

2 | “Mr. Security”

On July 20, 2019, Benjamin Netanyahu made history by becoming Israel’s longest-serving prime minister, surpassing founding father and first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. In stark contrast to Ben-Gurion, however, Netanyahu’s relationship with the military and intelligence community has been highly contentious, his long tenure fraught with civil-military tensions. Their strained relationship has centered around Netanyahu’s policies on key security-related issues, such as his handling of the Iranian nuclear program and his approach toward the Palestinians, topics that will be explored in Chapter 3. Beyond the policy disagreements, however, the level of mutual mistrust and suspicion between Netanyahu and the military and intelligence heads is without parallel in Israel. These tensions have had a strong personal dimension that stems from Netanyahu’s general aversion to risk-taking, except when he judges certain risks to be politically advantageous; his ceaseless demand for personal loyalty; and – from the perspective of many senior members of the security establishment – his questionable judgment. Perhaps above all, however, it is the widely held notion that Netanyahu routinely puts his own political and personal interests above the interests of his nation. This chapter explores Netanyahu’s worldview, his *modus operandi*, and the consequential steps he has taken throughout his political career to keep the generals at bay.

2.1 “Mr. Security”

Netanyahu has spent most of his life cultivating an image of himself as “Mr. Security.” In his army days, he served as a captain in the elite *Sayeret Matkal* commando unit, fighting in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Three years later, his older brother, Jonathan (“Yoni”), was killed leading the famed hostage rescue mission of a hijacked plane in Entebbe, Uganda. Yoni’s death had an indelible impact on

the younger Netanyahu, who had been working in the United States but returned to Israel to establish the Jonathan Institute, an organization named in his brother’s memory dedicated to counterterrorism research. Netanyahu edited and contributed papers to two books on terrorism, based on conferences he had organized at the institute.¹

Since entering politics, Netanyahu has sought to portray himself as an expert – *the* expert – on Israeli national security, the one person capable of ensuring Israel’s survival in a dangerous neighborhood. The security officials’ role, as he sees it, is to faithfully implement his policies, not to help craft them – an approach not consonant with the traditional pattern of civil–military relations in Israel, as explained in the Introduction chapter and Chapter 1. Most of the senior military and intelligence officials with whom he has interacted over the years – including his appointees – have departed from their posts on less than amicable terms, often emerging as his fiercest critics.

2.1.1 Personal and Political Interests First

Fueling the security community’s mistrust of Netanyahu is the prevailing view that Netanyahu places his personal and political interests above all else, even on matters of national security. It is an observation one hears often in Israel, particularly among public figures who have gotten to know Netanyahu well. Professor Manuel Trajtenberg, whom Netanyahu had appointed to lead a commission in response to the 2011 social justice protests, has said that Netanyahu “devotes his whole being to only one goal: his survival at all costs.”² President Isaac Herzog, as the opposition leader, remarked that “in most cases, Netanyahu prefers his personal interests over those of the nation.”³

¹ Benjamin Netanyahu, *International Terrorism: Challenge and Response* (New Brunswick, NJ and Oxford, UK: Transaction Publishers, 1982); Benjamin Netanyahu, *Terrorism: How the West Can Win* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986).

² Manuel Trajtenberg, “Between the Protests of 2011 to 2020, It’s Not the Same Frustration,” [in Hebrew] *Ynet*, July 15, 2020, accessed at www.ynet.co.il/article/Hyf6GH3JD#autoplay, September 24, 2022.

³ “Israel Opposition Chief Says Report of Unity Government Talks ‘Absolutely False,’” *i24 News*, October 4, 2016, accessed at www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/126985-161004-significant-progress-towards-israeli-unity-government-report-says, September 27, 2022.

Many senior members of the security community concur with this bleak assessment.⁴ Former Mossad chief Meir Dagan has said that when other prime ministers “reached the point where their own personal interest touched upon the national interest, it was the national interest that prevailed” but that Netanyahu was an exception to this rule.⁵ Former Shin Bet head Yuval Diskin likewise describes Netanyahu as a brazen opportunist:

I’ve seen all kinds of leaders – Rabin, Peres, Netanyahu, Barak, Sharon, Olmert and once again Netanyahu. With most of them, I felt that at the moment of truth, when there could be a clash between their personal interests and those of the state of Israel, they will always put the national interests of Israel above anything else. And unfortunately, many of my colleagues in the senior ranks of the security establishment feel that with Netanyahu and Barak, it’s not like that. For them, the personal, opportunistic and immediate interest always comes first.⁶

2.1.2 *Loyalty over Professional Suitability*

In the same vein, personal loyalty has always been a sine qua non for hiring decisions and one’s ability to influence policy under Netanyahu. In contrast to previous prime ministers, such as Shamir, Peres, and Sharon, who sought to surround themselves with talented individuals who were not always like-minded, for Netanyahu personal loyalty typically trumped professional considerations.⁷ Peres made it a point to hire young, highly educated, and ambitious aides who were encouraged to express their opinions openly to him.⁸ When a newly hired aide to

⁴ Paz, interview; personal interviews with Brig.-Gen. (Ret.) Dani Arditi, Reut, June 27, 2017; Maj.-Gen. (Ret.) MK Eyal Ben Reuven, Jerusalem, June 27, 2017; Maj.-Gen. (Ret.) Amram Mitzna, Tel Aviv, July 2, 2017.

⁵ Bergman, “Israel’s Army Goes to War With Its Politicians.”

⁶ Amir Tibon, “Netanyahu vs. the Generals,” *Politico Magazine*, July 3, 2016, accessed at www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/06/netanyahu-prime-minister-obama-president-foreign-policy-us-israel-israeli-relations-middle-east-iran-defense-forces-idf-214004, September 25, 2022.

⁷ Ronen Bergman, “Former PM Confidant Uzi Arad: Netanyahu Unfit to Run the Country,” *Ynet News*, October 24, 2017, accessed at www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5033176,00.html, September 24, 2022; “Attorney General Says Netanyahu Endangered Israeli Democracy,” *i24 News*, December 7, 2021, accessed at www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/politics/1638911521-attorney-general-says-netanyahu-endangered-israeli-democracy, September 24, 2022.

⁸ Ziv, *Why Hawks Become Doves*, 43.

Shamir disclosed to his boss that he was not a supporter of his policies, Shamir's response was "Do you love Eretz Yisrael [the land of Israel]? That's enough for me!"⁹ Similarly, when Sharon's newly appointed media adviser revealed to him that he had not voted for his new boss, Sharon responded by telling him that "most of the people around here didn't vote for me. I know what I think. I don't need people to tell me that I'm great ... I want to hear other views."¹⁰ By contrast, Netanyahu's tendency has been to surround himself with yes-men. When Avigdor Liberman served as Netanyahu's Chief of Staff at the start of his first term, he emphasized to job candidates that they were "searching for people of a like mind," loyal to Netanyahu's vision.¹¹ Former Mossad Chief Meir Dagan, who served under both Sharon and Netanyahu, noted that whereas one was able to express disagreements with Sharon, Netanyahu would not countenance a disagreement from a subordinate.¹² Writes Netanyahu biographer Ben Caspit: "Anyone who did not think like the leader was deemed a 'traitor.' It was unacceptable to cross Netanyahu."¹³ As the list of foes grew – many onetime aides became critics and even political rivals – so did Netanyahu's distrust of potential defectors. Other than a handful of longtime confidants, he consulted regularly with those he trusted the most: his wife, Sara, and increasingly, his wayward son, Yair, a brash ultra-nationalist who has advised his father on policy and has not hesitated to utilize social media to attack anyone he deems disloyal to the Netanyahu family. The harsh criticisms leveled at Netanyahu from Dagan and the other senior security officials who had served under him made Netanyahu even more determined to vet future candidates for these posts with increased scrutiny. His December 2015 Mossad chief appointee, Yossi Cohen, who had served as Netanyahu's national security adviser, was widely considered to have been a heavily politicized pick, a candidate chosen due to his personal loyalty to Netanyahu.¹⁴

⁹ Ziv, *Why Hawks Become Doves*, 23.

¹⁰ Ziv, *Why Hawks Become Doves*, 129.

¹¹ Ziv, *Why Hawks Become Doves*, 164.

¹² Gilad Morag, "Former Mossad Chief: I Don't Trust Netanyahu, His Actions Will Cost Us," *Ynet News*, January 28, 2015, accessed at www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4620516,00.html, September 24, 2022.

¹³ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 111.

¹⁴ Raviv Drucker, "His Man in the Mossad: Additional Details On the Prime Minister's Involvement in Advancing Yossi Cohen," *Channel 13* [in Hebrew], March 14, 2021, accessed at <https://13tv.co.il/item/news/politics/politics/>

2.1.3 *The Media-Savvy Israeli*

As a politician, he would learn to sell the “Mr. Security” image to the public via effective use of the media, becoming Israel’s master of the sound bite, with a deft ability to deliver a polished message without competition in Israel. Other politicians – including retired generals – appear inarticulate, colorless, and weak in comparison to Netanyahu. He often has exaggerated his military record, sometimes fabricating stories to convey the impression that he was at the heart of Israel’s historic events, placing himself in the company of the nation’s famed generals.¹⁵ It was the generals whom he has feared the most because they alone could puncture what many of them have viewed as a self-created myth. Removing them from the political arena would be a critical means to achieving his personal end goal: political survival.

Netanyahu understood the power of the media early in his career. In 1963, his family moved to Philadelphia, where his father, Benzion, was a professor at Dropsie College. The younger Netanyahu graduated from high school in Philadelphia before returning to Israel in 1967 to enlist in the IDF. In the 1970s, he spent several stints in the United States, completing his bachelor’s and master’s degrees at MIT. With his strong command of English, spoken with an American accent, he began appearing on American TV shows, where the young MIT graduate presented himself as an expert on international security. Appearing on “The Advocates,” a

[yossi-cohen-netanyahu-connection-1223264/](https://www.walla.co.il/item/3430576?utm_campaign=socialbutton&utm_content=twitter&utm_medium=sharebutton&utm_source=twitter&utm_term=social), September 24, 2022; Tal Shalev, “The Secret Meeting Between Ayelet Shaked and the Head of the Mossad at the Organization’s Headquarters – A Week Before the Elections,” *Walla!* [in Hebrew], April 21, 2021, accessed at https://news.walla.co.il/item/3430576?utm_campaign=socialbutton&utm_content=twitter&utm_medium=sharebutton&utm_source=twitter&utm_term=social, September 25, 2022; Yossi Melman, “Mossad Officials Look Forward to Chief Cohen’s Exit. Here’s What They Want Next,” *Haaretz*, May 4, 2021, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-05-04/ty-article/.premium/mossad-agents-are-looking-forward-to-chief-cohens-exit-heres-what-they-want-next/0000017f-e0dd-d568-ad7f-f3ffda230000, September 24, 2022; Jerusalem Post Staff, “Mossad Head Accused of Promising Loyalty to Netanyahu in 2013 – Report,” *The Jerusalem Post*, March 10, 2021, accessed at www.jpost.com/breaking-news/mossad-head-accused-of-promising-loyalty-to-netanyahu-in-2013-report-661595, September 24, 2022; Guy Rolnik, “Ex-Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen Is Arrogant and Corrupt – and Wants to Be Prime Minister,” *Haaretz*, June 2, 2021, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-07-02/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/ex-mossad-chief-is-arrogant-and-corrupt-and-wants-to-be-prime-minister/0000017f-f2d1-d5bd-a17f-f6fbca6e0000, September 25, 2022.

¹⁵ Pfeffer, *Bibi*, 102.

Boston debate show, the twenty-eight-year old said that he had “had to defend my country in two wars and in many battles” and that “nobody wants peace more than Israel, but the stumbling block to the road to peace is this demand for a PLO state, which will mean more war, which will mean more violence in the Middle East.”¹⁶ Confident and telegenic, the rising media star was clearly comfortable in front of the camera.

His political journey began when the then-Israeli Ambassador to the United States Moshe Arens, impressed with Netanyahu’s media skills, plucked him to serve as his deputy. Subsequently, Netanyahu became the Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations, a position he held from 1984 to 1988. As ambassador and later as deputy foreign minister in the early 1990s, in the Shamir-led government, he became a familiar face to the Israeli public and to international audiences alike. Throughout the 1991 Gulf War, Netanyahu dominated CNN’s airtime from Israel, representing Israel eloquently with pithy sound bites as he donned a gas mask during Saddam Hussein’s scud missile attack. A PLO official complained at the time that CNN was “becoming a propagandist for the Israelis” given Netanyahu’s frequent appearances.¹⁷ Netanyahu had become a media and political force in a short amount of time.

2.2 A Pragmatic Hardliner

Netanyahu grew up with the Greater Israel ideology. Born in Israel in 1949, he was raised in a Revisionist Zionist household. His father, Benzion, was a scholar and an activist in this militant movement and, by all accounts, had a significant influence on his son’s political views until his death in April 2012 at the age of 102. A fervent opponent of territorial partition, Benzion Netanyahu published a full-page ad in *The New York Times* titled “Partition Will Not Solve the Palestine Problem!” on the eve of the historic vote over the UN partition plan in the General Assembly.¹⁸

¹⁶ “Should the United States Support ‘Self-Determination’ for Palestinians in a Middle East Peace Settlement?” *The Advocates*, WGBH, June 6, 1978, accessed at http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_98F4072381BB439F8ECE8DC747297DBE, September 24, 2022.

¹⁷ Leon T. Hadar, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* (July 1991), 32, accessed at www.wrmea.org/1991-july/benjamin-netanyahu-the-joe-isuzu-of-the-middle-east-media-wars.html, September 24, 2022.

¹⁸ Pfeffer, *Bibi*, 42.

Netanyahu had a fully formed worldview by the time he entered politics. In his book, *A Durable Peace*, he wrote that he supported “the Palestinians’ ability to control their own destiny, but not their ability to extinguish the Jewish future” and that, therefore, he opposed a Palestinian state.¹⁹ Rejecting the notion of “a third independent state in what was once Palestine,” he argued that Jordan was “a two-state solution to resolve a conflict between two peoples.”²⁰ “The slogan ‘land for peace’ was singularly inappropriate” with respect to the West Bank, he argued.²¹ For Israel to be secure, “it must retain military control over virtually all the territory west of the Jordan River,” wrote Netanyahu.²² As if to drive home the point that the “land for peace” formula was misguided, Netanyahu relied on the oft-used Munich analogy: “In government, in parliament, in the press, Chamberlain and Daladier were praised, cheered, thanked for having traded land for peace.”²³ He was referring, of course, to the infamous case of appeasement, whereby the British prime minister and the French premier agreed to give the Sudetenland to Germany, a move that led to more aggression by Hitler, rather than the “peace in our time” that Chamberlain had proclaimed. Throughout his career, Netanyahu would frequently invoke the Munich analogy, not only in connection to the Palestinian issue but also with what he later viewed as US President Barack Obama’s appeasement of Iran.

For the newly minted politician, establishing a Palestinian state that would neighbor Israel was simply out of the question. Israel needed the West Bank for strategic depth; demilitarization of the area was “woefully ineffective against the miniaturized weapons of today and tomorrow”; and any state between Israel and Jordan would enable the PLO to carry out its phased plan to destroy the Jewish state.²⁴ Even a confederation with Jordan was unacceptable to Netanyahu for whom the West Bank was an integral part of Israel. “Carving Judea and Samaria out of Israel means carving up Israel, he wrote.”²⁵

¹⁹ Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place Among the Nations* (New York: Warner Books, 2000): 348.

²⁰ Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace*, 329–31, 351.

²¹ Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace*, 293. ²² Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace*, 284.

²³ Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace*, 157.

²⁴ Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace*, 260–93. ²⁵ Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace*, 287.

After Shamir’s loss to Rabin in the June 1992 national elections, Netanyahu took over the Likud party, spearheading the opposition to the Oslo peace process, initiated in 1993 by Rabin’s Labor-led government. Netanyahu worked feverishly to undermine the accords. In the Knesset, the right-wing opposition argued that Rabin’s government had received only a minimal majority in the Knesset – hardly a mandate for its dramatic policy change – and that it had violated its own pledge to refrain from negotiating with the PLO.²⁶ Beyond his parliamentary efforts, Netanyahu took his case to the streets, addressing anti-government demonstrations. At an infamous rally, a month before Rabin was gunned down by a right-wing extremist, Netanyahu appeared to ignore a larger-than-life effigy of Rabin, dressed in the uniform of a Nazi SS, and demonstrators who held signs calling Rabin a “traitor,” a “murderer,” and a “Nazi” for signing an agreement with the PLO.²⁷ To this day, Netanyahu is blamed by many observers for having contributed to the atmosphere of incitement that led to the assassination of Rabin.

It was during this time that Netanyahu introduced American political culture in Israel. Shimon Peres had replaced Rabin and ultimately called for early elections to be held on May 29, 1996. Palestinian suicide bombings had rocked major Israeli cities, leading to growing discontent with the Oslo process. Opposition leader Netanyahu, aided by US GOP political strategist Arthur Finkelstein, effectively tapped into Israelis’ feelings of anxiety and the deteriorating sense of personal security with a campaign slogan of “making a secure peace.” In what would become a pattern of US-style negative campaigning that included fabricating stories about his political rivals, Netanyahu’s other slogan – also, a Finkelstein creation – was “Peres will divide Jerusalem.” That Peres had no secret plan to divide Jerusalem was

²⁶ Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, “Peace-Making with the Palestinians: Change and Legitimacy,” in Efraim Karsh, ed., *From Rabin to Netanyahu: Israel’s Troubled Agenda* (London and New York: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001): 176.

²⁷ Barton Gellman, “Israeli Prime Minister Rabin Is Killed,” *The Washington Post*, November 5, 1995, accessed at www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/11/05/israeli-prime-minister-rabin-is-killed/2cca446e-33a8-4568-b156-2ecfdf18fe0a/?utm_term=.ba4f74b02fa5, September 24, 2022; and Tamar Pileggi, “Netanyahu Bats Away Claims He Incited to Rabin’s Murder,” *The Times of Israel*, November 12, 2016, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-bats-away-claims-he-incited-to-rabins-murder/, September 24, 2022.

beside the point; the intended damage had been done. In the nation's first experiment with direct elections – they were repealed in 2001 – Netanyahu eked out a narrow victory, beating Peres by less than 1 percent. At forty-six, he became Israel's youngest-ever prime minister. Netanyahu would hone this style of negative campaigning in his subsequent reelection bids. His media strategy would become paramount to his success, an inseparable pillar of his political fortunes. He became the first Israeli prime minister to launch a website, telling his viewers "You can ask me what you want ... you can decide what you hear."

In his short-lived first term, Netanyahu demonstrated a level of pragmatism not seen with the previous Likud chairperson, Shamir, who ran the country for eight years. Writes Dennis Ross: "Though loath to cave in to our pressure, he [Netanyahu] would want to show the mainstream of Israel that he had not destroyed Oslo."²⁸ He was expected – and pressured – to implement the Oslo Accords, such as when he signed the Hebron Agreement, which involved partial redeployment of the IDF in Hebron. He also signed the Wye River Agreement, which committed Israel to withdrawing from 13 percent of the West Bank. It is difficult to imagine Shamir ever agreeing to the territorial concessions entailed in these agreements.

However, at no point did he waver from his firm opposition to give the Palestinians a state of their own. Netanyahu had never really embraced the Oslo process and it is doubtful that his negotiations in the 1990s were conducted in good faith. A 2001 video that turned up nearly a decade later reveals Netanyahu, unaware he was being recorded, boasting that he knows America, which "can easily be moved" and that he "de facto put an end to the Oslo accords."²⁹

During his first term in office, Netanyahu developed an obsession with the media, which he believed was unsparingly critical of him – blaming him for incitement that led to Rabin's assassination and downplaying his achievements as prime minister.³⁰ To Netanyahu, the

²⁸ Ross, *The Missing Peace*, 266.

²⁹ Liel Leibovitz, "Fibi Netanyahu," *Tablet Magazine*, July 15, 2010, accessed at www.tabletmag.com/scroll/39692/fibi-netanyahu, September 24, 2022. See also Gideon Levy, "Tricky Bibi," *Haaretz*, July 15, 2010, accessed at www.haaretz.com/1.5149019, September 24, 2022; Ben Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 437.

³⁰ Yoram Peri, *Telepopulism: Media and Politics in Israel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004): 237; Amir Tibon, "Benjamin Netanyahu's Dangerous Obsession With the Media," *The Atlantic*, February 21, 2018, accessed at

media was part of the “soft liberal elite.”³¹ His constant battle with the media would manifest itself in several ways: avoiding press conferences, bypassing journalists, and delegitimizing those in the media whose credibility he questioned.³² At the same time, however, he made it a point to cultivate close, personal relations with media tycoons. His first term was cut short after his former army commander, Labor Party leader Ehud Barak, defeated him in the 1999 elections. This startling loss reportedly prompted Netanyahu to tell his associates, “I need my own media,” after which he enlisted the cosmetics billionaire Ronald Lauder to buy a majority stake in Israel’s Channel 10.³³

2.2.1 *A Mix of Ideology and Pragmatism*

Netanyahu’s political survival skills have enabled him to navigate the different paths of decisions that often place ideology and pragmatism at odds with each other. His biographer has noted that these two characteristics of Netanyahu – the pragmatist and the ideologue – “may indeed coexist despite their intrinsic contradiction” because “if remaining in office is the true ideology, the frequent flip-flops in policy are justified, along with the many concessions ... and tough stances.”³⁴ Netanyahu is an unreconstructed hawk – a disciple of the revisionist Zionist movement, a lifelong member of the Likud party, and an opponent of partitioning the land of Israel. Yet, he has shown a degree of pragmatism possessed by neither his mentor/father nor the man from whom he took over the Likud party chairmanship, Yitzhak Shamir. It was Netanyahu who agreed – typically, under immense pressure – to territorial concessions in the West Bank when he signed the Hebron Protocol in January 1997 and the Wye River Memorandum in October

www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/benjamin-netanyahu-mozes-adelson-israel-media-bribery/553844/, September 24, 2022; Ruth Margalit, “A Ruinous Obsession,” *Columbia Journalism Review* (Summer 2019), accessed at www.cjr.org/special_report/netanyahu-israeli-press.php, September 24, 2022.

³¹ Peri, *Telepopulism*, 235.

³² Peri, *Telepopulism*, 240–45; Aron Dónzis, “Clock Ticks on PM’s Absent Interviews,” *The Times of Israel*, February 9, 2014, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/clock-ticking-on-pms-absent-hebrew-interviews/, September 24, 2022.

³³ Ruth Margalit, “A Ruinous Obsession.”

³⁴ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 436–37.

1998; voted in favor of withdrawing from the Gaza Strip in 2004–5; acceded to President Obama’s demand to freeze the construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank for a ten-month period in 2009–10; and even showed a willingness to part from the Golan Heights prior to the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.³⁵ At heart, however, he has never been a believer in the concept of “land for peace” and could not fathom the idea of a sovereign Palestinian state living next-door to Israel.

2.2.2 *The Exclusion of the Generals*

To build the Mr. Security brand for himself and run the country unhindered by potential opposition from the security establishment, Netanyahu concluded that he needed to keep the generals at an arm’s length. Ironically, his emphasis on security would translate into less, rather than greater, involvement of the security establishment in the decision-making process. His approach toward the military differed markedly from the Rabin/Peres era; his relationship with its top brass, rocky from the start. Whereas Rabin and Peres (and later Barak) had endeavored to include the IDF in the peace negotiations, Netanyahu perceived the generals’ involvement in, and support of, the peace process as dangerous and he thus chose to exclude them.³⁶ As ex-IDF chiefs, Rabin and Barak spoke the same language as the generals. Peres was respected by the security establishment because, though not a former army official himself, he had played a key role in procuring arms for the fledgling state in the 1950s, established Israel’s nuclear program, and developed

³⁵ Shimon Shiffer, “Report: Netanyahu Agreed to Full Golan Heights Withdrawal,” *Ynet News*, October 12, 2012, accessed at www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4291337,00.html, September 24, 2022; Michael Bachner, “Netanyahu Held ‘Serious’ Talks With Assad on Relinquishing Golan – ex-adviser,” *The Times of Israel*, June 6, 2018, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-held-serious-talks-with-assad-on-relinquishing-golan-ex-adviser/, September 24, 2022; Frederic C. Hof, “I Almost Negotiated Israel-Syria Peace. Here’s How It Happened,” Atlantic Council, May 26, 2022, accessed at www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/i-almost-negotiated-israel-syria-peace-heres-how-it-happened/, September 24, 2022.

³⁶ Peri, *Generals in the Cabinet Room*, 60–61, 77–78; Mark Rosenblum, “Netanyahu and Peace: From Sound Bites to Sound Policies?” in *The Middle East and the Peace Process: The Impact of the Oslo Accords*, ed. Robert O. Freedman (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998): 67.

Israel's Aerospace Industries.³⁷ Netanyahu, on the other hand, is risk-averse and a man of rhetoric, rather than action, who has never been considered a member of this exclusive club. Former Shin Bet head Carmi Gillon bluntly describes him as a "coward" who "doesn't make critical decisions."³⁸ A biographer of Netanyahu writes of a conversation between the prime minister and Mossad Chief Meir Dagan in which the former boasted about a well-received speech he had given at an AIPAC conference. Dagan responded by saying he did not believe in speeches. When Netanyahu replied that "speeches make history," Dagan's retort was "yes, but Churchill didn't make do just with speeches. He also took action."³⁹ The Mossad chief had hit a nerve – intentionally, in this case – given Netanyahu's well-known admiration for the British statesman whose leadership he has sought to emulate.

Tensions between Netanyahu and the security establishment date to the beginning of his first term in office. A pattern of ignoring recommendations by the security establishment would come to characterize civil–military relations in the Netanyahu era. Brig.-Gen. (Ret.) David Agmon was hired as Netanyahu's bureau chief after two of his predecessors were forced out, but he, too, bolted after being excluded from Netanyahu's inner circle.⁴⁰ In his first months in office, Netanyahu dismissed repeated warnings by the IDF Military Intelligence and the Shin Bet of a possible massive outbreak of violence and a collapse of security. Maj.-Gen. Oren Shahor, the then-coordinator of activities in the territories, wrote to Netanyahu about the Palestinian Authority's vulnerable status, a concern shared by IDF Chief of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, who similarly warned of "overall chaos in the entire territory."⁴¹ Ignoring these warnings, Netanyahu opted to take decisions that he thought would shore up his popularity at home but which did nothing to enhance, and only harmed, Israeli security. On September 25, he decided to open the second entrance to the Hasmonean tunnel in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City without consulting with key members of the security establishment and despite

³⁷ Ziv, "Shimon Peres and the French-Israeli Alliance"; Ziv, *Why Hawks Become Doves*; Guy Ziv, "The Triumph of Agency Over Structure: Shimon Peres and the Israeli Nuclear Program," *International Negotiation* 20 (2015): 218–41.

³⁸ Ravit Hecht, "'The Palestinians Got Screwed. They Are Now a Non-issue Around the World.'"

³⁹ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 380. ⁴⁰ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 164.

⁴¹ Rosenblum, "Netanyahu and Peace," 67.

the opposition of Lipkin-Shahak and Shin Bet chief Ami Ayalon. The predictable violence that ensued left sixty-five Palestinians and fifteen Israelis dead.⁴² Morale had deteriorated to such an extent that, the following month, the Shin Bet ordered Israeli troops to leave their rifles behind when the prime minister visited their army base.⁴³

The following year, Netanyahu created a major international incident when he ordered the assassination of Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal in Jordan. Once again, he excluded senior security officials, including his defense minister, Maj.-Gen. (Ret.) Yitzhak Mordechai, from the decision-making process. The operation went awry when the Mossad agents, who had tried to poison Mashaal, were caught and arrested by the Jordanians. Netanyahu was then pressured by President Bill Clinton to send agents back to Jordan to administer the antidote, thus saving the life of the man who was supposed to have been eliminated.⁴⁴ To appease the furious King Hussein of Jordan, who felt he had been stabbed in the back, Netanyahu also agreed to the release of Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Yassin from jail, after which he returned to Gaza from Jordan. Netanyahu had not only angered Israel's best friend in the region, but he also had – as America's former longtime Mideast envoy Dennis Ross put it – strengthened Hamas in the process.⁴⁵ The man in charge of carrying out the operation, Mossad Chief Danny Yatom, placed the blame for one of the greatest blunders in the organization's history on Netanyahu for failing to take his recommendation.⁴⁶ Ross relates that when he asked Netanyahu whether it had occurred to him that something could go wrong with such an ill-conceived operation, he was dumbfounded when Netanyahu replied "No."⁴⁷

Lipkin-Shahak later hinted that the defense establishment had blocked other dangerous proposals during Netanyahu's first term

⁴² Rosenblum, "Netanyahu and Peace," 66.

⁴³ Rosenblum, "Netanyahu and Peace," 68.

⁴⁴ Michael Omer-Man, "This Week in History: The Failed Assassination of Mashaal," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 29, 2011, accessed at www.jpost.com/Features/In-Thespotlight/This-Week-in-History-The-failed-assassination-of-Mashaal, September 24, 2022.

⁴⁵ Ross, *The Missing Peace*, 358.

⁴⁶ Tzvika Brott, "Ex-Mossad Head Blames Bibi for Bungled Attempt on Mashaal," *Ynet News*, April 11, 2007, accessed at www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3386609,00.html, September 24, 2022.

⁴⁷ Ross, *The Missing Peace*, 357.

in office.⁴⁸ In announcing the new Center Party he formed with Mordechai, the popular defense minister whom Netanyahu dismissed in late January 1999, Lipkin-Shahak did not mince words, declaring that “Netanyahu is a danger to this country.”⁴⁹ Mordechai said that a new leadership was needed and pledged to be committed to the peace process that Netanyahu was seen to have all but abandoned.⁵⁰ Although the party received only six seats in the elections that May, the harsh criticisms they and other recently retired security officials leveled at Netanyahu were instrumental in Labor Party chief Ehud Barak’s successful effort to defeat Netanyahu in the polls. Netanyahu’s campaign slogan that year, “A Strong Leader for a Strong Nation,” proved ineffective when challenged by the ex-generals. Netanyahu blamed the media, Clinton, and the generals for his downfall.⁵¹ A decade later, following his return to the premiership in 2009, Netanyahu would continue his pattern of quarreling with the security officials.

2.2.3 *A Turn to the Right*

Following his electoral defeat, Netanyahu took a hiatus from politics to work in the private sector, where he was employed by BATM Advanced Communications Ltd, an Israeli high-tech company that makes communications equipment. In 2002, he returned to politics as foreign minister in the Sharon-led government. That November, he lost his Likud primary challenge to Sharon. Following the January 2003 elections, he became finance minister in Sharon’s second government. It was during this period that he emerged as Sharon’s fiercest critic from the right, determined to take back the reins of Likud and, from there, become prime minister again. Although he presented himself

⁴⁸ Yossi Verter, “His Nightmare Returns,” *Haaretz*, June 10, 2011, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/his-nightmare-returns-1.366931, September 24, 2022.

⁴⁹ Abraham Rabinovich, “Lt General Amnon Lipkin-Shahak: Decorated Israeli soldier Who Became an Advocate of Peace,” *Independent*, January 2, 2013, accessed at www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/lt-general-amnon-lipkin-shahak-decorated-israeli-soldier-who-became-an-advocate-of-peace-8434718.html, September 25, 2022.

⁵⁰ Tracy Wilkinson, “Defiant Mordechai Pumps Life Into Israeli Opposition,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1999, accessed at <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jan/25/news/mn-1507>, September 24, 2022.

⁵¹ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 191.

as the hardliner, Netanyahu's pragmatic side revealed itself once again. Sharon's plans to disengage from Gaza provided Netanyahu with an opportunity to plot his comeback. Initially, he was supportive of Sharon's moves. When Sharon first announced his plans in 2003, Netanyahu raised no objections, saying it was a done deal. Even after he began to criticize it, he voted for this plan on a handful of occasions – first, on June 6, 2004 in the cabinet vote; then, endorsing it in the Knesset on October 26; then, once again, on February 18, 2005, when he voted in the Knesset in favor of the Disengagement Plan Implementation Law, also known as the “Evacuation Compensation Law” because it provided compensation arrangements for those evacuated from the Gaza Strip and parts of the northern West Bank; and again for that law in the cabinet.⁵² When Sharon survived a tight vote of no confidence for a new coalition government that would allow him to carry out his disengagement plan, Netanyahu supported the government.⁵³ Although he had become increasingly vocal about his objections to the plan, he had voted for it on every occasion. Only when the cabinet voted to ratify the first phase of the plan on August 7, 2005, just days before its implementation, did Netanyahu vote against it and quit the government in protest over it.⁵⁴ Ever the pragmatist, Netanyahu had found his niche. He would wrest control of the party by appealing to its base. On September 27, Sharon narrowly defeated a leadership challenge from Netanyahu. Two months later, however, Sharon bolted the party he had helped found to form the centrist Kadima party, while Netanyahu returned to lead Likud.

Netanyahu would have to wait, however, to reclaim the ultimate prize: the premiership. The formation of Kadima shook up Israeli politics, as moderate politicians from both Likud and Labor joined

⁵² Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 199–200; David Makovsky, “Sharon, Netanyahu, Disengagement, and Likud Leadership,” Policywatch #511, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 17, 2005, accessed at www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sharon-netanyahu-disengagement-and-likud-leadership, September 24, 2022.

⁵³ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 200; “Sharon, by Tight Vote, Wins Approval of New Government,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2005, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2005/01/10/international/middleeast/sharon-by-tight-vote-wins-approval-of-new.html, September 24, 2022.

⁵⁴ Yossi Verter, “Netanyahu Quits Government Over Disengagement,” *Haaretz*, August 7, 2005, accessed at www.haaretz.com/1.4928835, September 24, 2022.

the new party. For the first time in Israel’s history, a party other than Likud or Labor would lead the country. In the elections held on March 28, 2006, Olmert’s Kadima party received the greatest number of votes – twenty-nine – while Labor came at a distant second, with nineteen seats. Netanyahu’s Likud party suffered a crushing defeat, with a mere twelve seats (down from twenty-six).

Back at the helm of Likud, Netanyahu focused on rehabilitating the party while plotting his comeback. Two critical actions were taken by his supporters in 2007 that would prove instrumental to securing his political future for years to come. First, Netanyahu’s associates passed the law requiring the cooling off period for members of the security establishment to be extended from six months to three years. As noted in the Introduction chapter, the so-called “Halutz law” initially targeted the then-IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, whom Netanyahu then viewed as a potential political threat. In effect, it enabled Netanyahu to stave off future challenges from popular retired generals while they were fresh in the public’s mind. By instituting an especially long waiting period, this law remains the most important structural change aimed at the top army brass for the express purpose of neutralizing their “danger” to the continued dominance of the political right.⁵⁵ The second action taken concerned Netanyahu’s media strategy.

2.2.4 *The Media Manipulator*

Netanyahu had befriended casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, an even wealthier tycoon than Ronald Lauder. Adelson founded *Israel Hayom*, a free tabloid that became the most widely read daily, known as “Bibiton” for its consistently favorable coverage of Netanyahu. “I intend to start publishing *Israel Hayom* in order to destroy your newspaper, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, and to ensure Netanyahu’s victory in the next elections so he can reign as prime minister for years to come,” Adelson reportedly told *Yedioth Ahronoth* journalist Sever Plocker months before the publication of the first issue.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Paz, interview.

⁵⁶ Sever Plocker, “Netanyahu’s Media Obsession Is Brought to You by an American Billionaire,” *Ynet News*, March 4, 2019, accessed at www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5473380,00.html, September 24, 2022.

The growing impact of *Israel Hayom* led Freedom House, the non-partisan organization that conducts research and advocacy on democracy, to downgrade Israel's press to "partly free" in its 2015 report, which stated that the newspaper's business model had forced other media outlets to "slash advertising rates, thus threatening their sustainability."⁵⁷ Meanwhile, additional media outlets were created to further Netanyahu's political agenda including Channel 20 – "the Heritage Channel" – that, in 2021 was rebranded to Now 14, and "Likud TV," an online platform fiercely loyal to him.⁵⁸

In *Telepopulism*, Yoram Peri highlights a handful of principles Netanyahu has embraced as prime minister in dealing with the media: (1) taking the initiative by setting the agenda so as to give his own spin on events; (2) it's not what you did, but what you say you did that is important; (3) developing close relationships with media personalities and using sticks and carrots in dealing with them; (4) when criticized, distract the media's attention with another issue; and (5) if you repeat it often enough, it becomes the truth.⁵⁹ Indeed, Netanyahu's ability to manipulate the media has been a critical factor in his longevity in public life.

Fifteen years after the publication of *Telepopulism*, Netanyahu would become the first sitting prime minister to be indicted on corruption charges – two of the three cases involving accusations of trading official favors for positive news coverage. In 2017, in the wake of the criminal investigation into his alleged collusion with major media outlets, Netanyahu was compelled to relinquish the communications ministry – a post to which he appointed himself in November 2014, an unprecedented move by an Israeli premier.⁶⁰ In his testimony to

⁵⁷ TOI Staff, "Media Watchdog Downgrades Israeli Press to 'Partly Free,'" *The Times of Israel*, April 27, 2016, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/media-watchdog-downgrades-israeli-press-to-partly-free/, September 24, 2022.

⁵⁸ Margalit, "A Ruinous Obsession"; Gil Hoffman, "Can Israel's New Fox News-style Channel Bring Netanyahu Back to Power? – analysis," *The Jerusalem Post*, November 29, 2021, accessed at www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/can-israels-new-fox-news-style-channel-bring-netanyahu-back-to-power-analysis-687341, September 24, 2022.

⁵⁹ Peri, *Telepopulism*, 204–11.

⁶⁰ TOI Staff, "Netanyahu Heard Intervening in TV Market While Already under Investigation," *The Times of Israel*, September 7, 2019, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-heard-intervening-in-tv-market-despite-suspicions-against-him/, September 24, 2022.

the Police, Len Blavatnik, the Ukrainian-born billionaire who lives in Britain and is a co-owner of Channel 13 (Reshet), said that Netanyahu “always complained about the media ... about the leftists – that they’re not good for the country, are anti-Israel and anti-business ... and that Channel 10 specifically [which merged with Reshet 13 in January 2019] is anti-Israel and anti-business...”⁶¹ Netanyahu met with Blavatnik with greater frequency once he purchased Channel 10, trying to convince him to establish an Israeli version of Fox News.⁶² Although the Channel 10 deal was not included in the indictment against Netanyahu, it was part of the pattern Netanyahu had established of enlisting media tycoons in his efforts to control what was said about him and his family.

2.3 Calculated Ambiguity toward the Two-State Solution

Two years later, Netanyahu made his stunning political comeback. Although Kadima received the greatest number of mandates in the February 2009 elections – it had one more seat than Likud – its new chair, Tzipi Livni, was ultimately unable to piece together a coalition. Netanyahu’s refusal to commit to a two-state solution had prevented her from forming a government of national unity with him. He also avoided commenting publicly on a Palestinian state in his first White House meeting with President Obama, who made it a point to emphasize the two-state solution in their joint appearance before reporters.⁶³ The outgoing Israeli ambassador to Washington, Sallai Meridor, reportedly told Netanyahu that failing to publicly declare his support for the two-state solution was causing significant damage to Israel.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Gidi Weitz, “Netanyahu Pushed Me to Create an Israeli Fox News, Said I Can Make a Lot of Money From It,” *Haaretz*, June 14, 2020, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-netanyahu-pushed-me-to-create-an-israeli-fox-news-1.8919543, September 24, 2022.

⁶² Weitz, “Netanyahu Pushed Me to Create an Israeli Fox News, Said I Can Make a Lot of Money From It.”

⁶³ Matt Spetalnick and Jeffrey Heller, “Obama Presses Two-State Solution in US–Israel Talks,” *Reuters*, May 18, 2009, accessed at www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-usa/obama-presses-two-state-solution-in-u-s-israel-talks-idUSTRES54H0P520090518, September 24, 2022.

⁶⁴ “Netanyahu Failure to Back Two-State Solution Harming Israel,” *Haaretz*, June 6, 2009, accessed at www.haaretz.com/1.5061259, September 24, 2022.

2.3.1 The Bar-Ilan Speech

The sudden endorsement of the two-state solution by a lifelong rejectionist just weeks later, at Bar-Ilan University, was naturally met with widespread skepticism including from those who knew him well. A Likud parliamentarian was quick to point out that Netanyahu's speech was a "tactical move ... intended for the world."⁶⁵ Asaf Shariv, who served as Israel's consul-general in New York during this period, later said that Netanyahu's speech was intended "to buy himself a few days of quiet."⁶⁶ A former senior aide to Netanyahu similarly suggested that his speech was meant to "ease some pressure internally and externally" but that Netanyahu had never truly embraced the idea of a Palestinian state.⁶⁷ His own relatives joined the chorus of voices expressing strong doubts that Netanyahu had changed his position on Palestinian statehood. Hagai Ben-Artzi, Netanyahu's brother-in-law who had collaborated with him on his book *A Durable Peace*, noted that Netanyahu had written "very clearly against the establishment of a Palestinian state" in this book.⁶⁸ Even Netanyahu's father said that his son did not support the two-state solution and that he would insist on conditions that the Arabs would never accept – "not a single one of them."⁶⁹

Already that year, Netanyahu added conditions that any Palestinian leader would find hard to accept, in particular his demand that Palestinians recognize Israel as a "Jewish state" – a criterion that had been absent from prior negotiations with the Palestinians or other Arab leaders including those of Egypt and Jordan. Netanyahu has repeatedly referred to the Palestinians' rejection of this demand as proof that they are not ready to coexist with Israel. His Bar-Ilan speech, in short, stemmed from expedient calculations – a tactical maneuver intended

⁶⁵ Ziv, *Why Hawks Become Doves*, 125–26.

⁶⁶ Personal interview with Asaf ("Asi") Shariv in Tel Aviv, June 26, 2011. This interview was conducted for a previous project.

⁶⁷ Personal interview with Aviv Bushinsky in Tel Aviv, June 21, 2011. This interview was conducted for a previous project.

⁶⁸ Daniel J. Roth and Gil Hoffman, "Report: PM's Brother-in-Law Says Netanyahu 'Very Clearly against Palestinian State.'" *The Jerusalem Post*, November 28, 2015, accessed at www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Report-PMs-brother-in-law-says-Netanyahu-against-Palestinian-state-435625, September 24, 2022.

⁶⁹ Segal, "Netanyahu's Father Reveals the Secret."

to diminish international pressure – rather than a reassessment of his beliefs.⁷⁰

2.3.2 *The Long Retreat from Bar-Ilan*

Still, despite the motivation underlying his Bar-Ilan speech, Netanyahu conveyed the impression that he would be willing to consider far-reaching moves for peace. His historic declaration in support of the two-state solution would be followed up with a settlement freeze, prisoner releases, and a willingness to make generous territorial concessions. In secret backchannel talks that were held in London from 2010 until November 2014, Netanyahu reportedly agreed to the 1967 lines, with exchanges of territory to account for demographic changes, as a basis for negotiations.⁷¹ Throughout his tenure, however, Netanyahu would deny such tentative agreements on his part while coming up with numerous rationalizations for why the two-state solution was not feasible. It became increasingly apparent that he had no intention to pursue the creation of a Palestinian state, putting him at odds not only with the Obama administration and with the Palestinian leadership, but also with the Israeli security community. In an offhand moment with Israeli writer Etgar Keret two years after his Bar-Ilan speech, Netanyahu said that the conflict was “insoluble” because it was based on Palestinian unwillingness to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, rather than on territory.⁷²

It was Netanyahu’s settlement policy that emerged as one of the greatest sources of tension with both the Palestinian leadership and the Obama administration. In November 2009, following immense pressure from Obama, Netanyahu announced a ten-month freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank as a gesture of goodwill

⁷⁰ Guy Ziv, “Benjamin Netanyahu’s Calculated Ambiguity toward the Two-State Solution,” *Political Science Quarterly* 134, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 217–44.

⁷¹ Ben Birnbaum and Amir Tibon, “The Explosive, Inside Story of How John Kerry Built an Israel-Palestine Peace Plan – and Watched It Crumble,” *The New Republic*, July 20, 2014, accessed at <https://newrepublic.com/article/118751/how-israel-palestine-peace-deal-died>, September 24, 2022; Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 449–50, 465.

⁷² Etgar Keret, “Netanyahu Says There’s No Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Haaretz*, June 15, 2011, accessed at www.haaretz.com/netanyahu-says-there-s-no-solution-to-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-1.367759, September 24, 2022.

toward the Palestinians. The pattern of leaving the generals in the dark continued in this second Netanyahu government. He built a firewall, forbidding any unauthorized contacts between the American negotiating team and top army brass, a policy extended to retired generals as well.⁷³ Netanyahu confidants, like attorney Yitzhak Molcho, dubbed “Dr. No,” were brought in to handle negotiations with the Palestinians while security officials were sidelined, consulted only minimally and only when deemed absolutely necessary.⁷⁴ “Proximity talks” with the Palestinian Authority began the following May but ended that September after Netanyahu refused to extend the settlement freeze. Positions on both sides only hardened, as President Abbas appealed to the international community by trying to get statehood recognition, as well as Palestinian membership, at the UN. With Obama informing Abbas that he would veto his UN statehood bid, it was clear that it would not succeed. (In November 2012, the UN General Assembly did, however, upgrade the status of the Palestinians to that of a “non-member observer state,” and in September 2015 the Palestinian flag was raised for the first time outside the UN headquarters.)

The negotiations were briefly revived in Obama’s second term, largely at the behest of John Kerry, who had replaced Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. In July 2013, Kerry engaged in active shuttle diplomacy to try to broker a deal between Israel and the Palestinians. It collapsed, however, a mere nine months after it began. Kerry placed much of the blame for the failed talks on Netanyahu’s announcement of 700 new housing units for Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem, which Palestinians see as the capital of their future state.⁷⁵ During the nine-month negotiating period, Netanyahu’s government increased settlement activity fourfold, constructing nearly 14,000 new homes in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.⁷⁶

Amid the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), Netanyahu raised concerns that a Palestinian state could be taken over by ISIS or another Islamic

⁷³ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 461. ⁷⁴ Caspit, *The Netanyahu Years*, 463.

⁷⁵ Mark Landler, “Mideast Frustration, the Sequel,” *The New York Times*, April 8, 2014, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/world/middleeast/israeli-settlement-plan-derailed-peace-talks-kerry-says.html?_r=0, September 24, 2022.

⁷⁶ Dan Perry and Josef Federman, “Netanyahu Years Continue Surge in Settlements,” *AP*, December 15, 2014, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-years-see-more-settlement-growth/, September 24, 2022.

extremist group in the region. The creation of a Palestinian state, he argued, would be "gobbled up" by a radical Islamic group like ISIS.⁷⁷ Netanyahu resorted, once again, to the politics of fear. Running for reelection in March 2015, he made it clear that he had no intention on working to establish a Palestinian state. His prior endorsement of such a state was "simply irrelevant," he said, because "in the situation that has formed in the Middle East, any territory that will be evacuated will be taken over by radical Islam and terrorist organizations supported by Iran," and therefore, "there will be no withdrawals or concessions."⁷⁸ On the eve of the elections, he took pains to assure his base that there would never be a Palestinian state formed as long as he was prime minister. "Anyone who is going to establish a Palestinian state, anyone who is going to evacuate territories today, is simply giving a base for attacks to the radical Islam against Israel," Netanyahu said.⁷⁹ To drive home this point, his Likud party even put out an election campaign ad suggesting that the left would allow ISIS into Israel.⁸⁰ On March 17, 2015, the day of these elections, Netanyahu appealed to his followers, via text messages, to go out and vote to offset the "droves of Arabs" who were being "bused to the polling stations by left-wing NGOs."⁸¹ The fear tactics worked. Netanyahu, who had been in trouble in preelection polls, managed to eke out another victory.

⁷⁷ Lori Lowenthal Marcus, "Bibi: 'ISIS Would Devour Palestinian State, We Cannot Help Create That,'" *Jewish Press*, March 9, 2015, accessed at www.jewishpress.com/news/breaking-news/bibi-isis-would-devour-palestinian-state-we-cannot-help-create-that/2015/03/09/, September 24, 2022.

⁷⁸ Lahav Harkov, "Netanyahu Says His Past Support for Palestinian State 'Simply Irrelevant,'" *The Jerusalem Post*, March 8, 2015, accessed at www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Likud-says-alleged-Netanyahu-document-of-concessions-to-Palestinians-is-a-lie-393302, September 24, 2022.

⁷⁹ Elliott C. McLaughlin, "Israel's PM Netanyahu: No Palestinian State on My Watch," *CNN*, March 16, 2015, accessed at www.cnn.com/2015/03/16/middleeast/israel-netanyahu-palestinian-state/, September 24, 2022; and Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: Bar-Ilan 2-State Speech No Longer Relevant in Today's Reality," *Haaretz*, March 8, 2015, accessed at www.haaretz.com/.premium-bar-ilan-speech-no-longer-relevant-1.5333961, September 24, 2022.

⁸⁰ Jonathan Lis, "Netanyahu's Newest Election Video: The Left Is Good for ISIS," *Haaretz*, February 14, 2015, accessed at www.haaretz.com/.premium-pm-s-latest-video-the-left-is-good-for-isis-1.5307172, September 24, 2022.

⁸¹ TOI Staff, "Netanyahu's 'Arab Drovers' Warning May Have Been Decisive in His Victory," *The Times of Israel*, March 25, 2015, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahus-arab-drovers-warning-may-have-been-decisive-in-his-victory/, September 24, 2022.

In late June 2016, on the eve of Netanyahu's visit to Rome for meetings on the peace process with Secretary of State John Kerry and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, two Israeli journalists reported that only four of twenty ministers in his cabinet supported the two-state solution.⁸² His own Likud party fervently opposed a Palestinian state. It would have been extremely difficult for him, therefore, to honor his Bar-Ilan pledge even if he were intent on doing so given his coalition and cabinet picks.

The election of President Donald Trump in 2016 was a turning point in US policy toward Israeli–Palestinian peacemaking. Trump put into question the traditional US role as an honest broker by openly siding with Israel while sparing no criticism of the Palestinians. Whereas the Obama administration clashed repeatedly with Netanyahu over settlement growth, the Trump administration all but ignored it. In February 2017, the White House released a statement indicating that “while we don't believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal.”⁸³ Trump's nuanced formulation emboldened, in turn, Netanyahu, who subsequently vowed to never remove the settlements.⁸⁴ Then, in November 2019, the White House upended longstanding US policy by declaring that settlements were not “inconsistent with international law.”⁸⁵

The settlements declaration followed earlier major reversals of long-time US policy. In December 2017, Trump announced American recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and his intention to relocate the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem – a promise he fulfilled on May 14, 2018. Following the suspension of Palestinian contacts with the

⁸² Amir Tibon and Tal Shalev, “Do the Ministers Support a Palestinian State?” *Walla! News*, June 26, 2016, accessed at <https://news.walla.co.il/item/2973513>, September 24, 2022.

⁸³ “White House Statement on Settlements,” US Embassy in Israel, February 2, 2017, accessed at <https://il.usembassy.gov/white-house-statement-settlements/>, June 24, 2022.

⁸⁴ Yotam Berger, “Netanyahu Vows to Never Remove Israeli Settlements from West Bank: ‘We’re Here to Stay, Forever,’” *Haaretz*, April 29, 2017, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-vows-to-never-remove-west-bank-settlements-we-re-here-to-stay-1.5446461, September 24, 2022.

⁸⁵ Lara Jakes and David M. Halbfinger, “In Shift, US Says Israeli Settlements in West Bank Do Not Violate International Law,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2019, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2019/11/18/world/middleeast/trump-israel-west-bank-settlements.html, September 24, 2022.

administration over its Jerusalem decision, Trump cut \$200 million in aid to the Palestinians in August 2018, in addition to ending American funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides basic services to millions of Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East.⁸⁶ A month later, Trump closed the PLO office in Washington, D.C. On March 21, 2019, the American president announced his decision to recognize Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The US had ceased, in effect, its role as an honest broker in the Middle East.

Netanyahu, for his part, did not hide his admiration for Trump. He hailed him as a “great friend to the Jewish people” and referred to the Trump presidency as a “new day” in US–Israel relations.⁸⁷ During his 2018 visit to Washington, Netanyahu even likened Trump to Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who, in the sixth century BC, liberated the Jewish people from captivity and was said to have helped them rebuild their temple in Jerusalem.⁸⁸ To thank Trump for recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, Netanyahu announced a new settlement there – “Trump Heights” – in honor of his “great friend” in the White House.⁸⁹

In contrast to his three immediate predecessors, Trump also de-emphasized America’s commitment to the two-state solution. In his first joint appearance with Netanyahu at the White House, Trump said, “I am looking at two-state, and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like.”⁹⁰ In making his Jerusalem announcement nearly

⁸⁶ Edward Wong, “Trump Administration’s Move to Cut Aid to Palestinian Refugees Is Denounced,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 2018, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/world/middleeast/trump-administration-aid-palestinian-refugees-.html, September 24, 2022.

⁸⁷ Tovah Lazaroff, “Netanyahu: Trump Is a Great Friend of the Jewish People,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 16, 2017, accessed at www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Netanyahu-Trump-is-a-great-friend-of-the-Jewish-people-481681, September 24, 2022.

⁸⁸ Andrew Silow-Carroll, “Who Is King Cyrus, and Why Is Netanyahu Comparing Him to Trump?,” *JTA*, March 7, 2018, accessed at www.jta.org/2018/03/07/news-opinion/the-telegraph/king-cyrus-netanyahu-comparing-trump, September 24, 2022.

⁸⁹ Oren Liebermann, “Israel Announces New Golan Heights Settlement Named ‘Trump Heights,’” *CNN*, June 17, 2019, accessed at www.cnn.com/2019/06/17/politics/trump-heights-golan-settlement-us-israel-scli-intl/index.html, September 24, 2022.

⁹⁰ Madeline Conway, “Trump Says He Can ‘Live With’ Either Two-State or One-State Solution for Israel,” *Politico*, February 15, 2017, accessed at www.politico.com/story/2017/02/trump-two-state-one-state-solution-israel-235054, September 24, 2022.

a year later, Trump said that the United States “would support a two-state solution if agreed to by both sides,” again stopping short of explicitly endorsing it, as had previous US presidents.⁹¹ When the administration finally released its much-touted Middle East peace plan in January 2020, it clearly favored the political priorities of the Israeli right.⁹² Although the administration’s plan envisioned a Palestinian state, it did not appear to be a contiguous or fully sovereign one. The Trump plan abandoned the longtime US demand that Israel withdraw to the 1967 borders with modifications to account for demographic shifts, leaving the Palestinians with approximately 70 percent of the West Bank in what would be a truncated state pockmarked with settlements and having less than full sovereignty. Rather than stating that East Jerusalem would serve as the capital of a future Palestinian state, the Trump plan envisioned Abu Dis – a suburb just outside of Jerusalem – as their future capital. Not surprisingly, the Palestinians, who were not consulted about this plan, rejected it out of hand.

Netanyahu, for his part, took full advantage of the Trump administration’s indifference toward the two-state solution and hands-off approach toward Israel’s settlement policy. In his first joint press conference with Trump, he repeatedly dodged questions about whether his Bar-Ilan speech was still relevant.⁹³ When pressed about it again in an interview on MSNBC, Netanyahu responded by saying, “I’ve always said that the labels are not important; it’s the substance that’s important.”⁹⁴ There was no mention of the two-state solution in the communiqué that followed a much-publicized three-day visit to Israel by Indian Prime Minister

⁹¹ David M. Halbfinger, Mark Landler and Isabel Kershner, “Trump Calls Jerusalem Plan Step toward Peace, but It Puts Mideast on Edge,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2017, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/middleeast/jerusalem-trump-embassy.html, September 24, 2022.

⁹² Michael Crowley and David M. Halbfinger, “Trump Releases Mideast Peace Plan That Strongly Favors Israel,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2020, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/world/middleeast/peace-plan.html, September 24, 2022.

⁹³ Raphael Ahren, “While Refusing to Endorse Two-State Solution, Netanyahu Says Israel Won’t Annex West Bank,” *The Times of Israel*, February 16, 2017, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/while-refusing-to-endorse-two-state-solution-netanyahu-tells-trump-israel-will-not-annex-west-bank/, June 2, 2023.

⁹⁴ “Netanyahu on Two-State Solution: ‘Labels Are Not Important,’” *Ynet News*, February 17, 2017, accessed at www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4923832,00.html, September 24, 2022.

Narendra Modi in July 2017.⁹⁵ When the topic could not be avoided, Netanyahu had made it a point to distance himself from it, such as when German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel noted, following their meeting in January 2018, that he was pleased to hear that "also the government of Israel wants to have two states."⁹⁶ Netanyahu corrected him by stating that "whether or not it's defined as a state when we have the military control [west of the Jordan River] is another matter, but I'd rather not discuss labels, but substance."⁹⁷ In a telling moment during a visit to Israel by Vice President Mike Pence, who was greeted with much fanfare, Netanyahu noticeably did not clap when Pence reiterated that the United States would support a two-state solution if "both sides agree."⁹⁸

A senior Likud official and close Netanyahu associate, Tzachi Hanegbi, even proclaimed boldly that Netanyahu no longer supported the two-state solution.⁹⁹ In January 2017, Netanyahu told his Likud colleagues that he was only willing to give Palestinians a "state-minus," implying that full sovereignty was not what he had in mind.¹⁰⁰ "I want a solution where they have all the power they need to govern themselves but none of the powers to threaten," he said during his March 2018 visit to the United States, where he addressed the Economic Club of Washington. "Does that comport with full sovereignty? I don't know, but it's what we need to live."¹⁰¹ This

⁹⁵ Yisrael Price, "Modi-Netanyahu Communique Snubs Two-State Solution," *Hamodia*, July 6, 2017, accessed at <http://hamodia.com/2017/07/06/modi-netanyahu-communicue-snubs-two-state-solution/>, September 24, 2022.

⁹⁶ "Netanyahu Corrects German FM on 'Two-State' Support," *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), January 31, 2018, accessed at www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/241404, September 24, 2022.

⁹⁷ "Netanyahu Corrects German FM on 'Two-State' Support," AFP.

⁹⁸ Peter Jacobs, "Benjamin Netanyahu Noticeably Didn't Applaud a Key Part of Mike Pence's Big Speech to Israel's Parliament," *Business Insider*, January 22, 2018, accessed at www.businessinsider.com/pence-israel-speech-benjamin-netanyahu-two-state-solution-2018-1, September 24, 2022.

⁹⁹ David Rosenberg, "Netanyahu No Longer Supports Two-State Solution," *Arutz Sheva*, May 29, 2017, accessed at www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/230314, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu Ahead of Trump Phone Call: I Am Willing to Give Palestinians a 'State-Minus,'" *Haaretz*, January 22, 2017, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/netanyahu-i-m-willing-to-give-palestinians-a-state-minus-1.5488898, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰¹ Ron Kampeas, "Netanyahu Says Solution May Not Include 'Full Sovereignty' for Palestinians," *JTA*, March 7, 2018, accessed at www.jta.org/2018/03/07/news-opinion/israel-middle-east/netanyahu-says-solution-may-not-include-full-sovereignty-palestinians, September 24, 2022.

formulation was quite similar to the one he had used in his prime ministerial debate with Shimon Peres twenty-two years earlier. In his April 2019 campaign for a fifth term, Netanyahu continued to distance himself from his June declaration a decade earlier, warning that his centrist rivals would establish a Palestinian state that “will endanger our existence.”¹⁰²

Well before the Trump peace plan was unveiled, the administration’s friendly attitude toward Netanyahu emboldened him to build aggressively in the occupied territories with few restraints. He assured settlers that he would oppose any form of settlement evacuation if Trump’s peace plan entailed such a move.¹⁰³ In March 2017, Netanyahu’s government approved, for the first time in two decades, the establishment of a new settlement in the West Bank.¹⁰⁴ Building activity there surged during Trump’s first year in office, with the construction of 2,783 settlement homes in 2017, a 17 percent increase over the annual average since Netanyahu took office in 2009.¹⁰⁵ Three days before the April 2019 elections, Netanyahu pledged to begin extending sovereignty over the West Bank, telling an interviewer that he did not “distinguish between settlement blocs and the isolated settlement points, because from my perspective every such point of settlement is Israeli.”¹⁰⁶ Two weeks before the redo elections in September, Netanyahu reiterated

¹⁰² Tovah Lazaroff, “Did Netanyahu Just Renounce His Support for a Palestinian State?” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 24, 2019, accessed at www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Did-Netanyahu-just-renounce-his-support-for-a-Palestinian-state-581577, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰³ Itamar Eichner and Elisha Ben Kimon, “Netanyahu: I’ll Oppose Settlements Evacuation if Trump’s Peace Plan Entails It,” *Ynet News*, March 19, 2019, accessed at www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5481406,00.html, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁴ Isabel Kershner, “Israel Approves First New Settlement in Decades,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2017, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2017/03/30/world/middleeast/israeli-settlements-netanyahu.html, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Josef Federman, “Israeli Monitor: Settlements Grew under Trump Presidency,” *AP*, March 25, 2018, accessed at www.apnewsarchive.com/2018/An-Israeli-monitoring-group-says-that-Israeli-West-Bank-settlement-construction-jumped-during-the-first-year-of-the-Trump-presidency/id-96f035c5a31244a98f05f5d9ba5605cb, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ David M. Halbfinger, “As Netanyahu Seeks Re-election, the Future of the West Bank Is Now on the Ballot,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2019, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2019/04/07/world/middleeast/israel-election-netanyahu-west-bank.html, September 24, 2022.

his intention to annex all Israeli settlements in the West Bank.¹⁰⁷ After the third inconclusive round of elections, which took place on March 2, 2020, Netanyahu formed a coalition with Gantz’s Blue and White party, resulting in the breakup of this short-lived centrist party; the factions headed by two of the coleaders, Lapid and Yaalon, split from Blue and White, leading the opposition. Gantz’s coalition agreement with Netanyahu made no mention of the words “Palestinians” or “Palestine” but appeared to greenlight Netanyahu’s pledge to annex Area C of the West Bank.¹⁰⁸ In the lead-up to July 1, 2020, the date Netanyahu had set for Israel’s unilateral annexation of parts of the West Bank, he once again excluded the security establishment from a consequential decision.¹⁰⁹ As the July 1st “deadline” approached, it became increasingly apparent that the Blue and White leadership was opposed to unilateral annexation, and the White House itself was conflicted on the matter, indicating to Netanyahu that his annexation plans be placed on hold.

2.3.3 *The Abraham Accords*

The Abraham Accords, which were announced the following month, thwarted the annexation plan in light of the unequivocal opposition by the UAE and Bahrain – the first two signatories to the Trump-brokered normalization agreements with Israel. Netanyahu’s and Trump’s signature foreign policy achievement, the Abraham Accords were the product of years of quiet, behind-the-scenes diplomacy. Well before the Trump era, Netanyahu had been championing the “outside in” approach of pursuing diplomatic relations with relatively moderate Sunni states that shared Israel’s fears about, and antagonism

¹⁰⁷ Jeffrey Heller, “Netanyahu Repeats Pledge to Annex Israeli Settlements in Occupied West Bank,” *Reuters*, September 1, 2019, accessed at www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-settlement/netanyahu-repeats-pledge-to-annex-israeli-settlements-in-occupied-west-bank-idUSKCN1VM10D, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Tovah Lazaroff, “Annexation as Early as July 1 Under Netanyahu-Gantz Deal,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 9, 2020, accessed at www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/annexation-as-early-as-july-1-under-netanyahu-gantz-deal-625304, September 24, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Yossi Melman, “How Netanyahu Silenced Israel’s Spies and Soldiers from Dissenting on Annexation,” *Haaretz*, July 2, 2020, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2020-07-02/ty-article-opinion/.premium/how-netanyahu-silenced-israels-spies-and-soldiers-from-dissenting-on-annexation/0000017f-db7d-d856-a37f-ffff5eba0000, September 24, 2022.

toward, Iran, rather than remaining stuck on the Palestinian issue. Regional security and economic cooperation were more realistic near-term objectives, he thought, than the endless pursuit of an elusive Israeli–Palestinian peace agreement. Netanyahu believed that strong ties with regional Arab actors would, in turn, increase pressure on the Palestinians to lower their demands and eventually return to the negotiating table with the Israelis under more realistic terms. Netanyahu initiated a secret meeting with the foreign minister of the UAE, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in New York on September 28, 2012.¹¹⁰ Additional meetings with UAE officials and other potential partners in the Middle East followed, such as Netanyahu’s trip to Oman in October 2018.¹¹¹ Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, was the administration’s lead negotiator, aided by his assistant Avi Berkowitz. Morocco and Sudan subsequently joined the UAE and Bahrain as signatories to the normalization agreements.

The Netanyahu–Gantz government fell apart after just seven months, leading to another vote on March 23, 2021 – the fourth round of elections in two years. The so-called “change government,” led by Bennett and Lapid, made it clear there would be no significantly new approach on the Palestinian issue in light of the contradictory agendas of its diverse coalition members. Netanyahu, now heading the opposition, wasted no time in warning Israelis that his political rivals were on the verge of forming a “dangerous left-wing” government.¹¹²

The government led by Bennett, and later by Lapid, sought to build on the Abraham Accords while taking steps to “shrink the conflict” with the Palestinians. Regarding the latter, the new government held high-level meetings with senior Palestinian officials; granted residency to thousands of undocumented family members of Palestinians in

¹¹⁰ Barak Ravid, “Exclusive: Netanyahu Secretly Met with UAE Foreign Minister in 2012 in New York,” *Haaretz*, July 25, 2017, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2017-07-25/ty-article/netanyahu-secretly-met-with-uae-foreign-minister-in-2012-in-new-york/0000017f-f5d4-d47e-a37f-fdfce3a30000, May 7, 2023.

¹¹¹ Felicia Schwartz, “Netanyahu Presses to Build Relations in Gulf States,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 28, 2018, accessed at www.wsj.com/articles/netanyahu-presses-to-build-relations-in-gulf-states-1540753549, May 7, 2023.

¹¹² Stuart Winer and TOI Staff, “Netanyahu Warns of ‘Dangerous, Left-wing’ Lapid-Bennett Government,” *The Times of Israel*, May 5, 2021, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-warns-of-dangerous-left-wing-lapid-bennett-government/, September 24, 2022.

the West Bank; approved 1,000 new Palestinian housing units; and increased by 15,000 the quota of Palestinian laborers allowed to work in Israel, while lending the Palestinian Authority \$156 million.¹¹³ It did little, however, to alter the status quo in the occupied territories. Nor did it initiate peace talks with the Palestinian leadership. With defections and threats of defections from several lawmakers in the coalition, it was obvious to all that this government’s days were numbered.

2.4 The Security Establishment Sees an Existential Threat

Netanyahu’s comeback in late 2022 brought far-right extremists to power, exacerbated the rifts in Israeli society, and sparked an unprecedented constitutional crisis. The security establishment became alarmed at what it considered an internal threat to Israel more dangerous than the external ones it faced. The security chiefs did not remain silent.

2.4.1 Netanyahu’s Far-Right Coalition

After the collapse of the wafer-thin sixty-one-seat Bennett-Lapid coalition, Israel held its fifth election in less than four years, returning Netanyahu to power with a sixty-four-seat coalition. His sixth government and the most right-wing and religious one in Israel’s history sparked renewed tensions with the security establishment before it was even officially formed. When Netanyahu seemed set on appointing Religious Zionist Party leader Bezalel Smotrich as minister of defense, prominent ex-generals expressed outrage that someone with neither experience nor knowledge in matters of national security should receive this important post.¹¹⁴ Following reports that Smotrich would be given the authority to nominate military generals for key positions, both outgoing IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi and the incoming one, Herzl Halevi, made their opposition to these plans

¹¹³ Adam Rasgon, “In Reversal, Israel’s New Government Engages with Palestinian Authority,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2021, accessed at www.nytimes.com/2021/09/25/world/middleeast/israel-palestinians-abbas-bennett.html?referringSource=articleShare, February 9, 2023.

¹¹⁴ Sapir Lipkin, “Former Senior Defense Establishment Officials: ‘Smotrich Evaded the Army and Did Nothing – Worrying,’” [in Hebrew], *N12*, November 14, 2022, accessed at www.mako.co.il/news-politics/2022_q4/Article-b4ff75384957481027.htm?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=NewsChannelPost&partne=rNewsChannelTwitter, May 7, 2023.

clear, expressing their concerns that Netanyahu's coalition agreements would break the chain of command.¹¹⁵ In the end, Netanyahu gave the defense ministry to the Likud's Maj.-Gen. (Ret.) Gallant, with Smotrich receiving the finance ministry as well as a newly created junior ministry in the defense ministry. The latter role gave Smotrich the authority over the Civil Administration, which oversees settlement matters including construction plans in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu appointed another far-right politician, Itamar Ben-Gvir, leader of the Jewish Power party, the minister of national security with expanded authority. Ben-Gvir, who had been deemed too extreme to serve in the IDF, was now given authority over the Police as well as the creation of a special paramilitary unit. The approval of a 2,000-member national guard drew criticism from security officials who feared a competing force alongside the existing security services – and one headed by an extremist who could use it to “launch a coup.”¹¹⁶ The outgoing IDF chief reportedly warned Netanyahu and Gallant that the IDF would not be answerable to Smotrich and Ben-Gvir notwithstanding their ministerial responsibilities.¹¹⁷ Netanyahu, for his part, reinforced the long-held suspicions in the national security community that his political interests were his top priority when he packed his security

¹¹⁵ Yaniv Kubovich, “Israeli Army Chief Says Won’t Let Politicians Determine Military Appointments,” *Haaretz*, December 6, 2022, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-12-06/ty-article/premium/israeli-army-chief-says-wont-let-politicians-determine-military-appointments/00000184-e3ed-d8c0-a1af-ebef89050000, May 7, 2023; TOI Staff, “Reports: Netanyahu Speaks to IDF Chief Given Concerns Over Military Authority,” *The Times of Israel*, December 26, 2022, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/reports-netanyahu-speaks-to-idf-chief-given-concerns-over-military-authority/, May 7, 2023; TOI Staff, “IDF Chief Reportedly Urges Netanyahu Not to Hand West Bank Powers to Smotrich,” *The Times of Israel*, February 17, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/idf-chief-reportedly-urges-netanyahu-not-to-hand-west-bank-powers-to-smotrich/#:~:text=IDF%20Chief%20of%20Staff%20Herzi,right%20Finance%20Minister%20Bezale%20Smotrich, May 7, 2023.

¹¹⁶ Ben Sales, “Israel Advances Plan for 2,000-Member National Guard Demanded by Far-right Minister,” *JTA*, April 2, 2023, accessed at www.jta.org/2023/04/02/israel/israel-advances-plan-for-2000-member-national-guard-demanded-by-far-right-minister, May 7, 2023.

¹¹⁷ TOI Staff, “Kohavi Said to Tell Netanyahu IDF Won’t Answer in Any Way to Smotrich and Ben Gvir,” *The Times of Israel*, January 5, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/kohavi-said-to-tell-netanyahu-idf-wont-answer-in-any-way-to-smotrich-and-ben-gvir/?utm_source=The+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=daily-edition-2023-01-06&utm_medium=email, May 7, 2023.

cabinet – a group of top ministers who would be deciding critical matters of national security – not only with Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, but also with similarly unqualified Likud party loyalists.¹¹⁸

2.4.2 *The Security Establishment versus the Judicial Overhaul*

Israel’s Supreme Court (“High Court of Justice”) has long stood as a thorn in the side of right-wing and religious Israelis who have seen it as being too empowered, too Ashkenazi (composed mostly of judges of Eastern European descent), and too willing to overturn decisions made by the elected officials. Although the Supreme Court has also been criticized by leftist groups and activists for insufficiently protecting Palestinian human rights – it has ruled against evacuating some unauthorized settlement outposts in the West Bank, for example – it also has struck down laws legalizing Jewish settler homes and numerous decisions of the executive branch. Curtailing its power, therefore, has long been an objective of conservative and religious politicians. Netanyahu had, in the past, defended the independence of the Supreme Court, assuring the public that he would never lend his hand to any effort to weaken its independence.¹¹⁹ Yet his new government’s top priority was to fast-track legislation that would do just that, setting off weekly mass demonstrations throughout the country not seen in decades. Among the legal “reforms” the government pursued was the override clause, which would allow the Knesset to override a Supreme Court ruling, thus barring judicial review. That Netanyahu could potentially stand to benefit personally from the proposed reforms given his corruption trial was not lost on legal commentators or the general public. Supreme Court President Esther Hayut said the legal overhaul, if passed, would be “a mortal wound to democracy.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ TOI Staff, “Netanyahu Set to Pack Security Cabinet with Loyalists Alongside Far-right Ministers,” *The Times of Israel*, January 3, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-set-to-pack-security-cabinet-with-loyalists-alongside-far-right-ministers/, May 8, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Knesset Channel, Twitter post [in Hebrew], November 8, 2022, 5:33 a.m. EST, accessed at <https://twitter.com/KnessetT/status/1589929049379704832>, May 8, 2023.

¹²⁰ Chen Maanit, “‘A Mortal Wound to Democracy’: Israel’s Chief Justice Slams Netanyahu’s Legal Overhaul,” *Haaretz*, January 12, 2023, accessed at

From the beginning, the reservists of the IDF's elite units made clear their opposition to the legal overhaul. More than 1,000 former Israel Air Force officials signed their names on a letter to Justice Hayut and other legal officials, expressing their fear that "the democratic state of Israel is in danger" if it gave up "its identity as a liberal democracy."¹²¹ A petition followed, with over 100 Israel Air Force reservists announcing they would stop reporting for routine, non-emergency service, joining a broader military reserve boycott over the government's agenda.¹²² Similar threats not to serve came from IDF's intelligence corps.¹²³ Later, naval commando reservists joined the opposition to the judicial overhaul, announcing that they too would stop showing up for reserve duty if the government pursued its legal agenda. Even before it became clear how widespread the reservists' protests would turn out to be, Halevi, the new IDF chief, expressed his concerns to Netanyahu that the reservists' threats to refuse to serve could harm the IDF's operational capacity.¹²⁴

In February, a group of former national security advisers, including Netanyahu confidant Yossi Cohen, sent a letter to the Knesset speaker urging compromise between the supporters and opponents of the judicial reforms.¹²⁵ For the most part, the community of retired

www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-01-12/ty-article/.premium/a-mortal-wound-to-democracy-israels-chief-justice-slams-netanyahus-legal-overhaul/00000185-a6ff-d948-a1bd-eeffd2a0000, May 8, 2023.

¹²¹ Emanuel Fabian, "1,000 ex-Air Force Officials Pen Letter: 'The Democratic State of Israel Is in Danger,'" *The Times of Israel*, December 26, 2022, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/1000-ex-air-force-officials-pen-letter-the-democratic-state-of-israel-is-in-danger/, May 8, 2023.

¹²² Amos Harel, "Over 100 Israeli Air Force Reservists to Stop Reporting for Duty as Protest Movement Grows," *Haaretz*, March 22, 2023, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-03-22/ty-article/.premium/over-100-israeli-air-force-reservists-to-stop-reporting-for-duty-as-protest-movement-grows/00000187-0a6c-d1cf-a7af-fffc7f060000, May 8, 2023.

¹²³ Yaniv Kubovich, "Israeli Military Reservists Threaten Not to Serve If Judicial Coup Legislation Continues," *Haaretz*, February 24, 2023, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-02-24/ty-article/.premium/israeli-military-reservists-threaten-not-to-serve-if-judicial-coup-legislation-continues/00000186-82e7-d525-a9ef-96ffb6da0000, May 8, 2023.

¹²⁴ TOI Staff, "IDF Chief Warns Netanyahu That Reservist Protest Refusals Could Spread in Military," *The Times of Israel*, March 5, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/idf-chief-warns-netanyahu-that-reservist-protest-refusals-could-spread-in-military/, May 8, 2023.

¹²⁵ TOI Staff, "Former Mossad Chief, Ex-national Security Aides Urge Compromise on Judicial Shakeup," *The Times of Israel*, February 11, 2023,

senior security officials sided with the demonstrators against the government. A day after thirty-seven out of forty pilots from the 69th Squadron announced that they would strike, rather than attend their scheduled training, ten living former Israeli Air Force chiefs published an open letter to Netanyahu and Gallant opposing the judicial overhaul.¹²⁶ Separately, 400 ex-senior security officials of the Police, Shin Bet, and Mossad signed a public letter urging the country's president, Isaac Herzog, not to sign laws "that contradict the country's Jewish-national and democratic-progressive character as laid out in the Declaration of Independence."¹²⁷ Former Shin Bet Chief Nadav Argaman warned that the government's plans would cause the security agency to "disintegrate from within."¹²⁸ An ex-Mossad head said that the Israeli reservists had every right to refuse serving in protest of the government's judicial overhaul.¹²⁹ Another former Mossad head said that the government's plans would turn Israel into a "country that I wouldn't want to live in" and called on Netanyahu to resign.¹³⁰ After Netanyahu spoke out against reservists who threatened to

accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/former-mossad-chief-ex-national-security-aides-urge-compromise-on-judicial-shakeup/, May 8, 2023.

- ¹²⁶ Yonah Jeremy Bob, "All Living Air Force Commanders Sign Letter against Judicial Overhaul," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 6, 2023, accessed at www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-733482, May 8, 2023.
- ¹²⁷ Michael Bachner, "400 Ex-security Chiefs Urge Herzog Not to Sign Laws That Negate Israel's Core Values," *The Times of Israel*, February 16, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/400-ex-security-chiefs-urge-herzog-not-to-sign-laws-that-negate-israels-core-values/, May 8, 2023.
- ¹²⁸ "Ex-Shin Bet Chief Suggests Overhaul Could Cause Agency to 'Disintegrate from Within,'" *The Times of Israel*, March 16, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/ex-shin-bet-chief-suggests-overhaul-could-cause-agency-to-disintegrate-from-within/, May 8, 2023.
- ¹²⁹ Ben Samuels, "Ex-Mossad Head: Israeli Reservists Have Every Grounds for Refusal Over Netanyahu Judicial Overhaul," *Haaretz*, March 15, 2023, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-03-15/ty-article/.premium/ex-mossad-head-reservists-have-every-grounds-for-refusal-over-netanyahu-judicial-overhaul/00000186-e683-d8a3-a9ae-e6a39f910000, May 8, 2023.
- ¹³⁰ Carrie Keller-Lynn, "Ex-Mossad Chief: Legal Reform Would Turn Israel Into 'Country I Wouldn't Want To Live In,'" *The Times of Israel*, February 13, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/ex-mossad-chief-legal-reform-would-turn-israel-into-country-i-wouldnt-want-to-live-in/, May 8, 2023; "Former Mossad Head Calls for Netanyahu to Resign, Asks on 'Every Israeli Citizen' to Protest," *Haaretz*, February 16, 2023, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-02-16/ty-article/.premium/former-mossad-head-calls-for-netanyahu-to-resign-asks-every-israeli-citizen-to-protest/00000186-59c0-dba0-a5c6-5bfc12250000, May 8, 2023.

refuse duty over the government's plans, his former commander in the elite Sayeret Matkal unit sent him a letter accusing him of having refused his own reserve duty during the First Lebanon War.¹³¹

Defense Minister Gallant had seen and heard enough. On March 25, he broke with the government. In a televised speech, he called for suspending the contentious legislation. "The rift within our society is widening and penetrating the Israel Defense Forces," he said. "This is a clear and immediate and tangible danger to the security of the state. I shall not be a party to this."¹³² The next day, Netanyahu announced that he was firing the defense minister, triggering spontaneous mass demonstrations throughout the country in a show of support for Gallant. Strikes were announced by the Histadrut labor federation, joined by health care providers. His firing served as a turning point in the battle over the legal overhaul and, more generally, over the way in which Netanyahu was perceived by the public because it was a decision that was widely interpreted – even by many of his voters – as politically driven, rather than based on national security considerations. For the first time, polls showed that respondents found centrist Benny Gantz more fit for the role of prime minister than Netanyahu, while his Likud party took a double-digit plunge.¹³³ A former military intelligence chief said he no longer trusted Netanyahu's judgment on matters of security and suggested that the damage to Israel's national security may be irreversible.¹³⁴ The national paralysis prompted Netanyahu to announce a suspension of the legislation, call for compromise negotiations, and reverse his decision to fire Gallant. The damage to his image as "Mr. Security," however, had already been done.

¹³¹ Michael Horovitz, "‘You’re the Refuser’: Netanyahu’s Former Commander Says He Evaded Wartime Service," *The Times of Israel*, April 11, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/youre-the-refuser-netanyahus-former-commander-says-he-evaded-wartime-service/, May 8, 2023.

¹³² Patrick Kingsley, "Israel’s Defense Minister Says Government Should Halt Contentious Judicial Plan," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2023.

¹³³ "Poll Shows Netanyahu Crashing, Gantz Far Ahead, Lapid Second," *Haaretz*, April 9, 2023, accessed at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-04-09/ty-article/polls-show-netanyahu-crashing-gantz-far-ahead-lapid-second/00000187-6753-dde0-afb7-7f5337590000, May 8, 2023.

¹³⁴ Amir Bar Shalom and TOI Staff, "Ex-IDF Intel Chief: Overhaul Damage to Israel’s National Security May Be Irreversible," *The Times of Israel*, April 10, 2023, accessed at www.timesofisrael.com/ex-idf-intel-chief-damage-to-israels-national-security-may-be-irreversible/, May 8, 2023.

2.5 Conclusion

Civil–military relations have ebbed and flowed throughout the State of Israel’s short history, but tensions reached a nadir during the Netanyahu years. Understanding the extent and depth of the poor state of relations between the security establishment and Israel’s longest-serving leader requires an understanding of Netanyahu himself – his self-image, his worldview, his *modus operandi*. As this chapter has shown, Netanyahu sees himself as the champion of Israel’s security. From the moment he entered politics in the early 1990s, he sought to market himself as “Mr. Security.” Polished, telegenic, articulate in both Hebrew and English, and a master of the sound bite, Netanyahu has deftly used the media to become the twenty-first century’s titan of Israeli politics.

Growing up in a highly ideological Revisionist Zionist home that informed his conservative worldview would put him at odds, naturally, with the largely non-ideological security establishment. Netanyahu can best be described as a pragmatic hardliner, always straddling the line between his hardline ideology and his ability to demonstrate flexibility. Nowhere has this approach been more evident than in his policies concerning Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians. He was a fervent opponent of the Oslo process, yet one who was begrudgingly willing to concede territories in the West Bank in his first term; a critic of Sharon’s disengagement plan from Gaza, but one who voted for it on multiple occasions; a lifelong rejectionist of the two-state solution who briefly embraced it with much fanfare before discarding it altogether; and a stalwart defender of the Supreme Court’s independence – only to back reforms aimed to weaken it later in his career. Netanyahu is risk-averse by nature, yet he has shown a willingness to embark on a dangerous adventure if he feels it will strengthen him politically; often, for him, political calculations appear to trump national security considerations. Netanyahu has never been one to adopt Abraham Lincoln’s “team of rivals” approach; on the contrary, he has sought to surround himself with loyalists. It is for these reasons that he has not endeared himself to the security establishment. He has had poor working relationships with nearly all of the IDF chiefs, Mossad and Shin Bet heads, and even with his own handpicked national security advisers and defense ministers, many of whom became his harshest critics upon retirement.

From the moment Netanyahu first assumed office in the summer of 1996, he began a pattern of excluding the generals, whom he associated with the Oslo process, from Israeli–Palestinian negotiations and, more broadly, from the decision-making process. Seeing the generals as a threat to his carefully cultivated “Mr. Security” image, he began a pattern of dismissing the security establishment’s warnings and recommendations. He lost his first reelection campaign in no small part because he had alienated the top security officials. The tough lesson had been learned. To stave off future political challenges from popular generals, Netanyahu orchestrated a law that lengthened the generals’ cooling off period, an important structural change that would benefit him politically for years to come.

Netanyahu’s strained relationship with the security establishment has been a near-constant feature of his years in power but has become more pronounced, as well as more visible, over the years, as former IDF chiefs and retired heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet have lined up to publicly repudiate him in the starkest of terms; many of the former have entered politics with the express goal of removing Netanyahu from power. The formation of his sixth government in December 2022, with extremist elements occupying key posts, along with Netanyahu’s handling of his government’s legal overhaul agenda, reinforced these tensions and severely undermined his reputation as “Mr. Security.” The following chapter details the intense policy disagreements between the security community and Netanyahu since his comeback in the 2009 elections.