Knesset seats. The remaining two parties on the Joint List, Balad and the United Arab List, also joined together and secured four Knesset seats. Together the two Arab parties received ten Knesset seats, three fewer than the Joint (Arab) List had obtained in 2015 (see Annex three). There were several explanations for the drop in Arab seats. In part the drop-off was due to the disaffection of the Israeli Arab voters with their Knesset representatives who concentrated on West Bank / Gaza Palestinian issues instead of issues such as crime in and economic development for Israel's Arab community. The Arab voters also appeared disappointed that their Knesset representatives could not maintain their unity in the Joint (Arab) List. Another cause was the drop in the Arab vote – only 49 percent in April 2019 versus 62 percent in 2015 – as the Arab community in Israel, despite its growing economic prosperity (see Chapter 6), felt themselves increasingly marginalized in Israel by the passage of the Nation-State Bill in 2018 (see Chapters 1 and 5), which downgraded the status not only of the Arabic language in Israel, but also prioritized the Jewish over the democratic character of Israel. Finally, some of the Arab voters may have been intimidated by Likud election observers, equipped with cameras, who came to Arab polling stations on election day.

Another major split occurred in the Jewish Home Party as Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked pulled out of the party, hoping to attract more secularist voters while keeping their Religious Zionist base as they formed the New Right Party. As in the case of Orly Levy-Abekasis, the gamble did not pay off, and the New Right Party fell just below the 3.25 percent electoral threshold. Another major split occurred in the Zionist Union Party, composed of the Labor and Hatnuah factions. The leader of the Labor faction, Avi Gabbay, thought Labor would do better in April 2019 by

running alone. It was another gamble that did not pay off. Running alone Labor only obtained six Knesset seats (see Annex four), while for her part, Tzippi Livni, the leader of Hatnuah, decided to retire from politics, and Hatnuah did not run in the April 2019 Israeli elections.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was the emergence and electoral success of a new centrist political party, Kahol V'Lavan (Blue and White). Perhaps taking the advice of Dr. Yael Aronoff that the center-left needed an ex-general to lead it if Netanyahu was to be defeated (see Chapter 2) the party combined no fewer than three ex-chiefs of staff: Benny Gantz, who led the newly formed Resilience Party, Moshe Ya'alon and his newly formed Telem Party and Gabi Ashkenazi. The three generals joined with Yair Lapid and his Yesh Atid Party, which had received eleven Knesset seats in 2015, to form Kahol V'Lavan. The idea behind the formation of the new party was that with three ex-chiefs of staff at the top of the party list, Netanyahu could no longer claim that his political opponents in the election were "weak on security," as he had done in the past. This, however, did not stop Netanyahu, who called the leaders of Kahol V'Lavan "leftists" – a word that had become a pejorative in Israel as the country moved politically to the right. Netanyahu also claimed that Kahol V'Lavan would make common cause with the Israeli Arab parties. This may have inhibited the leaders of Kahol V'Lavan from reaching out to at least the Hadash-Ta'al Party, which might have increased the Arab turnout in the election and weakened Netanyahu's potential right-wing coalition. Nonetheless, despite Netanyahu's criticism, and the fact that it was a brand new political party, and even without reaching out to Israel's Arab community, Kahol V'Lavan secured 35 Knesset seats, as many as Netanyahu's Likud Party, as the new party received the support of many of the voters who had previously backed the Zionist Union. In addition, Israeli Attorney General Mandelblit announced in February during the election campaign that he intended to indict Netanyahu on the three charges, although the prime minister would have the right to appeal his decision by providing evidence in a hearing before Mandelblit would make his final decision on the indictments.

Despite the announcement of the indictments, and the success of Kahol V'Lavan, the Center and Left parties in Israel, including the two Arab parties, could only muster 55 seats in the Knesset, while Likud and the right-wing parties it usually allied with received 65. The apparent new coalition included Likud, with its 35 seats, Shas and United Torah Judaism, which each received eight seats in the Knesset (see Annex four), along with Kulanu, a center right party, which dropped from ten Knesset seats in 2015 to only four in April 2019, Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu Party obtained five Knesset seats, and the new Union of Right Parties also got five seats. Consequently, Israel's president, Reuven Rivlin, asked Netanyahu to try to form a government

What accounts for Netanyahu's success? As noted earlier, as a result of three wars with Hamas in Gaza, the failure of the peace process with the Palestinians, the failure of the Israeli withdrawals from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005 to bring peace, instead bringing rocket attacks on Israel, and the Second Intifada, with its terrorist attacks on Israeli cafes and pizza parlors, the Israeli body politic had moved

to the right. Indeed, there was a poll by the Israeli Democracy Institute, reported in the *Wall Street Journal* on April 11, 2019, which stated that 56 percent of Israelis now described themselves as right-wingers, as compared to only 40 percent in 2004. In addition, the study showed that Netanyahu was supported by two thirds of voters ages 18–24 and more than half of those ages 25–34.

In addition to Israel's move to the right there were a number of other factors that contributed to Netanyahu's success in the April 2019 elections. Thus, just before the election, US President Donald Trump formally recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, and Russian President Vladimir Putin secured the return to Israel of the remains of an Israeli soldier killed in Lebanon in 1982, something of great importance to Israelis. In addition, the newly elected president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, made a highly publicized visit to Israel. All these events demonstrated Netanyahu's diplomatic prowess, and the Israeli Prime minister was also able to demonstrate Israel's high-tech progress under his leadership when an Israeli space craft, *Bereishit* (In the Beginning), named after the first book in the Hebrew Bible, traveled to the moon, although it crash-landed there.

Besides his foreign policy accomplishments to help him win the election, Netanyahu took a number of steps domestically, both to assure the maximum possible votes for Likud and to help create a right-wing coalition. Thus, on the eve of the election, in an effort to get increased support from West Bank settlers whom he might have feared would vote for the newly formed radical right Zehut Party of Moshe Feiglin, or for Naftali Bennett's New Right Party, which was a major supporter of settlement expansion, Netanyahu announced that if he won the election, he would begin extending Israeli sovereignty onto the West Bank. The ploy worked, as not only did Netanyahu get widespread settler support but neither Zehut nor the New Right Party got enough votes to cross the 3.25 percent threshold, although, as will be noted later, this was to cause problems for Netanyahu as he sought to form a post-election coalition government. In addition, Netanyahu was instrumental in putting together a new right-wing party, The Union of Right Parties, which – unlike the Zehut and the New Right parties, which were led by men who were Netanyahu's rivals (Moshe Feiglin and Naftali Bennett) – would support him in his effort to get a law passed in the Knesset that would prohibit a sitting prime minister from being indicted. Thus, he arranged a deal between the rump of the Jewish Home Party (following the departure of Bennett and Shaked), the National Union, and the Jewish Strength Party, which was composed of followers of the assassinated Meir Kahane, who had been disqualified from running for the Knesset in 1988 for racism. Netanyahu took this action because he was concerned that by themselves the three parties would not garner enough support to cross the 3.25 percent voter threshold. To entice the Jewish Home Party into the new arrangement, Netanyahu promised a safe seat (number 27) on the Likud Party list to a Jewish Home leader, Eli Dahan. This ploy also worked as the Union of Right Parties received five Knesset seats.

Despite having a potential 65-person coalition, Netanyahu had trouble putting his government coalition together. In part, this was due to the fact that two of his

natural coalition partners, the New Right Party and the Zehut Party did not get enough votes to cross the 3.25 percent election threshold, and this gave Yisrael Beiteinu leader, Avigdor Lieberman with Yisrael Beiteinu's five Knesset Seats, the power to make or break Netanyahu's government. Lieberman was unwilling to join the coalition government unless he was given the defense ministry with the right to take firm action in Gaza, and Netanyahu agreed to the conscription of Haredi males into the Israeli armed forces. The Haredim, with their 16 Knesset seats, vigorously opposed Lieberman's conscription demands, and as the deadline neared for the formation of his government, Netanyahu was at an impasse as neither the Haredim nor Lieberman was willing to compromise. Netanyahu got so desperate that he even invited Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay with his six Knesset seats to join the right-wing coalition, but even had Gabbay been interested, opposition from members of his Labor Party prevented him from joining. Netanyahu also sought to get members of Kahol V'Lavan to defect and join his government, but to no avail. The end result was that Netanyahu pushed through the dissolution of the newly elected Knesset with the date for the new election set for September 17, 2019.

## **B) Israeli foreign policy, December 2018 to May 2019**

US-Israeli relations, or at least relations between the Trump administration and Netanyahu, continued to be quite close following the dissolution of the Knesset in December 2018 as Trump made it quite clear that he wanted Netanyahu to win the April 2019 election. As noted earlier, to help Netanyahu in the election Trump recognized Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights while appearing to turn a blind eye to Israeli settlement expansion on the West Bank. Netanyahu also had to be heartened by Trump's decision to back off from his plans for a total withdrawal of American forces from Syria. Meanwhile the long promised "Deal of the Century" to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continued to be delayed although the administration did plan an "economic workshop" in Bahrein in June 2019 to lay the economic basis for a solution to the conflict; although the Palestinians, who wanted a political solution to the conflict first, refused to attend.

Meanwhile, although the Trump administration's relations with Israel remained strong, Israel's relations with American Jewry continued to deteriorate. Reform and Conservative Jews, already unhappy over Netanyahu's renegeing on his promise to give them prayer space at the Western Wall and his close identification with Trump (see Chapter 8), took strong exception both to Netanyahu's ploy to place the racist Jewish Strength Party into the Union of Right Parties, and his call to annex part of the West Bank. At the same time, for the first time in many years, anti-Israeli voices were heard in the US Congress as newly elected Moslem Representatives, Rashida Talib and Ilhan Omar were publicly critical of Israel. Trump seized on their statements to brand the Democratic Party as a whole as anti-Israel and even anti-Semitic in an effort to garner more Jewish support for his 2020 reelection campaign. Meanwhile, the Democrats responded by calling Trump and the Republican Party weak on white nationalist anti-Semitism. The whole episode revealed how

far, under Netanyahu, support for Israel had moved from being bipartisan in nature to becoming highly partisan.

In the case of Iran, Israel welcomed the US imposition of additional sanctions on the Islamic Republic, especially on Iranian oil exports, in the hope that it would help curtail the economic and military aid that Iran was sending to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, and to Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Nonetheless Netanyahu had to be concerned that, in the face of increasing Iranian-American tension, if a war broke out between the US and Iran, Hezbollah would fire its extensive armory of missiles at Israel from Lebanon, irrespective of the severe damage that would be caused to Lebanon from Israeli retaliation. However, a more immediate concern for Israel from Iran was the Islamic Republic's decision to move away from the JCPOA nuclear agreement by increasing its nuclear enrichment (although not yet to weapons-grade levels) and by installing advanced centrifuges.

As Ambassador Magen had predicted (see Chapter 13) Russian-Israeli tensions over the shooting down of the Russian aircraft over Syria in September 2018 dissipated. Netanyahu continued to meet with Putin, and Israeli aircraft continued to fly over Syria to attack Iranian and Hezbollah positions. As noted earlier, Putin helped Netanyahu right before the April 2019 election by securing the return of the remains of an Israeli soldier killed in Lebanon in 1982. In addition to improved relations with Russia, Israel was also buoyed by the results of elections in India and Australia, as the leaders of the two countries who were reelected, Narendra Modi in India and Scott Morrison in Australia were much more favorably inclined to Israel than their election rivals, Rahul Gandhi and Bill Shorten. In the case of China, Israeli high-tech cooperation continued. However, the Israeli decision to give a Chinese company management control over the Port of Haifa caused problems with the United States, which had been using Haifa as a quasi-home port for the US Sixth Fleet. The US was concerned that China could use its company's management control over the Port of Haifa to spy on US ships there.

Israel's biggest problem, in the period from December 2018 to May 2019 was how to deal with the terrorist threat coming from Gaza. Not only were Hamas and Islamic Jihad authorizing the sending of firebombs over the fence into Israel, causing numerous fires in nearby Israeli communities, but they also periodically launched rockets into Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv and Beer-sheba. Indeed, in early May no fewer than 700 rockets were fired into Israel. Netanyahu did not appear to have an answer to terrorism from Gaza, fluctuating between trying to buy calm (especially before the Eurovision contest in Tel Aviv) by allowing more Qatari money into Gaza and extending the limits that Gaza fishermen could sail into the Mediterranean, to curtailing the sailing limits for Gaza fisherman and responding to rocket attacks with Israeli airstrikes. In any case, pressure was building in Israel for more decisive measures to be taken against Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Whether Netanyahu would be willing to take such action as he was preparing for the September 17 election remained to be seen.

## PART TWO: FROM THE FAILURE OF NETANYAHU TO FORM A COALITION GOVERNMENT IN MAY 2019 TO THE SEPTEMBER 17 ISRAELI ELECTIONS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

### A) The road to the September election

Israeli political parties often resemble amoebas – basic organisms that split apart and then come together again. This was clearly the case in the June to September 2019 period as many parties which had split apart before the April 2019 elections came together again in one form or another. Thus the Arab Joint List Party which had split into two sections which ran separately in the April elections – and lost 3 Knesset seats – joined together once again. This time, however, Ayman Odeh, the leader of the Joint List, broke new ground in Israeli Arab politics when he offered to support a Blue and White led coalition headed by Benni Gantz – albeit on a conditional basis. The conditions included the repeal of the Nation-State Law (see Chapter 1), the end to the demolition of “illegally” built Arab housing, more resources to fight crime in Arab towns and villages, and the building of a new Arab city in Israel. Odeh was heavily criticized for his offer by members of Balad, the Palestinian nationalist faction of the Joint List, as well as by other members of the Joint List, and he backed off from his offer, only to repeat it following the September 17, 2019, elections.

In the Labor Party, the near disastrous performance in the April election, after Labor Party leader Avi Gabbay had forced Tsippi Livni’s faction out of the party, led to new elections in the Party after Gabbay resigned as its leader. The victor in the elections was Amir Peretz, a former leader of the party (and a former Defense Minister) who defeated some of the younger party contenders such as Stav Shaffir, who had been one of the leaders of the demonstrations in 2011 calling for lower housing prices (see Chapter 6). Peretz then confounded many members of his party by inviting Orly Levy Abekasis, the leader of the Gesher Party, which had failed to surpass the 3.25% electoral threshold in the April elections to join Labor in a Labor-Gesher alignment. Both leaders, Peretz and Levy-Abekasis, were Sephardi Jews who hoped to attract Sephardi support in the election with their socio-economic platform. The new alignment indicated how far the Labor Party had moved from the days when it had been dominated by Ashkenazi Jews such as Ben-Gurion, Golda Meyer, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

Another Left-of-Center party, Meretz, which had done poorly in the April elections (4 Knesset seats), also had new elections for its leader. The victor was Nitzan Horowitz who also surprised many members of his party, especially its Arab component, when he agreed to join forces with the Democratic Israel Party which was led by former Israeli Prime Minister and Defense Minister Ehud Barak who returned to Israeli politics after a six year absence. Their new party was called the Democratic Union and it was joined by Stav Shaffir who left the Labor Party and received the second spot on the Democratic Union list, with Barak agreeing to take the 10th position. While there was some talk of a merger between the



Labor-Gesher Alignment and the Democratic Union Party, the negotiations failed and both parties ran separately in the September elections.

On the right of the Israeli political spectrum, the major political change which took place was the return of the two leaders of the New Right Party, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, whose party had failed to cross the election threshold in April, to their old Jewish Home Party which was now named the Union of Right Wing Forces. It should be noted that both Bennet and Shaked had been fired from their ministerial posts by Netanyahu in early June, and their support for him, should he form a new coalition government, could be limited at best. Shaked, who was seen as more popular than Bennett, became the leader of the party which she renamed Yamina (To the Right). Her rise to the party's leadership was facilitated when the former leader of the party, Rafi Peretz, made a major gaffe when he asserted that gay conversion therapy could cure an individual from his or her homosexuality. Unlike the April elections, this time, despite Netanyahu's efforts, the Yamina party did not include the racist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) faction which ran as an independent party in the September elections, as did the anti-LGBT party, NOAM, which, however, pulled out of the electoral competition on September 15, 2019, two days before the election.

Meanwhile, as the polls continued to indicate a neck and neck race between the Likud and KaholV'Lavan Parties for the most seats in the Knesset – and the invitation by Israeli President Reuven Rivlin to try to form a coalition government – Netanyahu, who became Israel's longest serving Prime Minister on July 20th, fluctuated between seeking to maximize the number of Knesset seats for his Likud Party and the maximum number of seats for his likely right-wing coalition partners. His first move was to incorporate the Kulanu Party of Moshe Kahalon into Likud, in return for promising Kahalon the Ministry of Finance and Kahalon's promise in return that he would support a law that would prevent a sitting prime minister from being indicted while in office. Given that Likud had won 35 seats in the April elections and Kulanu had won 4 (see Annex Four), Netanyahu may have hoped that the polls would project 39 seats for Likud. Instead, by the beginning of September, Likud was only polling between 30 and 31 seats, the same numbers as its main rival KaholV'Lavan. Another ploy used by Netanyahu was to promise Moshe Feiglin, the leader of the radical right wing Zehut Party, which had failed to cross the 3.25% election threshold in April, a cabinet post if Zehut did not run in the September election. Netanyahu evidently believed that the Zehut voters would cast their ballots for Likud, thus strengthening Netanyahu's position. He was confounded, however, when the leaders of the rival Yamina Party Shaked and Bennett received the support of a number of senior Zehut leaders such as Gilad Alper and Libby Moland.

Another ploy used by Netanyahu was to play the annexation card in an effort to gain support among right-wing voters. He asserted that if he were elected he would extend Israeli sovereignty to the Jewish settlements on the West Bank as well as to the Jordan Valley – something that would destroy any prospect for a Palestinian State – and, visiting Hebron on the anniversary of the Arab slaughter of a large part of the city's Jewish community in 1929, he promised that Israel would

remain in Hebron “forever” and that he would expand the Jewish enclave in the city. As in 2015 he sought to invigorate the Likud base by pushing an anti-Arab agenda. He claimed that the Israeli Arabs were trying to “steal the election”, and he unsuccessfully sought legislation to put cameras in polling places in a clear effort to intimidate Arab voters.

Meanwhile, as Netanyahu was seeking to bolster both the Likud party and his hoped-for right wing coalition, he had to contend with the rising popularity of Avigdor Lieberman and his Israel is our home party. Lieberman, who had sabotaged Netanyahu’s efforts to forge a right-wing coalition in May, with his demands on the Haredi parties, saw the popularity of his party rise, with the polls giving him ten Knesset seats in early September as his secularist agenda poached some seats from the Kahol V’Lavan Party whose Yesh Atid faction had long advocated secularism. (By mid-September Kahol V’Lavan was counterattacking by stressing its own secularist agenda). Netanyahu tried to cut into Lieberman’s base in the Russian-speaking community in Israel by emphasizing his close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin, calling Lieberman a “Leftist” and promising increased benefits for the community, but by September according to the polls, Netanyahu’s strategy was not working and it appeared that Lieberman with his secularist agenda and call for a unity government between Kahol V’Lavan and Likud, without the Haredi parties, would be the king-maker in the post-election negotiations on the formation of a coalition government.

## **B) Israeli Foreign Policy in the June to September 2019 period**

Unlike in the period before the April elections, Netanyahu could not point to any major foreign policy achievements in the run-up to the September elections. His visit to Ukraine fizzled when his wife, Sarah, discarded the bread that was part of the traditional Ukrainian greeting; a visit by his Indian ally, Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, scheduled for eight days before the election was cancelled, and his lightning visit to the United Kingdom to meet its new Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, proved to be less than successful when Johnson pressed Netanyahu to accept a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Perhaps even worse for Netanyahu, on the eve of his pre-election visit to Russia, the Russian Foreign Ministry strongly condemned Netanyahu’s plan to annex the Jordan Valley. When asked about the Russian condemnation, Netanyahu replied “What did you expect them to do?” – not exactly a ringing defense of his diplomatic achievements with Russia. Putin did, however, on Israel’s election day, make a small gesture to Netanyahu by announcing that he would visit Israel in January 2020.

Israel’s relations with its most important ally, the United States, were mixed in the June to September 2019 period. Israel’s technological ties to China, as noted above, remained a problem as the Israeli Government did not terminate plans to have China run the port of Haifa which US naval ships regularly visited. In addition, Israel’s problem with US President Donald Trump’s mercurial nature also

remained a problem as it was when he impetuously decided to withdraw all US troops from Syria at the end of 2018 – something that would have hurt Israel’s strategic position – only to backtrack from his decision several weeks later (see Chapter Seven). This time Trump suddenly announced his willingness, without conditions, to meet with Iranian President Hussain Rouhani and even hinted that the US might be willing to ease sanctions against Iran. Since Netanyahu had claimed credit for helping to toughen Trump’s policy against Iran, which remained an existential threat to Israel (see Chapter 10), the American President’s action was detrimental both to Israel’s security and to Netanyahu’s reelection prospects, even if the prospects for a US-Iranian meeting were unlikely as the Iranians demanded a lifting of all US sanctions before a meeting could be possible. Compounding the problem for Israel – and for Netanyahu – was Trump’s firing of John Bolton, the US President’s National Security advisor, who was a strong advocate of close US-Israeli relations. Trump did, however, make a small gesture to Netanyahu on the eve of the election by stating that he had discussed with Netanyahu the possibility of a mutual defense pact between Israel and the United States although given the opposition of many Israeli security officials who feared such an agreement would tie Israel’s hands, and the vagueness of Trump’s comments, there was a question as to how much the American President’s statement would help Netanyahu in the election.

As far as the US “deal of the century” for peace between Israel and the Palestinians was concerned, there was little progress. An economic workshop labeled “Peace to prosperity” was held in Bahrein in June, but without either Palestinian or Israeli official participation and the Arab states that did send representatives, such as Jordan and Egypt, sent low-level officials. The plan envisioned a \$50 billion infrastructure investment fund with a mix of private and public financing that would provide \$27.5 billion for the West Bank and Gaza and the rest for Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt, but there was no discussion of the political issues that would lay the basis for a peace agreement which would make such infrastructure plans viable, and there were no firm pledges for the funding to support the \$50 billion plan. While the Trump Administration stated that the political aspects of the plan would be made public after the September Israeli elections, the decision by chief US negotiator Jason Greenblatt to resign after the publication of the plan raised serious questions as to the chances of the plan for success.

Meanwhile Israel’s relations with the US Jewish community continued to deteriorate. White House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer led a group of 41 House Democrats to Israel, in part to dispel Trump’s accusation that the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives was anti-Israel. In addition, the House overwhelmingly passed a resolution condemning the Palestinian-supported BDS (Boycott, Sanction and Divest) movement. However, much of the good will between the House Democrats and Israel seemed to dissipate when two of the House pro-Palestinian House Democrats, Rashida Talib and Ilhan Omar on a subsequent planned visit to Israel were first approved for entry by Netanyahu, but then rejected after Trump asserted that Israel would look “weak” if the two legislators were permitted to enter Israel. Netanyahu’s denial boomeranged as the House Democrats rallied around

Omar and Talib – the last thing Israel should have wanted. Then, to make matters worse, Trump asserted that if American Jews voted for the Democrats in 2020 they would be disloyal to Israel – thus raising the old charge of dual loyalty that had long plagued the American Jewish Community.

Meanwhile, as Israel continued to bomb Iranian and Hizbollah positions in Syria, the conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas and Islamic Jihad continued to fester with Netanyahu's political opponents, including Lieberman and Gantz calling for stronger action against Gaza. In an effort to demonstrate he was not weak Netanyahu extended Israel's attacks to Iranian and Hizbollah targets in Iraq and Lebanon — in the latter case breaking the de facto cease-fire with Hizbollah that had existed since 2006 and leading to a Hizbollah retaliatory attack on Israel's northern border. Netanyahu's actions, however, did not persuade Hamas and Islamic Jihad to stop their attacks on Israel from Gaza and Netanyahu was embarrassed when in the midst of a political speech in the city of Ashdod a week before the election, the city came under rocket attack from Gaza, and Netanyahu had to be hustled from the stage by his guards. Netanyahu then sought to postpone the Israeli election by seeking to mount a major military operation against Gaza, only to be informed by the Israeli Attorney General that he could not do so unless he received the support of the full Security Cabinet, which he had not done.

### **C) The September 17, 2019 elections and their aftermath**

Unlike previous elections, this time the results closely mirrored the pre-election polls for the major parties. Thus Kahol V'Lavan got 33 seats and Likud got 32. Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu received 8 seats (up from five in the April elections) and it became the swing party between the Right – Religious bloc led by Likud (32 seats), United Torah Judaism (7 seats), Shas (9 seats) and Yamina (7 seats – up from the 5 seats received by the Union of Right Wing Parties in April) for a total of 55 seats – not enough to form a government by itself – and the Center Left bloc of Kahol V'Lavan, (33 seats), the Democratic Union (5 seats – up from the four Meretz had gotten alone in April), Labor –Gesher (6 seats – the same as Labor alone had received in April) and the United (Arab) List (13 seats, up from the 10 seats which the two two-party Arab blocs had received in April), for a total of 57 seats, also insufficient to form a government. In the case of the Center-Left bloc, its position was weakened when only 10 of the 13 Arabs members of the Party agreed to support Gantz for Prime Minister as Balad, the nationalist Arab faction of the United List, with its 3 seats, defected, unwilling to support Gantz, leaving the Center-Left bloc effectively with only 54 seats, one less than the Right-Religious Bloc. The failure of the racist Jewish Power Party to cross the election threshold of 3.25% of the vote was, however, an encouraging sign for Israel's democracy and for Israel's relations with the American Jewish community.

Initially, it appeared that Netanyahu was the big loser in the election. His hoped-for 39 seats resulting from the Likud-Kulanu merger had shrunk to 32, and his anti-Arab rhetoric had encouraged more Arabs to vote, as the share of the eligible Arabs

who voted rose from 49% in April to 60% in September and the Arabs increased their representation in the Knesset to 13. To strengthen his position, Netanyahu cancelled a visit to the United Nations and extracted a pledge from the parties in his Right-Religious bloc that they would negotiate together as a bloc. How long that pledge would remain viable remained a question, but it did strengthen Netanyahu's position as Israeli- President Reuven Rivlin urged the formation of a national unity government between Kahol V'Lavan and Likud. The leaders of the two blocs, Gantz and Netanyahu, did meet but Gantz affirmed that he would not participate in a government "whose leader is facing a severe indictment", and because Netanyahu insisted on negotiating not only for Likud, but also for Israel's religious parties. Indeed, Netanyahu faced an indictment hearing on October 2nd, only two weeks after the election, and it was imperative for him to remain as Prime Minister to avoid being forced out of office if he were charged. After the failure of the national-unity talks, Rivlin asked Netanyahu to form a coalition government. Whether he would succeed, however, was a major question given the fact that Lieberman adamantly opposed sitting in the same government as the Haredi parties unless they made major concessions. Whether they would be willing to do so to allow Netanyahu to form a new government remained to be seen.

In any case, Netanyahu's efforts to form a new government which, if successful, would extend his tenure as Israel's longest serving Prime Minister is a good point of departure for ending the epilogue. Netanyahu's success or failure in this endeavor will be a topic covered in the second edition of this book.

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## Annex one: Israeli election results 2009

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PARTY	SEATS IN THE ISRAELI PARLIAMENT (KNESSET)
1 KADIMA .....	28
2 LIKUD.....	27
3 YISRAEL BEITEINU .....	15
4 LABOR .....	13
5 SHAS .....	11
6 UNITED TORAH JUDAISM .....	5
7 UNITED ARAB LIST-TA'AL .....	4
8 NATIONAL UNION .....	4
9 HADASH.....	4
10 MERETZ .....	3
11 HABAYIT HAYEHUDI .....	3
12 BALAD .....	3
TOTAL .....	120

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Source: Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics

## Annex two: Israeli election results 2013

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PARTY	SEATS IN THE ISRAELI PARLIAMENT (KNESSET)
1 LIKUD-YISRAEL BEITEINU.....	31
2 YESH ATID.....	19
3 LABOR.....	15
4 HABAYIT HAYEHUDI.....	12
5 SHAS.....	11
6 UNITED TORAH JUDAISM.....	7
7 HATENUAH.....	6
8 MERETZ.....	6
9 UNITED ARAB LIST.....	4
10 HADASH.....	4
11 BALAD.....	3
12 KADIMA.....	2
TOTAL.....	120

---

Source: Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics

## Annex three: Israeli election results, 2015

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PARTY	SEATS IN THE ISRAELI PARLIAMENT (KNESSET)
1 LIKUD.....	30
2 ZIONIST UNION (LABOR AND HATNEUAH).....	24
3 JOINT (ARAB) LIST .....	13
4 YESH ATID.....	11
5 KULANU .....	10
6 HABAYIT HAYEHUDI .....	8
7 SHAS .....	7
8 YISRAEL BEITEINU .....	6
9 UNITED TORAH JUDAISM .....	6
10 MERETZ .....	5
TOTAL .....	120

---

(Source: Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics)

## Annex four: Israeli election results, April 9, 2019

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PARTY	SEATS IN THE ISRAELI PARLIAMENT (KNESSET)
1 LIKUD.....	35
2 KAHOL VLAVAN (BLUE AND WHITE).....	35
3 SHAS.....	8
4 UNITED TORAH JUDAISM.....	8
5 HADASH-TA'AL.....	6
6 LABOR.....	6
7 YISRAEL BEITEINU.....	5
8 UNITED RIGHT – JEWISH HOME AND JEWISH POWER.....	5
9 MERETZ.....	4
10 KULANU.....	4
11 UNITED ARAB LIST-BALAD.....	4
TOTAL.....	120

---

Source: Ha'aretz, April 15, 2019

## Annex five: Results of the September 17, 2019 Israeli elections: Knesset seats

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1	KAHOLV'LAVAN (Blue and White) .....	33
2	LIKUD.....	32
3	JOINT (ARAB) LIST .....	13
4	SHAS .....	9
5	UNITED TORAH JUDAISM .....	7
6	YISRAEL BEITEINU .....	8
7	YAMINA .....	7
8	LABOR-GESHER .....	6
9	DEMOCRATIC UNION .....	5
	TOTAL .....	120

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