

# Israel and the Politics of Entrenchment

## Amnon Aran

Senior Lecturer in International Politics  
City, University of London

### Israel's Illiberal Turn

The 9 April 2019 Israeli elections resulted in a tie between the two leading parties. The centre-right Likud, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and its challenger, the centre-left Blue and White party, headed by former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, each secured 35 seats. However, the balance between the political blocs within the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, is tilted heavily towards the centre-right bloc. Netanyahu and his potential coalition partners won 65 of the 120 available Knesset seats while the centre-left parties secured only 55.<sup>1</sup>

The election result was significant, particularly given the string of corruption allegations implicating Netanyahu. On 28 February 2019, less than six weeks before polling day, the attorney general, Avichai Mendelblit, announced that Netanyahu was facing charges of bribery and breach of trust in connection to three cases, pending a public hearing.<sup>2</sup> Netanyahu responded with an effective campaign to counter these allegations, arguing that they were part of a witch-hunt orchestrated by the media and the Prime Minister's political rivals. This was not the only factor explaining the success of Likud in the recent elections. Another reason was Israel's impressive eco-

nomonic performance under the Netanyahu-led governments. According to a 2018 OECD report, Israelis were "more satisfied with their lives than the residents of most other OECD countries," while the Israeli economy has continued to record "remarkable" macroeconomic and fiscal performance.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the centre-right bloc's election victory was attributable mostly to a shift to the right of the Israeli political centre-ground. Since the 2015 elections, this shift has consolidated with Netanyahu presiding over the most right-wing government in the history of the State of Israel. A string of laws, passed since 2015, reflect the government's view that democracy is synonymous with unchecked majority rule and the government's opposition to judicial review and the protection of minority rights. This illiberal trend was reflected most strongly when, on 19 July 2018, the Jewish nationhood law was passed by the Knesset as a basic law, meaning that it becomes part of the country's constitutional foundation. The law's text, which makes no mention of the word "equality" – a crucial ingredient of "democracy," which is similarly not stated – is unequivocal. Plainly and simply, it asserts that the Jewish people have the exclusive right to self-determination in the State of Israel. This exclusionary terminology stands in stark contrast to Israel's declaration of independence, which recognizes the equality of all the state's citizens "without distinction of religion, race, or sex."<sup>4</sup> In addition, Arabic was demoted to a "special language" from being one of the official lan-

<sup>1</sup> Lis, Jonathan. "Final Israeli election results." *Ha'aretz*, accessed 13 May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> BBC. "Netanyahu and the allegations of corruption." [www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-47293807/netanyahu-and-the-allegations-of-corruption](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-47293807/netanyahu-and-the-allegations-of-corruption), accessed 14 May 2019.

<sup>3</sup> OECD. "Economic Survey of Israel 2018." [www.oecd.org/israel/economic-survey-israel.htm](http://www.oecd.org/israel/economic-survey-israel.htm), accessed 31 January 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The Israeli Declaration of Independence can be accessed at the Knesset's official website, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/About/Occasion/Pages/IndDeclaration.aspx>, last accessed 20 February 2019.

guages alongside Hebrew.<sup>5</sup> The law demonstrates the long-standing view of Prime Minister Netanyahu and his coalition partners that Israel is a Jewish state and a democratic state – in that order. The largely secular and progressive version of Israel that once captured the world’s imagination has been dealt a very serious, possibly mortal, blow.

## The law demonstrates the long-standing view of Prime Minister Netanyahu and his coalition partners that Israel is a Jewish state and a democratic state – in that order

### A Foreign Policy of Entrenchment

Benjamin Netanyahu is currently the longest-serving Prime Minister in the history of the State of Israel. Netanyahu’s recent decade in power has been marked indelibly by what came to be known as the Arab uprisings. From the outset, Netanyahu portrayed the uprisings as an epic struggle between “good and evil.”<sup>6</sup> Iran and the Islamist groups, argued Netanyahu, were leading the Middle East region into “medieval barbarism” and turning it into “a dark, savage, and desperate Middle East.”<sup>7</sup> He argued that Israel, on the other hand, “stood out as a towering beacon of enlightenment and tolerance.”<sup>8</sup>

This black and white view of the Arab uprisings had significant implications for Israel’s negotiations with the Palestinians. Prior to the Arab uprisings, Benjamin Netanyahu, although grudgingly, had conceded the need for a Palestinian state, in a speech delivered

at Bar Ilan University.<sup>9</sup> However, eight years into the uprisings, Netanyahu has been instrumental in undermining the two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians and, more broadly, the principle of exchange of land for peace. As the Israeli broadsheet, *Ha’aretz*, reported, in February 2016, Netanyahu rejected a proposal made by the then US Secretary of State, John Kerry, for a comprehensive peace deal with the Palestinians. Crucially, the proposal submitted to Netanyahu was commensurate with the Prime Minister’s own conditions for a deal, in three key respects: agreement would be based on recognizing Israel as a Jewish state; the Palestinian State would be demilitarized; and Israel would receive security assurances from the US.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, the Israeli government has been active in promoting the Trump Administration’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and to recognize Israel’s authority over the Golan Heights.<sup>11</sup> This has rendered extremely low any prospect of renewing a peace process with Syria and the Palestinians on the basis of land-for-peace – an integral part of Israeli foreign policy prior to Netanyahu’s rise to power. This shift is entirely commensurate with Likud’s foreign policy towards the Middle East since the return of Netanyahu to power, a policy that could be described as entrenchment. In line with this foreign policy of entrenchment, Israel will explore peace with the Arab world only in exchange for peace, not territory; will continue to rely on its iron wall of military force rather than prioritizing diplomacy and negotiations; and will maintain the Palestinians under occupation by strengthening its grip on the West Bank. To some extent, Netanyahu’s approach has been vindicated, since the twin threat posed by Iran and radical Islamist movements to Arab states has facilitated closer Arab relations with Israel. Netanyahu

<sup>5</sup> HATTIS ROLEF, Susan. “Basic Law: Israel: The Nation State of the Jewish People. Unofficial translation.” <https://knesset.gov.il/laws/special/eng/BasicLawNationState.pdf>, accessed 17 May 2019.

<sup>6</sup> ISRAEL MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. “Statement by PM Netanyahu following events in Cairo.” 10 September 2011. [https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2011/Pages/Statement\\_PM\\_Netanyahu\\_events\\_Cairo\\_10-Sep-2011.aspx](https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2011/Pages/Statement_PM_Netanyahu_events_Cairo_10-Sep-2011.aspx), accessed 17 January 2019.

<sup>7</sup> ISRAEL MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. “PM Netanyahu’s speech at the AIPAC Policy Conference” 2 March 2015, <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2015/Pages/PM-Netanyahu's-speech-at-the-AIPAC-Policy-Conference-2-March-2015.aspx>, accessed 17 January 2019.

<sup>8</sup> ISRAEL MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. “PM Netanyahu addresses the UN General Assembly.” <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2015/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-addresses-the-UN-General-Assembly-1-Oct-2015.aspx>, accessed 17 January 2019.

<sup>9</sup> ISRAEL MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS. “Address by PM Netanyahu at Bar-Ilan University.” 14 June 2009. [https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2009/Pages/Address\\_PM\\_Netanyahu\\_Bar-Ilan\\_University\\_14-Jun-2009.aspx](https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2009/Pages/Address_PM_Netanyahu_Bar-Ilan_University_14-Jun-2009.aspx), accessed 17 January 2019.

<sup>10</sup> RAVID, BARAK. “Kerry Presented Netanyahu with a Regional Peace Initiative During Secret Meeting with El-Sisi and Abdullah a Year Ago; the PM was Reluctant.” *Ha’aretz*. 19 February 2017. [www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.3870153](http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.3870153), accessed 7 January 2018.

<sup>11</sup> LANDER, Mark and HALBFINGER, David M., “Trump, with Netanyahu, formally recognizes Israel’s authority over the Golan Heights,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/25/us/politics/benjamin-netanyahu-donald-trump-meeting.html>, accessed 13 May, 2019.

has become the first Israeli Prime Minister since 1996 to make an official visit to Oman, a country with no diplomatic relations with Israel, where he met the country's leader, Sultan Qaboos Bin Said, on 27 October 2018.<sup>12</sup> Concurrently, Israeli and Saudi officials have been open about the covert cooperation between their two states.<sup>13</sup> In January 2019, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi confirmed that Egypt's military cooperation with Israel had reached unprecedented levels.<sup>14</sup> Indicatively, Israel and Egypt jointly imposed a 12-year siege over the Gaza Strip, which is controlled by the Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas. Although Israel and Hamas have engaged in several skirmishes during this period, the Islamic Resistance Movement has failed to harness Arab government support for its conflict with Israel.

The notion of common values, based on democracy and human freedoms, with the US and the EU, its traditional allies, is questionable given the deepening occupation of the Palestinians

### A Wondrous Decade?

Ostensibly, Israel's foreign policy of entrenchment record warrants the claim made by Benjamin Netanyahu that Israel has experienced "a wondrous dec-

ade." In addition to Israel's foreign policy record in the Middle East, Netanyahu points to its stronger relations with the EU, which remains its largest trading partner, with total trade with the EU amounting to approximately €36.2 billion in 2017.<sup>15</sup> The Prime Minister also celebrated Israel's burgeoning diplomatic and economic relations with China and India and "the further consolidation of our strong alliance with the US."<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, he conveniently glossed over some inconvenient truths. His foreign policy of entrenchment has deepened Israel's occupation of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which has entered its 52nd year. Despite Netanyahu's claims that a new Arab-Israeli axis is in the making, so far it has yet to come to fruition. The peace with Egypt and Jordan remains merely a strategic peace between narrow security elites, with wide swaths of the societies in both countries still utterly opposed to normalization. The Gulf countries, despite the clear threat they face from Iran, refuse to normalize relations with Israel until it resolves its conflict with the Palestinians. Meanwhile, Iran continues to expand in the Middle East, under the auspices of Russia; an expansion that Israel is incapable of halting using military means alone. Amid this uncertain regional environment, Israel's long-term relations with powers beyond the region seems indeterminate. The notion of common values, based on democracy and human freedoms, with the US and the EU, its traditional allies, is questionable given the deepening occupation of the Palestinians. Thus, the short-term gains of "entrenchment" may pose grave threats to Israel in the longer run.

<sup>12</sup> LANDAU, Noa and KHOURY, Jack. "Netanyahu Visit Oman, which has no Diplomatic Ties with Israel." *Ha'aretz*, 27 October 2018, [www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/netanyahu-secretly-visits-oman-which-has-no-diplomatic-ties-with-israel-1.6594761](http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/netanyahu-secretly-visits-oman-which-has-no-diplomatic-ties-with-israel-1.6594761), accessed 5 February 2019.

<sup>13</sup> IDF's former Chief of staff, Gadi Eisenkot's comments quoted in ZEITUN, Yoav and KEISSE, Ro'i. "Chief of Staff in a Rare Interview to a Saudi Website." *Ynet*, 16 November 2017, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5043847,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5043847,00.html), accessed 23 January 2019.

<sup>14</sup> HA'ARETZ. "Egypt's Sisi confirms unprecedented military cooperation with Israel." *Ha'aretz*, 4 January 2019, [www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/egypt/premium-egypt-s-sisi-says-military-cooperation-with-israel-is-closest-ever-1.6807888](http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/egypt/premium-egypt-s-sisi-says-military-cooperation-with-israel-is-closest-ever-1.6807888), accessed 23 January 2019.

<sup>15</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION. "Countries and Regions Israel." [http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/israel/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/israel/index_en.htm), accessed 30 January 2019.

<sup>16</sup> ISRAEL'S PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE. "Prime Minister's remarks at the opening of the 5th session of the 20th Knesset." 15 October 2018. [www.gov.il/he/Departments/news/speech\\_kneset151018](http://www.gov.il/he/Departments/news/speech_kneset151018), accessed 16 January 2016.