

# ISRAEL'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU

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FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



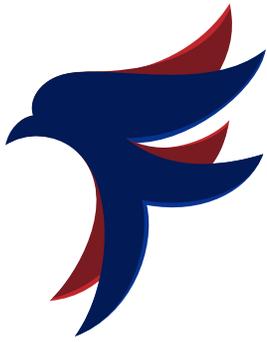
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COVER: One of Netanyahu's campaign posters during the 2009 Israeli legislative elections which stated that he would be the strongest choice for Israel's economy and security (Wikimedia Commons)



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# ISRAEL'S FOREIGN POLICY UNDER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU

## About the Author



**Ronen Hoffman**, a 2018-2019 Robert A. Fox Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Middle East Program, is an academician and former member of Knesset 2013-2015. He served as a member of Israel's Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee as well as the chairman of the sub-committee on Foreign Affairs and Public Diplomacy. Hoffman is an expert in the fields of Israel's Foreign Policy and the Middle-East political negotiations. He served as Personal Assistant to the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin during his political campaign, and was a member and the coordinator of the Israeli delegation to the peace negotiations with Syria. Dr. Hoffman is a lecturer at the School of Government at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and teaches courses on strategies and tactics in the Middle-East peace negotiations, political marketing and campaign management, and psychological warfare in conflict management, among others.

## Abstract

The ways in which Prime Ministers of Israel have shaped Israel's foreign policy have often reflected a fairly balanced combination of political, personal, and national interests. This balance is reflected when Prime Ministers sometimes prefer to challenge the political status-quo and even the stability of their own government, in cases when national interests seem more important than ensuring the continued political support they receive from their political base. Benjamin Netanyahu is an exception. For Mr. Netanyahu, who has served as Prime Minister for some 10 years in a row and a total of 13 years so far, securing his uninterrupted term in office is a top priority that overrides any other interest. This supreme objective guides him in shaping all official policy, including foreign policy, for which he is directly responsible as Prime Minister, Defense Minister, and even Foreign Minister at one point. Mr. Netanyahu often compromises Israel's long-term position for short-sighted policy that maintain his popularity and political position.

## INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Netanyahu has served as the Prime Minister of Israel for the past 10 years, and a total for 13 years so far. On April 9, 2019, he won another election and may serve as Prime Minister for the next term as well. Prime Minister Netanyahu's top priority is securing uninterrupted time in office. This objective guides him in shaping all policy, including Israeli foreign policy. The foreign policy of any country should reflect multi-dimensional considerations based on a wide range of national interests, rather than the narrow interests of a specific political group surrounding a specific politician. However, Netanyahu's foreign policy is almost entirely focused on attempts to please his political base to ensure his political survival.

Netanyahu's current government is clearly hardline and right-wing, which dramatically limits the potential of implementing any policies that promote reconciliation with the Palestinians. In the race leading up to the April election, Netanyahu competed for the leadership of the Israeli right-wing with the 'Jewish Home' party and the 'New Right' party, two hardline right-wing nationalist parties that reject any political compromise with the Palestinians and support annexation of the territories. The political right in Israel views hardline policy as a necessary stance in any interaction with the Palestinians; on this issue, the right is hostile to all liberal voices in Israeli, European, and American politics.

The Israeli political system is a parliamentary democracy, which usually gives the Prime Minister wide room for maneuver in foreign affairs since the PM is not constitutionally required to have the Knesset ratify peace agreements or any other foreign policy actions. This political environment grants Netanyahu extreme independence

when pursuing foreign policy, while effectively excluding other experienced advisers and ministers. Furthermore, in light of Avigdor Lieberman's resignation as Defense Minister on November 15, 2018, Netanyahu did not appoint a new one and decided to assume the position himself. Lieberman, the head of a medium-size, right-wing party that was part of Netanyahu's coalition, was a dominant Defense Minister who often countered and balanced Netanyahu's decision-making; however, Netanyahu currently serves as the Prime Minister, Minister of Defense and, for most of his recent term, he also served as Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The current government also tends to emphasize Netanyahu's rich personal experience<sup>1</sup> in policy-shaping and decision-making, thus promoting a leadership pattern based on personal aggrandizement. Currently, Netanyahu's personal and professional decision-support system on foreign policy is weak and limited, which turns the security establishment into the only body that can present a comprehensive professional analysis on foreign affairs and security matters.<sup>2</sup> The military-security establishment has overwhelming dominance in policy-making and pushes aside non-military analysis.<sup>3</sup>

This article will focus on the implications of the distortions that were created in Israeli foreign policy under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the past decade. The first part will present general characteristics of how Israeli foreign policy has been conducted since the establishment of the state in 1948. The second section will discuss how some of Netanyahu's predecessors conducted foreign policy that contradicted prevailing public sentiment, and even went against the positions of their own political base in contrast to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who

1 Glenn C. Altschuler, "Is Benjamin Netanyahu an unrivaled leader?," Jerusalem Post, May 20, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Magazine/An-unrivaled-leader-553452>.

2 Charles D. Freilich, "National Security Decision-Making in Israel: Improving the Process," Middle East Journal, 2013, 257-266]

3 Kobi Michael and Shmuel Even, "Principles of the Israeli Political-Military Discourse Based on the Recent IDF Strategy Document," Military and Strategic Affairs, Volume 8, No. 1, July 2016.



*The Knesset (Source: Adobe Stock)*

is not willing to endanger his political status. The final section will present two case-studies that illustrate how Prime-Minister Netanyahu chooses to base foreign (and domestic) policy decisions on narrow personal-political needs in order to secure his political survival.

# GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF ISRAEL'S FOREIGN POLICY

Israel's foreign policy has suffered from conceptual, cultural, and structural weaknesses for decades. The root cause of this dysfunction is the decisive dominance of the defense establishment over the diplomatic corps. One of the reasons for the dominance of the defense establishment is that it was easier to reach consensus regarding military-security issues than regarding sensitive political aspects of foreign policy issues, particularly those relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: for example, the status of Jerusalem, control over the occupied territories, and Jewish settlements in the West Bank.<sup>4</sup>

Israel's concept of security was shaped in the early 1950s. At that time, Israel was a small and relatively poor country, with only 2 million inhabitants (60% of whom were refugees and Holocaust survivors). This reality highlighted greater existential fears including concrete concern about a massive invasion of Israel by a coalition of Arab armies, with the ambition to totally destroy the Jewish state. In order to deal with these constraints, Israeli military power was designed to be based on a relatively small regular army, along with large reserve forces and weapon systems that provided Israel with a qualitative advantage to compensate for the enemy's quantitative superiority.<sup>5</sup> That defense doctrine was implemented in the formation of a "people's army," based on mandatory service and reserve duty for the entire population (men and women, excluding the Arab minority population). It became common for former high-ranking military officers to take senior political positions or to hold senior positions in private enterprises and

the education system. As a result of existential threats sensed by many Israelis over the years—despite significant changes in the fundamental conditions of the country since the early days of independence—the basic narrative has not changed much, and the full and sophisticated use of diplomacy and foreign policy usually still remains outside of that core narrative.

These weaknesses have developed into a basic conceptual flaw regarding the role of foreign policy as a possible central pillar of national security. The perception of the Israeli political leadership has been that Israel's national security is almost solely based on its military security rather than on foreign policy and on diplomatic outputs. Indeed, Israel's national security doctrine does not define foreign policy as a cornerstone of its own essence and weight.<sup>6</sup> Traditional Israeli national security doctrine is based on the following military elements: warning, deterrence, and decisive military victory.<sup>7</sup> This concept reflects the inclination of the entire establishment. Ministerial bodies, policy shapers, and decision makers rely on "hard power" (the use of military means and coercion in international relations) with almost no reference to "soft power" (a non-coercive approach based on appeal, persuasion, alliances, and partnerships), let alone to "smart power" (a combination of "hard" and "soft" power: the engagement of both military force and all forms of diplomacy).

It appears that Israel has no clearly defined concept of "smart power" and, as a consequence, this potentially effective tool is not integrated systematically into national security policy-making. The security and foreign policy

4 Daniel Bar-Tal, "Societal beliefs in times of intractable conflict: The Israeli case," *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 1998, 22-50]

5 Shay Hershkovitz, "'A Three-Story Building': A Critical Analysis of Israeli Early Warning Discourse," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*, 2017, 765-784]

6 Ronen Hoffman, "The absence of effective foreign policy in Israel's national security system," *Studies in Israel Defense Concept*, The Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2014.

7 Uri Bar-Joseph, "The paradox of Israeli power," *Survival*, 2004, 137-155]

establishments need to update and refine decision-making concepts and methods to erode the absolute hegemony of security and military considerations. Yet, this has not been successfully translated into workable reform. Attempts to create integrative decision-making mechanisms that balance military and diplomatic inputs have always failed. For example, when I was a legislator in the 19<sup>th</sup> Knesset, I introduced a proposal for a new law (the “2014 Foreign Ministry and Public Diplomacy Law”), which was intended to strengthen the position the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) by setting its formal role and authority as the central governmental organ entrusted with the design and implementation of Israel’s integrated foreign policy and public diplomacy. The opposition of Prime Minister Netanyahu and other ministers of his Likud party made it impossible to make this proposal into law.

Another example that illustrates the dominance of the security establishment over civilian politicians is the failure of the Israeli National Security Council to position itself as a central pivot in the formulation of foreign and national security policy. During Mr. Netanyahu’s first years in office, the Israeli public perceived him as a fresh, charismatic, innovative, and dynamic leader who had the skills and the knowledge needed to reform the Israeli system; he was seen as someone who would introduce updated American-style ideas to “shake up” politics-as-usual and change old-fashioned governance. To strengthen this image, Mr. Netanyahu has established, for the first time, an Israeli National Security Council (NSC) as part of his strategy to create an independent support mechanism at the PM’s office to help him with decision-making on foreign affairs and security issues.<sup>8</sup>

As soon as the NSC was founded, Mr. Netanyahu decided to indicate to the entire security system that diplomatic considerations will be at the core of the NSC’s work, and he appointed a senior official from the Foreign Ministry to serve as the NSC Deputy Head. That step signaled the

weight that was supposed to be given to foreign policy considerations in the work of the new NSC. In practice, due to the clear dominance of the Defense Ministry over all other government agencies in the decision-making processes, the Council failed to become a significant factor in the design and coordination of national security policy; it also failed to promote more integrative views on foreign affairs and “smart-power” within the existing establishment. Upon his return to the post of Prime Minister in April 2009, Mr. Netanyahu greatly strengthened the NSC when he moved its headquarters from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, and placed the office of the Head of the NSC adjacent to the Prime Minister’s bureau. The NSC was also reinforced by additional personnel and by the “National Security Council Law,” which defined and extended its duties. According to this law, the NSC should serve as the sole integrator between all government ministries when it comes to foreign affairs and defense issues. But even within the context of this supportive framework, NSC officials realized that it is tremendously difficult to break the decisive hegemony of the old defense establishment led by the Defense Ministry. The NSC thus remained an advisory body to the Prime Minister rather than a pivotal player in optimizing decision-making processes.

These and other cases illustrate how, in practice, Israel’s ongoing foreign policy does not stand on its own, but is mainly derived from security policy. In almost every situation that requires security and diplomatic action, military and security considerations get clear priority over foreign affairs and diplomatic considerations.

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<sup>8</sup> The security establishment traditionally has opposed the foundation of a National Security Council (NSC) out of fear that an NSC would limit its authority and power. Netanyahu used special circumstances, i.e. the resignation of the Minister of Defense, as an opportunity to form the NSC.

## A WEAK FOREIGN AFFAIRS ESTABLISHMENT

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is supposed to be the supreme authority to manage Israel's foreign policy. As stated on the MFA's official website, "The Foreign Ministry formulates, implements, and presents the foreign policy of the Government of Israel."<sup>9</sup> Yet the reality is very different: over the years, due to the actions of Prime Minister Netanyahu,<sup>10</sup> the MFA has lost power and authority. Its organizational and political standings are now at an all-time low<sup>11</sup> because of continued undermining of its authorities by Mr. Netanyahu. Its responsibilities in policy-related matters have shrunk as a result. An increasing number of newly-trained diplomats resign shortly after starting their careers, a trend that reflects demoralization among its entire diplomatic corps and administrative staff.<sup>12</sup>

In many respects, the MFA fell prey to the idea that the defense and intelligence establishment should be given priority over the MFA in responding to diplomatic and security challenges. Among policymakers, the MFA is not regarded as having unique added-value when it comes to issues that are high on the national agenda.<sup>13</sup> This vicious cycle is fed by long-standing negligence on the part of the MFA, along with unfortunate organizational circumstances, leading to deteriorating professional expertise among diplomats, which undermines their creativity in policy-making.

Moreover, due to budget cuts, the MFA has closed several embassies and consulates around the world, which harmed its traditional

diplomatic responsibilities of developing and maintaining local and personal ties around the world.<sup>14</sup> This precarious state of affairs has also led to cutting funding for Israel's international aid activities, which contain the potential to spearhead Israeli public diplomacy. In this case too, the cycle of negative feedback gets intensified, the MFA is pushed out of national security decision-making while losing capacity and functions that could lead it to taking an important role in strategic political processes. The contempt for the MFA and its roles is not limited solely to the defense establishment; it is also reflected in Israeli public opinion, which ignores the role of the MFA and the functions it is supposed to serve. In an annual survey conducted by "Mitvim," an Israeli research institute that analyzes Israel's foreign relations, respondents give a 5 out of 10 when asked to evaluate the management of Israel's foreign relations.<sup>15</sup> The MFA is considered to be a senior office that provides the Foreign Minister with prestige, along with high local and international public exposure. Hence, the PM uses it as a bargaining tool, given to him through the coalition agreement. Therefore, in many cases, the Foreign Minister is appointed as a coalition partner. This person is usually also seen as a significant political rival to the Prime Minister, which is another reason why the Prime Minister prefers to keep the administrative powers of foreign affairs in his hands, and have a weak Foreign Minister.

A host of strategic foreign policy positions emerged while the most important of them remained under the direct responsibility of the

9 "About the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," The Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/AboutTheMinistry/Pages/default.aspx>.

10 Herb Keinon, "Is Netanyahu Out To Destroy Israel's Foreign Ministry?," The Jerusalem Post, September 16, 2016, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/The-Netanyahu-led-Foreign-office-is-a-ministry-adrift-467848>.

11 Beilin Yossi, "Foreign Minister Netanyahu sidelines own ministry," Al-Monitor, Jan. 28, 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/israel-us-jewry-chad-foreign-ministry-benjamin-netanyahu.html>.

12 Eichner Itamar, "Next foreign minister will have his work cut out," Ynetnews, Nov. 27, 2018, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5415157,00.html>.

13 Charles D. Freilich, "Israel: National Security Decision-Making in a Leaky Political Fishbowl," *Comparative Strategy*, 2015, 117-132.

14 Raphael Ahren, "Foreign Ministry official slams budget cuts as a 'strategic terror attack'," Times of Israel, Jan. 16, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/foreign-ministry-official-slams-budget-cuts-as-a-strategic-terror-attack/>.

15 "The 2018 Foreign Policy Index," Mitvim - The Institute for Regional Foreign Policy, 2018, <http://www.mitvim.org.il/en/10-news/284-mitvim-poll-on-israel%E2%80%99s-foreign-policy-2>.



*The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Headquarters in Jerusalem. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)*

Prime Minister. The most prominent example of this pattern is the example of the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, who is personally appointed by the Prime Minister, and reports directly to him, without having to coordinate with the MFA or the Foreign Minister. Other issues that fall into this category include, inter alia, the covert cooperation with the Arab states with whom Israel has no diplomatic relations, and handling political and strategic relations with Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey by the Political-Security Division of the Ministry of Defense and through the Mossad.

The dispossession of the MFA from a significant role in shaping and managing the political and security agenda has reached new heights in the past decade. In 2009, a new Ministry of Strategy and Information was established alongside the MFA; it was charged with combatting the delegitimization and boycotting of Israel by civil society organizations in various parts of the world. Recent negotiations with the Palestinians were also conducted outside the MFA.

Apart from the overall weakness of the MFA, Israel's system of governance allows politicians to

regain their past positions, even after many years of non-service. Thus, a relatively small number of politicians have repeatedly served in the three key positions that shape Israel's foreign and security policy: Prime Minister, Defense Minister, and Foreign Minister. Ultimately, no more than 28 people have occupied these three roles during Israel's 70 years of existence. Kal Holsti, a well-known international relations theoretician, explains that the smaller the number of people involved in shaping a country's foreign policy, the less this policy reflects national values and needs; instead, it conveys the personal values and political needs of that small group.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the Israeli public is completely indifferent to the situation, i.e. the absence of a full-time Foreign Minister is almost ignored by the media and the public.

<sup>16</sup> Kalevi Holsti, "Restructuring foreign policy: A neglected phenomenon in foreign policy theory," Kalevi Holsti: A Pioneer in International Relations Theory, Foreign Policy Analysis, History of International Order, and Security Studies, 2016, 103-119.

## EXCEPTIONS: DOMINANT FOREIGN MINISTERS WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE IN FOREIGN RELATIONS

There are a few exceptions to this pattern, cases when special circumstances led to the appointment of a Foreign Minister who had a dominant and energetic personality, and managed to disrupt the almost complete hegemony of the security establishment regarding foreign policy and security issues. The most prominent example is Shimon Peres, who served as Foreign Minister three times: from 1986 to 1988 in Yitzhak Shamir's government; from 1992 to 1995 alongside Yitzhak Rabin (when he rivaled Rabin for party leadership); and from 2001 to November 2002 in Ariel Sharon's first government. Even if Peres' political and ideological course is criticized by several historians and Israeli statesmen, his creativity in advancing innovative foreign policy solutions was undeniable.

Peres came to the position of Foreign Minister in 1986, after two years as Prime Minister in a coalition between his Labor party and the right-wing Likud. During this term as Foreign Minister, he signed the so-called London Agreement with King Hussein of Jordan in 1987, which included the convening of an international conference that simulated an Israeli-Palestinian-Jordanian political settlement.<sup>17</sup> Although the agreement was rejected by Prime Minister Shamir, it is an example of a Foreign Minister's creative solution to a political challenge usually analyzed by the Israeli establishment only through the security prism. Seven years later, as Foreign Minister in Rabin's government, Peres succeeded in promoting the process that led to the formulation and signing of the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinians.

Twenty five years later, many in Israel consider the Oslo Accords a failure, but for the purposes of our discussion these Accords are another example of political thinking that offered solutions different

from those offered by the hegemonic military-security establishment. The Oslo Accords, which began as "Track II" negotiations, were conducted covertly by Peres' confidants. The Accords were a response to the difficulties the Israeli security establishment had in dealing with the Palestinian uprising (The Intifada). The Accords were anchored in a broad framework which focused on security, but which also included economic and environmental factors, and created international support that opened a new era of regional and international strategic relations for Israel.

Peres's third term as Foreign Minister in Ariel Sharon's government is another example of effective foreign ministry, leveraging diplomacy in order to improve Israel's standing within the international community. Sharon was elected Prime Minister at the beginning of 2001, under circumstances of a complex security crisis: the second Intifada. This crisis began after Israel and the Palestinian Authority failed to negotiate a permanent agreement designed to enable the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The failure of negotiations led to an outbreak of violent incidents that included large-scale violent demonstrations in which Palestinian residents of Israel (Israeli Arabs) took part, something that had not happened before. That wave of violence also included shooting incidents between members of the Palestinian security forces and Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and escalating terror attacks, including many attacks against Israeli civilians in major cities by Palestinian suicide bombers.

The Israeli response to this massive eruption of terror raging throughout the country could not be solely military: Israel had to take into account a complex political system that included American, Arab, European, and other interests involved in the international consequences of

<sup>17</sup> Peres-Hussein, "London Agreement," Apr. 11, 1978, [http://ecf.org.il/media\\_items/556](http://ecf.org.il/media_items/556).



*From right to left: Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Yasser Arafat receiving the Nobel Peace Prize following the Oslo Accords (Source: Israel Government Press Office)*

the rising violence. It was also necessary to take into account Israeli, Palestinian, and global public opinion. The way Israel handled the second Intifada, which lasted nearly three years, required multidisciplinary governmental and administrative inputs, and thus tight coordination between the security and political establishments. Peres's experience and standing, and the heavy burden of the ongoing crisis on Prime Minister Sharon, led to a momentary boost of MFA's prestige as a significant actor in managing the crisis.

The peak of the Israeli confrontation with the suicide bombers came in April 2002, in a military operation in Judea and Samaria, intended to reoccupy a number of Palestinian cities and territories, which were considered terrorist hubs. The unusual dominance of the Foreign Minister and the role of the MFA in determining policy of this military action led to a more complex international response that included both empathy and criticism towards Israel. Although the prevailing international atmosphere after the 9/11 terrorist attacks helped, it was also the result of political and public relations activities conducted by Shimon Peres as Foreign Minister.

# MR. NETANYAHU'S FOREIGN POLICY VIS-À-VIS HIS PREDECESSORS

With the unique combination of an exceptionally weak Foreign Ministry and an extremely dominant Defense Ministry, Israel's foreign policy decisions are mainly in the hands of the Prime Minister. However, the coalition-based political system guarantees some balance and compromise between the different political groups. With regard to sensitive policy issues in particular, the coalition system tends to limit the Prime Minister's ability to formulate creative policy solutions that deviate from the prevailing political equilibrium. This political system requires Prime Ministers to constantly calibrate their policies relative to the broadest common denominator among coalition partners making it very difficult to initiate changes in existing patterns of state affairs, especially when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The combination of the coalition method and public sentiment, which usually does not encourage political and security risk-taking, creates a setting in which any Prime Minister who would dare to initiate a political process that would include territorial concessions, evacuation of settlements, and the establishment of a Palestinian state, is putting his political tenure, and sometimes even his life, at risk.

Yet, in clear contrast to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who tends to always please his political base, other Prime Ministers were willing to take political and personal risks. The political history of the State of Israel clearly shows that Prime Ministers such as Yitzhak Rabin, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, and Ehud Olmert decided to advance political moves to alter the status quo and have consciously taken grave political and personal risks. Both the government of Yitzhak Rabin (1992-1996) and Ehud Barak

(July 1999-March 2001) were governments that experienced serious coalition crises as a result of their decision to engage in a sincere and intensive effort to make peace with the Palestinians and Syria. Rabin conducted the negotiations on the Oslo Accords while his government was based on a narrow unstable coalition. He was politically "blackmailed" by small coalition parties which demanded disproportionate payoffs in exchange for their support in his foreign policy moves.<sup>18</sup> Rabin paid the highest personal price when he was assassinated in 1995 as a result of his determination to continue implementing the Oslo Accords despite intensified Palestinian terror that raged in the streets of Israel.

Five years later, Prime Minister Ehud Barak also assumed a great political risk during his term of office when in 1999 and 2000 he chose to run a parallel "blitz" of peace talks on two tracks of simultaneous and intensive negotiations: one with the Palestinians for final status determination and the other for a full peace agreement with Syria. The overt management of two parallel channels of negotiations on strategically significant issues drew harsh public and political criticism toward both of them. The stinging failure of the negotiations with Yasser Arafat at Camp David in July 2000 led to the eruption of Palestinian violence, created political instability, and led to the rapid collapse of Barak's government.

While the political risks taken by Rabin and Barak involved attempts to reach an agreement with the Palestinians, Ariel Sharon's "Disengagement" was fundamentally different. Sharon was the first and only Prime Minister to take a unilateral strategic step of disengagement from the Palestinians when he decided in 2004 that Israel would fully withdraw from the Gaza Strip, removing the IDF

<sup>18</sup> Clyde Haberman, "Rabin Staves Off Collapse of Israeli Coalition, at Least for a Week," *New York Times*, May 12, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/12/world/rabin-staves-off-collapse-of-israeli-coalition-at-least-for-a-week.html>.

and evacuating all Jewish civilian settlements there. In this initiative, Israel returned to the international border, which was now defined as a permanent demarcation, not dependent on any agreement with the Palestinians. Sharon was aware of the political implications of that move, and sought to raise the legitimacy to his policy with his “home base.”

As head of the Likud, he turned to the party’s 100,000 registered members and asked for their vote of confidence. But 60% of them voted against his plan, leaving him with two options: to retract his move or to stick to his plan, risking his political mandate. Sharon decided to take the second option: he left Likud and formed a new party (Kadima), formed around 14 center-right Knesset deputies from and several deputies from other parties. Founding Kadima enabled Sharon to remain in power and implement his unique foreign policy of unilateral disengagement from Gaza. It is impossible to determine whether these moves caused Sharon to fall from power because in the midst of that process, on the eve of the 2006 elections, he suffered a stroke that led to his replacement by Ehud Olmert.

Prime Minister Olmert also decided to challenge the status quo and took a high political risk when negotiating in 2007-2008 with the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas over the core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At an advanced stage in these negotiations, Olmert offered a comprehensive peace plan based on Israel’s withdrawal to 1967 borders and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. However, here, too, a direct connection between Olmert’s initiative and his political survival is difficult to make, since his tenure was fraught with frequent political crises.

Unlike the foreign policy conducted by most of his predecessors, Prime Minister Netanyahu’s foreign policy is almost entirely focused on attempts to accommodate his political base to

ensure his political survival. For example, he does not have any long-term policy to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians or to build mutual trust with them. Knowing that his political base would completely reject any diplomatic process that requires concessions to the Palestinians, he always prefers to stay reactive rather than proactive on this crucial issue. In fact, Mr. Netanyahu has never indicated that he is willing to take even slight political risks and challenge his base with a creative, proactive foreign policy on any important issue.

For most of his years as Prime Minister, Mr. Netanyahu has been strengthening his right-wing base of support by employing a “tribal” politics of a polarizing narrative, labeling all groups who supported different policies than his as less patriotic.<sup>19</sup> Since 2016, under police investigation for corruption, he has chosen a militant political strategy of attacking his political opponents from the left and the state’s establishment for example: the Police, the Attorney General, and the media.<sup>20</sup> According to the narrative propagated by Mr. Netanyahu, his family and his core right-wing supporters are victims of a politically motivated raid conducted by hostile groups, mainly the “left” and the media.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Mr. Netanyahu has harnessed Israeli foreign policy to strengthen his political support among the nationalist hard-right. One of the most prominent recent examples is the media and political maelstrom which he unleashed upon the country in December 2018 over the breakup of his government. He decided to lead Israel to early elections, which took place in April 2019, more than six months before the expected date. This media frenzy began on November 18, 2018, with a speech to the nation, which the media dubbed as the “No Elections” speech.<sup>22</sup>

Former Defense Minister Lieberman’s resignation left Mr. Netanyahu’s coalition with a very narrow majority of two votes in the Knesset (61-59),

19 “Netanyahu Reportedly Appoints Himself His Campaign’s Chief Strategist, Plans on Attacking Attorney General,” Haaretz, Jan. 10, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-netanyahu-appoints-himself-his-campaign-s-chief-strategist-plans-on-attacking-ag-1.6827754>.

20 Srivastava Mehul, “Benjamin Netanyahu turns fire on attorney-general as election looms,” Financial Times, Jan. 17, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/538d7fd8-1814-11e9-9e64-d150b3105d21>.

21 “Sara Netanyahu’s fraud and breach of trust trial begins in Jerusalem,” The Guardian, Oct. 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/07/sara-benjamin-netanyahu-and-breach-of-trust-trial-begins-in-jerusalem>.

22 Landau Noa, “Invoking Security Situation, Netanyahu Warns of ‘Irresponsible’ Early Elections: ‘I Have a Clear Plan’,” Haaretz, Nov. 18,

and created an immediate political crisis. The crisis was exacerbated when another minister, Education Minister Naftali Bennett of the right-wing Jewish Home party, gave an ultimatum demanding to be appointed Defense Minister instead of Lieberman, threatening the collapse of the coalition. Netanyahu rejected Bennet's ultimatum and decided to retain for Defense Minister position for himself. This decision was accompanied by an intensive media campaign, a "blitz" on unspecified "security" issues, all in order to contain the crisis and prevent the collapse of his coalition. He decided to create turmoil to divert focus from the political crisis.

At a press conference, Netanyahu delivered a speech beginning with a few words, in an unusually excited tone, reviewing his combat and patriotic military past: his service in the elite "Sayeret Matkal" commando unit and his close relations to his older brother Yoni Netanyahu, the hero of Operation Entebbe. He also described a military operation which he participated in May 1969 and was almost killed in the Suez Canal. The message Mr. Netanyahu wanted to convey to the public was unequivocal: Israel is at a particularly sensitive moment of enormous security risks and it would be a security disaster for the country if the experienced right-wing government, under his leadership, fell and the left came to power. Therefore, this is not the time to take a gamble and hold elections. He also stressed that there was sensitive intelligence that could not be shared with the public, indicating that difficult times are about to come in the near future, requiring sacrifices from the Israelis.

Immediately after Mr. Netanyahu's dramatic speech, outgoing Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman publicly expressed disdain for his arguments, and claimed that there was no justification for hints that Israel was on the brink of war. The security apparatus did describe a complex security situation at the time but, unlike Mr. Netanyahu, they did not notice a dramatic change from the weeks preceding the

speech. Moreover, many commentators refused to accept this dramatic tone and noted that the description of the security circumstances as severe was largely influenced by the intensity of Mr. Netanyahu's political concern about the continuation of his tenure and the survival of his government.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the dramatic security situation presented in Mr. Netanyahu's speech was inconsistent with his numerous trips around the world in preceding weeks (usually during sensitive security situations Prime Ministers have preferred to remain in Israel). It also contradicted his frequent declarations about Israel's excellent strategic situation—and especially the fact that only two weeks earlier, he had seriously considered announcing early elections for reasons that seemed politically convenient at the time.

Three weeks after that speech, the Attorney General announced that his office was in the final stages of formulating a decision about the charges against Mr. Netanyahu; he stated that within a few months he would publish a decision as to whether or not to indict Mr. Netanyahu on bribery charges. This announcement motivated Mr. Netanyahu to make a sharp and immediate political shift, completely ignoring the "particularly sensitive moment of enormous security risks" he had described only a few weeks prior. Within a few days, he led the dissolution of the government and, with the consent of his coalition partners, agreed to set April 9, 2019 as the date for general elections, with the intention of receiving a renewed mandate from the public before his trial process began. From the moment he decided on early elections, the narrative of the "dangerous and sensitive security situation," which Mr. Netanyahu had tried to use as a logical reason for postponing elections, disappeared entirely. As far as Mr. Netanyahu was concerned, there was no reason not to go to elections, and elections should be held as soon as possible. This example illustrates how Mr. Netanyahu routinely exploits political and security narratives for his political needs.

2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-netanyahu-cancels-weekly-meeting-with-coalition-heads-as-snap-elections-loom-1.6659262>.

23 Pfeffer Anshel, "Netanyahu's Non-election Election Speech," Haaretz, Nov. 18, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-netanyahu-s-non-election-election-speech-1.6660775>.

# ILLUSTRATION: THE NATION STATE LAW AND RELATIONS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND AMERICAN JEWS

## *The Nation State Law*

**T**he Nation State Law, legislated by the Knesset in July 2018, formally defines Israel as a nation-state of the Jewish people and specifies the national and cultural attributes that must exist in order to give Israel the character of a Jewish state. By giving preference to Jewish national characteristics over the national characteristics of minority groups, particularly Israeli Arabs, the law implicitly assigns an inferior position to Israel's non-Jewish inhabitants. Since Mr. Netanyahu's political base tends to be highly nationalistic and religious, the initiative to enact the law has gained him increased popularity among his supporters. Most of the law's opponents and critics were branded by Mr. Netanyahu's political circles as belonging to the political left. This turned the debate about the law into part of Mr. Netanyahu's overall battle against the political left. This was enabled by a populist narrative that delegitimizes those on the far- and center-left: Mr. Netanyahu's political base has branded them as unpatriotic and extremist.<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that most opponents of the Nation State Law do not negate Israel's definition as the nation-state of the Jewish people. Rather, they assert that the nature of the state of Israel was already defined in 1948 by the Declaration of Independence, which determined, by its words and spirit, that Israel would be a Jewish and democratic state. In this regard, opponents of the law argue that at present there is no point in shaking the delicate fabric that has been created over the years in the relations between different ethnic groups in Israeli society. Indeed, despite inherent tensions between different social

groups, since it was founded, Israel has managed to construct a model that allows for reasonable and fair coexistence between Jews, Arabs, and other minorities. This model follows the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, which is considered as a constitutional document (even without being legislated), and which explicitly states, "The State of Israel . . . will maintain complete social and political equality for all its citizens, regardless of religion, race, or gender."<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, the Nation State Law, legislated by Mr. Netanyahu's government, omits the term "equality," and this omission is the main source of criticism against the law in its current form, even among some of its principal supporters. The enactment of the law sparked intense debate in the Israeli political system. The public's general perception is that the law deals with issues of Israeli identity and has nothing to do with foreign policy. However, the Nation State Law demonstrates how Mr. Netanyahu, by means of a legislative initiative, ostensibly dealing only with deep domestic values, is actually creating a constitutional structure for future possibilities of Israel's relations with the Palestinians. Under the surface, the law fits the long-term ambitions of the nationalist right regarding the annexation of most or all of the West Bank territories. Such annexations would lead to the loss of the Jewish majority that guarantees Israel's Jewish character in the current democratic framework.

Hence, under the public and the media's perception, Mr. Netanyahu's insistence on enacting the Nation State Law is related to the "one-state" idea. The fact that the Nation State Law in its current form creates a clear preference for the Jewish character of the state

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<sup>24</sup> Blum Ruthie, "What Netanyahu and Trump owe the left," Jerusalem Post, Aug. 12, 2017, <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/What-Netanyahu-and-Trump-owe-the-Left-502333>.

<sup>25</sup> MJL, "The Provisional Government of the State of Israel: The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel," Official Gazette, May 15, 1948, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-declaration-of-the-establishment-of-the-state-of-israel/>.



*Netanyahu and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, April 2018. (Source: U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv)*

over the value of equality is, de facto, laying the constitutional foundation for Israel to maintain a distinctly Jewish character even in a situation in which it will be transformed into a single political entity with an Arab majority, in the absence of an agreement with the Palestinians on two states. Thus, the law precludes the urgency of reaching an agreement for two-state solution. The current version of the law faithfully reflects the positions of the right-wing nationalist camp, which opposes the two state solution, supports the annexation of Judea and Samaria, and wishes to see in every scenario a preference for the Jewish character

above liberal-democratic values. When Mr. Netanyahu refers to the rationale underlying the enactment of the Nation State Law, he makes no mention of the “one-state” versus a “two-state” strategy. By leading the enactment of this basic law, Netanyahu created a latent but significant link between an internal issue related to the essence of Israel self-identity (i.e. Jewish and democratic) and a clearly foreign policy issue: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## *Relations between Israel and American Jews and Their Implications for U.S.-Israel Politics*

In the late 1960s, relations between Israel and the U.S. developed into a close and unique alliance between a leading world power and its “protégé.” For Israel, maintaining the special relationship with the U.S. has been one of the most important foreign policy portfolios and a top national security priority. Israeli Prime Ministers—from the right and from the left—have always been keen to nurture this alliance. Nevertheless, relations between the two countries have experienced some turbulence over the years, and sometimes even led to crises that involved heavy U.S. pressure on Israel including punitive sanctions and policies perceived in Israel as hostile to its key interests.

The main force that has defended Israel during the crises that broke out with the United States was the American Jewish community: Sympathy and support for Israel among American Jews, active support of Jewish Senators and Congressional representatives from both the Democratic and the Republican Parties, intensive pro-Israel activities of Jewish advocacy organizations like AIPAC, influential Jewish journalists and media figures, and support from senior leaders of Jewish Federations and Jewish communities around the United States. The American Jewish community in the United States has always been a great influence on American policy toward Israel, and American Jews have repeatedly assisted Israel when necessary. The sweeping support of American Jews and other politicians from both parties has resulted in ongoing bipartisan American support for Israel.

The support patterns of the American Jewish diaspora and the intensity of its influence can be seen clearly when reviewing some of the major crises that have occurred between the

two countries over the years. One of the most severe crises in U.S.-Israeli relations occurred between March and September 1975. It broke out about two years after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when the U.S. failed to advance interim agreements between Israel and Egypt, which, in the eyes of the American administration were supposed to be the beginning of a gradual peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sought to mediate a quick interim agreement that would increase stability and improve U.S.-Egyptian relations.<sup>26</sup> The Israeli government headed by Yitzhak Rabin was very reserved and cautious, and Rabin demanded that Egypt publish an official announcement declaring the end of the war as a precondition for Israel’s partial withdrawal from Sinai to a line of 15-20 km from the Suez Canal. The Egyptians refused, and as soon as Kissinger failed in his desperate attempts to get Israel to adopt a softer stance, the Americans accused Israel of being responsible for the failure. This caused the American administration to reassess its relationship with Israel, which amounted to adopting a coercive approach toward Israel.<sup>27</sup>

The first expression of this new policy was a series of punitive measures, which included postponing financial aid that was supposed to be given to Israel that year, delaying the delivery of surface-to-air missiles, and halting negotiations about the sale of F-15s. On March 31, 1975, U.S. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger even announced that the United States would refrain from taking on any new commitments to supply weapons to Israel as long as the policy of reassessment was in force.

But it quickly became clear to American officials that politics of coercion alone could not induce Israel to substantially change its position. They discovered that they would not be able to ignore domestic American groups who opposed these “reassessment” measures, American Jews foremost among them. On May 21, 1975, a

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<sup>26</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph, 1982, 778-799.

<sup>27</sup> Abraham Ben-Zvi, “The Limits of Coercion in Bilateral Bargaining Situations: The Case of the American-Israeli Dyad,” *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations*, vol.8, no.4, 1986, 68-69.

group of 76 senators who were furious that the administration exerted “heavy pressure on Israel” responded to an AIPAC initiative and sent a harsh letter to President Ford, demanding the removal of economic and military sanctions.<sup>28</sup> Significant additional public pressure emerged at the initiative of Jewish organizations, and it soon became clear that the administration lacked the domestic political support it needed in order to implement an effective coercive policy toward Israel.

In this situation, and in light of Egypt’s uncompromising stance, President Ford and Mr. Kissinger decided to soften their stance and include positive incentives for Israel, e.g., large-scale financial and military aid, advanced weapons systems, securing Israel’s oil supply as a hedge against shortage, and compensation for leaving west Sinai’s oil fields. The administration also made a commitment to maintain Israel’s qualitative military superiority by equipping the IDF with advanced weapons systems, including F-15s and F-16s. In addition, the U.S. provided Israel with political guarantees that referred to the Palestinian issue with ensuring U.S. non-recognition of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as long as it does not recognize Israel’s right to exist and does not accept UN Resolutions 242 and 338.

American Jewry’s sweeping traditional support for Israel, and its significant influence in Washington greatly aided Israel in other crises as well:<sup>29</sup> in 1977, against President Carter’s attempt to force Israel to negotiate with the PLO and his intention to impose sanctions on Israel when it refused; in 1981, against President Reagan’s intention to impose sanctions on Israel due to the Israeli air attack on the nuclear reactor in Iraq; against President H.W. Bush’s tough policy toward the government of Yitzhak Shamir in 1989-1992, which was a response to Shamir’s refusal to stop building settlements; and in several other cases. It can therefore be said that relations between Israel and American

Jews have been extremely important for Israel’s national security since they exert significant influence on the bilateral relations between Israel and the United States.

It appears that during Mr. Netanyahu’s term as Prime Minister there has been a sharp turnaround that has led to real erosion in Israel’s relations with the American Jewry, and especially with the Reform Jewish Movement, or the majority of American Jews. This erosion is puzzling since, thanks to his personal and professional background, Benjamin Netanyahu, is the most American-oriented of Israeli Prime Ministers ever. The fact that he studied in the United States and lived there for many years provided him with the tools to understand American society and politics, possibly better than any other Israeli politician. Although one could assume that the importance of the American Jewish community is clear to him, he chose to weaken relations with the liberal wing of American Jewry, and with the Democratic Party, both of which have the support of an overwhelming majority of Jews in the United States. Relations with the Democratic Party reached their nadir in March 2015, when Mr. Netanyahu gave a speech to the Congress to express opposition against the nuclear deal with Iran. The speech was a continuation of tense personal relations between Mr. Netanyahu and President Barack Obama. Mr. Netanyahu’s attitude toward President Obama severely damaged Israel’s relations with the Reform Jewish Movement and the Democratic Party. Alternatively, Mr. Netanyahu chose to strengthen his and Israel’s ties with Orthodox Jews and right-wing conservative evangelical Christians, who belong to President Donald Trump’s core supporters.

Mr. Netanyahu is probably well aware of the changes that have taken place in American Jewish communities in recent years: In October 2013, a comprehensive survey conducted by the Pew Research Institute revealed a general distancing of American Jews from religion by

<sup>28</sup> Eduard R.F. Sheehan, *The Arabs, The Israelis and Kissinger*, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975, 145.

<sup>29</sup> Abraham Ben-Zvi, “The Limits of Coercion in Bilateral Bargaining Situations,” *The American-Israeli Dyad*, 72.

showing that 20% of the American Jews defined themselves as “devoid of religion,” and this appears to be a growing trend.<sup>30</sup> Pew’s research also found that the number of American Jews who define themselves as atheists, or without religious affiliation, is higher among the younger generations. The study shows that liberal Reform Judaism continues to be the largest Jewish movement in the United States, and about a third of American Jews belong to it. About 18% of American Jews say they belong to the Conservative movement, and only 10% identify with Orthodox Judaism.

The results of that research confirmed one of the American Jewish community greatest concerns: it found that most American Jews who leave one Jewish school for another do so in only one direction—they move to a less traditional Jewish school. Reform Jews are currently challenged with an identity crisis in relation to the role of Israel in their lives. They find it difficult to maintain support for Israel because of two main issues that apparently prompt their alienation from Israel as a whole. The first is their inability to identify with Israel’s policy toward the occupied territories and settlements during the past decade under Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing governments. The second is the Orthodox Israeli establishment’s hostility toward liberal American Jews, a hostility that has pushed liberal and pluralistic Jewish streams out from Israel’s formal institutions and refuses to recognize them at all.

The intensity of the crisis in Israel’s relations with Reform Jews in the U.S. is reflected in the words of Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, who was interviewed on the Israeli Public Broadcasting Cooperation (Channel 11) on March 9, 2017. In this interview, Jacobs warned of the “bear-hug” between Mr. Netanyahu and the Trump administration and said, “The Orthodoxy in Israel is dangerous to Judaism,” explaining that it distances the rest

of the Jewish streams in the United States from Israel. Jacobs added, “In Israel, our support is considered as granted, but the fact is that more and more American Jews are turning their backs on Israel.” He explained that these Jews distance themselves from Israel because Israel does not respect their values, and this is Mr. Netanyahu’s fault: “The Israeli government brought this crisis on the Jewish people. The Jews of North America do not understand why the Judaism they know and love is not recognized by Israel.”

On September 24, 2017, in an open letter to Mr. Netanyahu, Jacobs wrote:

During your recent visit to New York, you tried unsuccessfully to give the impression that no crisis exists between the government of Israel and the majority of North American Jewry. . . . Mr. Prime Minister there is a crisis. . . . It is time for you to make good on your claim that you are the Prime Minister of the entire Jewish people. To do so will require infinite fortitude and moral courage. The two largest Jewish communities of the world should be deeply interconnected and interdependent. . . . Your recent actions demonstrate once again, that you are not able and not willing to be in dialogue with us. We are not giving up on Israel, on equality, or on democracy. We will continue to insist on our rights. You may try to avoid us, but we trust that the Supreme Court, the protector of democracy in Israel, will give us a swift decision ensuring equality and freedom of religion for all Jews in Israel.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that Mr. Netanyahu could have used his position as Prime Minister to mediate between

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30 “A portrait of Jewish Americans,” Pew Research Institute, 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.

31 Rick Jacobs, “Netanyahu Refuses to Talk to Us But We, American Jews won’t be Silenced,” Haaretz, Sep. 24, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/netanyahu-refuses-to-talk-to-us-but-we-american-jews-won-t-be-silenced-1.5452928>.

the Israeli Orthodox community and the liberal-pluralistic movements among American Jews, and to help reduce the hostility directed at liberal American Jews by the religious establishment in Israel. It is also clear that he could have chosen to reach out to the Reform Movement, to make a gesture toward them, and strive to preserve their long-standing relationship with Israel and their great influence in favor of Israel in American politics. But as with so many other issues, Mr. Netanyahu remains loyal to his habitual patterns, preferring closest political allies, i.e., the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox elements of the Israeli political system, alongside nationalist right-wing parties. Here, again, he has chosen to appease his political base even at the cost of damaging one of Israel's foremost political-strategic assets. Since most liberal American Jews are to some extent opposed to the continuation of the Israeli occupation of Judea and Samaria, Mr. Netanyahu and his government do not consider them as supportive of the State of Israel. It is quite possible that the post-Trump American administration will be much less committed to evangelicals and much less friendly towards Israel. If the erosion of Israel's relations with the liberal American Jewry continues, Israel may eventually lose its prolonged American Jewish support. In that sense, there is no doubt that Mr. Netanyahu's foreign policy on this important issue stems from narrow and short-term considerations, which, in this as in many other cases, are related mainly to the appeasement of his political base. 

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